



**THE RESPONSE OF THE NATIONAL UNION
OF TEACHERS TO THE DfE CONSULTATION
'PRIMARY ASSESSMENT AND
ACCOUNTABILITY UNDER THE NEW
NATIONAL CURRICULUM'**

SEPTEMBER 2013

6. Should we introduce a baseline check at the start of Reception?

10. No. This proposal reveals a fundamental lack of understanding about early years and primary education. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile is the statutory means by which children's achievements are summatively assessed at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, that is, at the end of the Reception year. The Profile is also used throughout the EYFS, from birth to five years old, as a means of recording on-going achievements and to track progression against the seven areas of learning. It does have links to Key Stage 1 curriculum and assessment but these are not explicit.

11. The statutory EYFS Framework describes the Profile thus:

"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."

12. It is intended as a holistic and supportive assessment process, which reflects all aspects of the EYFS learning requirements. There is no suggestion in the consultation document that the proposed Baseline Check would follow this model but from the information provided it does appear to be envisaged as focusing only on children's English and mathematic skills, to provide a baseline for comparison with end of Key Stage 1 results and beyond. This is a worryingly narrow definition of assessment for the youngest children in primary schools and, as the Check would take place between two and six weeks after entry to Reception, would not necessarily be either accurate or helpful.

13. Reception, as the last year of the EYFS, is supposed to act as a transition period into compulsory schooling in Year 1, which takes into account the different starting places children will be in their learning and seeks to prepare them for primary school proper. Both in terms of the range of prior learning experiences and of stage of development, children of Reception age do not all start on a level playing field. As standard practice in Reception, teachers conduct informal assessments to supplement any records received from previous settings to find out what children can do and what they need to do next. The focus is completely on the child as an individual and the information gathered is used to inform planning.

14. The Government's proposals would mean that formal national baseline activities would have to be carried out alongside these practical but informal assessments.

This could hardly be described as an exciting or motivational introduction to school life, especially as it would inevitably lead to some children being labelled as less able or even having SEN, despite evidence which links pupils' performance to differences in quality of prior education, month of birth or even gender for this age group¹. The last thing the Government should be encouraging in children and their families is a perception of failure before a child has even entered the formal school system.

15. It is a serious step to move to a system whereby children were subject to annual formal statutory assessment from entering school until age seven. At an age when the majority of children in the best international education systems are not even part of formal primary education, it is absurd that the Government proposes the imposition of yet another test. It should rethink its position and continue to let schools determine how they assess young children on entry to Reception, for the benefit of the children's learning and not as yet another accountability measure.
 16. The consultation document asserts that a Baseline Check is necessary because the current, school-led arrangements represent "*a perverse incentive for schools not to focus resources on early intervention*" (paragraph 5.6), although it provides no evidence to support this view. Schools are currently held responsible for their performance at the end of Key Stage 1 by Ofsted and others using EYFS Profile outcomes to measure and be measured against. It is therefore offensive to suggest that schools are not engaging in early intervention support because of a lack of accountability measures. In addition, it is suggested that a Baseline Check "*could also provide valuable national information on the effectiveness of different types of early years provision*" (paragraph 5.6). This kind of information already exists, published by the DfE and based on the EYFS Profile, thus providing a much more useful picture of the effectiveness of the different kinds of early years institutions which have been responsible for teaching it.
- 7. Should we allow schools to choose from a range of commercially-available assessments?**
17. This is the least desirable option for a mandatory Baseline Check. At school-level, precious resources would be spent on choosing and then purchasing a particular assessment scheme whilst at national level work would need to be done to ensure that each company's materials were equally valid and reliable. In the same way that Ofqual has responsibility for ensuring that qualifications are of a comparable standard and meet certain minimum criteria before a school or other educational institution is able to select them, some national body would have to take responsibility for quality assuring any commercial Baseline Checks which might be developed. Even then, the results would not be able to be compared directly.
- 8. Should we make the baseline check optional?**
18. The suggestion that schools could choose not to administer the Check if they considered that the assessment burden at the start of school was too heavy is very welcome. It is in keeping with the principles expounded by Government elsewhere regarding greater professional autonomy and freedom and reduction of bureaucracy.

¹ E.g. http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/566/1/WRAP_Wolke_Epicure.pdf

19. In reality, however, it is extremely unlikely that schools would be able to make this 'choice' freely, as the other proposals in the consultation document suggest that primary accountability would be redesigned around it. For instance, it would be far easier to present statistics from the Check to Ofsted rather than any other method a school might choose to use, which may or may not be accepted for scrutiny by inspectors. The effect of accountability on schools' 'freedom' to choose assessment practices is perhaps best demonstrated by the continued use of Key Stage 3 test papers in some schools, despite the tests ceasing to become a statutory requirement in 2009, because they are a readily accepted proxy indicator of performance by Ofsted.
20. The NUT would recommend that no formal statutory baseline assessment should be introduced; that baseline assessment activities should continue to be determined by individual schools and focused on informing children's learning in the Reception year and beyond; and that the outcomes of the EYFS Profile should remain the baseline for progression at the end of Key Stage 1.

