Research and analysis

Strong foundations in the first years of school

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Applies to England

Contents

Introduction

This report examines how schools secure the foundational knowledge and skills that every child needs by the end of key stage 1 to give them the best chance of educational success. Schools are facing significant challenges in dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children currently in Reception and key stage 1. This report identifies what might be particularly important for schools to focus on.

Research is clear that high-quality early education establishes the foundations for

later success, including academic achievement, good health and well-being.[footnote 1] While high-quality education benefits all children, it is especially important for those whose early learning has been limited. This may include children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and those whose language and communication are delayed.[footnote 2] Making sure that all children have the best start in life is one of Ofsted's strategic priorities.

The report focuses on the aspects of the Reception and key stage 1 curriculum that, our evidence suggests, make the biggest difference to children learning what they need by the end of key stage 1. It draws on evidence from our previous publications:

- 'Best start in life: a research review for early years', which examines the early years foundation stage (EYFS) areas of learning, with a focus on children aged from birth to 4 [footnote 3]
- our curriculum research reviews (national curriculum subjects) [footnote 4]
- our subject reports (national curriculum subjects) [footnote 5]
- 'Education inspection framework: overview of research' [footnote 6]
- 'Bold beginnings: the Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding schools' [footnote 7]

To supplement this evidence, His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) visited 20 schools to explore the findings of these publications in more detail and to examine the specific implications for the Reception Year, and Years 1 and 2.

The report draws clear conclusions and gives recommendations, but it is for schools to decide whether and how to use the findings.

Context

What children learn when they are young has a profound and lasting impact. This is well illustrated by recent data on reading in England. The 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) placed England's Year 5 pupils fourth out of the 43 participating countries. The study also reported 'a positive correlation between performance in the Year 1 phonics screening check and performance in PIRLS 2021'. [footnote 8] The same report also noted that 'a 1-point increase [in the screening check] was associated with nearly a 4-point gain in PIRLS 2021.' [footnote 9] England's systematic approach to teaching early reading, as well as the check's sharply focused assessment at the end of Year 1, now shows up positively in pupils' performance in reading as they move towards the end of primary school.

The Ofsted mathematics report in 2023 was similarly encouraging. We found 'a resounding, positive shift in mathematics education' in primary schools. We also noted that 'leaders intend that pupils "keep up, not catch up". These approaches set out a better path to proficiency for pupils.'[footnote 10]

However, although performance in the phonics screening check has improved by 21 percentage points since it was introduced in 2012, disadvantaged children are still less likely to meet the expected standard.[footnote 11] Although 67% of disadvantaged children reached the expected standard in 2023, representing an increase of 4 percentage points since 2022, this still means that around 3 in 10 cannot decode sufficiently well by the end of Year 1. Our mathematics report identified a similar concern, noting the 'large gap between the lowest and highest achievers, and between disadvantaged and advantaged pupils'. [footnote 12]

When children join Reception, what they already know differs greatly. Some will need additional teaching.[footnote 13] They will need opportunities to develop their language and communication, to learn what their peers already know.[footnote 14] This may include children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Early education must equip all children, without fail, with the knowledge and skills they need to make progress in Reception, through key stage 1 and beyond.

By the end of key stage 1, all children need foundational knowledge: how to communicate, read, write and calculate. This includes the general knowledge that will help them to understand the world around them. Their physical, emotional and social development are also important. Finally, developing executive function is crucial for both learning and well-being. This means they need to be able to:

- focus their attention on what matters and screen out what is not relevant
- hold information in their minds in order to work on it
- focus on a goal and work out when it is necessary to change their approach to achieve it [footnote 15]

Our evidence suggests that the children who are already the most knowledgeable and confident get the most out of Reception and key stage 1. Those who need the most help to secure firm learning foundations do not always get the teaching and practice they need. As a result, even at this young age, some children fall further behind their peers. Once children fall behind, it is hard for them to catch up.

Main findings

Some schools are not making sure that all children learn the foundational knowledge that they will need later. This makes it harder for children to learn at key stage 2.

- Some schools do not identify clearly enough the knowledge that children need to learn during Reception and key stage 1. This means that teachers do not know what to prioritise in their teaching and assessment.
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Curriculums are often overloaded with activities that do not focus on helping children to build fluency in foundational knowledge and skills.

- Schools do not always allocate enough time for children to practise what they have been taught so that they remember it.

- Curriculums, particularly in some Reception classes, leave children's learning too much to chance. When there is a choice about whether to take part, some children, often those who need the most teaching and practice, opt out.

