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'I feel like the Wicked Witch': Identifying tensions between school readiness policy and teacher beliefs, knowledge and practice in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the tensions arising between Reception teachers' professional beliefs and knowledge, and the school readiness agenda in England. It scrutinises how the increasing academic expectations placed on children to ensure they are 'ready for school' may conflict with teachers' understanding of how young children learn, their pedagogical philosophies and classroom practices. In this paper, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is utilised as a methodological and analytical framework, specifically harnessing Engeström and Sannino's work on 'manifestations of contradictions'. This theoretical lens is applied to elucidate the specific contradictions that surface at the policy–practice interface and to explore how teachers navigate these conflicts and tensions. Data were gathered through interviews with two Reception teachers and analysed to identify four distinct contradiction categories: dilemmas, double binds, critical conflicts and conflicts. The findings make a critical contribution to ongoing debates about the implications of the school readiness agenda on teacher beliefs, professional knowledge and the impact on children. Furthermore, this paper extends an original contribution to the practical application of CHAT in Early Childhood Education (ECE) research and emphasises the utility of identifying linguistic

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cues as an effective strategy to reveal contradictions in textual data, thereby furthering understanding of policy–practice tensions in ECE.

KEYWORDS

early years, educational issues, teachers, theoretical frameworks

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The main issue that the paper addresses is the tensions between teachers' professional beliefs and knowledge, and the school readiness agenda in a Reception classroom in England. Using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), contradictions are identified as a way of illuminating these policy–practice tensions.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The main insight that the paper provides is the impact that the school readiness agenda has on teachers and children. The paper also evidences the usefulness of using CHAT as a methodological and analytical framework in Early Childhood Education.

INTRODUCTION

I often feel like the wicked witch ... they just look so small ... and you just push ... especially my little one who just gets so worked up about doing it or getting it wrong ... it just breaks your heart, and you think you're not ready for it and I do wish they could do play for a lot longer ... but because of the restrictions that we are under you can't ... because we've got things to meet as well unfortunately.

(Erin, Year 1 teacher and doctoral research participant)

Internationally, discourses of quality, standards and school readiness permeate global and national policy agendas as governments continue to invest in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) stipulate that by 2030, all children should have access to 'quality early childhood education, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education' (online, Goal Target 4.2). Ensuring a child's school readiness is seen as a 'viable strategy' for closing the learning gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers and improving the socio-economic prospects of future generations (UNICEF, 2012, p. 4). However, well-intentioned goals have directly influenced specific aspects of practice. The focus on academic outcomes has intensified over the last 20 years, with the OECD (2021) and UNESCO (2021) identifying the 'schoolification' of ECE as resulting from downward pressures from the school system. Subsequently, Ang (2014) argues that 'pre-school' has become a preparation for formal education, which calls into question the purposes of ECE 'as a nexus for enriching children's lives and experiences or simply preparing

children for schooling' (p. 185). The *Starting strong V* (OECD, 2017) report warns that a focus on more formal outcomes—such as Mathematics and Literacy—may result in a shift away from specific pedagogical approaches considered to be appropriate for young children.

The 'Wicked Witch' quote encapsulates this tension. Here, Erin articulates her belief that young children should be allowed to 'play' for longer but there are curricular and assessment requirements that mean children must reach expected outcomes in reading, writing and number. Consequently, there is a steer towards more formal teaching methods, even though some children struggle with this, to ensure these learning outcomes are met. Erin's quote illuminates what Engeström and Sannino (2011) refer to as a 'critical conflict' contradiction, occurring when people are placed in situations where they experience inner doubts or guilt, articulated using strong metaphors. Using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1999) as a methodological and analytical framework, this paper explores the tensions that emerge between the beliefs and professional knowledge of teachers and the school readiness policy agenda they are expected to implement in the Reception classroom for children aged 4–5 years old.

