

Once, twice, three times a failure: time to permanently scrap statutory Reception Baseline Assessment?

Abstract

The paper focuses on findings from research that investigated teachers' and key stakeholder's perspectives on the use of Reception Baseline Assessment. Data collection was carried out in 2021-22, which was the year this assessment was introduced into Reception classes in England. In total, 70 teachers and key stakeholders from 47 Local Authorities were surveyed using a mixed methods approach. The findings highlight that most participants considered that the assessment was not beneficial to them, and negatively impacted on children and practice during the crucial first six weeks of Reception Year. Many participants in the study called to scrap this form of assessment.

Keywords: Reception, baseline, assessment, standards, and teachers

Introduction

In England, the education system has been dominated by the standards agenda since the 1970's, which has focused on neo-liberal notions of assessment, accountability, and performativity. These changes included the introduction of the national curriculum, assessments that include Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), the use of league tables and Ofsted inspections (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020). All successive governments have continued to focus on standards in schools and have further developed means of measuring success for children, teachers, and schools. Inevitably, this focus has filtered into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and statutory assessment has been increased. In 2021, the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) was re-introduced after two previous unsuccessful attempts. This paper focuses on this assessment, which is implemented in the first six weeks of children entering Reception Year. It explores teachers' and key stakeholder's perspectives on this assessment in its first year of implementation and considers the assessment's benefits, limitations and its impact on children, teachers, key stakeholders, and their classes.

Establishing a standards driven system

To understand today's standards driven system, and its infiltration of ECEC, it is important to explore how and why the education system radically changed. In the era of Thatcherism, the Education Act (1980) and the Education Reform Act (1988) introduced a new, more competitive ethos between schools, which promoted significant changes for schools to become market-led and public-facing (Galloway and Edwards, 1991). There was a policy shift towards developing individuals' skills to meet economic objectives, which represented a significant change in the ethos of education. Hursh (2005, p.5) identified that when the central concern is employability and economic productivity, education is less about developing "well-rounded liberally educated" people and more concerned with developing individuals to be 'economically productive' members of society. The *Better Schools* White Paper (DES, 1985) made teachers more accountable for their performance and gave the Government more control of the curriculum on a national scale. Teachers and schools experienced reduced autonomy and the relationship between government, schools and teachers became more hierarchical (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020).

Regardless of political persuasion successive governments have continued to focus on standards, which have objectives based on assessment, accountability, and performativity. New Labour in 1998 introduced literacy and numeracy strategies which mandated half of all curriculum time should be spent on these subjects (DfES, 1998, 19999, in Harnett and Vinney, 2008). These restrictions were later relaxed; however, standards objectives have continued to dominate education discourse. These have overshadowed policies that promote a broader approach to educational achievement, including the introduction of contextual value-added measurements of school performance, which was later removed by the Coalition government (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017) and inclusive practice objectives (Williams-Brown and Hodkinson, 2020). Pratt (2016, p.892) notes that:

the mantra of successive governments has been the need to 'raise standards'; in effect to ensure that test scores rise for 11 year olds... The result has been a school system, and particularly an assessment system that has become increasingly techno-rational in outlook. English teachers teach within a tightly controlled set of parameters, some made explicit in national curricula and national strategies, and others implicit - but no less real for teachers - in the way pupils are regularly tested and the results used to make judgements about both learning and teaching.

There has been significant and continued criticism on standards objectives. SATs is an example of a statutory assessment that has been deeply criticised but has continued to be implemented for three decades. SATs were first published in league tables in 1992, which compare schools' success and therefore ensures high stakes accountability to teachers and schools. Schools are ranked according to the number of children who achieve the expected national average (Higgs *et al.*, 1998). Research on SATs has for many years highlighted teachers' negative experiences on the conformity and constraints of its outcomes and concerns on its use to 'teach to the test' and 'prep' children to focus on academic achievement (Brown and Manktelow, 2015; Fieldings *et al.*, 1999; Wyse and Torrance, 2009). Other research has focused on the process being time-consuming (West *et al.*, 1994) and the impact of 'failing' SATs for children, teachers, and schools (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020). The assessment uses a bell curve system to assess how many children meet the determined national average. Those below the national average are seen as failing the assessment, but it is impossible for all children to achieve this average, otherwise the average would increase. In research carried out by Williams-Brown and Jopling (2020), teachers were not against assessment, but called for assessment to consider a broad range of achievements and to be rebalanced by focusing on the wellbeing of all children.

