

Reception teachers' and heads of schools' perspectives and experiences of an observation based assessment that focuses on child-initiated activity

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This research focuses on the experiences of a group of teachers and head teachers as they piloted the Early Excellence Baseline (EExBA-R), one of the Government approved baseline assessments, in 2014. The EExBA-R includes two separate parts; the first section is a screening of children's levels of wellbeing and involvement using the Leuven Scales 'to ensure that children are assessed at the optimum time within these 6 weeks' (Early Excellence 2015). The second part assesses 'Characteristics of Effective Learning, all three Prime Areas [...] covered in the English Early Years Curriculum Guidance (EYFS) and the Specific Areas of Literacy and Maths'. According to Early Excellence (2015), EExBA-R was designed to 'not disrupt settling in routines' in a Reception class context and information is gathered based on evidence of teachers' 'knowledge of the children from a range of means' including previous settings, parents and observations carried out during children's first weeks in the setting'.

Data collection took place in between October 2014 and March 2015. Semistructured interviews were carried out with 12 reception/foundation stage teachers and 5 head teachers from schools in the south of England. Questions focused on the implementation of the EExBA-R assessment, the ways that information was collected and participants' views on the value of the information. Our findings suggest that the process followed in this particular baseline assessment helped participants to get to know the children during this important transitional period, offering opportunities for principled practice and reflection. However, the focus on accountability and measurement presented dilemmas and raised concerns.

Teachers considered the observation-led approach and the consideration of children's levels of wellbeing and involvement to fit with their early years pedagogical approach and their transition and assessment practices. Taking levels of wellbeing and involvement as a starting point was perceived as offering teachers important information about how individual children were settling in school. This is an important finding, particularly in relation to debates around children's academic progress in primary school, as there is clear connection between children's early social-emotional skills and their emotional wellbeing and their academic achievement (Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012; Niehaus & Adelson, 2013). However, our data raises questions about the use of the Leuven scales in a performative assessment context as they were not designed for this purpose. There were some indications that wellbeing in the context of baseline assessment may be oversimplified and/or perceived as 'fairly stable' during key transition periods (see Dodge et al, 2012).

All of the teachers in our study saw observations of child-initiated activities as key to the assessment process. Some also referenced parents' contributions as valuable in getting to know the child as well as the importance of the information passed on to them from previous (nursery) settings. However, although they emphasised observations of child-

initiated activities as key to getting to know children, some teachers talked about having to organise specific or more structured activities in order to complete the baseline assessment within the time constraints dictated by government policy. Aside from challenges related to timing, the government policy raised other concerns, particularly in relation to 'translating' their understanding about each child into binary scores. Teachers felt that the baseline assessment may not be valid for children with special needs and children with English as an additional language. Some challenged the assessment regime itself, articulating concerns about the degree to which it positions children in deficit, scoring them as a 'zero'. In this way, they raised questions about the validity of relying on assessments that focus mainly on literacy and numeracy on entry to school, echoing similar concerns expressed in other research (for example Goldstein & Spiegelhalter, 1996; Reay and Wiliam 1999) which stresses the implications for children's wellbeing as well as their academic development.

Despite the concerns raised above, a number of the teachers involved in our research seemed to more-or-less accept the language of accountability. This raises a different set of questions, this time around the degree to which this language is being assimilated into professional discourse, highlighting concerns about the impact of the baseline assessment policy on teachers' understandings of children's potential and holistic transition practice. Further critical issues include the possibility that teachers will experience the baseline assessment as an increase in top-down pressure, which will influence their pedagogical practices in other ways (Rose and Rogers, 2012), having implications for equality of opportunity and outcome for all children, but especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Brooker 2002). We plan to investigate this complex context further in future research, examining the understandings and implications of the baseline assessment policy in greater depth over time.

Publications from the research (more to follow):

Brogaard Clausen, S., Guimaraes, S., Howe, S. and Cottle, M. (2015) Assessment of young children on entry to school: informative, formative or performative?' *Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education (IJCDSE)*. Volume 6. Issue 1.

Guimaraes, S., Howe, S., Brogaard Clausen, S. and Cottle, M. (2015) 'Assessment of what/for what? Teachers' and head teachers' views on using wellbeing as a screening for conducting baseline assessment on school entry in English Primary schools'. Manuscript submitted for publication to *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*