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# ‘What works’ and for whom? *Bold Beginnings* and the construction of the school ready child

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## Abstract

School readiness is a dominant discourse in current policy agendas in UK and international contexts, fulfilling a range of goals such as providing children with the ‘best start in life’ by breaking the cycle of poverty, and preparing children for formal learning in compulsory education. Focussing on the school readiness agenda in England, this paper interrogates how the local touchdown of international policy formulations influences policy at country-level. It is argued that the emphasis on teaching Mathematics, Reading and Writing as a way of readying children for school raises concerns over the formalisation of pedagogy and curriculum in the Reception year (aged 4–5), in preparation for the transition to Year One of the National Curriculum. Using Hyatt’s Critical Discourse Policy Analysis Frame (CPDAF) this paper examines how the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) report ‘Bold Beginnings’ further strengthens the policy discourse that establishes Reception as a site for school readiness through a discursively constructed narrative of ‘what works’. Based on the analysis, the paper then questions whether the ‘what works’ OfSTED agenda works for teachers and children.

## Keywords

Bold Beginnings, early childhood education, Ofsted, policy, school readiness

## Introduction

Over the past 20 years, Early Childhood Education (ECE) has been a focal point for education and social policy interventions aimed towards raising standards, reducing poverty and improving future outcomes for children. As a result, international organisations such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD) have encouraged government investment in ECE as a way of improving the socio-economic prospects of future generations (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2018). Ensuring school readiness is a key driver to improve the life-chances of children and is seen globally as a ‘viable strategy’ that aims to close the learning gap

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amongst young children by supporting the ‘adoption of policies and standards for early learning’ (UNICEF, 2012: 4).

Whilst the key drivers behind the school readiness agenda are to address social inequalities, there is no clear, singular definition of school readiness or the school ready child (OfSTED, 2014; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015; UNICEF, 2012). The OECD (2017) report *Starting Strong V* highlights how countries adopt different approaches to the school readiness agenda, and the outcomes that are privileged when assessing a child’s readiness for school. Countries who follow a social pedagogy tradition (Nordic and Central European countries) favour an ‘open and holistic curriculum’, whereas countries where ECE is associated with primary education (France and the English-speaking world, with the exception of New Zealand) tend to privilege academic outcomes linked to Mathematics and Literacy (OECD, 2006: 135). It is argued that the policy construction of school readiness that focuses on academic outcomes has led to the ‘schoolification’ of the early years (Bradbury, 2019; Moss and Cameron, 2020). The *Starting Strong V* (OECD, 2017: 254) report warns this may result in the focus shifting away from the participation of the child towards practices such as ‘higher staff-pupil ratios, more hours spent away from home, more teacher-directed paedagogies, greater attention to academic content and less playtime’.

The aim of this paper is to highlight how the school readiness agenda has influenced educational policy at a local level, the outcomes that are privileged within a particular construct of the school-ready child, and the potential impact on teachers and children. In a critical analysis of workforce reform in ECE policy, Kay et al. (2021: 180) establish how the exploration of the ‘touch down of global policy flows, and the responses made at national level’ contribute to wider international debates in ECE. In light of policy reach and intensification, it is therefore important to interrogate local touch down, and local policy formulations at country-level as responses to and outcomes of these broader global meta-narratives.

The focus on the English policy landscape in this paper is intentional and relevant to international debates about the school readiness agenda, and the educational and economic outcomes that are expected from government investment in ECE. School readiness is a dominant discourse in ECE policy and is seen by the government as a way of providing children with a head start into compulsory education and establishing England as key player in the global market (Kay, 2018a). Accordingly, the reach and policy intensification of this agenda are evident in the formulation of curriculum goals (Department for Education [DfE], 2017) in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (birth to five education and care framework) and in national assessments (Standards and Testing Agency [STA], 2017). Each child’s performance at the end of the EYFS is judged through the use of the Good Level of Development (GLD) which in turn has become a measure of school readiness. In order to achieve a GLD each child must meet the learning outcomes set out in the 17 Early Learning Goals, which are the EYFS standards for learning and development.