- When schools identify weaknesses in children's knowledge, skills and behaviour, they do not always consider carefully enough how the curriculum or teaching approaches might need to be adapted to compensate.

Children who begin school with the lowest starting points and those who start to fall behind are the most affected by weaknesses in curriculum, teaching and assessment.

This vulnerable minority of children are more likely to suffer when opportunities to learn are not equitable. Adults tend not to interact with them as much as they do with other children. Although they need the most teaching and opportunities for practice, these children often get the least. As a result, the gap between them and their peers widens.

Schools' curriculums for English – and literacy in the early years – beyond the teaching of phonics, are often weak.

- The teaching of reading is improving. Government policy and guidance, and our research on how well schools teach children to read, have highlighted the important role of systematic synthetic phonics in early reading. [footnote 16]

- Schools introduce complex reading and writing tasks too early. They do not give children enough teaching and practice for them to become fluent in foundational knowledge and skills, such as in handwriting and composing simple sentences.

- End of key stage 1 assessments unhelpfully influence the schools' decisions about the English curriculum. These assessments are no longer statutory. However, many schools still provide children with activities that replicate those tests, well before they have taught them what they need to know to complete them successfully.

The barriers to learning

Our findings show that the main barriers preventing children from learning important foundational knowledge are:

- school leaders have not made clear what needs to be included and emphasised in the curriculum for children in Reception and key stage 1
- teaching methods do not help children learn and remember important knowledge
- assessment is weak
- schools do not instil the behaviour and attitudes necessary for children to learn successfully

Discussion of the findings

In this section, we discuss each barrier and the specific concerns we have identified relating to them. We summarise each concern, drawing on positive and negative examples from our wider evidence base, and illustrate these using examples from our visits.

A clear curriculum

A school's curriculum is at the heart of education; it should set out the knowledge and skills that children will learn.[footnote 17]

Our mathematics report described how effective schools make sure that curriculum plans, teaching approaches, tasks, assessments – and ways of making sure that these evolve as necessary – align well.[footnote 18] When this is successful, for any subject, all the elements work in harmony, and each element is of high quality, so that children learn effectively. The curriculum sets out the path to proficiency in the subject, while good assessments check that children are firmly on that path and that they stay on it.

When this clear thinking about curriculum is absent, children do not learn what they need by the end of key stage 1.

- The mathematics report found that Reception Year curriculums lack detail.[footnote 19] There was a similar finding in our 2017 report, 'Bold beginnings'.[footnote 20]

- The English report noted that curriculums for writing often introduce complex tasks too early, before pupils have learned the knowledge and skills they need to complete them.[footnote 21]

Introducing complex tasks too early

Building fluency in foundational knowledge allows children to succeed and therefore grow in confidence. However, English and literacy curriculums, more than mathematics, tend to introduce complex tasks too early. Therefore, children do not learn foundational knowledge properly, such as:

- how to compose simple sentences orally
- how to hold a pencil correctly and form letters and numbers [footnote 22]
- how to spell
- how to become a fluent reader

Language is the bedrock of thinking and learning. It should be a priority in the curriculum. In order to write, children need to be able to compose orally (that is, to say out loud what they want to write). They also need to know how to spell, form letters and punctuate correctly. Some curriculums, however, do not sequence this knowledge coherently and sequentially. They expect children to work on tasks that are well beyond their competence. For example, children in the Reception Year are often asked to write stories or about recent events before they have learned the necessary knowledge and skills. This is particularly difficult for children with lower starting points. For example, all the children in a Year 1 class might be expected to write a character description, even though some of them still cannot form all their letters or write recognisable words.

Teaching handwriting only in phonics sessions, as some schools do, is part of the problem. It means that children do not learn the basics of letter formation that establish the foundations for speedy and fluent handwriting later on. Further, plans to teach handwriting in key stage 1 do not always include important elements that the national curriculum requires, such as making sure that children understand which letters belong to which handwriting ‘families’ and that they practise these. Incorrect letter formation then becomes a habit. Even when schools provide explicit handwriting lessons, teachers do not always demonstrate well enough to children what they need to do. For example, asking children to trace over letters, rather than showing them how to form letters correctly, is unhelpful.

> Some Year 3 teachers recognised that pupils entering key stage 2 were struggling because their handwriting was weak. Leaders, however, had not identified this as a shortcoming of the Reception and key stage 1 curriculums and so had not adjusted them accordingly.