Schoolification and datafication in Early Childhood Education and Care

Since 2003, children in England have been formally assessed between four and five years old and the results at the end of their Reception year reported to parents and subject to school and national analysis. This form of assessment, based on observations throughout the academic year, replaced informal and local baseline testing (Bradbury, 2014). The assessment covers development of children from birth to age 5. It was originally known as the Foundation Stage Profile but was changed to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile in 2008. Ang (2014, p.191) stated that the EYFS profile "...is essentially a formalised tool for monitoring and assessment to gauge levels of children's attainment". In 2012 it was revised and reduced, but the results continued to be measured against 'good levels of development' and reported to compare developmental achievement (Bradbury, 2014). The Department for Education has annually released national and Local Authority level achievement outcomes since the implementation of the EYFS Profile (Department for Education, 2010). Practitioners are tasked with judging whether children meet the required level of development according to two

bands: 'emerging' or 'expected' (DfE, 2022). In current practice, children are assessed against 17 goals every six weeks. Bradbury (2019) states that the EYFS profile data provided the first set of statutory data, which increased attention from school leaders and can be used as part of the narrative of progress in Ofsted inspections.

Periodically, there has also been the implementation of baseline assessment in Reception. Cowley (2019, p.1) stated "the history of statutory assessments in English Reception classes is a long one, littered with false starts and failures". The Labour government in 1997 introduced this form of assessment, but it was dropped in 2002 when it was determined to be unworkable (Cowley, 2019). In 2015, the Government again approved a new RBA to try and formalise 'baseline' progress measures. Each child received a score that could be compared to their attainment at 11 years of age and used to measure the school's effectiveness. Schools were asked to sign up to one of three providers and nearly two thirds opted for a test-free baseline assessment, which was provided by Early Excellence (TES, 2015). Three providers were used for this assessment, two using one-to-one assessment with the use of a tablet and the other using observations. Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2017, p.680) found that teachers were concerned that the assessment was "educationally and ethically inaccurate, inappropriate and dangerous in setting low expectations". It ceased in 2016 because of incomparability between assessment providers, but returned in 2021 (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2017). In 2016 (p.5), Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury found that only 7.7% of 1,131 respondents to their survey agreed that the 2015 assessment was an 'accurate and fair way to assess children'. In 2021-2022 there has also been a Phonic Check introduced in Year 1 and a Times Table check in Year 4, which means there is now statutory assessment in five of seven primary school years. Bradbury (2019, pp.7-8) explains the link between these forms of assessment and datafication of ECEC practice:

This policy context has led to the datafication of ECE in England (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017), where practices, values and subjectivities shift towards a focus on the production and analysis of data, most often related to assessments. At the same time, the statutory curriculum and assessment have been criticised as the further evidence of the formalisation or 'schoolification' of ECE (Alexander 2009; Moss 2013; OECD 2006).

ECEC use of national and statutory assessment can be considered unique to other countries in the United Kingdom and internationally (Bradbury, 2014). The introduction of a mandatory

standardised curriculum like in other phases of education has increased formalisation and placed emphasis on standards and assessment (Ang, 2014; Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020). Pressures from Key Stage 1 have infiltrated ECEC. Over a decade ago, Pugh (2010, p.9) stated: ‘There are continuing concerns that the downwards pressure of Key Stage 1 into reception classes, together with poorer adult–child ratios in those classes, is creating a less than ideal situation for many four-year-olds’. This has led the sector to be subjected to datafication (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017) and schoolification (OECD, 2006, in, Bradbury, 2019), which has promoted a focus on ‘school readiness’ (Brooks and Murray, 2018), and more focus on literacy and numeracy achievement before entering the National Curriculum. In 2013, a group of leading professionals in the sector launched a campaign entitled ‘Too Much Too Soon’, which voiced concerns about the dominance of ‘school readiness’ and the government’s focus on ECEC being preparation for school. The campaign showed disagreement with the increased use of baseline tests and called for ECEC to be seen as a separate and distinct education sector. Instead of addressing these concerns, the government responded in the Guardian (2013, in Ang, 2014, p.190) and disagreed with the campaigners, stating that this perpetuated a “culture of low expectations in state schools”. Emphasis remains on ECEC settings preparing children for compulsory schooling, and formalised approaches are used to measure children’s achievements (Cameron and Moss, 2011, in Van Laere, Peeters and Vandebroek, 2012).