In addition to these curricular and assessment performativity constructs, the education inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), monitors and regulates educational services in England. Formed under the Education (Schools) Act in 1992, OfSTED is one of the largest inspection bodies in the United Kingdom, and since 2005 has been responsible for inspecting early years services, producing reports and more recently research reviews. This paper focuses on *Bold Beginnings*, an Ofsted research review of the curriculum in the Reception year in England (DfE, 2017). The Reception year (age 4–5) is the last year of the EYFS (birth to 5), regulated by the EYFS statutory framework which sets the standards for learning, development and care across all ECE settings. Commissioned by Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman, the review had the aim of ‘providing fresh insight into leaders’ curriculum intentions, how these are implemented and the impact on outcomes for pupils’ (OfSTED, 2017: 2). The report, *Bold*

*Beginnings* (OfSTED, 2017: 4), aimed to examine provision and the ‘extent to which it was preparing four- and five-year olds for their years of schooling and life ahead’.

This analysis will reveal how OfSTED has become a producer of particular discourses that impact on the way in which educational standards are conceptualised at a local level (Baxter, 2014). Neaum (2016: 243) argues that ‘The significance of OfSTED’s assessment of school readiness cannot be underestimated’ as they are able to influence policy in such a way that places them in a central position to the ‘creation and maintenance of the dominant discourse’. Within this context, OfSTED defines the direction and purpose of governing education, and through the inspection framework they ‘promote and embody the governing project’ as a way of driving change in education (Ozga et al., 2013: 220). These power effects are played out not only via the inspection system, but also through reports such as *Bold Beginnings* which serve to further re-enforce the purpose of ECE to ‘ready’ children for school.

This paper makes an original contribution to policy studies in ECE, specifically what interventions are made, and by which government organisations, in order to connect global discourses and local responses. Hyatt’s (2013a: 837) Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame (CPDAF) is applied to reveal how *Bold Beginnings* re-enforces the school readiness agenda, and how this is ‘shaped and characterised ideologically through relations of power’. Section 1 justifies Hyatt’s framework within the wider field of policy analysis. This is followed in section 2 by an analysis of *Bold Beginnings*, specifically how the discourses of ‘what works’ and school readiness are constructed. The discussion then focuses on the consequent power effects of this discourse that persuade schools and teachers to act in particular ways. Finally, this analysis identifies critical questions about what the concomitant tensions and dilemmas are for teachers and children.

## **Critical policy discourse analysis frame as an analytical framework**

Ball (1993) presents two conceptualisations of policy: policy-as-text and policy-as-discourse. Recent approaches to policy analysis centre discourse as a process that involves the ‘production, reification and implementation of policy’ (Hyatt, 2013b: 44). Relevant to this discussion is Ball’s (1993: 12) view that policies are ‘textual interventions into practice’ posing ‘problems to their subjects’ and creating circumstances in which ‘the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrow or changed’. Furthermore, Hyatt’s (2013a: 837) framework views discourse as being ‘socially and culturally formed’, offering certain perspectives that come to be considered as ‘normal’ and others as ‘deviant’ or ‘marginal’.

Hyatt’s CPDAF provides a toolkit for policy analysts that is ‘empirically grounded in the text but informed by and linked to the broad policy context’ (Wiggan, 2018: 723). The frame comprises of two elements: the first is concerned with contextualisation of the policy, and the second with the deconstruction of the policy text and discourse. Contextualisation considers the drivers, levers, steering and trajectory of the policy which Hyatt (2013a: 838) argues are ‘central to understanding the evolution of a policy’ and how it is interpreted in different contexts by various actors leading to its ‘interpretation and recontextualisations by and within institutions’. Contextualisation is important as the role of OfSTED has intensified with responsibility for inspecting schools, childcare, adoption and fostering agencies, initial teacher training and the regulation of early years and children’s social care service. Schools and early years setting are monitored by OfSTED for their ‘effectiveness’, and teachers and managers exist within a regime of ‘accepted modes of successful practice’ (Perryman et al., 2018: 147). Through these inspection processes, and recent research reviews such as *Bold Beginnings*, OfSTED is positioned as ‘the sole arbiter of quality’ and has the power to influence how and what is taught in order to produce the desired learning outcomes of children (Wood, 2019: 793). Threatened with closure if they receive a ‘notice to improve’ in an

inspection, schools exist within a ‘high stakes’ context whereby the question ‘What does OfSTED want?’ dominates teachers’ thinking and behaviour (Ehren et al., 2015: 391).