Beyond teaching spelling in phonics lessons, schools rarely use dictation as a way for children to practise spelling without having to compose sentences themselves. The schools visited did not always realise that this is part of the national curriculum for Years 1 and 2:

> 'Pupils should be taught to: … write from memory simple sentences dictated by the teacher that include words using the GPCs [grapheme-phoneme correspondences] and common exception words taught so far.'[footnote 23]

Some whole-school approaches to reading comprehension are unsuitable for children in the early stages of learning to read. Expecting children to answer written comprehension questions when they can neither read the text on their own nor write down their answers is not realistic. They need more practice in reading decodable books to develop reading fluency. They also need time to develop their language comprehension by talking with adults about rich and interesting texts.

Similarly, some whole-school approaches to writing are not realistic for children in the early stages of learning to write. For example, in some schools, the writing curriculum is based on producing different text types, such as instructions, recounts and stories. When schools focus on text types in Reception and key stage 1, they often pay less attention to foundational knowledge, such as spelling, handwriting and orally composing sentences, which would allow children to successfully compose such pieces of extended writing.

> Some Year 3 teachers told us about several children who, by the start of key stage 2, who had lost their enthusiasm for learning and lacked independence. They needed well-developed reading, writing and language to access the key stage 2 curriculum, but their earlier curriculum had resulted in them missing vital stages in learning to read and write. As a result, they found the key stage 2 work too difficult.

Emphasising activities rather than what all children need to learn

Schools intend that every child will learn important knowledge in the early years. Most schools are clear that certain learning, such as learning to read and write, and understand and use numbers, cannot be left to chance through a child's own choices.

However, if the Reception curriculum is not clear enough about what all children need to learn, it can become merely a list of activities. Simply providing experiences that children can choose from is not enough. A typical child might pass much of the day engaged and busy, but may not spend enough time learning

new concepts and encountering new ideas. Sharing books and having discussions with adults help the child to build conceptual knowledge that, later, will feed into their writing and their understanding of texts and extend their knowledge of the world.

Additionally, not all children take full part in what is offered. Those with more limited knowledge are the least likely to participate, which exacerbates their disadvantage.

Developing an effective curriculum for the youngest children is challenging. Leaders often prioritise practical considerations, such as the physical environment, groupings and how best to use adults. The risk is, however, that when these practical considerations take priority, the question 'What do we want children to learn?' becomes 'What do we want children to do?'

Not taking sufficient account of children's starting points

Effective support for disadvantaged children and those with SEND has always been important in Reception and key stage 1. Since the pandemic, it has become even more important. Children who fall behind early on struggle to catch up.

Schools told us about the consequences of lockdowns. For example, children were starting Reception with delayed communication and language, poor self-help skills and emotional difficulties. Many children's needs had not been identified earlier. While schools talk confidently about children's difficulties on entry, adjustments to the curriculum to take account of these difficulties are not always considered. Children are likely to progress at different rates and, therefore, may need different quantities and kinds of teaching to succeed.[footnote 24] As our 'Bold beginnings' report found, successful schools do not accept that some will 'catch up later'.[footnote 25]

> A headteacher during one of our visits said, 'We cater for the children who would once have been 'school action' through our mainstream teaching and learning. The ones who struggle get the scaffolding and support they need.'

Some schools consider high numbers of children in Reception and key stage 1 classes to have SEND. In response, staff provide extra help for small groups of these children throughout the day. However, while some small-group sessions may be needed, their extensive use raises a question about the overall suitability of the school's curriculum.

> One school visited had revised its Reception curriculum to provide extra help for children with speech, language and communication difficulties.

Increasing numbers of children joining Reception were experiencing these difficulties. This made it hard for them to express their wants and needs or to make friends and experience high-quality play.

The revised curriculum emphasised language development for all. For example, staff made sure that every child took part in conversations with adults every day. This helped children to learn conversational language structures, which they were then able to use with others. Children were given more opportunities to sing songs and nursery rhymes. When staff read stories, the children learned key words and phrases by heart. Over time, the number of children deemed to have SEND halved. Leaders also noticed that, as children's communication improved, so did their behaviour.

