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Scrapping of baseline assessment

Following a series of articles in *Education Journal's* research section on baseline assessment and growing disquiet in the teaching profession, the Government may now scrap its plans for the assessment exercise with reception children.

This was the feeling that surfaced at a research seminar on baseline assessment organised by Newman University last week that we report in our research section. Dr Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said she hoped that the Department for Education would see sense and scrap baseline assessment for reception children. She added that instead, the Government should keep the early years foundation stage profile which was a far more sophisticated assessment of how children developed and it enabled teachers to get to know the children they were teaching.

Dr Bousted urged that Government to put its promises in to action and trust teachers to use their professional judgment to assess four-year-olds. But she also warned the Government to think very carefully before replacing baseline assessment with a "school readiness check" and to continue to listen to teachers as it developed its assessment policy. Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said that time, money and heartache for teachers, children and parents could have been avoided if Government had listened to teachers in the first place.

But she stressed that the Government must fully consult about ideas for any new check, and listen to consultation findings, so it would not repeat the mistakes of Baseline. Ms Blower added that the NUT rejected the notion that any narrow test, be it Baseline Assessment or a "school readiness check", could be used to score children accurately, or to judge the performance of teachers or schools.

MPs pass Education & Adoption Bill

The Education and Adoption Bill, which has completed its passage through Parliament, will see more schools becoming academies. The Schools Minister, Nick Gibb said that the Bill would raise standards in schools by allowing the Government to tackle failure from day one to ensure that swift action was taken wherever a school was not providing high standards of education.

He added that the Bill would now go to Her Majesty the Queen for royal assent, which when given would turn the Bill into an act of Parliament.

In this issue

Editorial

Bacc & Progress 8.
Page 2

News

Assessment.
Secondary places
shortage. NEETs.
Pages 1 to 4

Feature

HMCI.
BAFTA vs BRITS.
Pages 5 and 6

Conference

Morgan. Ofsted.
Pages 7 to 9

Research

Baseline assess.
Pages 10 and 12

Opinion

Carter. Teachers.
Adult education.
Pages 13 to 18

International

Lithuania. OECD.
Page 19

Documents

HE TEF.
Pages 20 and 21

Parliament

HE free speech.
Pages 22 and 23

Baseline Assessment: what research is telling us

A report from an invitation research seminar held in Newman University on 24 February 2016

By Professor Margaret M Clark OBE
Newman University

This is the fourth in a series of articles on baseline assessment; the three previous articles were published in *Education Journal* issues 244, 258 and 259. The articles in issues 258 and 259 give further information on the papers at the seminar by Louise Wormwell and Guy Roberts-Holmes. From 2016 the Government has indicated that it expects all children in reception class in England to be assessed within a few weeks of starting school on one of three baseline assessments, and in English, the scores to be used for accountability and to assess children's progress by the end of Key Stage 2.

This policy has aroused concern among many professionals. On 24 February an invitation research seminar, *Baseline Assessment: what research is telling us*, which I convened jointly with Professor Terry Wrigley, Visiting Professor, Northumbria University, was held at Newman University. In this article I summarise the eight papers presented at the seminar and highlight the issues raised during the discussion. The summaries and discussion will be made available online shortly. A flavour of the range of research presented can be gained from the brief quotes from the summaries:

1. *Why it is better without baseline assessment. 4 core reasons.* Nancy Stewart, Principal Consultant, Early Learning Consultancy stated that many education experts and teaching unions are strongly opposed to the introduction of these standardised on-entry assessments on a number of well-evidenced grounds, including that:

- a) Many children are already being wrongly labelled as achieving below typical standards, with harmful effects;
- b) The assessments disrupt children's introduction into school;
- c) The narrow focus on attainment in prescribed subject areas is harmful to children's learning and development in the early years;
- d) The planned system will not provide a useful indicator of school quality.

See <http://www.betterwithoutbaseline.org.uk> for further information.

2. *Baseline assessments: who made the cuts and why?* Louise Wormwell, Newman University quoted The Standards and Testing Agency, May 2014 as claiming: "The purpose of the reception baseline is to support the accountability framework and assess school effectiveness by providing a score for each child at the start of reception....as the basis for an accountability measure of relative progress of a cohort of children through primary school." She also drew attention to a significant disturbing point in the guidance in 2014 under the sub-heading of 'Minimising bias', "A particular focus should be given to pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) to ensure that the progress measure is not unduly beneficial to schools with high proportions of EAL children." See *Education Journal* Issue 258 for her article with the same title.

3. *Baseline assessments: the delusions of 'predictive validity'.* Terry Wrigley, Visiting Professor, Northumbria University took as his focus "the claims and assumptions that baseline tests can form a reliable starting point for evaluating the value-added by the school, and the dangers posed to children by assumptions that they can accurately assess 'ability' or 'potential'. The presentation was based on a study of documents, interviews and data secured as the result of a Freedom of Information request. He stressed that his criticisms are not of the organisations per se, but of the whole policy "which is deeply flawed". He warned that many children are "particularly at risk of receiving teaching which is premised on the

"This policy has aroused concern among many professionals."

assumption that they have limited potential”.