Drawing on Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001: 4), the second part of the contextualisation process examines how the policy discourse signifies ‘justification, authority or “reasonable grounds”, particularly those that are established for some course of action, statement, or belief’. The notion of warrant is subdivided into three categories: evidentiary, accountability and political. The evidentiary warrant examines how policy provides and uses selected evidence to supported presented conclusions. However, it is pertinent to acknowledge Hyatt’s (2013a: 839) observation that ‘evidence is not a neutral entity’, and that ‘selections, omissions, and interpretations’ are permeated with values and embedded in ideology. The accountability warrant highlights what might happen if a desired course of action is not implemented through the presentation of potential negative outcomes. The political warrant is justification in terms of the ‘public good’, usually evoked by reference to ‘freedom, social justice, inclusion, social cohesion, or family values’ (Hyatt, 2013a: 839).

Integral to the deconstruction component is the analysis of *Bold Beginnings* at a semantic and lexical level utilising Fairclough’s (2003) four *modes of legitimation*. These are the processes by which values and norms are attached to policies as a form of justification; authorisation (legitimation by reference to authority of tradition, custom, individuals); rationalisation (legitimation by reference to the value of a particular course of action); moral evaluation (legitimation by an appeal to a value system around what is desirable) and myths (cautionary narratives advising of the positive/negative actions of particular courses of action) (Hyatt, 2013a).

The first part of this analysis will provide an overview of the policy landscape of ECE in England. The use of warrant in *Bold Beginnings* will consider how the ‘what works’ strategies are constructed for teachers to implement in the Reception classroom as a way of producing the ‘school ready’ child, and how these are ‘shaped and characterised ideologically through realisations of power’ (Hyatt, 2013a: 837). The discussion will conclude by critically considering whether the ‘what works’ discourse constructed in *Bold Beginnings* actually works for all children and teachers.

## The ECE policy context in England

Flewitt and Roberts-Holmes (2015: 96) argue that ‘discourses of economy have dominated neo-liberal national and global arguments for educational transformation’, and that Mathematics and Literacy are commonly seen by the English government to be the panacea for the ‘social ills of poverty, unemployment and poor health’. The privileging of Mathematics and Literacy as the panacea for an improved society is reflected in the trajectory of ECE curricular and assessment policy frameworks over the past 20 years. The *Desirable Learning Outcomes* (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority [SCAA], 1996) marked a significant starting point in the reform of ECE as prescribed outcomes were imposed on children age 4- and 5-years old (Kay, 2018a). A national framework, *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (CGFS) (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2000) was introduced for children from 3 to 5 years old, with the core aim of providing a ‘smooth path from birth into compulsory schooling’ (Faulkner and Coates, 2013: 22). This curricular iteration followed a ‘standards-based’ agenda, measured through children’s achievement of the *Early Learning Goals* (QCA, 1999) and reported to the government through the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (EYFSP) (QCA, 2003), a summative assessment process completed at the end of the Reception year for children between 4 and 5 years old.

In 2002, the Education Act extended the National Curriculum in English primary schools to include the Foundation Stage, and the six areas of learning in the guidance became statutory:

- Personal and social development
- Language and literacy
- Mathematics
- Knowledge and understanding
- Physical development
- Creative development

The EYFSP also became statutory whereby each child receiving government-funded education had to complete thirteen summary scales for each of the six areas of learning by the end of his or her time in the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2003). This policy formation marks the beginning of the ‘culture of accountability’ in ECE, where teachers and schools are judged on the reported attainment data of the children. As a consequence, the need for teachers and educational leaders to be coercive within this policy context increased as schools were regulated through the ‘disciplinary technologies’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2015: 304) of OfSTED inspections, and the performativity culture was re-enforced through the EYFSP data. Ball (2003: 216) defines this type of performativity as ‘a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)’. Within an English educational context, this means teachers must achieve a favourable OfSTED grading and accomplish good national test and assessment results in order to secure a high position in school league tables, thereby becoming more attractive to parents and students in the educational marketplace (Jeffrey, 2002).

In spite of 20 years of policy interventions in ECE, *Bold Beginnings* asserts that for some children, particularly those who are disadvantaged, the Reception year is ‘far from successful’ (OfSTED, 2017, 9). However, OfSTED now measure ‘success’ as children achieving the outcomes required for the GLD. Children who do not reach the expected level in those outcomes are therefore considered to have been ‘unsuccessful’ in their Reception year. Of particular concern is that, year on year, children find the outcomes for Literacy and Mathematics the most difficult, resulting in the lowest percentage of attainment across the EYFSP (DfE, 2019). Furthermore, findings from a national review of practice in the Reception year (Pascal et al., 2017: 27), highlight how pedagogy in Reception is ‘becoming more instructional, teacher directed and narrowly focussed on Literacy and Mathematics learning, with a loss of play and more individualised, creative approaches’.