Reception Baseline Assessment

The government has recently published their Levelling Up White Paper that details their aim to significantly increase standards in reading, writing and maths. In England, this will mean that 90% of children should achieve this expected standard (HM Government, 2022). The latest RBA, provided by the National Foundation for Educational Research became statutory from September 2021 (NFER, 2022). It is likely to be used to support evidence of whether the government meets this target, especially as the first results will be published the summer of 2028 when this year’s Reception children are at the end of Key Stage 2 (GOV.UK, 2022). The focus of the assessment is on early mathematics and literacy, communication, and language. In response to the 2017 public consultation the government stated that the assessment would consist of “skills which can be reliably assessed, and which correlate with attainment in English and mathematics at the end of key stage 2, most noticeably early literacy and numeracy”

(Standards and Testing Agency, 2019, p.1). Originally, self-regulation skills including working memory, inhibitory control, and attentional flexibility were also going to be assessed. However, this was discontinued due to not being able to measure each skill area separately (Gagne and Nwadinobi: 2018; Standards and Testing Agency, 2019).

The baseline assessment is intended to provide a snapshot of four-year-olds levels of development in literacy, numeracy, language, and communication as they arrive at school. NFER (2022, p.1) state “It will provide a starting point to measure the progress schools make with their pupils between Reception class and the end of primary school”. The results provide a single number that will be compared to SATs results in Key Stage 2 to determine whether each child has progressed during their time in primary education. The reduction of a result to a single number has been critiqued as not considering children’s complex learning (Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, in Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2017). The assessment will provide a means of measuring school success, but in the ‘Information for parents’ booklet by the Standards and Testing Agency (2021) parents are informed that the test cannot be passed or failed, and the assessment is not to put their child under pressure, label or judge them. In fact, the results of this assessment are not published to parents unless requested, and teachers receive minimal feedback. The key objective is to release results at the end of Key Stage 2 to compare baseline results to SATs results (Meechan, 2023).

The assessment requires children to complete two twenty-minute one-to-one assessments with their teachers outside of their classroom. These assessments consist of practical tasks which use physical resources, using an online scoring system as pupils engage with the tasks (Standards and Testing Agency, 2022). There appears to be very little consideration regarding children’s initial experiences and wellbeing on entering school and being asked to complete this assessment. The focus on statutory assessment, that is not through observations, is in direct contrast to ECEC culture, values, pedagogy, and practice (Meechan, 2023). In 2018, the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) published a report entitled ‘A Baseline without Basis’. One concern raised in the report was the reliability of assessment when teachers were having to explain to each child, in differing ways, why the assessment was necessary. The report states that there will be “inevitable variations in administration as teachers seek to explain to young children - just settling into school and with no prior experience of test taking - what is required” (BERA, 2018, p.12). Additionally, as this assessment is statutory, there is no space for agency or negotiability on the part of the parent or child in terms of the data they produce (Meechan, 2013).

The Standards and Testing Agency (2019) detail the development of the assessment and state that it has gone through expert review processes, informal trialling and there was a large-scale trial last year which involved more than 300 schools and 3,000 pupils. The government have stated that “unlike the current progress measures, this [assessment] will give schools credit for the important work they do with their pupils between reception and year 2” (GOV.UK, 2022, p.1). However, both DfE and Ofsted have said that they need to deal with ‘gaming’, which include concerns on curriculum narrowing because of the pressure on schools to achieve in SATs. Cowley (2019) states that it’s in schools’ best interests that their children do not do well in the baseline assessment to demonstrate maximum progress between this assessment and SATs. Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2017) also raise concern that it will be acceptable for children who receive low scores in the baseline assessment to also receive low scores in SATs. They state: “This is a problem inherent in any ‘value added’ measure where the baseline is known and is more likely to affect those groups who are lower attaining within the system in general, such as ethnic minorities, children receiving free school meals, children with SEN and EAL and some summer-born children” (Bradbury, 2011, in Roberts-Holmes, 2017, p.674).

Research on RBA has ‘earned almost universal disapproval’ (More than A Score, 2022). Several ECEC high-profile organisations and members of the wider teaching community have raised concerns (Cowley, 2019). These include criticisms on the requirement to complete the assessment in the first six weeks of reception and the impact this has on building positive interactions and relationships (Cowley, 2019 and Roberts-Holmes *et al.*, 2019). It is imperative that perspectives of teachers and key stakeholders are gained following the first year of implementing the latest RBA. This paper will now discuss the research carried out in 2021 and its key findings.

