# Reception baseline research: views of teachers, school leaders, parents and carers

## Research Brief

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# Introduction

In March 2014, the Department for Education published its response to a consultation on reforming assessment and accountability in primary schools. The response set out the Department's intention to change the way it will be holding primary schools to account, by introducing a reception baseline assessment, which will be the only measure used to assess the progress of children from entry (at age 4-5) to the end of key stage 2 (age 10-11), alongside an attainment floor standard of 85 per cent. From the reception cohort in 2016 onwards, all schools that wish to demonstrate progress for accountability purposes will have to adopt an approved reception baseline scheme. In 2023, when this cohort of pupils reaches the end of key stage 2, the reception baseline will be the starting point used to measure pupil progress for all-through primary schools. Schools can opt to use an approved baseline assessment from September 2015 if they wish to do so.

DfE commissioned research to inform the approach to implementation of the reception baseline and to identify effective ways of communicating the results to parents[1]. The research comprised two strands. The first was a randomised control trial carried out in the autumn term 2014 by DfE in partnership with the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) at Durham University, which aimed to investigate schools' behaviour changes in response to the accountability reforms and to evaluate the effectiveness of different report formats for parents.[2] The second strand was a qualitative study undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) which is reported here. The qualitative study aimed to explore the accountability context of the reforms and to investigate the reporting formats that stakeholders find most useful. This summary sets out the key findings drawn from the qualitative study.

# Methodology

The research involved: a) an online survey of senior managers and reception teachers in schools (based on a representative sample of 1000 schools including 156 schools which were involved in the CEM trial). The survey yielded 356 responses, including 101 from staff in schools involved in the CEM trial (53 in the treatment group and 48 in the control group). The 356 responses represented 296 schools, including 81 schools participating in the CEM trial. The responding schools were broadly representative of schools nationally; b) telephone interviews with 51 staff (including 22 in the CEM group); and (c) focus groups with 47 parents from ten schools (including five involved in the CEM trial). The fieldwork took place between October – December 2014.

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[1] 'Parents' includes primary carers throughout.

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?keywords=&publication_filter_option=research-and-analysis&topics%5B%5D=all&departments%5B%5D=department-for-education&official_document_status=all&world_locations%5B%5D=all&from_date=&to_date=

Survey data was analysed by producing basic frequencies for the whole sample of 296 *schools* and 356 *respondents* and cross-tabulating the data to explore the relationship between some survey outcomes and factors such as school type, existing on-entry assessment approach, and involvement in the CEM trial (or not). Where any differences between subgroups emerged they have been reported, but no statistical significance testing was carried out.

## Key findings

- Forty eight per cent of respondents to the survey said that they understood the new accountability measures very well. Just under half (49 per cent) said that they only 'somewhat' understood the measures.

- The majority of respondents (60 per cent) were positive to some extent about the introduction of the reception baseline. Although there were also nearly a third (30 per cent) of respondents who were *not* in favour of it, almost all were going to implement the baseline (only ten per cent of schools were undecided about whether to do a reception baseline or not).

- All of the schools surveyed were already using some form of on-entry assessment and two-thirds were doing this in a formal way (i.e. assessing all pupils against identical items, such as scales or tasks, in order to either produce a score or to make a best fit decision about how to allocate a child to a particular ability group/band).

- A quarter of schools (27 per cent) carried out observations only; if the reception baseline products made available are more formal, this may result in more change for this group.

- Most schools were using the outcomes as evidence for accountability (including for Ofsted inspections), but the uses of the data were evidently broader. While the reforms focus primarily on the accountability at a school-level, most schools were already using on-entry assessments for purposes beyond the aims of the reception baseline, such as to inform targeted teaching at an individual pupil-level, to inform what and how to teach the whole class, and to verify data that early childhood education settings provided when pupils started school .

- Schools participating in this study also took a wider view by being interested in comparing their performance with other local schools. In this context, some respondents were concerned about consistency of administration, which could impact on comparability between local schools.

- There was *some* evidence to suggest that schools may adopt a conscious 'gaming' approach i.e. change their current assessment practices to maximise the opportunity for progress, including by carrying out assessments at the earliest opportunity to minimise any learning gain. A 'gaming' approach could be harmful for learning, if teachers minimise learning opportunities at the start of reception in

favour of concentrating on the administration of the assessment and on keeping scores low at baseline.

- However, few schools planned to change the level of support given to pupils during assessments and only a small minority reported that they would be more cautious about judgments (i.e. not giving benefit of the doubt about a pupil's answer when they might have before), in order to keep scores low or depress results. Variations in the extent of 'gaming' across schools could impact on the reliability of accountability data.

- Staff would prefer to communicate the outcomes of the reception baseline to parents orally, because this would give them the opportunity to contextualise the results. If a written report was considered necessary, staff and parents felt the report should include information on a child's personal development and next steps.

