

EVALUATION OF READING PRACTICES FOR CHILD EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

Publicly-funded early years education (Early Years Entitlement)

The UK government first funded pre-school, early education places in England 1998. This was the first national scheme and it entitled 4 year olds to 2.5 hours per day for 33 weeks per year. Parents were able to top-up the funding if more provision was needed, for example, due to work commitments. This scheme was extended to 3 year olds in 2004, and the number of hours was increased to 15 hours per week for 38 weeks in 2010. Since September 2017, 3- and 4-year-olds with working parents have been entitled to a free nursery place equivalent to 30 hours per week over 38 weeks of the year. This is known as the 'extended entitlement'.

Currently, there is no nationwide entitlement for 2-year olds, although children from disadvantaged families are eligible for 15 hours of free provision per week for 38 weeks of the year. Eligibility is determined on economic grounds and by other criteria, including whether children have special educational needs (SEN). This entitlement was introduced in 2013 for around 20% of the age group, and extended to around 40% from 2014.

Participation in Early Years Education

The Childcare Act (2006) is a key piece of legislation governing early years provision in England. Section 7 of the Act (as substituted by Section 1 of the Education Act 2011) places a duty on local authorities (LAs) to secure early years provision free of charge. Regulations made under the Childcare Act set out the type and amount of free provision and the children who benefit from the free provision.

Early years providers are nursery schools, nursery classes in maintained (local authority) primary schools, academies, children's centres, private schools, private day nurseries, plus some play groups and registered childminders.

Although participation in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is voluntary, most children attend some form of pre-school or nursery education, either full- or part-time. Very few children remain at home until the start of compulsory education, which begins the term following their fifth birthday. In January 2018, 95% of all 4-year-olds,

92% of all 3-year-olds and 72% of eligible disadvantaged 2-year-olds were participating in funded early education.

Participation rates for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds by type of provider are as follows:

Provider	% of 2-year-olds	% of 3-year-olds	% of 4-year-olds
Private and voluntary	82	61	19
Childminders	4	2	1
Independent schools	1	2	2
Maintained nursery schools	5	4	1
Nursery classes in primary schools	8	30	13
Infant classes in primary schools	-	-	63
Publicly-funded secondary schools	-	-	1
Special schools	-	-	-
All providers¹	100	100	100

DfE/ONS, 2018:7.

Curriculum and the teaching of reading in the early years (0-5 years) in England

The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) (DfE, 2017) sets standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old. All schools and Ofsted-registered early years providers in England must follow the EYFS, including childminders, preschools, nurseries and school reception classes. The EYFS has been developed to 'ensure children's "school readiness"' (DfE, 2017:5) and to provide:

- **quality and consistency** in all early years settings, so that every child makes good progress and no child gets left behind
- **a secure foundation** through learning and development opportunities which are planned around the needs and interests of each individual child and are assessed and reviewed regularly
- **partnership working** between practitioners and with parents and/or carers
- **equality of opportunity** and anti-discriminatory practice, ensuring that every
- child is included and supported (DfE, 2017:5).

Note: There are different early years standards in Scotland and Wales.

The EYFS sets out seven areas of learning and development. There are three 'prime' areas and four 'specific' areas that are intended to shape educational programmes in early years settings. The prime areas of communication and language; physical development; and personal, social and emotional development focus on the skills

¹ Figures rounded to nearest whole %

children will need to successfully access the specific areas of the EYFS. In relation to the teaching of English, there are two relevant areas:

- 1) communication and language (prime)
- 2) literacy (specific)

Communication and Language: opportunities should be provided to enable children to 'experience a rich language environment; to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves; and to speak and listen in a range of situations' (DfE, 2017: 8).

Literacy: children should be encouraged 'to link sounds and letters and to begin to read and write. Children must be given access to a wide range of reading materials (books, poems, and other written materials) to ignite their interest' (DfE, 2017: 8).

Reading: children read and understand simple sentences. They use phonic knowledge to decode regular words and read them aloud accurately. They also read some common irregular words. They demonstrate understanding when talking with others about what they have read. (DfE, 2017: 11)

Children for whom English is not their first/home language

The EYFS (DfE, 2017) encourages educators to provide opportunities for children to develop and use their home language in play and learning. It is important that providers support language development at home. However, they should also ensure that children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) have sufficient opportunity to 'learn and reach a good standard of English language' during the EYFS in preparation for accessing the National Curriculum (2013) in year 1. Practitioners are encouraged to explore the child's skills in their home language with parents to identify any potential issues with language development/delay.

