

Too soon or just the right time

Despite the controversy, the reception baseline does not need to be a burden on teachers or children, states Greg Watson; here, he outlines the development and feedback process behind the assessment.



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IT IS fair to say that news of the reception baseline, being introduced by the DfE to assess literacy, language and numeracy from September 2015, was met with concern from some quarters. Will it unsettle children in their early weeks in school? Could new school starters end up being inappropriately judged? And, can the assessment of such young children be reliable?

As a parent of two daughters, I understand these fears. No-one wants to see children being perturbed in any way during their first days at 'big' school when there are friends to be made and new experiences to be had. But my day job means I know that it does not have to be like this.

Fit for purpose? When designing a good assessment for young children, it is extremely important to keep things low key from the child's point of view, preferably to the point where they do not even realise

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they are being assessed. That means paper-and-pencil tests are not ideal – especially at an age when not all children are able to hold a pencil. Instead, you need to make the assessment as fun as any other activity they do at school. For our team of assessors, the solution was to have the child sit side-by-side with their teacher, each holding a tablet and going through a simple and enjoyable set of exercises.

Try and try again: The other challenge is around designing an assessment for four and five-year-olds that will be reliable. It needs to be based on research and it needs to take account of the developmental gap between summer born children and their older peers, for example, or the language gap of a child coming to school from a home where English is not the main language. This is where extensive trialling comes in – 1,560 pupils in England trialled GL Assessment's Baseline in September 2014 and 500 of these pupils were reassessed later. It was also trialled in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and in a number of international schools.

The purpose of all this is to see if one question particularly favours one group of pupils or disadvantages another. Responses are analysed and if

one group, such as English as an additional language, do unfairly well, then we know we need to change the question.

Essential feedback: Designing a good assessment for this age group also means listening to the teachers that know these children inside and out. By doing this we discovered that having introduced an assessment at the start of reception, teachers would actually want to see how much progress children make over the reception year – they did not want to wait until the end of key stage 1. For this reason we added an option to re-assess with the baseline assessment at the end of the reception year so that they could see how far a child has come over the year. Feedback from teachers also told us that they not only wanted the results from the assessments but ideas of how to develop the skills a child was lacking and to be able to share these with parents. For this reason, we have added progression ideas to our reports and ideas for parents, too.

So what do schools think? Baseline has proved popular with the schools involved in the trial. Teachers liked the fact they could control what the child sees on the tablet and then adjust the pace to suit the child's needs. Children were equally as enthusiastic according to Rhys Penny, the foundation stage leader at Cedar Road Primary School, one of our trial schools: 'The children ask, "When is it my turn?" and "Do I get to do that?" You don't get that kind of response with other tests!'

Rhys also explained how it has actually highlighted an issue with children's learning and allowed him to address it: 'Interestingly, it has improved sequencing. Once I realised children found the sequencing of the day difficult, updating our visual timetable became a priority. As a result, children can move from activity to activity more quickly and easily.'

In my view, there is nothing new about the concept of baselining to establish a child's abilities. Teachers do this anyway in less formal ways when children start school. The big change is putting forward highly reliable and robust assessments that reinforce a teacher's day-to-day observations, and provide an indicator of what help and support children need. eye

Useful resources

- For a full list of reception baseline providers, with links to more information about each one, visit: <https://www.gov.uk/reception-baseline-assessment-guide-to-signing-up-your-school>