Methodology

The study sought to investigate teachers’ and key stakeholder’s perspectives and experiences of the RBA and therefore sits within an interpretivist paradigm (Denscombe, 2021). The study had several aims and objectives that included providing an analysis of how the RBA had impacted on practice in 2021-2022 and to offer recommendations regarding the successful navigation of this assessment moving forwards. The study had the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' and key stakeholder's perspectives on the Reception Baseline Assessment?
2. What impact has the Reception Baseline Assessment had on practice in children's first few months of formal schooling?
3. What are teachers' and key stakeholder's perspectives on successfully navigating the Reception Baseline Assessment beyond 2021-2022?

Data collection was carried out between October 2021 and January in 2022. A survey was used to nationally reach out to teachers and key stakeholders including Headteachers, EYFS leads and teaching assistants. In total, 70 teachers and key stakeholders completed the survey. Demographic information for participants can be found in the below tables. This information includes participants that chose to answer these questions in the survey and includes categories defined by the way the participants described their roles.

[insert table one and two]

The study used a survey to gather statistical data on commonalities of perspective across the sample of participants as well as qualitative data. This approach magnifies the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative data collection by enabling researchers to consider collective perspectives as well as detail individual responses (Bryman, 2004). Typically, surveys require participants to respond to categories decided by the researcher. However, "...this risks reducing the participants to data objects rather than agentic people" (Hammerley and Traiqnou, 2012, in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The survey did include closed questions that asked participants to select responses that were most relevant to them. However, the survey included open questions for participants to also have space to explain their individual perspectives and experiences. Such an approach allowed for meta-inferences to be made by integrating both quantizing and qualifying within the analysis into a coherent whole (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998 in Onwuegbuzie and Combs, 2010, p.398) relating to participant's perspectives of the RBA. However, whilst statistical data is included in the findings of the study, emphasis is placed on detailing qualitative responses from participants to evidence individuals' differing perspectives and experiences. In doing so, these findings are not over generalised to be representative of all teachers and key stakeholders, but instead focuses on the participants' positions in this sample, acknowledging that their positions and actions can alter over time and are dependent on situational circumstances. Findings can then

be compared between different periods of time or between different places (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). The findings are then compared to relevant literature, campaigns and research on the current RBA, and its predecessor in 2015, to review more broadly its use in 2021-2022. In considering validity of the research participants held a variety of professional roles and the survey and its analysis were peer-reviewed by the experienced research team.

The findings are represented in relevant themes derived from the quantitative and qualitative data collection. Closed question data was statistically analysed using descriptive analysis to provide percentages of participants across the sample who held commonalities in perspective. Open question data was analysed using thematic analysis by “...identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, in Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Our approach included initially identifying themes in the open question data that were then collated into an excel document, discussed with the whole team, and compared to the quantitative results before themes were finalised. These findings are presented as direct quotes from the participants.

It was important that participants felt free to express their perspectives and experiences without concern of their identities being revealed in dissemination of the research. Questions were asked about the participants role, Local Authority, and type of school. All other forms of identification were omitted from the survey, and participants were not asked to name their setting. This means that the study is unable to state how many settings were involved, but it provided participants with the reassurance that the team did not know where they worked. The survey was disseminated via social media and the teams professional contacts. The front page of the survey detailed information about the research, including its aims and objectives. Details on the study and information on confidentiality, anonymity of participants, right to withdraw and voluntary completion were provided online before participants completed the survey. Participants were asked to proceed to data collection if they consented to take part in the study.

Findings and discussion

Professionals’ views differ to the government

Participants were asked to explain the purpose of RBA. From those who completed responses for this question, over half (63%) focused on the assessment being used to measure or track progress and obtain a baseline that can be compared from Reception to Key Stage 2 SATs

results. These responses relate directly to the government's objective to 'correlate' and release baseline assessment results at the same time as each year's Key Stage 2 results (GOV.UK, 2022; Standards and Testing Agency, 2019). Interestingly, many respondents mentioned the comparative use of this data, but only 7% specifically mentioned the skills that were being assessed. Examples of comments provided were as follows:

"Assess where the children are at the beginning of their time in primary school to judge progress over 7 years" (EYFS Lead with 27 years' experience).

"Collection of data to use in future to quantify progress across school" (Assistant Head with 13 years' experience).

"For the Government to have a starting assessment of children so they can compare it as they travel through school" (Reception Teacher with 3 years' experience).