Research findings that define ‘good’ or ‘effective’ practice, exemplified in *Bold Beginnings*, have a powerful influence on how the standards must be achieved via specific approaches to curriculum planning and pedagogy. *Bold Beginnings* therefore further illuminates the intensification of the role of OfSTED as the provider of knowledge about best practices in ECE through research-based evidence generated in their own reports. With this in mind it is important to consider how *Bold Beginnings* has the potential to influence the work of teachers through a discourse that links school readiness with a ‘what works’ agenda. The following section deconstructs *Bold Beginnings* to expose the power effects of OfSTED.

### *Deconstructing Bold Beginnings*

Framed rhetorically as a way of ensuring children have the ‘best start in life’ (Allen, 2011; Field, 2010), the school readiness agenda aims to break the cycle of poverty at the most ‘cost-effective’ point and prepare children for formal learning in Key Stage One (ages 5–7) (Kay, 2018a). Throughout *Bold Beginnings* there is a dominant narrative of accountability which warns of restricted life chances if children are not prepared for the ‘demands of Year 1’ (OfSTED, 2017: 12).



Moral evaluation is exemplified through the assertion that: ‘A good education is the foundation for later success. For too many children, however, their Reception year is a missed opportunity that can leave them exposed to all the painful and unnecessary consequences of falling behind their peers’ (p. 4). The use of cautionary language – ‘missed opportunity’, ‘falling behind’, ‘exposed’, ‘painful’ and ‘unnecessary’ – establishes a warrant of accountability, shifting the focus of Reception as the transition between the EYFS and Key Stage One, to the core purpose of ensuring that children are ‘readied’ for school. Furthermore, *Bold Beginnings* rationalises that a ‘good education’ will ensure later success which contextualises the intended aims of the report to define what a ‘good education’ looks like.

It is pertinent to consider the methodology OfSTED uses to create the evidentiary warrant that defines a ‘good education’ in *Bold Beginnings*. A total of 41 schools, recently judged to be ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’, were visited by OfSTED inspectors in the summer term. During the visit inspectors spoke with headteachers and staff, observed children’s learning in mathematics, reading and writing, and listened to children read. A yes/no survey was also distributed to schools and relevant stakeholders asking leaders and Reception staff to ‘share their views about the typical knowledge, skills and understanding shown by children on entry and exit from Reception’ (OfSTED, 2017: 31) which generated 208 responses from 76 schools. As Wood (2019) highlights in her analysis of *Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?* (OfSTED, 2015), there is no information about the framework used for interviewing headteachers and staff, and there is no reference to the qualifications, experience or age of the participants. Importantly, *Bold Beginnings* highlights that its overall aim is to ‘provide fresh insight into **leaders**’ curriculum intentions’ (OfSTED, 2017: 2) but again no further explanation is provided of the specific experience headteachers had of teaching in the early years. References to research evidence is limited, with one citation of a Department for Education (DfE) (Sylva et al., 2014) longitudinal study *Students’ educational and developmental outcomes at age 16*, signposting to EYFS policy frameworks, and two sources focussing on the attainment of vocabulary (Beck et al., 2002) and mastery in Mathematics (NCETM, 2016). This evidentiary warrant thus draws on a limited ‘evidence base’ and echoes Wood’s (2019: 790) assertion that OfSTED utilises a ‘circular discourse’ to ‘uncritically reinforce the OfSTED narrative’ and calls into question the reliability of the research and the validity of the recommendations.

*Bold Beginnings* claims legitimacy on the basis of what ‘successful primary schools’ are doing, where success is measured on whether children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have ‘achieved well’, defined as meeting the outcomes necessary for the GLD. This is a key political warrant in *Bold Beginnings*, justified by the rationalisation that the purpose of the Reception year is to provide children with the ‘essential knowledge and understanding they need to reach the good level of development’. The report warns that if this does not happen, children will be predisposed to ‘years of catching up rather than forging ahead’ (OfSTED, 2017: 9). Headteachers are responsible for ensuring the curriculum being delivered in Reception is ‘fit for purpose’, with the ‘purpose’ defined as equipping children to ‘meet the challenges of Year 1 and beyond’ (p. 4). This core purpose justifies the focus on evidencing how ‘good’ schools with a ‘clear vision’ ensure the children are ‘prepared’ for the ‘demands of the years ahead’ (p. 12).