The following sections summarise the main themes explored in the research in more detail.

## Were schools already administering on-entry assessments?

All of the 296 schools which responded to the survey were already doing some type of on-entry assessment. For more than two-thirds of schools, their combination of assessment approaches included assessing pupils against identical items (such as tasks or scales), either to produce a score or to help make a best fit decision about how to group/band a child. Just over a quarter of schools (28 per cent) were *only* carrying out these arguably more 'formal' types of assessments, while others combined this 'formal' approach with observation of normal classroom activities to assess pupils' capabilities. Almost three-quarters of schools (71 per cent) carried out observations to assess pupils when they started school. Most did observations in combination with more 'formal' methods of assessment, although 27 per cent of schools carried out observations only; if the reception baseline products made available are more formal, this may result in more change for this group.

Over a quarter of schools (75 schools/27 per cent) had finished on-entry assessments by the end of the third week of the new autumn term; a further two-fifths (115 schools/41 per cent) had completed by the end of the fifth week. However, a considerable proportion of schools completed assessments later (48 schools/17 per cent had not finished until weeks seven or eight). The average duration was two and a half weeks overall (but two weeks for schools involved in the CEM trial). Interview data confirmed that the timing of on-entry assessments varied across schools, although it was most common for assessments to take place in the first two weeks, or at least by the end of September (by the fourth week) to establish a '*true baseline*'.

Most schools (97 per cent) used the outcomes as evidence for accountability (including for Ofsted inspections) and to contribute to the process of monitoring progress (98 per

cent), although evidence suggests that the uses of the data were broader. While the reforms focus primarily on the accountability at a whole school level, most schools are likely to take a wider view, as they have been using the outcomes of existing on-entry assessments to inform teaching and learning practices. For example, almost all schools (98 per cent) used the outcomes to inform targeted teaching and/or early interventions. Most also used the outcomes to inform *what* and *how* to teach the whole class (94 per cent and 85 per cent respectively). More than three-quarters (79 per cent) also used the on-entry assessment data to verify information that early childhood education settings provided when pupils started school.

## Did staff understand the reception baseline and were they in favour of it?

Around half (48 per cent) of the 356 survey respondents reported that they understood the change to primary school accountability measures 'very well'. However, a similar proportion (49 per cent) only understood it 'somewhat'. Three-fifths (60 per cent) were in favour of the reception baseline as an accountability measure at least 'to some extent', whereas just under a third (30 per cent) were 'not at all' in favour. Respondents in local authority maintained schools were more likely to be 'not at all' in favour compared with those in academies (31 per cent compared with 17 per cent). The majority of the 51 staff interviewed on the phone did not see the introduction of a reception baseline as a particular *disadvantage* for their school. Most were either positive (considering it as beneficial to monitor pupils' progress) or were indifferent (because they were already carrying out on-entry assessments).

## Will schools use an approved reception baseline?

Responses from senior managers in 243 schools suggest that most (89 per cent) anticipated using a reception baseline; more than half (56 per cent) from 2015. Only ten per cent (N=25) were undecided. A minority of the 51 interviewees said that their school was undecided about whether to use a reception baseline as they were waiting to review the DfE-approved products before making a decision, as one headteacher said: *'We'll take a look at what's available when it's available and make decisions from there'.*

## How are schools preparing for the reception baseline?

Interviews with staff suggested that schools were preparing for the reception baseline by:

- researching new products
- discussing the policy and products among local partnerships of schools (aiming to be 'joined up' for consistency and comparability at a local level)

- having discussions with feeder early childhood education settings (if the feeder was part of the school/on-site, the results of the reception baseline were a reflection on internal staff, or because feeders had concerns about their own outcomes not being reflected in the baseline assessment);
- discussing the changes with staff, governors and parents.

Staff said that the most important factors influencing their choice of a reception baseline were: ease of administration; format (including a practical element to enable staff to assess a child's independent learning), content (to include personal development), reliability (so the output is useful for planning), and value for money (not necessarily just cost).

## Do schools expect to change on-entry assessment practice when the reception baseline is introduced?

The most common anticipated change was for schools to provide training for staff administering the reception baseline (47 per cent would definitely do this; 27 per cent might). Interviews with staff suggested that the training would relate to ensuring staff understand how to administer the baseline assessment product and that they do so consistently.

More than a quarter (27 per cent) reported that they would *definitely* schedule the reception baseline earlier than previous on-entry assessments and a similar proportion (29 per cent) reported that they *might* do this. This is an indication that some schools could be adopting 'gaming' strategies to maximise room for pupil progress.

Overall, 17 percent of schools had definite plans to change how they communicate with parents *before* the implementation of a reception baseline and more schools (21 per cent) had definite plans to do this *after* the baseline assessment had taken place. A larger proportion of schools also said they *might* change communications with parents before and after (see below for further discussion).