Global policy drivers touch down at country level in different ways, as evidenced in varying levels of government intervention and funding, and the implementation of frameworks for practice that include goals, outcomes and means of assessment, with contrasting degrees of flexibility and prescription (OECD, 2020). The focus of this paper is on England, where the ECE policy framework positions school readiness as a way of achieving social, economic and education policy goals, including breaking the cycle of poverty and narrowing the attainment gap (Kay, 2018; Sutton Trust, 2021; UK Parliament, 2021). To prepare children for formal learning in primary school, these policy drivers also focus on the teaching of phonics, Literacy (reading and writing) and Mathematics, and on the assessment of children's attainment in those areas of learning. Research carried out by Roberts-Holmes (2015) exploring the 'datafication' of early years pedagogy found that the assessment shift towards Mathematics and phonics resulted in 'pedagogical shifts towards the replication of primary school performance culture' (p. 307). A culture of performativity not only makes teachers accountable but can 'carefully construct and steer teaching practice in implicit and particular ways' (Kilderry, 2015, p. 635). The concept of steering practice is increasingly visible in policy-intensive environments for ECE. In England the national inspection body, the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), intervenes directly in matters of pedagogy, curriculum, play and school readiness via research reviews and practice guidance (Wood, 2019, 2020). Such interventions mean that although teachers interpret school readiness discourse in policy within the contexts of their practice (Hizli Alkan & Priestley, 2019), their professional knowledge and beliefs are constrained by these prescriptive policy drivers (Kay, 2018).

CHAT provides a robust framework for analysing professional work practices (Foot, 2014) and, in this research, is used to understand the classroom as a complex activity system with internal and external influences, identify the specific tensions between policy and pedagogical practice, and analyse how teachers experience and manage those tensions in relation to their beliefs and professional knowledge. Whilst there is a wealth of literature on theoretical aspects of CHAT, this paper extends the practical application of CHAT in ECE, contributing to the development of the theory as a useful methodology when exploring tensions between beliefs and practice.

The following section presents the policy context in England, the formulation and impact of the school readiness policy agenda, and the concept of teacher beliefs and professional knowledge as mediating tools within the classroom activity system. The utilisation of CHAT as a methodological and analytical framework is elucidated, with a focus on Engeström and Sannino's (2011) work on 'manifestations of contradictions'. Following this, the contradictions that emerged from the data will address the methodological question: *How can the exploration of discursive manifestations of contradictions identify tensions between teacher beliefs and professional knowledge, ECE policy and pedagogical practice?*

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2021) is the statutory framework that sets the standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to age 5. The 'educational programme' incorporates the 17 early learning goals (ELGs) that summarise 'the knowledge, skills and understanding all young children should have gained by the end of the Reception year' (DfE, 2021, p. 8). The ELGs are set out in overlapping age bands and reflect a linear trajectory of child development, with variations in the pace of development (DfE, 2020). Educational programmes must involve activities and experiences in the three prime areas (Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Physical Development; Communication and Language) and the four specific areas (Mathematics; Literacy; Understanding the World; Expressive Arts and Design) (DfE, 2021). Teachers are required to carry out a summative assessment of each child at the end of the Reception year, the first year of a child's schooling in England, using the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) (DfE, 2022a). The summative assessment provides evidence of whether children have achieved the 17 ELGs in two outcome bands: emerging and expected (DfE, 2021). Children assessed at the expected levels are described as having met the GLD (Good Level of Development) (DfE, 2022a). The government uses the GLD as a measure of school readiness, and as a national dataset for monitoring and comparing levels of child development (DfE, 2021).

The policy construction of school readiness as meeting the outcomes for the GLD has created tensions between policy aspirations to narrow the attainment gap and the recommended approaches to curriculum and pedagogy in the EYFS. Evidence collated by the Department for Education indicates that measuring 'school readiness' using the GLD is problematic, as year-on-year results show that specific groups of children (Table 1) find the 'expected' outcomes difficult to achieve and are therefore assessed as having failed to reach the 'school readiness' benchmark (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2022b). Children who struggle to meet the 'expected' outcomes of the GLD are assessed as 'emerging' rather than working at the 'expected' level, and enter Year 1 of the National Curriculum in a deficit position. Reading, writing and numbers are the three areas of learning that these children find most difficult, resulting in the lowest percentage of attainment across the EYFSP (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2022b).

When interpreting these outcomes, a further concern is that the statements of 'expected' levels of development in the EYFSP have shifted downwards from Key Stage 1 into the EYFS over the past 20 years, and are now academically more difficult for children to achieve (Kay, 2018). This shift also needs to be understood in relation to the recommended changes in pedagogical practices during the Reception year, from play, child-led

TABLE 1 Achievement of the GLD by pupil characteristic (DfE, 2022b).