Summary of the main concerns

- lack of clarity in the curriculum, so that teachers do not know what to prioritise in their teaching and assessment
- introducing complex tasks too early and therefore not building children's fluency in foundational knowledge
- focusing on planning activities rather than on what all children should learn
- not taking sufficient account of children's starting points

Curriculum considerations for leaders

- Does the curriculum prioritise children's communication and language?
- How do you make sure that the curriculum gives enough emphasis to other foundational knowledge and skills, such as addition facts, handwriting and how to write simple sentences (depending on year group and EYFS/national curriculum requirements)?
- Do whole-school approaches get in the way of children learning important foundational knowledge in the early years and key stage 1? Do these approaches (for example, to extended writing or reading comprehension) expect children to do too much too soon?
- When activities are designed, to what extent is the focus on what children should learn and practise and how all children will benefit?
- To what extent does the curriculum reflect children's starting points? Does it sufficiently emphasise the knowledge and skills that children need to learn so that they are not held back later?

Appropriate pedagogy

Our definition of 'teaching' in the early years is broad.[footnote 26] It covers the many different ways in which adults help young children to learn, including:

- interacting with children during planned and child-initiated play and activities
- communicating and modelling language
- showing, explaining and exploring ideas
- encouraging, questioning, recalling and providing a narrative for what children are doing
- setting challenges and helping children to achieve them
- paying attention to the physical environment and resources, as well as the daily structures and routines that establish expectations

Both play-based learning and direct instruction have value for teaching young children, but considering which is better suited to a particular form of knowledge is crucial. It is also important to think about how best children can learn what is intended.

If we acknowledge that learning is, at least in part, about altering long-term memory, then it is important to choose the teaching approaches that will be most effective in achieving this.[footnote 27] Children integrate new, taught knowledge into long-term memory, and connect it with what they have already learned, in order to help them understand it. The approach the teacher chooses is therefore critical to successful learning.

A challenge for schools when considering appropriate pedagogy is that, as previously discussed, children not only begin school with different starting points but are likely to progress at different rates. Therefore, they may need different amounts of teaching and practice to succeed. Several of our subject reports have identified a common weakness in this area: that teachers do not always give pupils sufficient practice so that they can remember what their teacher intended they should learn. Children have covered the content of the curriculum, but they have not remembered it.

Overload of children's working memory

Children have an extraordinary capacity to learn but, like adults, they are limited by what they can hold in working memory at any one time. Young children are also still developing executive functioning skills, such as being able to focus their attention.

Lessons in which children are taught routines that help them take part, such as turning to talk to a partner, or routinely repeating letter sounds, key words and phrases, help them to focus on and remember what they are learning. This reduces cognitive load, because they do not need to use working memory to

anticipate what might happen next: they are familiar with the lesson's structure, routines and opportunities for repetition.

> Some Reception and key stage 1 teachers asked children to think about a question and talk to a peer about it. This gave them time to process their thoughts, practise using vocabulary and sentence structures and secure their knowledge. Children learned how to use this time well. The routines and expectations were clear. In these schools, most children were engaged in their learning and eager to contribute fully.

Our mathematics report recommended using routines in mathematics lessons.[footnote 28] It emphasised the importance of making sure that the whole class is facing the teacher when that teacher is explaining new content and giving instructions. This helps children focus on what is being taught. It also recommended keeping noise levels low.

Below is an example of a child who has lost focus in a mathematics lesson, resulting in, what could be described as, a complete loss of information from working memory.[footnote 29] When this happens, children are unable to remember any of the intended learning.

> The teacher was teaching about the relationship between a whole and its parts. The children were asked to write numbers in circles on a laminated worksheet and were given a cloth to wipe out errors. One example showed a circle with one red crayon and a second circle with 4 blue crayons. Each circle was joined by straight lines to a third circle showing the whole group of 5 crayons.
>
> The children had pots of crayons on their table. A child who was struggling with this task was distracted by the cloth and by wiping out numbers. Tipping crayons out of the pot provided a further distraction. When the teacher came to the table, the child had completely forgotten what the task was and could not recall the earlier discussion of 'part-part-whole'.

It is vital that teachers make sure that children pay attention to the lesson's important information. This means minimising anything irrelevant or distracting as, otherwise, children's working memory will be quickly overwhelmed.

Not building on previous learning

Sometimes, teachers wrongly assume that children already have the knowledge they need to complete a task successfully. As a result, the children cannot

succeed in the task because it does not build effectively on what they have already learned. Rushing through the curriculum and expecting children to do too much too soon may give the illusion of progress, but it creates gaps in children's knowledge that will take more time to deal with later. Both our mathematics and English reports identified this.[footnote 30] Our visits revealed similar problems.

> We saw children trying to record mathematics learning in books when they had not been taught how to write numbers correctly. We also saw children rewriting a story when they did not have the phonics knowledge to spell most of the words they wanted to use.

