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Why are we tracking Reception-aged children? Teachers' and key stakeholders' perspectives on the reintroduction of national Reception Baseline Assessment

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Abstract

This paper considers the recent development and implementation of statutory Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) in England introduced by the Department for Education (2021). Internal baseline assessments, undertaken by early years professionals, have traditionally been an integral part of gaining informed knowledge and understanding of individual children in Reception classes. Previous iterations of baseline assessment have included observations and interactions with children in order to begin to construct an overview of their holistic development, their experience, abilities, skills, strengths, and areas for development (TES, 2015). Such types of assessment are used by early years teachers and practitioners to inform learning and teaching during children's first year of primary school (Brodie, 2013). In 2021, the RBA statutory guidance (DfE) established a formal assessment process for assessing all Reception-aged children within six weeks of starting primary school.

This paper provides a review of literature and research and outlines the development and processes involved in the implementation of RBA. A research-based study, investigating teacher and key stakeholder perceptions of RBA is then detailed. The

paper reports on the research, which utilised a qualitative survey (Bryman, 2004) to collect data from 70 teachers and stakeholders across 47 local authorities in England. Data was collected and analysed, and the findings detail distinctive differences in purpose and values of RBA in comparison to internal baseline assessment. The paper concludes by recommending that RBA is halted and reconsidered in relation to teachers' priorities at this crucial time, and the purpose and values of internal baseline assessment be further discussed.

Keywords

Reception, baseline, assessment, teachers

Link to article

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Introduction

This paper aims to provide an overview of recent statutory developments in baseline assessments for Reception-aged children who are aged 4-5 years in primary schools in England (DfE, 2021). It details an investigation into teacher and key stakeholder perceptions of the implementation of Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA). The literature and research included presents a brief review of baseline assessment leading to the current RBA (DfE, 2021). An overview of the structure, organisation, processes, and implementation of RBA provides the context for the research-based investigation that was undertaken during 2021-2022. The paper then details this study which utilised a qualitative survey (Bryman, 2004) to collect data from 70 teachers and stakeholders across 47 local authorities. Key findings are then compared to relevant published literature; recommendations for practice are included in the conclusion.

Round One: Reception Baseline Assessment became a statutory requirement

Since the late 1970s, a standards agenda based on neoliberal notions of accountability, assessment and performativity has dominated education policy and

rhetoric in England (Williams-Brown and Hodkinson, 2019). Furthermore, the development of implicit and explicit forms of managerialism have increasingly influenced the ways education systems are presented (Hall, 2020). Since the Education Reform Act in 1988 a succession of neoliberal measures have shaped education policy in England, including parent choice of schools and the creation of an educational market place (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). One aspect of measurements that has been considered is a child's starting point within formal education, otherwise known as a baseline. In September 1998, Reception Baseline Assessment was made a statutory requirement for all maintained primary schools in England by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE, 1998). Schools had autonomy on what, and how, they would measure the attainment of 4-year-olds starting in their setting. Bradbury (2014) highlights that gradually observation-based assessment, undertaken during the academic year, replaced local, informal testing.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) was introduced from 2008, and the Department for Education (DfE, 2010) produced annual national and local authority (LA)-level outcomes. Early years teachers and practitioners recorded whether individual children achieved the 'emerging', 'expected' or 'exceeding' criteria (DfE, 2013), and this provided a 'formalised tool for monitoring and assessment to gauge levels of children's attainment' across all areas of learning (Ang, 2014: 91). Lindsay and Lewis (2013: 1) note that:

Baseline assessment was generally viewed positively and regarded as working effectively by school and, in particular, by LEA [local education authority] personnel... areas of concern focused on lack of training in the use to be made of the data by schools, weaknesses concerning validity and reliability, lack of parental involvement or understanding of the process, and confusion of purposes.

Cowley (2019: 1) took the concerns further and suggested that the 'history of statutory assessments in English Reception classes is a long one, littered with false starts and failures'.