Pupil characteristic	% Reaching the GLD
All children	69%
Autumn born	79%
Boys	62%
Summer born	59%
Children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM)	54%
Children with a Special Educational Need (SEN)	23%
Gypsy/Roma	24%

Note: GLD = Good Level of Development.

and adult-led activities, to formal approaches with teacher-led activities (OfSTED, 2017, 2022). Furthermore, the normalisation of development is at odds with the core principles of the EYFS, where it is explicitly stated that children are 'unique' and learn and develop in different ways and at different rates (DfE, 2021, p. 6). These policy expectations place demands on teachers because they must work with the statutory frameworks, and are subject to inspection and accountability, where children's outcomes are an indicator of their own performance. Therefore, tensions arise between teachers' beliefs and professional knowledge, ECE policy and pedagogical practice.

TEACHER BELIEFS, PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

ECE is steeped in an historically accumulated legacy of professional knowledge, beliefs and values about the value of learning through play, child-centred practice and pedagogical approaches that combine play, child-led and adult-led activities (Arnott & Duncan, 2019; Pascal et al., 2019). Teachers work within complex and dynamic environments, where their knowledge of children's individual needs must be considered alongside national and school policies and an outcomes-driven curricular agenda. Furthermore, curricular policy is a fluid construct, dependent on the ideological drivers of the government of the day (Apple, 2019).

Teacher knowledge can manifest in several ways, including formal knowledge (i.e., pedagogical knowledge, classroom management, models of teaching), contextual knowledge (i.e., situation-specific and different from one day to the next, depending on the immediate situation, a particular goal or the short/long-term impact of such decisions), interactive knowledge (i.e., through an understanding of individual interests and the social/emotional needs of the child) and speculative knowledge (i.e., allowing for multiple, unanticipated contingencies, most of which are beyond the teacher's control) (Kay, 2018).

Beliefs are defined as the 'embodied conscious and unconscious ideas and thoughts about oneself, the world and one's position in it developed through membership in various social groups and considered by the individual to be true' (Cross, 2009, p. 326). Fives and Buehl (2012) assert that the beliefs teachers hold are 'complex and multi-faceted', and act as filters of information and experience, guiding intention and practice, and framing situations and problems (p. 478). When framed in this way, belief systems become rich and diverse, with many different factors influencing and shaping the beliefs of the individual, as well as the professional knowledge that inheres within fields of practice. In practice, beliefs can take many forms and can be embodied in such things as the teacher's expectations of a child's performance, or theories about teaching and learning. However, holding a set of beliefs does not necessarily mean they are acted upon in a classroom setting (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006), and external forces can exert significant influence on the beliefs and behaviour of teachers (Priestley et al., 2015).

Extensive research has found that teachers have beliefs about school readiness and the types of skills and behaviours that are important to ensure a smooth transition into school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Kay, 2018; Murphy et al., 2023; Rouse et al., 2023; Smith & Glass, 2019). These beliefs are often shaped by social and cultural factors, specifically teachers' personal experiences and their professional knowledge (Kay, 2018). However, policy guidelines set out increasing academic expectations for children, which can potentially impact on teachers' understanding of school readiness and the pedagogical practices that are enacted within the classroom (Brown & Lan, 2015). The focus on Mathematics and Literacy, the shift towards formal teaching and linking assessment with datafication all construct a policy version of school readiness that may not be consistent with teachers' beliefs

and professional knowledge. The interpretation of policy is a complex process and can thus create potential tensions between teachers' professional knowledge, their beliefs about how young children should learn, policy compliance and pedagogical practice. Using CHAT as a methodological and analytical framework aims to identify discursive contradictions that will illuminate the specific tensions between teachers' beliefs and professional knowledge, ECE policy and practice.