Either the curriculum had missed out the important teaching that these children needed, or the teacher had not given them enough opportunities to practise to make sure that they remembered crucial knowledge later.

We also saw positive examples.

> Teachers spent time revisiting knowledge that they had previously taught and then modelling new learning. Afterwards, children worked independently and practised what they had learned. We saw adults praising children for applying what they knew to a new task and prompting them, when required, to recall more of the specific knowledge they needed. These approaches enthused the children, and being active participants helped them to learn and remember more.

Helping children complete a task at the expense of long-term success in the subject

All children need foundational knowledge and skills to make progress later. This means that some of them, including some children with SEND, may need to work at an earlier stage of the curriculum than their peers. This will enable them to learn and practise important knowledge that their peers already have, until it is fluent.

We have already noted that:

> 'We often see pupils with insufficient knowledge being expected to attempt the same learning as their peers. Struggling to access the lesson wastes precious time and can threaten their self-confidence. Pupils who need more teaching and practice opportunities than their peers end up with less.' [footnote 31]

We also found this on some of our visits, and it is referred to in several of our subject reports. For example, in our history report, we noted that:

> ‘Teachers focused on adapting the immediate task so that pupils could complete it, instead of building their knowledge and skills and addressing gaps so that they could access the curriculum in the longer term.’ [footnote 32]

Inequitable opportunities for learning

Research suggests that children who struggle with learning have fewer social conversations and caring interactions with adults than other children. More of their interactions with adults focus on managing behaviour. [footnote 33] Our evidence also suggests this.

Sometimes we see adults giving more attention to the confident and articulate children. This promotes their intellectual and social development at the expense of the minority who need the most support. Knowledgeable and sociable children also spend more time engaged in rich learning activities, attracting further contributions from adults. Meanwhile, other children appear to learn how to blend into the background, so they go unnoticed.

> We saw Year 1 children who were mostly silent and appeared withdrawn when the teacher directed questions to one child at a time. Some children appeared to give up because they had to wait so long for their turn to speak. Other children appeared not to understand what was being taught or what their peers were saying. Sometimes schools regarded these quiet children as well behaved and therefore did not pick up on their steady loss of engagement and possible lack of understanding.

Some tasks do not offer children a fair opportunity to learn. Children in Reception and key stage 1 are commonly asked to write about their weekend or holiday news. For children with fewer opportunities and experiences in their home lives, there is little to tell.

Ineffective use of play-based learning

Well-planned play is important. It gives children opportunities to practise using their knowledge and skills to:

- explore and make sense of the world around them
- learn to focus their attention
- learn to communicate and cooperate with others

Teachers need to think carefully about play-based learning and the role of the adult. For example, they should plan and prepare resources for play that reflect children's differing knowledge and broaden their interests. When adults, through their interactions, help children name new objects and thoughtfully explore resources with them, they develop children's language, extend their vocabulary and introduce them to knowledge of the world.

Reading stories aloud to children can also inspire their play: they gain knowledge about real and fantasy worlds that they can use later.

Following some teaching input, teachers might plan for children to practise what they have learned in their play. For example, when learning to jump and hop with accuracy and control, children benefit from watching an adult demonstrating these skills and from having a go themselves. Once children have learned these skills, adults may teach them a game, such as hopscotch. This gives children the opportunity to put the isolated movements together and practise some fundamental movement skills.

However, play-based learning in Reception classes sometimes does no more than occupy children's time. If it does not challenge their thinking, problem-solving, persistence and collaboration, it is ineffective in developing their executive functioning. Such poorly planned play keeps children busy but does not support their development: their hands and bodies are active, but their minds are not.

Summary of the main concerns

- not choosing appropriate teaching methods
- insufficient practice before moving on
- overload of children's working memory
- not building on previous learning
- helping children to complete a task at the expense of long-term success in the subject
- inequitable opportunities for learning
- ineffective use of play-based learning

Pedagogy considerations for leaders

- How do you make sure that all children get enough practice to become fluent in

using important foundational knowledge?
- How are tasks broken down to focus on small steps of learning and to prepare children for what comes next?
- What routines help children to maintain attention without overloading their working memory?
- How are distractions kept to a minimum to help children focus?
- Does instruction involve all children, including those who find learning more difficult?
- How do you make sure that children with lower starting points have enough opportunities to interact with adults?
- To what extent have you considered what children are thinking during play-based learning?
- Do all staff understand how play can develop children's language and executive functioning and help them to learn important knowledge?
- Do staff know how to address children's speech, language and communication difficulties?