For children who do not have English as a first language and who speak languages other than English in the home, there is no evidence that they are 'at a greater risk of being behind in English language skills by the age of 5 (Petitto, 2009; Sorace, 2007). English language skills at age 5 are a good predictor of reading ability at age 11.

A government research report into best practice in the early years (Callanan et al, 2017: 9) suggests that good and outstanding providers prioritise creating:

'a 'language rich' environment through the use of songs, nursery rhymes, stories and providing time for adult/child and peer to peer interaction. High quality adult/child interactions were viewed as essential, as was encouraging home

learning and the quality of parent/child interactions through activities and reading at home.'

Best practice also places an emphasis on supported transitions, both within settings and between settings. The transition to a school setting is particularly significant. Recommendations for a smooth transition include staff making home visits along with:

'effective information sharing with schools through transition reports, school visits to settings, and consulting parents on the information that was being shared [about their child]. Taking children to visit their new school, and building on-going relationships with local schools' (Callanan et al, 2017: 10).

The EYFS is grounded in socio-cultural theory and the work of Vygotsky. The deployment of continuous provision, which combines focussed teacher input and make believe play are typical of practice supporting Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is defined as *'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'* (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). The EYFS recognises that children need to learn through language and about language. According to Fisher (2006: xiii) this means *'learning about the social uses of language as well as the structure of words, sentences and texts'*. or crafting their writing for a

The following comments, relating to the teaching and learning in early years settings in England, reflect the practices of teachers in:

- 1 infant school (ages 2 – 7) in a socially-disadvantaged area, hence the provision for 2 year olds
- 1 primary school, with a nursery class in a socially disadvantaged area
- 2 primary schools in more affluent areas.

All had some children for whom English is not a first language.

2. TEACHING METHODOLOGY IN LEARNING TO READ

Approaches to Planning and Teaching

In England, there are a range of early years settings; however, all will place 'continuous provision' at the heart of the planning process. Each area of continuous provision should reflect the needs of the pupils at that time and it therefore directly linked to the practitioner's assessment of the children in their care (Bryce-Clegg, 2013). For maintained schools, some local authorities provide guidance and planning templates for organising continuous provision. The guidance will include suggested resources and possible learning experiences, or invitations to play, in different areas or zones within

the classroom. For example, one authority we researched recommends the following for the 'Book Area':

- Cushions
- Bean bags
- Small soft chair/couch
- Books, variety ie: fiction, non-fiction poetry
- Hard back
- Paper back
- Interactive stories
- Puppets and props to support key stories
- Material
- Musical instruments
- Children's home made books
- Photographs
- Selection of paper, mark making tools.

The expected learning/invitation to play would include:

- playing collaboratively and using the book area appropriately
- making choices
- opportunities for talking through shared activities
- listening to stories in small groups or 1-1
- following instructions
- making plans
- presenting ideas to others
- handling books carefully
- learning to turn pages one at a time
- learning to read from left to right
- enjoying listening and making up stories
- using imagination to develop language skills
- learning to listen
- learning to take turns
- developing memory
- exploring rhythm and rhyme
- exploring sounds
- opportunities to play with words
- enjoying stories and rhymes with a mathematical element, (e.g. 1,2 buckle my shoe).

In primary schools in England, there is a Head of Foundation Stage who will oversee the planning, delivery and resourcing of the curriculum, and pupil progression for children

attending the school's nursery and Reception classes. Some schools have children from age 2, others from age 3.

Some schools have a private day nursery on site. In this case, the nursery and school Reception Class will plan separately, each responsible for learning within their own organisation. Collaborative planning is restricted to the curriculum being followed. Therefore Foundation Stage teachers/practitioners do not collaboratively plan with Primary Curriculum teachers. Occasionally in smaller rural schools, Foundation and Year 1 may be a mixed Reception (foundation) and Year 1(primary) class. The teacher will then plan using both curricula. Teaching Assistants are involved in the planning process, although their level of contribution differs depending on the school.

2.1 TEACHING METHODOLOGIES

In this subsection, we will reflect the results of the actions that teachers use to teach reading and if they are more oriented to a specific methodology.

The primary approach to teaching early reading in England is Phonics. This supports the word recognition element of the 'Simple View of Reading', which informs the Primary National Curriculum (2013) – see primary report for more information.