CHAT AS A METHODOLOGICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

CHAT arises from the work of Vygotsky and draws on ideas around cultural development through 'physical and psychological mediational tools', with an emphasis on the collective rather than the individual (Ellis, 2010, p. 2). In CHAT, the function of the mediating tool is to 'serve as the conductor of human influence on the object of the activity', ultimately leading to a change in the object (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). These tools can either be tangible (a pen or whiteboard) or symbolic (concepts or beliefs), shaping the way teachers engage in pedagogical practice and the way they think about the activity (Kay, 2015). The activity system is a 'constant mutually shaping dialectic' (Edwards, 2011) and is made up of key components represented in Table 2.

The relationship between the different elements of an activity system, and the interactions with each other, can also be represented diagrammatically (Figure 1).

As teachers participate in external activity, their experiences are internalised and then these internal constructions are used to shape new external activities (Saka et al., 2009, p. 1000). The benefit of using the CHAT framework is that the researcher can study 'the process or activity of engaging with a task rather than the outcome or product' (Ellis, 2010, p. 95). This framework allows the interactions between the individual (the teacher) and the wider contextual aspects of an activity to be examined (Saka et al., 2009). Furthermore, the framework enables the exploration of the 'multiple influences on teachers' belief enactment' (Fives & Buehl, 2012, p. 487), the wider context within which the teacher works and the outcome of these enactments.

For this discussion, the framework for the activity system (pedagogical practices) becomes the basic unit of analysis; the bi-directional relationship between the *subject* (teacher), *tools* (teacher beliefs and professional knowledge), *rules* (policy) and *object* (the GLD) will be explored (Figure 2).

Here the focus is shifted away from the outcome of the activity (school readiness), redirecting the gaze to the 'mediation of the subject's or participant's activity by physical or psychological tools' (Ellis, 2010, p. 95). In this instance, the beliefs and professional knowledge of teachers as a mediating tool will be scrutinised to help identify any contradictions within the activity system between *subject*, *tools*, *rules* and *object* (Kay, 2015).

TABLE 2 The activity system (Engeström, 1996, p. 67).

Subject	The individual or group whose viewpoint is adopted
Object	The problem space at which the activity is directed
Tools	Mediate the object of the activity
Community	Participants of an activity who share the same object
Division of labour	The division of tasks between the community
Rules	Regulate the actions and interactions within the system

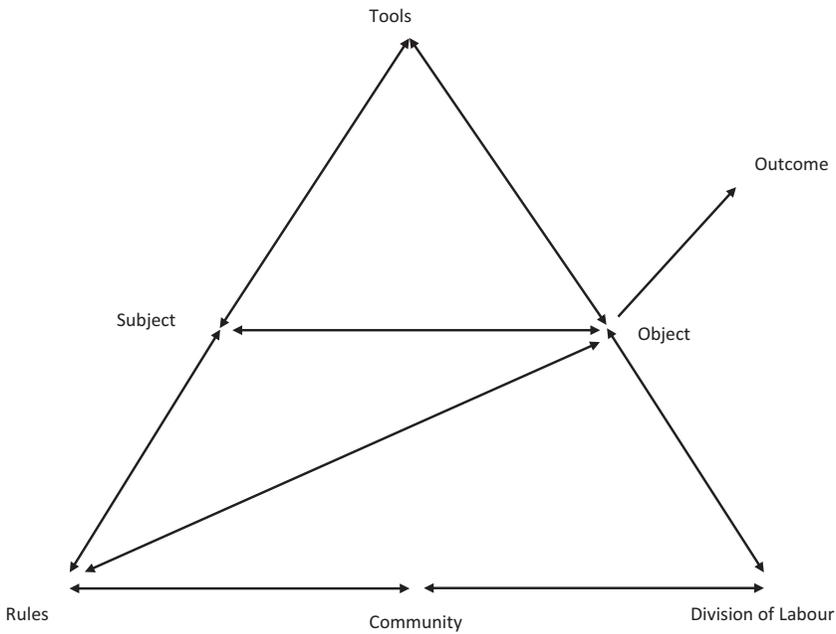


FIGURE 1 An activity system (Engeström, 1987).