4. *Which abilities of 4 year olds predict later academic achievement? Developmental evidence and implications for early assessment.* David Whitebread, University of Cambridge argued that if the purpose of making baseline assessment of children’s capabilities is “ultimately to improve the quality of their education” then we should bear in mind that “the BA models currently on offer are likely to be inaccurate, unreliable and potentially harmful, as they are in danger of negatively impacting on the crucial first few weeks of children’s experience of their primary school”. Whitebread, D., Pino-Pasternak, D. and Coltman, P. (2015) *Making learning visible: the role of language in the development of metacognition and self-regulation in young children.* In S. Robson and S. Quinn (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Young children’s Understanding.* London: Routledge: 199-214.

5. *Reception Baseline Research: views of teachers, school leaders, parents and carers.* Sarah Lynch, National Foundation for Educational Research reported the findings of an independent research commissioned by DfE between October and December 2014. The aim of the research was to inform the implementation of the reception baseline and identify effective ways of communicating the results to parents/carers. The research was an online survey plus telephone interviews and focus groups of parents. The majority of respondents were positive to some extent about the introduction of baseline assessment. However, all the schools surveyed were already using some form of on-entry assessment and most schools were already using the outcomes of existing on-entry assessments as evidence for accountability.

The report is available

at <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/DFER01home.cfm>.

6. *The Introduction of Baseline Assessment: views of head teachers, teachers and parents.* Guy Roberts-Holmes, UCL, IoE, London reported the main findings of the NUT/ATL sponsored research carried out in the autumn of 2015 involving a nationwide survey and five case studies in primary schools. They found that, “For many teachers, baseline assessment has had a negative impact on their working lives without benefiting the children they teach”. Teachers and headteachers see all three baseline assessment providers as inaccurate, unreliable and lacking in validity and hence its ability to accurately measure the ‘value added’ by schools. The report was published online on 12 February 2016 on ATL’s website atl.org.uk and NUT’s website: www.teachers.org.uk/baseline.

7. *Reception teachers’ and heads of schools’ perspectives and experiences of an observation based assessment that focuses on child-initiated activity,* Sally Howe and Michelle Cottle, University of Roehampton. The research, funded by the Froebel Trust, between October 2014 and March 2015, studied the experiences of a group of teachers and head teachers as they piloted Early Excellence. “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”. They felt that it may not be valid for children with special needs and children with English as an additional language and “raised questions about the validity of relying on assessments that focus mainly on literacy and numeracy on entry to school”. Brogaard Clausen, S., Guimaraes, S., Howe, S. and Cottle, M. (2015) *Assessment of young children on entry to school: informative, formative or performative?* in the *Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education.* Vol.6, Issue 1.

8. *Baseline Assessments: their value and validity in assessing young children on entry to school,* Margaret M. Clark, Newman University. This is a small ongoing study in five schools. Seven teachers involved in baseline assessment in 2015 were interviewed. What is unique is that we have details not only of the children’s scores on the baseline assessment but also their sex, date of birth, whether they attended the school’s nursery class and if so if that teacher assessed them, and if English is not their mother tongue,

“For many teachers, baseline assessment has had a negative impact on their working lives without benefiting the children they teach”. Teachers and headteachers see all three baseline assessment providers as inaccurate, unreliable and lacking in validity and hence its ability to accurately measure the ‘value added’ by schools.”

which language they do speak. In three schools with a total of 117 reception children assessed there are 52 children who speak at least one other language; 16 different languages in addition to English are spoken by children in these four reception classes. We plan to analyse the results for 2015, extend the study to include further schools and make an assessment of selected children on a diagnostic language test.

Key issues raised in the discussion

There were 60 participants at the seminar, staff from universities, teachers and advisers and representatives from the teachers' unions. No one challenged the strength of the research evidence against the proposed baseline assessment policy, stressing that this was not a criticism of specific providers but of the policy itself. The major focus in the discussion was on how to alert parents to the precise nature of this policy and its damaging effects on children by its deficit model of prediction and by labelling children; its effect on the practice in schools in the children's early weeks in reception class and the strain it was placing on teachers to implement a policy in which they did not believe and which they felt added nothing to the knowledge they had or could get from other sources. I noted two researches cited in *Education Journal* the previous day (Issue 260). Save the Children stated that "the research demonstrated that the most crucial determinant of success in Sats tests was how well children could communicate when they started school" (p. 6). A new paper by UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report revealed "that 40% do not access education in a language they understand" and, to quote from page 12: "A review of 40 countries' education plans found that less than half recognised the importance of teaching children in their home language, particularly in early grades."

In view of the data we are collecting in our ongoing research on the variety of languages spoken by young children in many reception classes in England, it would appear that DfE pays insufficient attention to researches such as these!

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Footnote

On 25 February in <http://schoolsweek.co.uk> in an article "Baseline assessments could be scrapped over comparability concerns" it is claimed that following a study commissioned by DfE it has been found that "tests from the three chosen providers for baseline assessments of reception children cannot easily be compared – putting the policy's future in doubt". "Government officials would not confirm the content of the study".... To quote: "A mooted alternative to baseline test is the introduction of 'school readiness' checks – an option said to be preferred by No 10. Such checks assess children's ability to hold pencils or read basic words and have been widely debated in the US.

Should such an alternative be proposed not only is further research needed with a shift in focus, but reference back to existing research over many years showing the unreliability of such tests of so-called 'school readiness'.

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