Round Two: Piloting a standardised Reception Baseline Assessment

In 2015, schools were asked to opt for one of three DfE-accredited baseline assessment providers. Two providers utilised one-to-one assessments with individual children recording responses on a tablet, with the third provider opting for an observation-based approach. TES (2015) reported that nearly two thirds of schools opted for the latter, test-free, observation-based approach called ‘the Early Excellence Baseline Assessment’ (Early Excellence, 2015). Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2017: 1) suggested that having to use one of only three DfE-accredited providers: ‘...blurred the distinctions between not-for-profit social enterprises, digital policy innovation labs, edu-business, and the state... baseline's simplistic reductionism allowed for the economisation of early years education assessment and for its commercialisation of comparison’. The initial 2015 attempts were scrapped due to a lack of comparability across the three providers. However, the government once more announced a tender for a Reception Baseline Assessment in 2018. Furthermore, the RBA tender in 2018 specifically stated that the assessment had to be an age-appropriate assessment (Gov.uk, 2019) and therefore signified a shift away from the observation-based baseline approaches that two thirds of schools had previously favoured. This is evidence of a continuing aim to establish neoliberal measurements and the ‘datafication’ and ‘dataveillance’ of children’s starting point and thereafter, progress, in formal education to ensure compliance against prescribed standards and targets (Bradbury and Robert-Holmes, 2018).

Ward (2017: 1) reported in a statement released by Early Excellence that the government’s proposals for the assessment were ‘self-contradictory, incoherent, unworkable and ultimately inaccurate, invalid and unusable... will not accurately reflect what the children know and understand, provide data that is meaningless and unusable, and, most absurdly of all, appears unlikely to even be available until seven years later’. Crowley (2019) states that only one organisation tendered for, and was subsequently awarded, the £10 million contract: the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). This added to the concerns raised by Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, fuelling a reduced scope and specific shift away from the preferred observation-based baseline assessments typically used by early years professionals.

Sainsbury, a research associate with NfER argued a case for baseline assessment, stating that teachers would want to know the children's existing abilities, to enable them to build on these, and that this was an 'intrinsic part of their professional role' (cited in Fouser, 2022: 1). Cambridge Evaluation and Monitoring (2021) noted that teachers understand that children have varied starting points, and effective baseline assessment should highlight this and generate feedback on strengths and be integral to future learning and teaching. Sainsbury (cited in Fouser, 2022) queried why there was controversy regarding baseline assessment and considered that this may have been based on the notion of testing, often associated with formal written tests rather than observational assessment.

Round Three: The introduction of a national standardised Reception Baseline Assessment

In 2020, schools could 'opt' to participate in a voluntary, early adopter year of the RBA (Autumn 2020). Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2017: 1) had previously suggested 'that within the context of punitive performativity, head teachers might be considered 'irresponsible' if not engaging with the new accountability measure in its voluntary year'. However, Gibbons (2021) reported that:

The number of primary and infant schools expressing an interest in trialling the controversial new baseline assessment for four- and five-year-olds, before it becomes statutory, has fallen by more than half, new figures reveal - 3,878 schools signed up as "early adopters" for Reception baseline assessment, compared with the 9,657 that took part in the previous year's pilot.

Following this voluntary pilot, the RBA was made statutory in schools from September 2021. The government stated that 'unlike the current progress measures, this [assessment] will give schools credit for the important work they do with their pupils between Reception and Year 6' (Gov.uk, 2022: 1). This statement shows a shift in purpose of the baseline assessment. Whereas traditionally baseline assessments were undertaken to inform teacher's understanding of a child's strengths and areas for development, this baseline approach is the first part of a new process to recognise progress at an institutional level. In addition, it was noted that whilst there were clear

links between the learning and development requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile (DfE, 2022), the RBA was intended to be completed within six weeks of children starting in Reception class, rather than at the end of the academic year. All children, irrespective of whether they start Reception in the autumn, spring, or summer, were expected to be assessed. Early years teachers, practitioners, teaching assistants, trained education professionals and providers were specifically told they 'must' implement the statutory requirements, and 'should' have regard to provisions outlined when completing the RBA, and 'should not depart from them unless there is good reason for doing so' (DfE, 2021: 19). It is expected that the administration of the assessment follows the guidance and assessment and reporting arrangements, and that the assessments should take approximately twenty minutes per child.