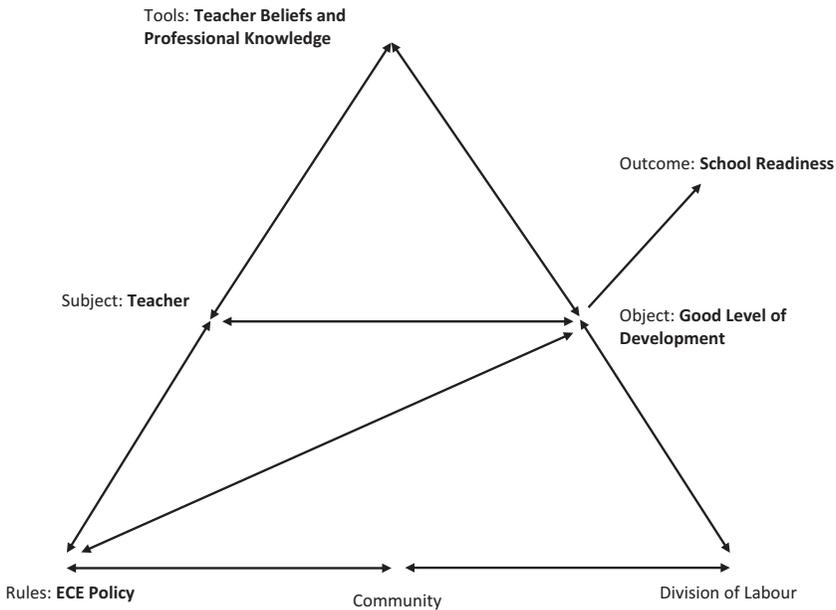


FIGURE 2 Mapping the research concepts to the activity system.

DISCURSIVE MANIFESTATIONS OF CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN BELIEF AND PRACTICE

According to Engeström (2001), contradictions are ‘historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems’, whereby the primary contradiction permeates

TABLE 3 Adapted from Engeström and Sannino's (2011) 'Types of discursive manifestations and contradictions'.

Manifestation	Features	Linguistic cues
Dilemma	Characterise our everyday thinking and conduct—ideologically created and products of history	Commonly expressed through hedges and hesitations, such as 'on the one hand'/'on the other hand' and 'but'
Double bind	Typically, a situation that cannot be resolved by the individual alone	Transition from the individual 'I' to the collective 'we have to', rhetorical questions, expressions of helplessness
Critical conflict	Situations where people face inner doubts, feel guilt or are silenced	Personal, emotional and moral narrative accounts that may employ strong metaphors
Conflict	Resistance, disagreement, adjustment and criticism	'No'/incidences of disagreement

all other elements of the activity system. When a new element is introduced to the system, secondary contradictions can emerge where the new system collides with the old (p. 137). Extending this, four levels of contradiction are proposed by Engeström (1987):

1. Primary inner contradictions that occur within each component of the activity system (e.g., within the community).
2. Secondary contradictions that arise between the constituents of the activity system (e.g., between the community and the subject).
3. Tertiary contradictions that arise when a new method or technology is introduced to help achieve the object.
4. Quaternary contradictions that occur between the central activity and neighbouring activities. (p. 104)

Contradictions, however, are not seen as a negative force within the activity system, but rather are 'starting places' that open new ways of understanding (Foot, 2014, p. 17). Wilson (2014) argues that as contradictions become 'increasingly disruptive and challenging', participants reflect on the situation and begin to look for solutions. Using CHAT as a framework enables contradictions to be identified and opens possibilities for change and learning as part of the research process (p. 23). For the purpose of this analysis, the identification of contradictions within the activity system reveals the tensions between teacher beliefs and professional knowledge about school readiness, ECE policy and pedagogical practice.

Here I take inspiration from Engeström and Sannino's (2011) work on discursive manifestations of contradictions, which moves away from the tendency to define contradictions as competing priorities that need to be rebalanced. They argue that contradictions do not 'speak for themselves' but rather emerge when participants 'articulate them in words and actions' (p. 371). Contradictions are not 'observed directly' but are 'identified through their manifestations' (p. 369). Therefore, the suggested framework begins with the analysis of 'rudimentary linguistic cues that potentially express discursive manifestation', followed with the identification and analysis of the actual manifestation from the data (p. 370). As a way of analysing the interview data, Engeström and Sannino (2011) present four types of manifestation of contradiction that are identified using specific linguistic clues (p. 375), summarised in Table 3.