Consistent with Hyatt’s framework, as a way of conceptualising the power effects of *Bold Beginnings* a search for the word ‘successful’ was carried out. It was then identified how this word was situated within the text to establish an evidentiary warrant of ‘what works’. For OfSTED to define schools who are undertaking these more formal practices as ‘successful’ is a powerful rhetorical tool implemented as a way of ‘persuading’ teachers to adopt ‘what works’. The nature of the evidence presented, sourced from schools graded as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’, and positioning the voices of teachers and headteachers as central to the discussion, establishes a powerful narrative of authorisation around the ‘what works’ agenda and how this is implemented in practice.

For those ‘successful schools’, reading was placed at the ‘heart of the curriculum’, and Literacy and Mathematics were given ‘sufficient direct teaching time every day’ (OfSTED, 2017: 4). The importance of reading is prevalent within *Bold Beginnings*, and a search of the document reveals the word ‘reading’ occurs 76 times. The use of words such as ‘core purpose’ and ‘fundamental’ rationalises the privileging of reading and phonics within the Reception curriculum and constructs a particular set of skills and behaviour that define Literacy in terms of content and pedagogy. However, the focus on narrow objectives linked to reading, phonics and writing ignores the broader Literacy curriculum that equitably considers all aspects of communication and language. Furthermore, Wood (2020) highlights how these EYFS objectives are skills-based outcomes, reducing Literacy to an entity that can be observed and measured, rather than a complex social and cultural practice.

Building on this rhetoric, key recommendations in the report attribute importance to the teaching of numbers, and an assertion that reading and phonics should be ‘the core purpose of the Reception year’ (OfSTED, 2017: 7). These recommendations are rationalised with the explicit assertion that ‘by the end of Reception, the ability to read, write and use numbers is fundamental’. *Bold Beginnings* presents formal practices as evidence of good practice in children’s attainment in Reading, Writing and Mathematics, including children sitting at tables, using a correct pencil grip when writing in ‘exercise books’ (p. 23), and undertaking complex place-value calculations using ‘Base 10 materials’ (p. 25). Kay (2018b: 331) argues that the EYFS policy-practice logic shows a ‘distinct shift towards effective teaching’ and the acquisition of formal outcomes in Mathematics and Literacy, thereby establishing the core purpose of the Reception year in readying children for school.

Through *Bold Beginnings*, a policy version of the school ready child is discursively constructed through formal approaches to teaching and learning, while alternative conceptions of school readiness are ignored. The power effect that this creates, through discourses of accountability, positions teachers and children in particular ways. The next section will discuss what this policy analysis has highlighted about school readiness, and ‘what works’ in the context of *Bold Beginnings*. It will also be questioned whether this construction of ‘school readiness’ solves the policy problems it sets out to achieve or creates new problems/challenges for teachers and children.

### ***Bold Beginnings and the ‘what works’ agenda***

This analysis has revealed how *Bold Beginnings* re-enforces the political agenda that being ‘ready’ for school is the best start in life for *all* children, particularly disadvantaged and marginalised children. It is difficult for teachers and researchers to argue against such a powerful discourse because it constructs a ‘hegemonic common sense’, and any criticism can be portrayed as being ‘negative, unambitious and harbouring low expectations of the disadvantaged’ (Tee, 2008: 596). Described by Ball (2003: 16) as a ‘mode of regulation’, the importance of achieving a favourable OfSTED grading of Good or Outstanding is paramount to a school’s success. Consequently, the practices that have been favourably judged by OfSTED are legitimised creating a mimetic isomorphism as schools strive to reproduce those practices. The temptation to imitate other schools who have achieved a good or outstanding inspection outcome, and the importance placed on children being ‘readied’ for school in a particular way, becomes difficult to avoid.