Reading is taught in the following way in the Foundation stage. There are small variations between schools, depending on the phonics scheme the school has adopted. Some schemes encourage ability grouping, with regular assessments every six weeks e.g. [Read Write Inc.](#) This has implications for cost as classes of 30 have to be split into smaller groupings and taught by the teacher/lead practitioner and teaching assistants. Other schemes recommend a mixed ability whole class approach e.g. [Phonics Play](#). All approaches will involve regular monitoring of children's progress.

A common 'teaching' approach for Reception Class (30 children)

- **20 minutes daily phonics work that is teacher led.** The English alphabetic code is used to introduce a new phoneme to the children daily (this depends on cohort competence) e.g. 's'. Schools move from the simple to the complex code. Phonics schemes often begin with the following six letters is: s,a,t,p,i, n as they allow for a selection of Consonant, Vowel, Consonant (CVC) words to be formed – read and blended. Some digraphs are introduced early to the children e.g. sh, th. Children

also use the metalanguage associated with the teaching of phonics e.g. phoneme, grapheme, digraph, trigraph etc.

- **The classroom is then set up with 5 activity areas as a carousel in line with continuous provision.** Each day the children rotate to a different area. Two of the activities are directly linked to literacy:
 - i) Guided reading with the teacher (20 minutes)
 - ii) Phonics activities with the Teaching Assistant (blending words containing sounds learnt plus sight words).

Book area is one of the 3 remaining child-led carousel of activities. The children can play and practise what they have learnt. Teachers have reported placing some phonics reading scheme books in the 'Book Area' so that children can practise sounding out/blending. Teachers have commented this has had a positive impact on children's reading confidence as they are able to read aloud a complete text. Children also engage with picture books and other literary sources (tourist information leaflets etc) during this time.

The remaining continuous provision area may include an outdoor area and a small world area, for example, depending on the focus of learning.

In addition to the continuous provision, the teacher/educator will also undertake daily whole class 'shared read'. The shared reading book is either in the form of a big book or an electronic book using the interactive whiteboard. Texts are either selected by the teacher based on the children's interests or are selected by the children using a voting system. The latter is done by allowing children to select from three texts by placing a marble in a jar next to their chosen book.

During shared and guided reading the teacher will question the children about their responses to the text, plot, characters, settings etc. encouraging children to draw on their own experiences. They will also use this time to discuss literary terms and features e.g. role of author/illustrator, publisher, text genre and features as well as significant features at text, sentence and word level.

Note: children to learn the alphabet (i.e. letter names) but this is usually done through song and never at the same time as phonics teaching is taking place. This is so that the children do not confuse letter name and phoneme.

2.2 PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES AND READING LEARNING

During both shared (whole class) and guided (groups of 4 – 6 children) reading, children are encouraged to discuss and share their responses and to build on each other's experiences.

Spoken language and literacy are linked as the teacher uses shared and guided reading times as an opportunity to make connections between discrete phonics teaching and reading books by highlighting words/letter combinations that should be familiar to children from their phonics teaching/learning. Authors' vocabulary choices will also be discussed and alternatives considered in order to extend children's vocabulary.

In addition, children will be asked to compare stories that have been read to them and be asked to relate texts to their own experiences e.g. will select texts that allow children to make connections between the lives they live and the lives of the characters portrayed in the text e.g. the poem 'The Sunshine Tree' by Clive Webster. Such dialogic teaching promotes critical thinking and links between language and literacy. The move to dialogic teaching is becoming more pronounced across the both the EY and primary phase (Alexander 2011; Reedy 2018). This involves planning talk activities to support learning and to develop children's critical thinking skills.

The majority of schools/early years settings will have wall displays linked to literacy. For example, teachers report displaying images of book covers from books that have been, or will be, shared with the class. This helps parents to know what their children will be reading. Alphabetic code charts are displayed to support phonics teaching along with a selection of words relating to the phoneme being taught. Children's responses to reading may also be displayed e.g. independent 'tiger stripes' paintings after reading *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*.

