



Early Excellence initial response to the publication of the Ofsted Document 'Bold Beginnings'

8th December 2017

The Reception Year (YR) has increasingly become a contested phase of education, sitting awkwardly at both the end of the statutory EYFS; (where it is described in terms of establishing the 'foundations' for successful learning and development) and the beginning of 'School' (where it is conceived as 'receiving' children into the requirements of 'Schooling').

The statutory EYFS, and its preceding documents were built on evidence and research and have established a clear set of expectations and outcomes in order to ensure that YR provides the most effective and significant learning opportunities for children at this age. This is considered both in terms of content; through the Areas of Learning and Development, and the essential learning behaviours through the Characteristics of Effective Learning. Equally, it presents guidelines on the approach to the most effective delivery of appropriate pedagogy.

However, it is clear that confusions and misunderstandings remain, and Early Excellence welcome the focus on YR provided by the 'Bold Beginnings' and its recognition as a unique and important year in its own right.

The findings described in 'Bold Beginnings' were primarily drawn from visits to schools that had been judged as 'outstanding' following recent Ofsted Inspections. It was, therefore, a reflection of a sample of practice considered successful by the Inspectors who had observed it. Within the broad and detailed content of the report a number findings identified the elements of successful practice within these schools and the key elements and aspects that define their success.

In March 2017, Early Excellence published the findings from 'The Hundred Review' which similarly focused on YR practice and provision. As part of this review a commissioned study 'What research tells us about effective pedagogic practice and children's outcomes in the Reception year' outlined the academic evidence that identified the comparative and longitudinal evidence for ensuring effective and successful YR practice and provision. This concluded that in order to achieve long term successful outcomes acknowledgement and support for the following aspects were central to YR practice:

- Language development
- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Physical development
- Self-regulation
- Executive Functioning

The research also concluded that the range of 'approaches' to learning and teaching in YR needs to be varied and appropriate, blending direct teaching of knowledge and skills with opportunities for children to engage in self-initiated / 'play' activities to deepen, contextualise and embed their learning.

Using the outcomes of EYFS Profile data, the 'Bold Beginnings' identifies that the lowest national outcomes in YR lie in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics. Describing these as 'fundamental' and 'the building blocks for all other learning', 'Bold Beginnings' proceeds to then focus on these specific areas as identified targets for development in YR. Unfortunately this culminates in a set of recommendations, particularly specified for Primary Schools, that entirely narrows the focus to reading, writing and mathematics. The implicit assumption that the other aspects of the EYFS are currently delivered effectively creates the impression that only these identified aspects are important and that the remainder of the EYFS requirements will be achieved regardless. This creates a very real danger of misinterpretation and the limiting of effective practice to achieving outcomes in three Specific Areas of Learning and Development at the expense of the importance of the wider YR curriculum.

One of the conclusions of 'The Hundred Review' stated that:

"The need for children to have a good knowledge and understanding of the skills required for successful Literacy and Mathematics outcomes is unanimously supported by YR teachers and practitioners. However, in order for children to attain good outcomes in Literacy and Mathematics, a range of other contributory knowledge, skills, experiences and learning behaviours are equally important, and successful outcomes in these two areas of learning are dependent on more than the acquisition of formal skills. This counter-intuitive approach to early Literacy and Mathematics is often misunderstood or its importance not acknowledged, with a negative effect on the very outcomes that are being worked towards."

Reading, Writing and Mathematics are complex knowledges that require direct instruction and opportunities for children to embed and understand them in meaningful contexts. They are also dependent on other aspects being securely in place. By omitting any reference to these supporting aspects, there is a real danger that a misinterpretation of the recommendations of 'Bold Beginnings' will further undermine effective achievement. Although learning to read may indeed be a 'core purpose' of YR, this is equally dependent on the appropriate acquisition of effective language, personal, social, emotional and physical skills as well as acquiring appropriate proficiency in the aspects of self-regulation and executive functioning. These are all 'core purposes' of YR and it is both misleading and unhelpful to separate and fragment them artificially. They are not hierarchical in nature but intrinsically interdependent and the failure of the recommendations in 'Bold Beginnings' to present this accurately has the potential to damage the credibility of the entire report.

There is no dispute that YR is a critically important year for children in its own right and that the most appropriate and effective curriculum and pedagogy has the potential to influence outcomes for a sustained period of time. Therefore it remains more imperative than ever to build a broad consensus on what the priorities and practices in YR should be. While 'Bold Beginnings' claims to reflect effective practice in a number of successful schools, its conclusions are open to misinterpretation with the potential for a negative impact on YR practice and provision.