The RBA (DfE, 2021) assesses children in early mathematics, literacy, communication, and language, and is intended to provide the starting point data for cohort level school progress measures. The assessment involves asking a series of short questions, the children can use practical resources, and teachers record the results on a laptop, computer, or tablet. The data will be used to compare against Year 6 Key Stage 2 outcomes to provide an overall progress measure for each school. DfE (2021) stated that the data collected and analysed from the RBA will be stored in the National Pupil Database (NPD), and that the numerical scores from the RBA would not be shared with external bodies: schools, teachers, the pupils, or their parents/carers. Following the assessments, the DfE provides a series of narrative statements for teachers indicating how a child had performed.

It is expected that all maintained schools and academies, special schools, and Service Children's Education (SCE) schools, with Reception year cohorts participate in RBA. The RBA was developed to be inclusive, so that most Reception-aged pupils, including those with SEND and English as an additional language, would participate (DfE, 2021). Resources have been modified for use with pupils with visual and hearing impairments, and further adaptations could be made by teachers or practitioners, before administering the assessment, such as enlargement or the use of coloured paper. On rare occasions a headteacher might consider that the RBA is inappropriate for a particular child and could deem that the child should not undertake it.

School headteachers are responsible for ensuring the RBA is delivered as stipulated within the statutory guidance (DfE, 2021), and deviation from this could potentially result in investigations of maladministration. This may result in local authority monitoring if a provider is found to have deliberately misadministered the RBA and impacted on results. Although Ofsted do not have access to numerical data produced by the assessment, access may be granted for a specific purpose. Ofsted will also have access to individual schools' progress scores when these are released at the end of Key Stage 2.

The literature review explains that the latest RBA is the third round of trying to effectively implement standardised baseline assessment. Since 2021, RBA has become a statutory requirement in all schools (DfE, 2021). It is therefore essential that research is carried out to explore how RBA is working in practice. The paper will now detail findings from a study that investigated teachers' and key stakeholders' perspectives on the latest RBA in its year of inception. Findings will be linked to research published on the historical use of RBA and the present-day RBA.

Methodology: The study's aims and scope

The research undertaken sought to investigate teachers' and key stakeholders' perspectives and experiences of using the Reception Baseline Assessment during its first year of implementation in Autumn 2021. The research aimed to provide an analysis of how the RBA had impacted on practice during this term and to make recommendations for future implementation. It was underpinned by the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' and key stakeholders' perspectives on the Reception Baseline Assessment?
2. What impact has the Reception Baseline Assessment had on practice in children's first few months of formal schooling?
3. What are the teachers' and key stakeholders' perspectives on successfully navigating the Reception Baseline Assessment beyond 2021-2022?

The data collection process was undertaken between 2021 and 2022. The survey was designed and shared using JISC Online Surveys and included eight sections that expanded on the above research questions. For the purpose of this paper, survey data is drawn from sections relating to participants' general baseline assessment practices before the introduction of the RBA, participants experiences of administering the RBA and what participants would change in administering the RBA next year. The survey included 70 participants, across 47 different local authorities. In total, 90% of participants were early years or reception teachers, and 10% were teaching assistants or members of the senior leadership team. Participants had a diverse duration of professional experience in school, ranging from 1 to 27 years, with an average of 16 years' experience. There was an equal split between local authority schools and academies. The specific roles, experiences, and qualifications of the participants, contributed towards gaining useful insights into the organisation, management, and impact of RBA, ad how participants intended to develop this in subsequent years. Demographic information for participants can be found in tables 1 and2. This information includes participants that chose to answer these questions in the survey and includes categories defined by the way the participants described their roles.

Participant role	Number of participants
EYFS lead	27
Reception class teacher	21
Teacher/Class teacher	13
Assistant Head	3
Teaching Assistant	2
Curriculum Advisor	1
Headteacher	1
Participant experience	
Average number of years' experience	16
Lowest number of years 'experience	1
Highest number of years' experience	27
Participant qualifications	
BA	25
Degree	13
Masters	8
PGCE	17
QTS	3

Table 1: Participant demographic information

Total number of Local Authorities included in the study	47
Type of school participants working in at the time of data collection	
Academy	31
LA	35
Trust	1
Faith based	1

Table 2: School demographic information

The research design

Cohen *et al.* (2017) stated that when considering a phenomenon in educational research, and when viewing the world, we should integrate rather than separate data.