One school in a deprived area has adopted a curiosity approach to teaching which involves keeping displays and colour to a minimum. Instead, classes have walls painted in neutral colours. The teachers have noticed improved concentration. The curiosity approach also promotes the use of real items for play, and not plastic toys. This enables teachers and practitioners to 'support, scaffold and demonstrate how to

handle items with care...[teachers] are role models and help children learn practice and embed new skills and to manage their own risk.' (Bennett, 2019)

2.3 ORGANIZATION OF ACTIVITIES (PROGRAMMING OR PLANNING, TIMING, STUDENT GROUPING)

The following groupings occur in all schools represented in this research:

- Shared reading (whole class) up to 30 children - afternoons
- Guided reading (4-6 children) (mornings as part of a carousel of activities)
- Individual reading- Note: this is school/setting dependent at this age. In schools offering 1 to 1 reading experiences, children are removed from free play to go and read to the teacher or teaching assistant (schools in more affluent areas) – lunch/afternoons
- Phonics teaching is either whole class OR ability groups - 20 minutes every day at either the start of the day or before lunch. A published scheme is followed – schools have a choice in relation to the scheme they choose from a Government recommended list.

2.4 SPACE, MATERIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES (TYPE, ORGANIZATION, PARTICIPANTS, TYPE OF PARTICIPATION)

Resources

Classrooms will have a dedicated Book/Reading area (see earlier section). Children will read out loud individually or to each other in this area. They may look at books and 'tell' the story. A range of texts are available to children – picture books (fiction and non-fiction), nursery rhymes/poetry, media texts (tourist information leaflets), calendars, and reading scheme books.

Interactive whiteboards are also used. Images are displayed on the interactive whiteboard as an introduction to visual literacy and to promote discussion. The interactive whiteboard is used for writing/segmenting words for spelling during phonics teaching. [Phonics Bug](#) is a phonics reading scheme with teaching delivered via an interactive whiteboard. Teachers will also use storytelling websites (e.g. [Storynory](#)).

Working with families

Two schools in socially deprived areas offer literacy classes to parents to improve adult literacy skills. These classes are delivered by the reception class teachers, usually at the start or end of the school day. These schools also run 'stay and play' sessions for parents so that they can spend time in the classroom with their child and learn how to educate through play. Schools also offer training for parents in the phonics approach to reading

and introduce parents to the terminology their children will be using (start of Reception Year).

Reading books are sent home with children. A reading log is also sent home so that parents can make comments. This is monitored by the teacher.

Story sacks and literacy-related games are also provided by schools for children to take home and use with their families.

2.5 EVALUATION

Teachers assess children regularly and formatively through observation and questioning. More formal assessments take place once per half term (i.e. every 5-6 weeks). In terms of assessing reading, there is much emphasis placed on decoding skills. Teachers report keeping a portfolio for each child. This may contain examples of mark making, photographs of a child taking part in an activity, teacher notes/comments and any summative assessment e.g. attempt to write name etc.

Assessment and progression to the Primary National Curriculum

The UK Government provides clear guidance on the assessment of children, their reading skills and reporting to the Year 1 teacher as part of the transition process. Guidance is as follows:

Assessment at the end of the EYFS – the Early Years

The Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)

2.6. In the final term of the year in which the child reaches age five, and no later than 30 June in that term, the EYFS Profile must be completed for each child. The Profile provides parents and carers, practitioners and teachers with a well-rounded picture of a child's knowledge, understanding and abilities, their progress against expected levels, and their readiness for Year 1. The Profile must reflect: ongoing observation; all relevant records held by the setting; discussions with parents and carers, and any other adults whom the teacher, parent or carer judges can offer a useful contribution.

2.7. Each child's level of development must be assessed against the early learning goals. Practitioners must indicate whether children are meeting expected levels of development, or if they are exceeding expected levels, or not yet reaching expected levels ('emerging'). This is the EYFS Profile.

2.8. Year 1 teachers must be given a copy of the Profile report together with a short commentary on each child's skills and abilities in relation to the three key characteristics of effective learning (see paragraph 1.9). These should inform a dialogue between Reception and Year 1 teachers about each child's stage of development and learning needs and assist with the planning of activities in Year

1.

2.9. Schools must share the results of the Profile with parents and/or carers, and explain to them when and how they can discuss the Profile with the teacher who completed it. For children attending more than one setting, the Profile must be completed by the school where the child spends most time. If a child moves to a new school during the academic year, the original school must send their assessment of the child's level of development against the early learning goals to the relevant provider.

The Profile must be completed for all children, including those with special educational needs or disabilities. Reasonable adjustments to the assessment process for children with special educational needs and disabilities must be made as appropriate. Providers should consider whether they may need to seek specialist assistance to help with this. Children will have differing levels of skills and abilities across the Profile and it is important that there is a full assessment of all areas of their development, to inform plans for future activities and to identify any additional support needs.