Assessment

The best forms of assessment pick up children's misunderstandings quickly and provide early opportunities to help children who need extra teaching and practice. Training can also help staff to be alert to children's misconceptions during teaching and practice.

> Staff who had received subject-specific training were quick to spot when children had misunderstood something during a lesson. They could then explain the concepts more clearly to the children who did not understand. This meant that misconceptions and gaps in the children's knowledge were less likely to become permanent. Effective day-to-day assessment kept these teachers well informed.

Weak assessment, on the other hand, gets in the way of understanding what children really know and can do.

Coverage at the expense of understanding

A common finding in our subject reports is that when teachers focus on covering curriculum content rather than making sure that it is learned, pupils do not develop secure knowledge.

Further, if the curriculum does not set out clearly the important knowledge that children need to learn, staff are less likely to emphasise it in their teaching. The result is that pupils are left with gaps and misconceptions in important knowledge. We have already noted the impact of this on children's early writing when errors in spelling or inaccurate letter formation take hold. Our history report also noted that 'accepting significant gaps between pupils, in knowledge of important content and concepts, means that these gaps will widen over time.' [footnote 34]

> The schools we visited tended to make good use of the structure and guidance in published programmes, such as those for mathematics and phonics. These programmes set out the curriculum clearly and helped staff to know what knowledge to check at key points during the year. They also helped staff to know what to revisit so that children could catch up.

Repeatedly practising for tests

The assessments at the end of key stage 1 appear to have distorted leaders' understanding of the nature of a high-quality English curriculum. Our English subject report identified this, and we also saw the impact during our visits.[footnote 35] We found that the removal of statutory assessments at the end of key stage 1 has not yet altered this practice. Teachers expected children to learn, and be assessed, by completing tasks that were similar to those in the end of key stage tests. However, assessing children on complex tasks, such as answering written comprehension questions, well before they are ready, wastes precious classroom time. Teachers should be using this time to build important foundational knowledge, such as developing reading fluency and language comprehension, so that children get better at reading and writing. The Department for Education's reading framework says:

> 'Pupils will become better at each of the assessed aspects of reading when they read, think deeply about, and respond to texts through discussion and in writing. The best way to prepare pupils for a reading assessment on an unseen text is therefore to:
>
> - ensure that they can decode fluently, reading the great majority of words at a glance
> - develop their vocabulary and strong background knowledge, building these up through wide and regular reading' [footnote 36]

Relying too much on recording evidence in Reception

Our report, ‘Bold beginnings’, recommended that teachers’ workload in relation to assessment should be reduced.[footnote 37] The 2021 EYFS reforms intended that assessment should draw more substantially on professional judgement.[footnote 38] A 2023 independent evaluation of the reforms recognises a reduction in the time spent on assessment.[footnote 39] Despite this, some assessment still takes up too much time and does not provide a reliable picture of what children know and can do.

> Staff in some Reception classes relied on photographs of the children participating in activities to support their assessments. Many of them, however, realised that the photographs showed only the curriculum coverage and which children had participated in activities. They did not give information about what the children had learned. However, when shown to children, the photographs played a positive role in helping them to reflect on and talk about their experiences.
>
> Staff had collected much more evidence in relation to some children than others because those children were more talkative and more likely to participate in activities. This indicates a lack of interaction between adults and the more vulnerable children, and a false assumption that assessment should be only of child-initiated activities.
>
> Some staff said that making multiple observations and collating them into children’s books created unnecessary work. More importantly, however, it was clear that such assessments were taking adults away from the children who most needed their support. These assessments were also unlikely to provide important information about what children knew, such as their knowledge of the world.

Our inspection handbook explains that we do not require photographic evidence or a particular frequency or quantity of work in children’s books.[footnote 40]

Failing to share the most useful information at key transition points

Assessment information can be particularly useful when it is shared at points of transition. Most schools share summative assessment information at the end of each academic year, such as whether a child has met the early learning goals at the end of Reception. However, data alone is of little use in informing a teacher of the next steps for a child. In ‘Bold beginnings’, we identified that teachers typically want more specific information about a child’s reading, writing and mathematical knowledge. For example, they want to know the specific GPCs the child has learned, their knowledge of numbers and, especially, where there are gaps.[footnote 41]

Existing assessment practices, such as those discussed here, result in few schools sharing this sort of detail about gaps in children's knowledge and their barriers to learning. As a result, a child's next teacher is less well placed to help them with fundamental knowledge and skills: communication and language, letter formation, pencil grip and more. This makes it more likely that problems will persist.