The study aimed to investigate a national sample of perspectives from differing schools across England. A survey was used to gather qualitative data collection to explore an in-depth analysis of individual perspectives as well as investigate commonalities of perspective across the sample (Bryman, 2004). Sandelowski (2001: 230) contested that one of the myths of qualitative research is that it is “defined by the absence of numbers”. However, “...not every use of numbers has the same implications for the research design and the classification of the study” (Maxwell, 2010: 478). The interpretivist focus of this study was on the positions of the individuals being researched to gain an in-depth understanding of these participants’ positions (Basil, 2010). Interpretivist research does not aim principally to generalise findings, but instead focuses on the participants’ positions, acknowledging that their positions and actions alter over time and are dependent on their situational circumstances. Findings can then be compared between different periods of time or between different places (Cohen *et al.*, 2017).

The survey included closed questions that asked participants to select responses that were most relevant to them and included open questions for participants to have space to explain their individual perspectives and experiences. Findings are represented in relevant themes derived from the qualitative data collection. The approach included initially identifying themes in the open question data that were then collated into an excel document, discussed, and compared to the statistical results before themes were finalised. The ‘voice’ of the respondents is presented as italicised direct quotes.

Ethical considerations

Prior to undertaking the empirical research, ethical approval was sought from the University of Wolverhampton and the University of Birmingham Ethics Committees. The committees needed to be assured that BERA and university ethical guidelines had been considered in the planning and development of the research proposal, and that these would be followed during the implementation of the research (BERA, 2018).

Ensuring anonymity in education research is vital. Participants need to be assured that their experiences, perspectives, and voices are protected (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). As such, the survey questions focussed on the participants’ roles, whether they worked in a local authority school or other, and the type of school or setting, to ensure

anonymity could be maintained. In this way, statistical data could be collected to establish the type of schools and settings involved and the roles and number of years of experience of participants with no personal or identifiable data. The front page of the electronic survey detailed information about the research, including its aims and objectives. Details about the research and information regarding confidentiality, anonymity of participants, right to withdraw and voluntary completion were provided online before participants completed the survey. Participants were asked to proceed to data collection if they were willing to give informed consent to participate in the research (Denscombe, 2002).

Findings and discussion

Participants were asked questions on their use of internal baseline assessment that they carried out before the reintroduction of RBA in 2021. They were also asked questions on their perceptions and experiences of using RBA in 2021-22 and whether they continued also to carry out their previous forms of assessment. In analysing the data there were clear disparities between the purpose and value teachers placed on internal baseline assessment and the purpose and value placed on RBA. These findings focus on commonalities of perspectives amongst the participant group and detail key themes that directly relate to the purpose and value of both assessments.

Internal baseline assessments

Purpose: Getting to know the child and informing teaching practice

Many of the participants had experience of internal, class-based assessment and assessment procedures before implementation of the RBA. In total, 95% strongly agreed or agreed that they had previously carried out internal baseline assessment of children during their first term of Reception. The most frequently cited activities used during the informal assessments, were play based, with teachers and practitioners involved in the games and play based activities or observing the children whilst they were playing. Examples of comments provided by the participants are as follows:

“Children enjoyed 1-1 time with their teacher. It was an informal approach - playing games etc. Helped build relationships by having conversations and finding out about their interests” (EYFS Lead with 18 years experience).

“I spent time getting to know the children in my class whilst doing the baseline. We would play games. I would make observations whilst joining in their play. It gave lots of time to build relationships, support children discovering a new environment and set clear boundaries” (Reception Teacher with 5 years experience).

“It was an observational assessment with judgements made over 5 weeks playing with children, talking with them and taking on the views of parents and colleagues” (EYFS coordinator with 32 years experience).