The focus for 33% of the participants was on this assessment being directed by the government with aims that were for the government. Double this number of participants (66%) linked these aims to standards agenda language such as 'accountability' and 'judgement'. In doing so, these responses link the assessment to either assessing and judging children's achievement and/or assessing and judging schools' achievement in the six years between these two assessments. Direct comparisons between RBA and SATs appear to place the RBA as another high stakes assessment, equal to SATs as it will be used to baseline the SAT results (Higgs *et al.*, 1998; Meehan, 2023). Examples included:

"Accountability tool to see schools' impact from YrR to 6 according to the government" (Teacher with 22 years' experience).

"For the government to judge how well schools are doing" (Reception Teacher with 8 years' experience).

"To judge the level of progress made in the child's time from Reception to year 6" (EYFS Lead with 23 years' experience).

Whilst most responses focused on detailing the aims of the government, 6% participants chose to detail their negative views on the introduction of this assessment. These findings compare directly to negative perspectives of the assessment predecessor that was implemented between

2015-2016 and the current More than a Score campaign (More than a Score, 2022; Cowley, 2019; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2017; Roberts-Holmes and colleagues, 2019). Examples were as follows:

“A rope to hang us by when they get to year six & ‘underachieve’?” (EYFS Lead with 15 years’ experience).

“To use to punish schools over whatever the next headline is” (Assistant Head with 10 years’ experience).

“Useless, a DfE accountability lever that serves no purpose to teachers or schools” (Reception Teacher with 20 years’ experience).

Is the assessment valuable?

Most participants disagreed that the RBA was beneficial for their children and their practice. In total, 78% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that the RBA informed their understanding of children’s strengths, 81% disagreed or strongly disagreed that it informed understanding of children’s areas of development and 87% disagreed or strongly disagreed that it informed their teaching. Participants in the study were asked to rank how valuable the RBA is for children, parents/carers, teachers, Headteachers, Local Authorities and the Department for Education. The results below contribute to More than A Score’s statement that the assessment has ‘earned almost universal disapproval’ (More than a Score, 2022). It shows that participants felt the assessment has no value for children and parents/carers. The assessment value increases slightly for teachers and Headteachers and increases again for Local Authorities and the Department for Education. However over half of the sample did not believe this assessment was valuable even for these stakeholders. The findings visually represent that for the participants the assessment is carried out for governmental purposes and has no or little value for other stakeholders. The table below includes all participants that completed these questions in the survey and details the percentage of the sample that ranked each stakeholder from the assessment being valuable to really not valuable.

[insert table three]

When asked for their perspective on the introduction of the RBA, 77% of the participants provided negative responses. Findings compare directly to research carried out by More than a Score (2022) which calculated that there has been a loss of at least 60,000 school hours because of the RBA. More than a Score found that 77% of teachers did not consider the baseline assessment to be useful information and 80% did not believe the assessment provided an accurate picture of children’s attainment. The table below provides examples of responses for the four commonalities in perspective that were held by over 5% of the participant sample. These were the assessment being a waste of time or pointless, negative accounts of needing to leave the classroom and the assessment being developmentally inappropriate. Moreover, 5% participants also extend findings on this current assessment by stating its non-inclusive. Participant’s responses were coded into all relevant themes and therefore some key stakeholders appear in more than one theme if their response relates to two or more themes.

[Insert table four]

Children need their teachers in the classroom

In total, 80% of the participants agreed that the RBA had negatively impacted on quality time spent with their children in the first half term. Moreover, 90% agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment had negatively impacted on their workload. This directly compares with research carried out on the 2015 baseline assessment that criticised completion of the assessment in the first six weeks of reception and the impact this had on building positive interactions and relationships (Cowley, 2019 and Roberts-Holmes *et al.*, 2019). More than a Score (2020) has also passionately emphasised the detriment in the timing of this new assessment. Nancy Stewart, spokesperson for the campaign stated ‘The first few weeks of school are absolutely critical. This is when teachers rightly spend their time getting to know children and instilling a love of learning. It’s simply wrong to disrupt that time with a test whose sole purpose is data collection’ (More than a Score, 2022, p.1).

In total, almost half the teachers (49%) attributed this to having to be out of the classroom to carry out individual one-to-one assessment. The government has emphasised that this assessment will “give schools credit for their important work” between reception and year 6 (GOV.UK, 2022). However, teachers and key stakeholders in this research focused more on its

negative impact on their children during this year of assessment. Examples of their strongly worded statements included:

“I lost weeks getting to know them as individuals and to develop that crucial bond with them” (Class Teacher with 12 years’ experience).