A notable minority (28 schools/13 per cent) said they definitely would or might change their entry approach by *introducing* a staggered start to reception, for example when entry is phased and some pupils start on different dates than others. In contrast, eight schools reported that they definitely will or might *remove* their existing staggered start.

## What challenges do schools anticipate?

At the time of the interviews (November-December 2014), most schools were waiting for information about the shortlisted Department-approved products and so were unsure about the changes to practices or challenges ahead.

Overall there was no evidence of any overriding concerns, but the most common challenges foreseen by a minority of interviewees were:

- **time** to administer the reception baseline (for example, '*getting accurate assessments of the children in the time*') . Some staff were also worried about the time the administration of the reception baseline will take away from settling-in activities when pupils start school.

- **how to choose a product** (schools were waiting for information and many would then be making joint decisions with other local schools). School staff wanted *information* about the products and then wanted *time* to review and compare the different options.

- a possible lack of consistency across teachers using the same product (for example, in the way questions are interpreted, answers are recorded, and the amount of time given to an assessment), either within a school or across schools.

## What is the most effective way of reporting outcomes of the reception baseline to parents?

Of 132 teaching staff (survey respondents who were not managers) in schools that undertook on-entry assessments, 91 (69 per cent) already reported the outcomes to parents, but most often orally rather than by distributing a written report. Staff were cautious about using a written report and pointed out that pupils may not have settled fully into school (and therefore not show their true potential); and that the on-entry assessment only shows a 'snapshot' of their achievements at a particular point (it does not show the progress that pupils may be making).

As part of the CEM trial, schools involved were given access to new reporting materials (they were assigned one of three different reporting groups; descriptor only; descriptor with a graphic; and descriptor, graphic and teacher comment) although CEM recommended that the reports were communicated to parents face-to-face to give teachers the opportunity to add context and allow parents to ask questions. Of staff interviewed in 22 CEM-trial schools, nearly all of them had verbally summarised the reports for parents and only nine had given out written reports.

A small sample of parents linked to ten schools (some involved in the CEM trial, others not), were interviewed to gather their views on all three versions of the reports and on the important features of reports in general. Opinions were divided: while some favoured the format with the graphic others preferred the teacher comment, even though they were aware of the extra work that this would cause for teachers. If required to provide a written report, staff and parents interviewed felt it would be important to include information on personal development of the child and next steps in their learning.

Of 214 surveyed schools overall, 37 (17 percent) *will* change how they communicate with parents *before* the implementation of a reception baseline and 46 (21 per cent) had definite plans to change communication afterwards. The introduction of the reception baseline is a policy change that will directly impact on pupils. For some schools this could be the first time they use a formal assessment in reception. It is likely therefore that schools will want to communicate this to parents before and/or after the assessment has taken place.

## Conclusions

The findings suggest that primary schools will be able to facilitate the introduction of the reception baseline. The extent of change to practice necessary will depend on how different the chosen product is from the current approach. The next step will be for local authorities and school partnerships (e.g. clusters, trusts and academy chains) to support schools in reviewing and making choices about which assessment product to use. Most schools will face a change in their assessment tool, and some will be using a formal approach for the first time.

Most schools had broad uses for their existing on-entry assessments - to inform teaching and learning practices, to target interventions, and to validate data received from early years providers. Teachers may still want to carry out their own assessments to give them broader outcomes for planning purposes, which could have implications for curriculum time.

In addition to teaching and learning use, the evidence suggests that schools will want to compare their performance with other local schools and schools nationally. They are therefore concerned about consistency in the administration of the reception baseline. This presents a challenge for policy makers to address this concern and explain to school staff how the reception baseline will be quality-assured and moderated.

There was *some* evidence that conscious 'gaming' might occur (for example, some schools planned to carry out assessment earlier, possible to maximise room for progress). Few schools, however, anticipated giving pupils less support during assessments and only a small minority reported that they might be more cautious about judgements in order to keep scores low or depress results. A variation in approaches to administering the reception baseline, and in the extent of 'gaming', could have an impact on the reliability of the data being used for accountability purposes. Therefore, moderation of the administration of the reception baseline is likely to be important.

There is a need for baseline providers and leaders at the local level to facilitate training and the sharing of practice across schools, to minimise any challenges and impact they could have on learning. School leaders considered that dialogue with school governors, staff and parents; nursery and pre-school feeders; and local school partnerships was going to be essential for managing this change.

As regards the reporting formats that stakeholders find most useful, some schools did not like the idea of sending out a written report. If schools are to be encouraged to provide reports, it was thought important to contextualise the results so that parents gain a full understanding of their children's educational progress. However, staff were aware that including teacher comments in *written* reports would have implications for teachers' workload. Staff and parents preferred oral feedback (for example, provided at a parents evening) which give teachers an opportunity to explain the results face-to-face.

School staff and parents were keen for the next steps to be included in any report, so that teachers and parents understand what actions they can take to support the education of the child.