“Allowed time to get to know the children in different areas of their learning and without a focus being on sheets, resources and iPads. We talked to them, played with them and enjoyed being with them instead of ticking their name off a list before moving onto the next child” (EYFS Lead with 5 years experience).

“The first few weeks of school were all focused on getting to know the children and baselining. A mixture of observing and engaging with children in their play as well as spending time 1:1 with each child so a well-rounded picture built up covering all 7 areas of learning” (Reception Teacher with 8 years experience).

For most of these participants this internal assessment covered seven areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage, with 83% strongly agreeing and agreeing this was the case. Most of these participants (81%) strongly agreed or agreed that their internal baseline assessment was reviewed each year to ensure it was appropriate and responded to developments in the EYFS. Participants were asked to respond to statements regarding the purpose of their internal baseline assessments. These were as follows:

- Internal baseline assessment informed an understanding of children’s strengths (91% strongly agreed and agreed in total).

- Internal baseline assessment informed an understanding of children’s areas for development (91% strongly agreed and agreed again).
- Internal baseline assessment informed teaching for that term and beyond (91% strongly agreed and agreed again).

It is clear from these findings that most of the participants saw significant purpose in the use of internal baseline assessment that focused on observations, play and getting to know the children. Such purpose is supported by Sharman, Cross and Vennis (2022: 5) who state that observations are ‘an invaluable tool’ when we consider the process of maximising progress for children in early years settings. Formative assessment based on observations is used by teachers and practitioners to develop knowledge and understanding of the children, and to plan and teach appropriate activities and lessons. These findings relate to Loblely (2019) who compared this form of assessment with RBA and noted that observational assessment has been considered less intrusive than RBA and makes use of teachers’ professional judgement during the first few weeks of Reception, rather than one-off binary assessments. Ninety per cent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they continued to administer other baseline assessments to compliment the RBA.

Value: Getting to know each child as an individual

During internal, class-based assessments, many of the participants (69%) utilised the time to get to know the children as individuals. This time was spent engaging in playbased activities with the children and observing whilst they were involved in activities, as the responses illustrate.

“An example would be when we are carrying out a focused activity and your engaging and modelling the activity. You step back and observe and interact with the children to assess their skills and understanding” (EYFS Lead with 8 years experience).

“Every interaction I have with a child, whether in carpet sessions or free flow time, helps to build a picture of what I know about the child” (Reception teacher with 5 years experience).

“Through talking to a child when they are involved in play I can question and model vocabulary to move on their learning” (Headteacher with 30 years experience).

“Regular observation, in the moment feedback to children and adjusting an activity to enable them to progress in a skill we see needs supporting” (EYFS Lead with 16 years experience).

Participants were asked how internal baseline assessment influenced the time spent getting to know children in the class. The most frequently cited responses concentrated on getting to know the child and on some of the practical processes of carrying out internal baseline assessment. Responses are detailed in table three, with examples of comments from the participants. Participants comments were coded in multiple themes where appropriate.

Theme	Percentage of participants	Participant comments
Got to know the child as an individual	29%	<p>“The assessment gave me the chance to really know my children. The time I spent doing the assessments in each area helped this” (Reception Teacher with 5 years experience).</p> <p>“Allowed time to get to know the children in different areas of their learning and without a focus being on sheets, resources and iPads. We talked to them, played with them and enjoyed being with them instead of ticking their name off a list before moving onto the next child” (EYFS Lead with 5 years experience).</p>
Used play and play partnering	20%	<p>“It was an observational assessment with judgements made over 5 weeks playing with children, talking with them and taking on the views of parents and colleagues” (EYFS Coordinator with 32 years’ experience).</p> <p>“We spent time talking and playing with individual children as they went about their day. There was some ‘formal’ elements of our baseline but these were kept to a minimum” (Class teacher with 12 years experience).</p>