“I was having to take children out of class to administer the test leaving the rest of the children” (Teacher with 12 years’ experience)

“Instead of getting to know the pupils, they were left with non-teaching staff members while I carried out RBA over the course of almost two weeks” (Reception Teacher with 10 years).

“Lots of teacher hours wasted by me being out of class, meaning it has taken longer for some children to settle which means a delay to the start of valuable teaching time” (Reception Teacher with 17 years’ experience).

“Took adult away from getting to know children settle them. Establish class behaviours and teaching how to make most of environment” (Reception Teacher with 15 years’ experience).

In total, 94% of the participant sample strongly disagreed or disagreed that the RBA had helped them get to know their children better than previous years. Participants commented on the constricted, scripted nature of the assessment and its narrow focus. Examples of their responses were as follows:

“Formality of the test is inhibitory - questioning is flawed - statements after the test are not accurate. Insufficient information about key areas - nothing about well being and involvement” (Teacher with 30 years’ experience)

“Because the baseline is so scripted some children couldn’t access the questions” (Teacher with 16 years’ experience).

“I don’t need a test on a laptop to help me get to know my class” (Class Teacher with 12 years’ experience).

“If anything I know them less as I’ve spent so much time on this pointless task!!” (Foundation stage Leader with 25 years’ experience)

“It was a false situation and so descriptive- we could not be natural and the child didn’t respond naturally” (EYFS Lead with 40 years’ experience).

Need for observations and time to talk

In total, 77% of the participants also mentioned the need for observations to accurately assess children’s development and the need to spend time talking and interacting with children. In total, 90% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they also administered other baseline assessments, for instance Local Authority baseline assessment, which were delivered before introduction of the statutory RBA and focus more on observations (Meechan, 2023). This directly relates to findings from research on the 2015 baseline assessment. Roberts-Holmes and colleagues (2019) found that 69% of their participants disagreed that the assessment helped develop positive relationships with children. They found that teachers felt anxious and conflicted in implementing the assessment at a time when they needed to settle children into school and develop positive relationships. Examples of their responses were as follows:

“Teachers are able to develop stronger relationships with children within the provision where they are interacting daily. Being removed from the setting to work with a teacher 1:1 has very little benefit” (Curriculum Advisor with 11 years’ experience).

“Talking to a child is the best way to get to know them” (Early Years Lead with 12 years’ experience).

“Spending time with the children and engaging in their self-chosen activities gives me a far better understanding of the children's needs and abilities” (Assistant Head with 30 years’ experience).

“Spending time observing and talking to children in play is more beneficial” (Assistant Head with 13 years’ experience).

“Our own baseline enabled lots of interaction between myself and the children” (Class teacher with 12 years’ experience).

We have more faith in our own assessment

Some of the participants (17%) commented that the assessment was too narrow and didn’t focus on all areas of learning. This raises questions on the appropriateness of this assessment and the purpose of assessment. Ang (2014, p.189) in referencing Genishi’s (1992) work stated:

...assessing children’s learning can be an important and valuable part of any curriculum and early childhood practice, but what is significant is not the unquestioning use of assessment itself, but the ways in which children are engaged appropriately in an empowering process where their diverse skills and abilities are recognised, and educators are able to explore alternative pedagogical strategies that support children’s learning.

Participants commented that reflected on the inappropriateness of the RBA were as follows:

“The RBA spent too much time asking the wrong questions and looking forward the wrong evidence” (Reception Teacher with 10 years’ experience).

“Because it was very narrow and only gave a snapshot on that day. It was not possible to gain a deep understanding of a child from such narrow parameters” (EYFS Lead with 26 years’ experience)

“Because the government baseline assessment did not give us useful information as it took the children too much out of their comfort zones. It is more useful to assess the children through their play” (Reception Teacher with 11 years’ experience).

“Because we have more faith in our own internal baseline assessment” (Class teacher with 12 years experience).

“Had to redo everything to build a picture of the children with notes I could compare” (EYFS Teacher with 20 years’ experience).

“The information given in the report didn't help us to know the gaps in knowledge or specific maths/literacy skills” (Early Years Lead with 12 years' experience).