Hasan and Kazlauskas (2014) declare that 'In Activity Theory, the relationship between *subject* (human doer) and *object* (the thing being done) forms the core of an activity' (p. 9). Activities are specific, directed towards an *object* that is to be acted upon with a motive and a desired *outcome*, and any of these facets 'may be constructed or perceived differently' by the *subject* (Foot, 2014, p. 10). This dialectical relationship can be both objective and subjective, and in the context of this research clear contradictions emerged between the subjectivity of teachers, their beliefs and professional knowledge, and working towards the objective way 'school readiness' is measured using the GLD (Figure 3). Further contradictions are identified between teachers, the *rules* of ECE policy and school readiness that construct a workplace culture of performativity and accountability driven by children's attainment of the GLD (Figure 4). Contradictions within the activity system are depicted by the red, two-headed, lightning-shaped arrows.

Using contradictions as a basis for analysis serves as a way of interpreting how teachers develop their practice as they continuously grapple with the accountabilities of the school readiness policy agenda and pedagogical activity. Foot (2014) asserts 'Contradictions are not points of failure or deficits in the activity system in which they occur. They are not obstacles to be overcome to achieve goals. Rather than ending points, contradictions are starting places' (p. 17). Identifying the contradictions within the activity system helps to understand the tensions that are created when policy discourses of school readiness do not comfortably align with the beliefs and professional knowledge of teachers.

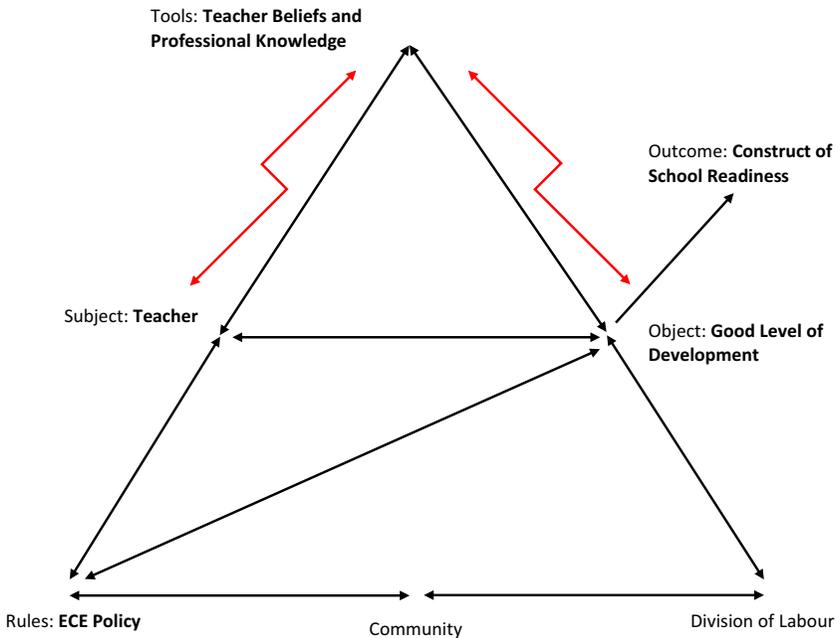


FIGURE 3 Contradictions in the activity system (Subject > Tool > Object).

This is explored in depth in the next section, where the research process is outlined first and the data analysis and findings are presented next.

DATA COLLECTION

The research was carried out in a two-form entry primary school in an area of religious and cultural diversity. The school was larger than the average-sized primary school, with a high proportion of children with a Special Educational Need (SEN) and an average number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A purposive sampling approach was adopted, as this allows the researcher to 'discover, understand and gain insight', and therefore it was important to select a sample from which 'the most can be learned' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 96). The two participants, Sarah and Mary (pseudonyms), were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Trained as a teacher and have Qualified Teacher Status.
2. Work within a Reception classroom.
3. Work in a two or three-form entry school.
4. Geographically convenient.