Involved observations	18%	<p>It was based on observations and playing alongside the children, and getting a deep understanding of them (EYFS lead with 27 years experience).</p> <p>The baseline was us observing and interacting with the children. It didn't take time from getting to know them and was an intrinsic part of it (EYFS Lead with 16 years experience).</p>
Completed alongside children in class	12%	<p>"Mainly done alongside the children and during group time activities. Very little need for 1:1 and got to know my children well in the first few weeks" (EYFS LEAD with 23 years experience).</p> <p>"Activities set up in the classroom meant the children were not removed from their environment and it wasn't staged" (FS2 Teacher with 6 years experience).</p>
Built relationships	11%	<p>"Essential time to build relationships with new children, playing alongside them and acknowledging every child is uniquely" (EYFS Lead with 16 years experience).</p> <p>"I spent time getting to know the children in my class whilst doing the baseline. We would play games, I'd make observations whilst joining in their play. It gave lots of time to build relationships, support children discovering a new environment and set clear boundaries" (Reception Teacher with 5 years experience).</p>

Table 3: How internal baseline assessment influenced time spent getting to know children in the class

Most of the participants highlighted the importance of time spent getting to know each individual child using internal baseline assessment, and beginning to formulate their expectations. Hornstra *et al.* (2018) highlighted that teachers' expectations of pupils had an impact on their motivation and learning outcomes. Therefore, it is essential that expectations are fluid as teachers learn about the child and are unaffected by a process such as the RBA which has limited scope in terms of a child's holistic development (Lobley, 2019).

Reception Baseline Assessment

Purpose: tracking children from Reception

Only 34% of the participants' settings were early adopters of RBA in 2020. In total,

90% of the participants were directly involved in the administration of RBA in 2021/2022 and 65% of participants received input or training on RBA prior to implementation. Participants were asked to explain the purpose of RBA. Table 4 details the most frequently cited responses which focused on measuring progress and baselining children. Most of the responses detailed the same terms on 'measuring, tracking, assessing, progress and baselining children'. However, there were then different focuses to the statements that meant there were fewer overall commonalities in the responses. For instance, 6% of participants commented on accountability, 4% on judging progress, 4% on judging schools and 3% on national levelling of children.

Theme	Percentage of participants	Participant comments
Measuring and tracking progress	25%	<p>“To assess children in CL and Literacy and Maths so that it can be compared to their year 6 data when they are older” (Class Teacher with 12 years experience).</p> <p>To be used as part of a progress measure for schools (Teacher with 16 years experience)</p> <p>To give a score as to how well the children make progress from reception to Y6 (EYFS Lead with 22 years experience)</p> <p>“To track children’s progress from Reception through to year six” (EYFS Phase Leader with 6 years experience).</p> <p>“To track/ compare progress from when children start school to when they leave at the end of year 6” (Reception Teacher with 21 years experience).</p>
Assessing children and providing a baseline	19%	<p>To assess children to give a starting point entering into school. However, I feel this is more for the DfE than teachers (EYFS Lead with 8 years experience).</p>
		<p>To provide a baseline set of data which will demonstrate progress when that child reaches the end of year 6 - another accountability measure for the school and tool of league tables (Class teacher with 12 years experience).</p> <p>To assess whether the children have progressed throughout the school (Reception Teacher with 11 years experience).</p> <p>“To provide a baseline judgement to measure attainment across the primary phase” (EYFS Leader with 13 years experience).</p> <p>“To measure where the children are at as they start school and to use this to measure what their expected progress should be by the end of Year 6” (Assistant Head with 30 years experience).</p>

Table 4: Most frequent responses to purpose of RBA

Most participants in these findings highlight their disagreement with the purpose of RBA assessment. This compares with comments from Merrick, Chief Executive of the

British Association for Early Childhood Education (in Fouser, 2022) who suggested that RBA is an accountability measure based on children's value added between Reception and Year 6 that is derived from a single score rather than a broad-based profile. Merrick (in Fouser, 2022, p,1) raised concerns that the 'assessments are based around a deficit model, requiring scheme providers to ensure that no more than 2.5% of children achieve full marks, and requiring each test item to be scored on a simple yes/no basis'. Concerns were also raised regarding the age difference of children in Reception, children with SEND and children with English as an additional language (EAL). 'Even as an accountability measure, these tests are highly questionable in terms of what they purport to measure, and how they attempt to do it' (Merrick, in Fouser, 2022: 1).