It would be helpful to check that children have learned foundational knowledge, in the way that the phonics screening check identifies children's knowledge of GPCs at the end of Year 1. Important indicators (depending on children's year group and EYFS/national curriculum requirements) might include:

- pencil grip
- reading fluency
- letter and number formation
- understanding of the numbers to 10
- number bond knowledge
- the spelling of common exception words

Summary of the main concerns

- focusing on covering the curriculum at the expense of checking children's understanding of important knowledge and skills
- not checking whether children have learned knowledge before moving on
- repeatedly practising for tests
- relying too much on recording evidence in Reception
- failing to share the most useful information at key transition points

Assessment considerations for leaders

- Does training make sure that staff can anticipate and deal with misconceptions during instruction and practice?
- Do gaps in knowledge for the lowest-attaining children persist? If so, why?
- To what extent do current reading and writing tasks replicate end of key stage tests? Can tasks be introduced that provide practice (and opportunities for assessment) in foundational knowledge?
- How do you assess foundational knowledge and skills such as handwriting and number facts?
- How might information about any gaps in children's knowledge be shared most effectively with the children's next teacher?

Personal development, behaviour and attitudes

The COVID-19 pandemic is still having an impact on children's behaviour and social skills. Schools that think carefully about the curriculum make sure that children become increasingly skilled at recognising and understanding their emotions and managing the demands of life in school. Children should also be able to tell a trusted adult how they are feeling. Our 'Best start in life' research review highlighted that, as children get better at controlling and directing their thoughts, emotions and behaviour, they can get more from teaching and learning activities.[footnote 42] Positive interactions with familiar adults can help children manage their emotions and can reduce negative behaviour towards others.[footnote 43]

Not providing an effective enough curriculum to support children's personal, social and emotional development

Some schools take the view that, to an extent, children will pick up good behaviour from their peers or from watching adults. However, this can, inadvertently, result in low expectations taking hold. These schools wait for good behaviour to develop rather than plan explicitly for it. Schools do not always consider fully enough how teaching, in the widest sense, instils positive behaviour and attitudes.

> Reception children's behaviour deteriorated when they were not taught how to manage and care for toys and equipment. The classroom became chaotic. Inevitably, children had absorbed the message that such things did not matter and that adults did not care what happened to resources.

Leaders sometimes describe their concerns about behaviour but have not considered sufficiently how making changes to the curriculum might alleviate the problems. They sometimes see children struggling to behave well as being purely a problem with the child rather than a possible reflection of weakness in curriculum or teaching.

> Staff assumed that all children had the skills to engage in play-based learning without adult help. This resulted in staff telling some children off for not being able to complete the activities on their own.

In contrast, other leaders recognise that not all children come to school knowing how to be polite, follow instructions, care for their surroundings and respect adults. They also understand that some children need well-established routine and

precise instructions on how to behave. They need to know how to understand their own and others' emotions, how to make friends and how to keep them. These leaders actively plan for this.

> Children who were getting the most out of their learning were explicitly supported to get on with each other and to learn well. The view in these schools was: 'If it's important, we should teach it.' One such school leader explained that time spent teaching classroom routines in Reception made it easier for children to enjoy school as it 'reduced the cognitive load … They know what to do, how to do it and when to do it.'

Ineffective curriculum choices

Some schools fail to understand that children need foundational knowledge and sufficient opportunities to practise. These schools often give children tasks that are too difficult to complete. This affects children's behaviour, especially that of the children who are still learning how to behave.

> An inspector noted that 'In English, most pupils are visibly frustrated by not being able to complete tasks set. They also struggle to pay attention. In contrast, when teaching activities are matched to what they know and can do (such as in mathematics), the same pupils are enthusiastic and have a different demeanour.'

We have already explored how some whole-school approaches to teaching reading comprehension can result in ineffective decisions about what younger children have to do. When children are faced with tasks that require proficiency and understanding that they simply do not have, lessons become difficult to manage – for teachers and for children.

> Children were working independently on reading comprehension. Many could not answer any of the questions, because they could not cope with the multiple demands: reading the text, finding the required information and writing down the answer. As the teacher read out the correct answer, some children had already become disengaged, rocking on chairs and resting their heads on the tables.

In contrast, when schools have high expectations for all children and make sure that they learn successfully, children are better prepared, both academically and

emotionally, for the challenges ahead.

