

BRIEFING NOTE

Date: February 2016

BASELINE ASSESSMENTS FOR RECEPTION AGED CHILDREN VIEWS FROM SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND SPECIALIST RESOURCE PROVISIONS FOR DEAF CHILDREN

1. BACKGROUND

This paper considers the accessibility of baseline assessments for reception-aged children in England, from the perspective of special schools and specialist resource provisions for deaf children. The intended purpose of the paper is to contribute to our understanding of current practice in relation to deaf children. We do not attempt to make any judgement on the principle or purpose of baseline assessments.

2. INTRODUCTION OF BASELINE CHECKS

National testing for reception-aged children in England will be introduced from September 2016. The purpose of the 'baseline check' is to assess each child's level of development at the beginning of their formal schooling, so that progressed by age 11 can be measured. The checks assess basic literacy, reasoning and cognition. The baseline assessment tests are designed to give teachers and schools a clear picture of each child's initial skills.

Schools were able to opt in to the baseline assessments from September 2015, or alternatively opt out altogether. Schools were able to select assessments from one of three providers:

1. Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring,¹ (CEM) Durham University - Base
2. Early Excellence²
3. National Foundation for Educational Research³ (NFER)

3. Experiences of the different assessments

*Nursery World*⁴ reported on schools' experiences of the three assessments:

3.1 CEM - Base

Just under 10,000 children across 2,500 schools used Base. Most were maintained schools, but there were also a small number of independent and international schools. Base is computer-based and adaptive. It is reported as being easy to administer, and presented to children in a fun and visually attractive way.

¹ <http://www.cem.org/>

² <http://www.earlyexcellence.com/>

³ <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/>

⁴ <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/>

3.2 Early Excellence

Early Excellence has been used in 12,000 schools, equivalent to 70% of primary schools in England. This is an assessment that relies on teachers' observations of children's skills within the normal day-to-day school routine, so that children don't even know they are being tested. Children are assessed against 38 different statements within the 'prime' and 'specific'⁵ areas of learning described in the document *Statutory framework for the early Years Foundation Stage*.⁶ The characteristics of learning they display is also recorded.

3.3 NFER

There are no reported figures on the number of schools who used NFER assessment. It was reported by *Nursery World* as being easy to use, giving a clear indication of the level that children were at on entry to reception. The NFER assessment uses common reception classroom resources like counting bears, plastic shapes and number and picture cards. Children work through the activities while the teacher records the child's progress on a digital device or in individual paper pupil booklets.

4. Views of Teachers of the Deaf

The National Deaf Children's Society asked Teachers of the Deaf in special schools and specialist resource provisions for deaf children about their experiences of using the baseline assessments. This was done largely by email, with follow-up interviews by telephone.

One special school for deaf children reported that they were using NFER. The Sign Bilingual consortium, with which the school is associated, had decided to use this assessment because the resources are classroom-based and would be in natural use in the classroom. The school also felt that the online information about NFER was very useful. Sign and speech could be used at the same time to deliver the assessment. The assessment was familiar and there were no training implications for staff.

One challenge in using NFER was that pupils with additional complex needs struggled with the tasks. Despite this, the staff felt that the assessment did provide a baseline which could help them to show progress. They commented that they had used the NFER Helpline which was very useful.

Other resource provisions and special schools for deaf children that we spoke to had all used Early Excellence. The general consensus was that Early Excellence reflected good early years practice. Settings reported that it was holistic and noted that it was recommended by trusted academics and experts in the field. The other assessments were easy to use but, when scrutinised, teachers felt that they were not accurate assessment tools and simply provided data rather than supported progress.

Most teachers did not report any challenges in using the assessment with deaf children.

Where challenges were reported, these included:

- Teachers needed to make judgements which relied on what they heard the children say.

⁵https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335504/EYFS_framework_from_1_September_2014_with_clarification_note.pdf Sections 1.3, and 1.4, page 7ff.

⁶<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>

- Some of the 31 broad objectives contain multiple parts, and the assessment did not recognise that some children could do one part but not another. These children would be marked as having not achieved the objective, even if they had shown they have some of the skills required.

The majority of teachers said they would not have done anything differently. Where suggestions were made, these included:

- Some of the information required for the assessment cannot be found out from children's self-initiated activities. To address this, teachers would have set up activities specifically to gain the relevant information to enable the assessment.
- Teachers would have sought more information about the assessment beforehand to get a better understanding of the timescales required to carry it out.
- Teachers would have taken more time to carry out the assessment. As children had only been in school for five weeks before the assessment had to be completed, the process was found to be quite intense.

One teacher would have liked to have seen different individual language skill objectives that take into account and credit the actual skills of a child with delayed language skills. She would also have liked to have seen different reporting facilities comparing different groups of children. No one else reported that there was anything they wished they had known about beforehand.

We asked teachers to share any thoughts or experiences of using the assessments. General comments were that the process of gathering information was helped by the whole school being on board with the process around baseline assessments. As with all assessments, the importance of the teacher knowing the child well in order to complete the assessment accurately was stressed. This was obviously a problem if carried out too early.

One teacher said that it was useful, but not comprehensive enough to be an effective tool, as so much depended on the child's mood or their understanding of what was required, and having to give a yes-no answer was a limitation. Another felt that the standardised assessment was inappropriate for use with children who communicate in sign, rather than through spoken language.

When we asked for recommendations, one teacher of the deaf said:

Use the assessment in line with your normal recording of assessments - and if your school have adapted for signing children follow those guidelines to assess for baseline.

5. Conclusion

This briefing note provides an early snapshot of how baseline assessments are being used by special schools and resource provisions for deaf children. A number of minor points were raised, as set out above, but no major concerns were raised and, at this time, there appears to be no need for further advice and resources.

6. Feedback

To help us keep a watching brief on this issue, we would welcome any further feedback that other education professionals working with deaf children have about the use and accessibility of baseline assessments with deaf children.

Contact: professionals@ndcs.org.uk