There has been a notable increase in the production and use of data. 'The past 20 years have seen the steady 'datafication' of school systems – i.e. the rendering of key aspects of school practice into data that is digitally collected, processed and circulated' (Selwyn, 2020: 353). Datafication has become a key term to describe the increased significance, visibility, and constant governance through dataveillance, which is what happens when people or systems are 'subjected to the demands of data production' (Bradbury and Robert-Holmes, 2016: 6). The authors state that the constraint of this approach include 'making teachers' work visible within systems, which are both disciplinary and controlling, while often reducing the complexity of children's learning to single numbers' (Bradbury and Robert-Holmes, 2018: xii). There is clear differentiation between policy based 'compliance data', used to achieve an intended purpose, such as RBA, and 'useful data' which can be used to support learning, such as formative observation-based assessment (Selwyn, Henderson, and Chao, 2015).

Value: More for the government than the children

Participants were asked to rank the value of RBA for each key stakeholder. Findings show that the participants collectively did not place a lot of value on RBA. Some of the participants felt that the assessment was valuable for teachers and headteachers. More of the participants felt that local authorities and Department for Education gained from this assessment, but this was fewer than 50% of all participants for all key

stakeholders. Table 5 details percentages of participants that rank ordered the value of RBA for each stakeholder.

Value	Children	Parents/ carers	Teachers	Headteachers	Local Authority	Department for Education
Really valuable	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	9%
Valuable	1%	0%	17%	16%	28%	37%
Not valuable	13%	26%	28%	22%	16%	15%
Really not valuable	85%	74%	55%	62%	54%	39%

Table 5: Rank order of RBA value for each key stakeholder

Most of the responses on RBA were negative, including 90% of participants strongly agreeing, and agreeing that RBA negatively impacted on their workload. Moreover, the same percentages of participants stated that they also had to administer other baseline assessments to compliment RBA, such as a local authority baseline assessment. Most of the participants provided qualitative comments on why RBA impacted negatively on their workload. The most frequently cited responses focused on time in differing ways. This included time being spent out of the classroom, time spent training staff for RBA and time spent still having to undertake their own baseline assessment. Examples of the most frequent responses are detailed in table six.

Theme	Percentage of participants	Participant comments
<p>Negative impact on being removed from the class, the role of the teacher and getting to know children in the class</p>	<p>49%</p>	<p>The time it took us out of the classroom for to complete the tests was unmanageable. Much of the information it provided was unhelpful as you had to follow a script rather than fully explain a task so some children could have completed the tasks of you had explained in a different way or modelled first! Would much preferred to spent the time with the children in a more meaningful way (EYFS Lead with 18 years experience).</p> <p>I felt I had to do my own baselines as well as the RBA. It also took time away from getting to know the children and build relationships with them (Reception Teacher with 4 years experience).</p> <p>It has taken members of staff out of the classroom in the most vital time of year. The first 6 weeks is an essential time to build relationships, settle children, set boundaries routines and expectations. It is such a big step for children and we need all staff on board (Reception Teacher with 5 years experience).</p>
<p>Need to still undertake own baseline assessment</p>	<p>21%</p>	<p>The RBA doesn't give a clear picture of each child and doesn't include each area of learning so we have to complete our own school internal baseline - so effectively I've completed baseline assessments on my class twice (Teacher with 17 years experience).</p> <p>Baseline is carried out on all areas of learning to assess what a child can do naturally and what their individual needs are. Some children were reluctant to be withdrawn to access the baseline resources but would do activities willingly in the class amongst peers. In some cases activities were being duplicated (EYFS Leader with 21years experience).</p> <p>Because the reception baseline does inform teaching and learning of your cohort (as stated in the Reception Baseline ARA), teachers have to carry out their own internal baseline. The statements that you receive at the end of the</p>

		baseline are limited and do not tell you enough about what each individual child can do. Also, the government baseline does not cover the all prime areas of learning - key skills that pupils need in order to be successful in the specific areas (Curriculum Advisor with 11 years experience).
Time taken to set up RBA system, train staff and carry out scripted delivery	17%	<p>It was more work to ensure staff were trained in something new, and it took longer to complete than our internal baseline, but staff didn't feel this was a negative impact (EYFS Leader with 13 years experience).</p> <p>Additional training, set up time, still needing to implement our own baseline to give us a true picture of the children (EYFS Lead with 27 years experience).</p> <p>Spent quite a lot of time on the phone sorting the admin as headteacher didn't have time to be involved (Early Years Lead with 15 years experience).</p>