> Observing a small group of pupils who were struggling to learn to read, an inspector noted: ‘The school puts its strongest teachers with the children who need the most help. In this instance, the teacher has exceptional skills in creating a high-challenge, focused learning experience for these pupils, who are behind where the school expects them to be in phonics. The teacher rigorously checks what children can do and makes sure that misconceptions are corrected immediately. These children are getting the additional help and practice they need. As a result, they are experiencing success and growing in confidence.’

Summary of the main concerns

- not providing an effective enough curriculum to support children’s personal, social and emotional development
- ineffective curriculum choices

Personal development, behaviour and attitudes considerations for leaders

- How do you help children to get on with others and learn well? In particular, how do you help children who have less previous experience of this than others?
- How do you make sure that activities enable children to learn and to be able to do what you expect? How do you make sure that activities are not too complicated?

Recommendations

Schools should:

- make sure that the curriculum clearly identifies the foundational knowledge and skills, as outlined in the EYFS and national curriculum, that children will need for later learning
- give children sufficient high-quality opportunities to practise using foundational knowledge and skills so that they become fluent
- choose teaching methods that are suited to what is being taught and what children already know

- make sure that assessment picks up children's misunderstandings quickly and gives teachers early opportunities to help children who need extra teaching and practice
- make sure that end of key stage 1 assessments do not disproportionately influence decisions about curriculum and teaching methods

In light of this report's findings, we intend to review and update our guidance for inspectors. This will help them to focus more on how well curriculum, teaching and assessment lead to all children in Reception and key stage 1 learning foundational knowledge.

Annex A: key terms used in this report

Decode: This refers to converting written words into spoken language.

Decodable books: This refers to books that have been written so that they only present words that include the GPCs that pupils have learned and the common exception words they have been introduced to. As these words are consistent with children's developing phonic knowledge, children know how to decode them and do not need to guess what they say.

Early education: In this report, the term refers to the curriculum for children in Reception and key stage 1.

Executive functioning: This consists of 3 core areas:

- inhibition (focusing attention on what matters and screening out what is not relevant)
- working memory (holding information in mind in order to work on it)
- cognitive flexibility (focusing on a goal and working out when it is necessary to change the approach to achieve it)

Foundational knowledge: This refers to the knowledge that children need to be able to retrieve accurately and automatically in order to carry out complex tasks.

Fundamental movement skills: Fundamental movement skills are a set of basic motor patterns that benefit from good teaching and practice to aid development. They can be subdivided into 3 sets of skills that have common aspects for the range of movement:

- locomotor skills, for example running and jumping
- stability skills, for example twisting and balancing
- manipulation skills, such as throwing and catching

Grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs): The links between letters, or combinations of letters (graphemes) and the speech sounds (phonemes) that they

represent. In the English writing system, graphemes may correspond to different phonemes in different words.

Play-based learning: Many schools describe play-based learning as 'continuous provision' or 'free-flow play' for children in the Reception Year and, occasionally, in Year 1. It includes imaginative play and can be guided by an adult or led by the child.

Annex B: methodological note

This thematic report draws on a range of previously published evidence, including subject reports that we published between February 2023 and December 2023. [footnote 44] For each of these reports, inspectors visited 25 primary schools to identify common themes about the subject education that are likely to be relevant in a wide range of schools. It also uses the definition of quality in our curriculum research reviews and 'Best start in life' early years research review. [footnote 45]

We have supplemented this with additional research visits by His Majesty's Inspectors to 20 good and outstanding schools during October and November 2023. The inspectors looked at the implications of our subject report findings for the curriculum in Reception and key stage 1.

We used a range of criteria to select the schools. The sample was broadly representative of schools nationally, in terms of region, disadvantage quintile, size of school, and whether the school is in a rural or urban location.

We gathered qualitative evidence about early education from discussions with senior leaders and teachers (including subject leaders), from observing lessons, and from talking to children. Inspectors also reviewed children's work.

In each school we visited, we considered the effectiveness of the Reception and key stage 1 curriculum in relation to both the EYFS and the national curriculum. We considered how our evidence-based understanding of how schools can provide high-quality education relates to children's early education.

This report does not replace the criteria in the school inspection handbook. These are listed under the 'Quality of education' heading and provide guidance for inspectors on evaluating the quality of schools' curriculums. Inspectors will not use the findings of this report as a checklist. We recognise that schools can create and teach a high-quality curriculum in many different ways.

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