



NAPE

**National Association for Primary
Education**

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Bold Beginnings: Ofsted survey of the Reception year

An assessment by the National Association for Primary Education

This is a confused survey of children learning during their Reception year. Much of the survey draws on sound established practice and research but this is accompanied by assertions of political policy which contradict the otherwise enlightened discussion of teaching and learning before statutory school age. An unfortunate impression is created overall and the review has failed to receive the support of practitioners who now see the inspectorate as a government agency which has lost the political neutrality formerly guaranteed by HMI and their responsibility to the Crown.

The focus on preparation for future education. Preparation is seen as the early acquisition of core skills with little discussion of how children learn in their early years. The need to concentrate upon the growth of understanding through direct experience is neglected as is the importance of positive attitudes. There is no appraisal of the quality of children's experience of their life in school.

Children must fit the curriculum. The review assumes throughout that there is a reception child who must meet "expected" levels of performance largely in the skills of literacy and mathematics. There is no recognition of the diversity of age and background which is of paramount importance in such young lives. There is no mention of the practitioner's skill in matching the learning experience to the nature and needs of the individual learner.

All children must progress at the same rate and the faster the better. The survey does not acknowledge that children vary a great deal in their need for pace in learning. There are frequent references to the need to "start quickly", to "catch up quickly" and to "catch up with their peers". The political idea that education is a race is particularly damaging to the education of children who find learning difficult. Children from disadvantageous backgrounds often require a different approach to those who are more fortunate. It is all too clear that an old fashioned remedy to the attainment gap is offered and the evidence is that this simply leads to a widening of the gap during primary and secondary education.

There is merit in whole class teaching. The review has a somewhat nostalgic affection for elementary education in which children sit quietly to be instructed through what is called "direct teaching". The illustrations to the review provide a better indication of the challenging classroom environment which facilitates the teaching and learning of young children. At no point is there a definition of "teaching directly" and no awareness of the skills of teaching through children's play. Once again the illustrations show many examples of sound child centred teaching while the text hints fondly at a style of teaching more typical and appropriate to secondary education.

Methods of teaching are decided by Ofsted and the government. Although ministers affirm from time to time that in our democracy the content of the curriculum can be defined by the government but that teaching methods are for teachers to decide, there has been a drift towards control of teaching methods by successive governments. This reaches its apogee in the review's advocacy of the political decision which is backed by punitive sanctions that synthetic phonics should be the child's first introduction to reading. There is no consideration of the practice of very many teachers who employ a more balanced approach including analytic phonics.

The teaching of mathematics. There are sounder comments with regard to this aspect of the curriculum but these are weakened by an advocacy of whole class teaching. Such teaching of mathematics to young children has a high potential for damage to future development. Essential to the children's grasp of mathematics is their understanding gained through practical experience through play and not through receiving instruction unrelated to that experience. The weakness of the review is further revealed by the treatment of what are called "manipulatives" which are seen as supporting the grasp of numbers rather than integral to learning.

The impact of assessment upon teaching and learning. Teachers are criticised for devising tasks simply to tick off elements of the early learning goals yet there is no consideration in the review of the impact that statutory assessment has upon the quality of primary education, even in the Admission class. Teachers are pressured into a pointless search for evidence because politicians have shown all too clearly that they do not trust professional judgement. The report's advocacy of assessment via means other than the observation of children is barely mitigated by a concession that observational assessment promoted better progress -- a contradiction which reveals the Janus-headed character of the survey. Sound evidence based observations are accompanied by support for policies rooted more in rhetoric than fact.

A major opportunity has been lost. Instead of a serious discussion of the issues confronting the crucially important transition to primary school and in defiance of the evidence, practitioners are presented with a highly politicised thrust towards a more formal approach to teaching and learning in the early years. The professionalism of Ofsted is impugned.

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