Revised 'Reception Baseline Assessment' (RBA)

Following a pilot in schools, the Government will introduce a new school entry assessment in Autumn 2020. The test will be carried out within the first six weeks of a child starting school and it will be the responsibility of the Foundation Stage Leader to ensure that staff are trained and that the test is carried out in line with Government guidance. The assessment should take approximately 20 minutes to complete and breaks can be taken if needed. The assessment should be carried out in a familiar setting, by a practitioner known to the child, so that the child feels comfortable. Staff completing the assessment will need access to an online system (via a tablet, laptop or PC).

The purpose of the RBA is to provide an on-entry to school assessment of pupil attainment to be used as a starting point from which a cohort-level progress measure to the end of key stage 2 (KS2) can be created (Standards and Testing Agency, 2020). Ultimately it will allow schools to receive credit for the progress their pupils make throughout their time in primary school.

The new assessment will also enable the Department for Education (DfE) to remove statutory end of Key Stage 1 assessments, as they will no longer be the starting point for progress measures.

Assessment Content

The Assessment focuses on Mathematics and Communication, Language and Literacy areas of the EYFS. More specifically, the assessment consists of:

- Mathematics tasks

- o early number
- o early calculation (early addition/subtraction)
- o mathematical language
- o early understanding of pattern
- Language, Communication and Literacy (LCL) tasks
 - o early vocabulary
 - o phonological awareness
 - o early comprehension

Early cognitive development is multifaceted and the reception baseline requires a range of cognitive processes to be used in responding to the variety of tasks included. A variety of cognitive domains enables an effective assessment of children of this age and taps into their unique experiences. In order to respond to the assessment, pupils may need to demonstrate linguistic skills such as blending sounds, or mathematical skills such as number sense. Some cognitive processes, such as memory or attention, are deployed in both the mathematics and LCL tasks (Standards and Testing Agency, 2020). The skills being assessed could be considered to reflect Vygotsky's understanding of concept development (Vygotsky, 1987).

Reporting Assessment Results

The RBA will produce simple narrative statements about each child's performance. These statements will be sent to the school. Schools are not provided with the children's scores. This is important in relation to those children who have particular needs, for example English as an additional language, because generalised statements may unintentionally contribute to the labelling and grouping of children, with low expectations being set for some children. Children 'could be unnecessarily labelled as low-ability at the very beginning of their education, with the risk that premature judgements about their abilities may then become 'self-fulfilling' (BERA, 2018, 4).

2.6 TYPES OF TEXT

The English system is based on genre theory. Children have to be introduced to a range of texts. In all cases generic structures are explored. In the early years the texts are predominantly: phonics scheme books, picture books (fiction), picture books (non-fiction), instructions (recipes, games etc), reports, explanations, dictionaries, poetry and nurse rhymes, media texts, comics, promotional leaflets, brochures, maps and online websites. All early years practitioners are expected to provide access to the full range of texts.

3. THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN READING LEARNING

Several researcher teams have demonstrated how the pre-school home learning environment can be seen to have a significant role in explaining how early socio-economic risk impacts on reading ability. Crampton and Hall (2017) found that children exposed to greater early socio-economic risk were less likely to enjoy stimulating home environments during their preschool years. These less stimulating home learning environments were then associated with poorer academic self-concept at age 7 and with poorer reading ability at ages 7 and 10. The negative chain of effects linking socio-economic risk to preschool home learning environment and then to children's reading and self-concept at age 7 was then found to have further impacts upon children's reading ability and academic self-concept at age 10 years. In addition, Melhuish et al. (2008) undertook a study of 3,172 British children aged 3-10 years which linked socio-economic risk to home learning environments, and both to children's reading.

Of course, we know from our own research that not all families have access to books in the home. However, parents generally see the importance of being able to read and recognize the role that school plays in that. Some parents have read books to their children from birth and the children have built up a small home library by the time they start school. These parents see the benefits of giving and receiving books as gifts.

While there are a small number of parents who do not engage at all, the majority of parents will take part in activities offered by the school to support their children's reading – attending information events, parents' evenings, completing reading logs etc. In fact, many parents are competitive and keen to compare their child's progress with others in the class. This usually relates to the level of book the child is taking home to read from school and how quickly children are progressing through the school's reading scheme.

Tablets and phones are increasingly popular forms of media. Children will take part in activities featuring their favourite characters from television e.g. [Peppa Pig](#) or will play 'reading' games like [Endless Alphabet](#), [Reading Eggs](#), or [Teach your Monster to Read](#).

However, it is interesting to note that parents often do not relate environmental print – signs, carrier bags etc - with reading.

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