The view of ‘readiness’ constructed in *Bold Beginnings* is embedded within a policy discourse of formal teaching methods and the privileging of instrumental outcomes. Rather than draw on their professional judgement and experiences, contradictions emerge as teachers are expected to comply within the demands of performativity, acting out the expectations established in these OfSTED publications. As a consequence, Connell (2013: 108) asserts that OfSTED has the



potential to de-professionalise teachers and their ‘capacity to make autonomous judgement about curriculum and pedagogy in the interests of their actual pupils is undermined by the system of remote control’. Furthermore, Biesta (2007: 21) argues that the ‘what works’ agenda of evidence-based practice focuses on technical questions while ‘forgetting the need for critical inquiry into normative and political questions about what is educationally desirable’. The production of an introspective knowledge base does not allow other kinds of knowledge to enter policy debate and ignores the divisive social consequences of the market agenda in education which has a propensity to privilege certain groups over others (Connell, 2013). Through the ‘what works’ agenda, *Bold Beginnings* advocates a ‘best way’ to teach, ignoring the multiple perspectives of ECE pedagogy in favour of a more formal mode of delivery to ensure particular outcomes are met. This is in contradiction to the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL), and the mixed approaches advocated by the EYFS on teacher-led and child-initiated activities, including play and exploration.

The concern here is that a focus on academic readiness may have already become the modus operandi as teachers work within a framework where their performance is judged on the results their pupils achieve, particularly with technical skills being foregrounded in the school readiness agenda. The privileging of particular formations of phonics, Literacy and Mathematics in *Bold Beginnings* re-enforces the ‘schoolification’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2015) of the early years as teachers strive to ensure children achieve these outcomes. Ball (2003: 222) argues that the pressure of accountability that is placed on teachers creates a form of ‘values schizophrenia’ where teachers have to sacrifice their own judgements and beliefs for measurable outputs and performances. By constructing a pedagogy of ‘what works’ in *Bold Beginnings*, OfSTED further steers the teaching practices and curriculum provision of Reception teachers in explicit ways and provides the means by which policy goals can be accomplished. Furthermore, the report highlights an increasing policy intensification around discourses of school readiness and effective practices, creating tensions between policy aims and aspirations and the established values and beliefs of the ECE sector.

Whilst policy in ECE aspires to reduce the educational impact of poverty and disadvantage, it is questioned whether the ‘what works’ agenda perpetuated by *Bold Beginnings* works for all children, or if it re-enforces the privileging of particular groups of children. Darbyshire et al. (2014: 818) suggest there is a disconnect ‘between the pressures felt by teachers to get children ready for a prescribed school curriculum at an ever-earlier age’, and the individual needs of children who may benefit from ‘broader developmental experiences’. The OfSTED report counters this disconnect by claiming that ‘Increasingly, children are arriving in Reception personally, socially and emotionally ready to learn – that is, able and eager to take on the increased challenges of the specific, content-led areas of the wider curriculum’ (OfSTED, 2017: 10). Whilst this might be the case for some children, there are many cultural and contextual factors to consider when we contemplate the diverse life experiences that children bring into the classroom (Biesta, 2010; Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

Referring back to Hyatt’s (2013a) framework, the failure to recognise developmental complexities and variations in children’s diverse social and cultural experiences highlights the way discourse constructs what is considered to be ‘normal’ and the way those who do not fit the corresponding descriptors are positioned as ‘deviant’ or ‘marginal’. Factors such as English as an Additional Language, Special Educational Needs, being in receipt of Free School Meals, summer born children and gypsy/Roma children are consistently highlighted in the EYFSP data as those who do not achieve the GLD (DfE, 2019). The data illuminates how the construction of the GLD as a measurement of school readiness further marginalises children who are already disadvantaged by positioning them in an educationally deficit position as they enter Year One (aged 5). Furthermore, the focus on the data of the GLD in *Bold Beginnings* seemingly contradicts the assertion in the EYFS (DfE, 2017: 6) that ‘children develop and learn in different ways and at different

rates'. Children who do not reach the outcomes linked to the GLD are judged as being at a lower stage in their expected development and consequently become a site for intervention to ready them for school.

Roberts-Holmes (2015: 304) argues that these inappropriate assessment constructs de-contextualise children, teachers and schools, and 'denies the impact of structural inequality', laying the responsibility at the feet of teachers and individual schools. When the focus is centred on 'micro-level child and family characteristics' rather than 'macro-level systemic and political factors', issues of power and social justice are ignored (Shallwani, 2009: 6). Rather, the child is idealised as a learner that is both agent, 'obliged to protect the prosperity of the nation', as well as subject through which 'interventions are inscribed' (Sonu and Benson, 2016: 236). Hence, tensions emerge between the need to improve the socio-economic circumstances of future generations for the greater benefit of society, and the individual needs of the child.