Many of the participants (79%) used their own assessment, including internal baseline assessment using observations and play to learn more about their children's development and inform their teaching practice in reception. These results show that the inefficiency of the RBA leads to this assessment being an extra assessment on top of pre-existing assessments. There is a real concern about children being subjected to multiple types of assessment and the occurrence of data doubling of the child (Meechan, 2023). However, these findings show that this was necessary in 2021-2022 because of insufficient evidence from the RBA. Examples of their comments were as follows:

“My own observations and teacher judgement. Time to trust teachers” (EYFS Lead with 15 years 'experience).

“Our own baseline gives a better picture of the whole child. Focusing on the prime areas” (EYFS Lead with 22 years' experience).

“The RBA was not an accurate representation of what the children can do. They were tested in a quiet room, one to one. Some of them chose not to answer the questions or were distracted by the room. Our own baselines judgement through coplaying with the children are much more accurate (Reception Teacher with 8 years' experience).

“The baseline did not provide enough information. Quality time spent observing and interacting with the child and the observations of other adults and conversations with parents provide a more detailed wholistic approach” (EYFS Leader with 21 years' experience).

“We did our own based on observation and interaction in order to get to know the child well in order to plan and teach successfully” (EYFS Leader with 40 years' experience).

“We made observations of children in the setting over a 4-week period to give a more accurate picture of what child could do rather than a brief narrow snapshot where the child was often bored (Reception Teacher with 4 years’ experience).

Time to scrap statutory baseline assessment

Participants were asked for their final comments on the RBA and just over half (54%) chose to strongly advocate for its removal and for teachers as professionals to carry out their own assessment. More than a Score (2022) found that respondents felt the assessment is a ‘tick-box exercise’ that devalued professional judgement and increased workload. Participants in this study did not define it as ‘tick-box’, but for many of these participants, the RBA took them away from being in the classroom, learning from observations and their own assessment. Examples of their comments were as follows:

“Please stop testing 4-year-olds!!” (EYFS Lead with 18 years’ experience)

“I would like it to be scrapped and more trust given to teachers to do their job rather than adding to our workload. I love my job teaching and feel privileged to work with my children. They should be allowed to be children and we should celebrate their uniqueness” (EYFS Lead with 15 years’ experience).

“... Our children are already some of the most assessed and tested in the world - we don’t need to test 4-year-olds as soon as they start school. Baseline assessments can be achieved without this ridiculous test. Another stick with which to beat schools with I fear?!” (Foundation Stage Leader with 25 years’ experience)

“Please just scrap it. Teachers have trained for years to do our jobs. We know how to assess children. Let us get on with it” (Reception Teacher with 5 years experience).

“This is another in a series of failed baselines! Why do we keep doing this?” (EYFS Lead with 40 years’ experience).

“Please reconsider the use of this pointless exercise and actually listen to the professionals who are experienced with working within Early Years, not just civil

servants who haven't experienced a classroom in the last decade" (Class teacher with 12 years' experience).

"Please can this be cancelled from here on in and teachers be left to baseline children themselves. PSED, CL and Physical are prime areas and are more important than Literacy and Maths so surely baselining these areas would be more beneficial, so without the prime areas they will never be able to access the specific areas such as maths and literacy" (Reception Teacher with 21 years' experience).

"Please scrap this hideous monstrosity of an assessment you utter fools to think this is beneficial you should be ashamed of yourselves" (EYFS Teacher with 7 years' experience).

Conclusion

The research sought to investigate teachers and other key stakeholder's perspectives on the latest use of Reception Baseline Assessment in the first year of implementation. Whilst the sample size of participants is relatively small, commonalities of perspective were evidenced that showed shared perspectives and experiences across 47 Local Authorities, with a range of school types and professional roles. Findings from the study show that Reception Baseline Assessment did not work for most of these participants in 2021-2022 and negatively impacted on children and practice during these crucial six weeks of reception. Most participants in the study did not value this form of assessment, and had to then carry out their own assessment to individually get to know the children in their care. The results of the assessment were not considered useful, and therefore the comparative use of these results to SATs results in Key Stage 2 were not valued. This perspective is directly in contrast to the aims of this assessment and the government's view that the assessment would give schools credit for their work (GOV.UK, 2022). Most participants in the study did not focus on projected use of the assessment in Key Stage 2, but instead focused on the effect of this assessment in Reception. One of the participants stated, 'it should benefit the children and teachers in the here and now-it doesn't' (EYFS Teacher with 20 years' experience).