Table 6: Most frequent responses detailing negative impact of RBA on workload

Participants in the findings mostly saw little or no value in RBA. These findings relate to publications that question the rationale for tracking children from Reception to Year 6. Loblely (2019) suggested that, despite the need for easy comparisons, age4 could be too early for assessments. Merrick (in Fouser, 2022: 1) remarked that RBA was not for the benefit of the children or teachers and that ‘they will not help children to feel comfortable and gain confidence in their new surroundings’. The time spent tracking could also impact on time available for the provision of opportunities for play, which research highlights as significant for the development of children’s linguistic and cognitive abilities (Mooney, 2013 as cited in Levey, 2022: 47), as well as children’s wellbeing and self-regulation (Ergler, Kearns and Witten, 2013: 178).

Cowley (2019) suggested that it would be in the school’s best interests if the children did not do well in the baseline assessment as this would appear as more progress during primary years. In addition, Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2017) noted concern that if it was acceptable for children to receive low scores in the baseline assessment in Reception, the same children could then achieve low scores in SATs, whilst still having made progress. Bradbury (2011, in Robert-Holmes, 2017: 674) raised the

further concern that in any 'value added' measure, where the baseline is known, it is more likely to affect those groups who are 'lower attaining within the system in general, such as ethnic minorities, children receiving free school meals, children with SEN and EAL and some summer-born children'.

Conclusion

Participants in the research highlighted differing values and uses between internal baseline assessment and RBA. For most of the participants RBA is not a replacement for internal baseline assessment because its purpose is different. The RBA is very much a neoliberal tool that generates compliance data rather than useful data for children and teachers (Selwyn, Henderson, and Chao, 2015). Many of the participants, therefore, had to also carry out additional baseline assessment. Time was an important factor for these participants and most found that RBA was detrimental in such a crucial time where they needed to get to know the children in their class. Moreover, one of the significant findings of the research was that the participants focused on the detrimental impact of RBA on their practice, and on their children in Reception. Whilst some comments questioned the validity of this assessment, the participants' main concerns focused on how the RBA affected Reception children in their Reception year, and most significantly in their first six weeks of schooling. It is notable from the findings that RBA cannot replace internal baseline assessment, and should not be a priority over settling children into school and getting to know each individual child. Recommendations from the findings are as follows:

- Based on the evidence gained from the research, priority should be placed on the children and not on a score that can be used to compare progress in Year 6. RBA should be halted, and internal baseline assessment needs to be prioritised to best meet the needs of the children, teachers, and schools.
- If RBA is to continue in the future, then the relationship between internal baseline assessments utilised in respective schools and RBA, should be reviewed collectively between the Department for Education and key stakeholders. This should include the purpose and values of both forms of assessment. Participants in this study called to prioritise internal baseline

assessment in the first 6 weeks of Reception. Therefore, the RBA's timeline would need to be extended so that the first six weeks could be used for formative assessment based on interactions and observations of the children engaged in play-based activities. RBA could then be implemented after this crucial period, but with a different form and format, as evidenced in the findings. This would also contribute to a shift in producing useful data and not only compliance data.

- If the RBA is to continue in the future, then there needs to be consideration on how RBA can complement existing internal baseline assessment. Informal notes and records could be made during the RBA to inform teachers' knowledge of each child, and to be able to ascertain progress being made. This could be used to develop planning, learning, and teaching. Additionally, other professionals could carry out the RBA to ensure that teachers do not have to take themselves out of the classroom. One of the schools in the research intended on asking members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to administer RBA so that teachers were not removed from the class and could spend their time getting to know the children. This would require flexibility on the form and format of RBA, to ensure this assessment is not the priority and instead compliments internal baseline assessment.

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