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the diverse range of experiences faced by the early years sector and families and children highlight further complexities in ECE. Between March and June 2020, the first national lockdown was implemented in England to prevent the spread of the virus with imposed restrictions including the closure of schools and early years settings. The sector faced significant challenges during this time with staffing/ratio issues and financial feasibility as the number of children attending settings diminished. In response to the crisis, the DfE paused the EYFSP assessment for 2020, and announced that completion of the profile would not be mandatory in 2021. Furthermore, the advice for EYFS providers was to use 'a "reasonable endeavours" approach in complying with the learning and development requirements' (DfE, 2020a). The DfE (2021) defined 'reasonable endeavours' as prioritising children's care and safety within settings and providing a 'broad range of educational opportunities'.

During the first lockdown, the government announced that settings should provide childcare for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers (DfE, 2020a). The Local Government Association (2020: online) reports that during this period the number of children attending early years settings fell to around 4% of the usual level asserting that 'we do not yet know the impact of this fall in attendance on child development and school readiness'. However, research findings from the Sutton Trust (Pascal et al., 2020: 3) highlight the different experiences of children who continued to access provision and benefitted from smaller class sizes or were at home spending 'quality time with their parents' and those children who were at home in more difficult circumstances, likely to be 'the most vulnerable in the system'. In a report on social mobility and COVID-19, Montacute (2020: 4) asserted there was a significant risk that the crisis would 'further open up the early years' attainment gap in both the short and the long term'.

Despite the pandemic, OfSTED continued to carry out 'assurance inspections' across the education system with due regard to the limitations that were placed on schools and early years settings. As part of these inspections OfSTED (2021: online) aimed to identify how settings worked to ensure children 'return to their expected levels of development'. Rather than consider how to facilitate effective transitions for children and families, the OfSTED focus was on catching up on lost learning in order to meet specific outcomes. This failed to acknowledge the complexities of children's experiences during the lockdown period, and the ramifications these experiences may have had on their transition back into the school environment.

## Conclusion

In this article, the local touchdown of global policy discourses has been explored focussing on how the OfSTED report *Bold Beginnings* has constructed the school ready child. I have argued that the 'what works' agenda presented in *Bold Beginnings* contributes to the continuing emphasis

on formal approaches in order to ‘ready’ children for school, embedded within discourses of accountability and performativity. The drive to improve educational outcomes and give children a head-start as they progress into Year One has taken precedence over established approaches to ECE and has repositioned Reception as the school readiness year rather than the transitional year into school. Furthermore, *Bold Beginnings* has reified a particular version of school readiness that aligns with the National Primary Curriculum beginning in Year One (ages 5/6) rather than the more holistic approach of the EYFS. The current review of the EYFS framework (DfE, 2020b) which will become the statutory guidance from September 2021 further re-enforces the concerns of the ‘top-down approach’ that continues to impact upon the educational experiences of young children in England. In particular, the proposed Literacy Educational Programme in this review mirrors the discourse of the Year One Programme of Study for English, highlighting a further push for formal outcomes into the Reception year.

The OECD report, *Early Learning and Child Well-being in England (2020: 3)* describes England as being ‘an international leader in education, making decisions based on evidence rather than ideology or convenience’. However, this analysis, has shown how policy intensification is occurring in England through the power of the education inspectorate, but has also questioned the evidence base of the recommendations made in *Bold Beginnings*. Consistent with Wood’s (2019) argument, *Bold Beginnings* also uses circular discourses, based on selected evidence as the evidentiary warrant for the claims of ‘what works’ in order to produce a policy version of school readiness. This analysis, therefore, makes a significant contribution to international debates about global discourses and local formulations of school readiness within a continuing trajectory of formalisation in ECE provision. Hyatt’s (2013a) CPDAF has provided a way of interrogating the ideological and political drivers behind the school readiness agenda, and how this impacts policymaking at a national level. This analysis has revealed how *Bold Beginnings* re-enforces the school readiness agenda through specific textual interventions in practice, and how this agenda is ‘shaped and characterised ideologically through relations of power’. The paper makes a timely and original contribution to the growing field of policy studies in ECE, specifically how government policy levers and drivers are re-enforced in England through a powerful inspection regime, the ongoing concerns about the impact on teachers’ practice, and the consequent implications for children. These implications should be at the forefront of ECE practices as we move towards a ‘post-COVID’ world.

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