The findings show that lessons have not been learnt from past attempts at implementing statutory baseline assessment. Changes have been made, but these have focused on using one provider and having one form of assessment for consistency purposes (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2017). The choice of assessment has not considered damning criticisms of the 2015 baseline assessment that highlighted concerns with testing narrow parameters, taking teachers out of the classroom and not focusing assessment for this age-range on observations (Bradbury, 2014 and 2019; Cowley, 2019; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2017). It is important to reiterate that these findings directly compare to findings of the 2015 baseline assessment. The Standards and Testing Agency state that this assessment was trialled through expert review processes, informal trialling and a large-scale trial that included 300 schools and 3,000 pupils (The Standards and Testing Agency, 2019). However, it is imperative that last year's experiences of this assessment are investigated and considered in determining whether Reception Baseline Assessment should continue. This form of assessment cannot continue because gaining the results is beneficial for national, comparative data (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020). Most of the participants in the research were not against assessment but called for appropriate assessment to be used for this age range. The need for standards and its objectives of assessment, accountability and performativity should not be prioritised over the experiences of children being measured. Therefore, Reception Baseline Assessment, based on analysis of findings, should be scrapped and appropriate assessment should be used. For participants in the study, appropriate assessment for four-year-olds is the continued use of internal assessment, that focuses on a broader range of development, using observations and play.

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Table one: Participant demographic information

Participant role	Number of participants
EYFS lead	27
Reception class teacher	21
Teacher/Class teacher	13
Assistant Head	3
Teaching Assistant	2
Curriculum Advisor	1
Headteacher	1
Participant experience	
Average number of years’ experience	16
Lowest number of years’ experience	1
Highest number of years’ experience	27
Participant qualifications	
BA	25
Degree	13
Masters	8
PGCE	17
QTS	3

Table two: School demographic information

Total number of Local Authorities included in the study	47
Type of school participants working in at the time of data collection	
Academy	31
LA	35
Trust	1
Faith based	1

Table three: Value of assessment for key stakeholders

Stakeholder	Really valuable	Valuable	Not valuable	Really not valuable
Children	0%	1%	13%	85%
Parents/carers	0%	0%	26%	74%
Teachers	0%	17%	28%	55%
Headteachers	0%	16%	22%	62%
Local Authorities	1%	28%	16%	54%
Department for Education	9%	37%	15%	39%

Table four: Negative commonalities in perspective

Commonalities in perspective	Percentage of participants	Examples of responses
Waste of time/pointless	54%	<p>“Absolutely pointless, workload increasing, expensive and useless” (Teacher with 22 years’ experience).</p> <p>“Absolutely time wasting and detrimental to the children’s crucial first weeks in school” (class teacher with 12 years’ experience).</p> <p>“It a pile of cow pat. Waste of time and money. Not beneficial in the slightest. I wish people who decide what we do actually worked in schools so they could understand how completely and utterly pointless this</p>

		baseline is” (EYFS Teacher with 7 years’ experience).
Negative impact on being out of class	53%	<p>“Don't like being out of class at such an early stage when children need settling and we need to establish rules/expectations/relationships (FKS Lead with 25 years’ experience)</p> <p>“I felt it took me away from getting to know the children within the classroom environment. I would have preferred to spend time getting to know the children within the classroom during their first few weeks...” (Reception Teacher with 16 years’ experience)</p> <p>“I think it is shocking that young children are removed from the classroom setting at such an early stage to answer random questions. It takes the teacher away from the class at the worst possible time” (Teacher with 16 years’ experience).</p>
Developmentally inappropriate	7%	<p>“I felt it was a waste of time that took me from my class. I feel angry that such a developmentally inappropriate activity is expected of such young children” (EYFS Lead with 16 years’ experience).</p> <p>“...It’s flawed in terms of a robust measure of progress and doesn’t take developmental stage into account... (Reception Teacher with 15 years’ experience).</p>
Not inclusive	5%	<p>“I don't think it's inclusive. I work with SEN children and it's completely inappropriate & not suitable for these children” (Teacher with 8 years’ experience).</p> <p>“I think that although the assessment is intended to support, it adds to our workload significantly. It also is not inclusive for children with special educational needs” (Reception Teacher with 5 years’ experience).</p> <p>“...The RBA only assesses basic Maths and Literacy skills. It is also harder for EAL children as it is in English e.g. . Children may be able to count but just don't know the words for the numbers”</p>

		(Assistant Head with 30 years' experience).
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