In the study, five interviews were carried out: two initial interviews with the Reception teachers, one interview with the Nursery teacher (who was also a member of the Senior Management Team), a group interview with the Year 1 teachers and a final group interview with the Reception teachers. The interviews elicited understanding of the teachers' beliefs and professional knowledge about 'school readiness'. However, for the purpose of this analysis I will focus on the interview data from the two Reception teachers (Sarah and Mary) to highlight the tensions between beliefs, knowledge, policy and practices, as they are under

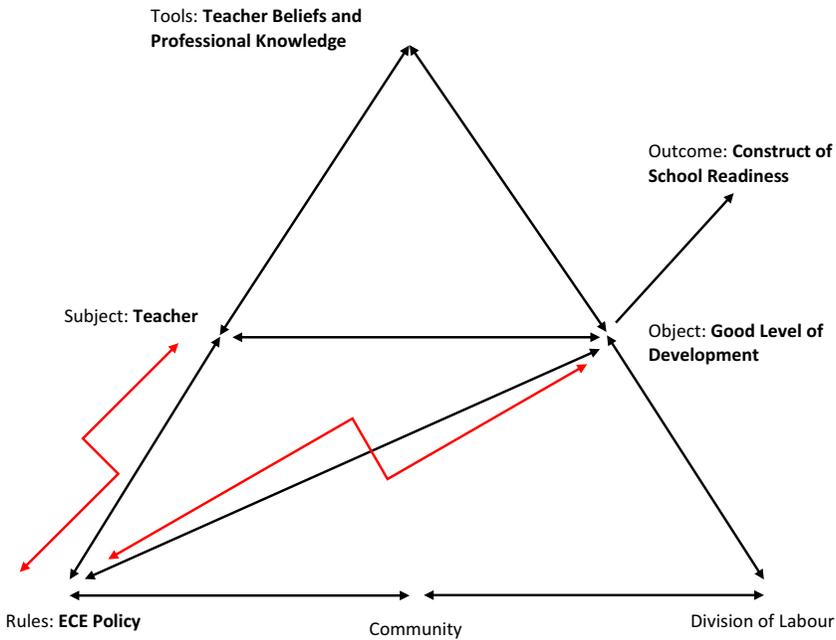


FIGURE 4 Contradictions in the activity system (Subject > Rules > Object).

the most pressure to 'deliver' the school readiness expectations as children transition to Year 1.

Quantitative findings

As a starting point for the analysis of discursive manifestations of contradictions, the quantitative distribution of the specified linguistic clues was examined, the results of which are displayed in [Table 4](#).

The linguistic clues for the 'dilemmas' category were highlighted in the text using the 'find' function for occurrences of the word 'but' in the word processing software. To identify conflicts, double binds and critical conflicts, the interview data was carefully examined in more detail and each segment of text linked to the specified linguistic clues was highlighted using different colours as a way of thematically identifying relevant sections for later analysis. It was during this stage that a critical approach was taken, and occurrences of the linguistic clues that did not correspond to the four categories of discursive manifestations of contradictions were disregarded. Each interview was analysed in turn as a way of becoming familiar with the data, and when all four categories had been applied, the data was interrogated again to identify common themes emerging.

Qualitative findings

I now return to the question raised at the beginning of this paper: *How can the exploration of discursive manifestations of contradictions identify tensions between teacher beliefs and professional knowledge, ECE policy and pedagogical practice?* The following subsections

TABLE 4 Occurrences of linguistic clues (pseudonyms have been used).

Interview	Length (min/s)	Dilemmas	Double bind	Critical conflict	Conflict
First interview—Sarah (Reception)	87.13	144	15	22	9
First interview—Mary (Reception)	44.03	78	4	7	1
Final group interview—Sarah and Mary (Reception)	49.38	101	11	3	3

will present the data that exemplify the four different contradiction categories: dilemmas, double bind, critical conflict and conflict. The implications for teachers, children and pedagogical practices will also be discussed.

Dilemmas

Dilemmas are defined by Engeström and Sannino (2011) as ‘an expression or exchange of incompatible evaluations, either between people or within the discourse of a single person’ (p. 373), identified in the textual analysis of the interview transcripts through a search for the use of the word ‘but’.

Dilemmas that emerged from the analysis highlight issues around children entering Reception from a range of different settings and with diverse needs and abilities. Sarah talked of how the focus on school readiness was around children being ready to ‘*actually come through the door of school*’ rather than the transition from Reception into Year 1. Over the course of the study, participants questioned numerous times whether ‘school readiness’ refers to the transition into Reception, or the transition from Reception into Year 1. Within the context of this research, the year the study took place was the first year the school had offered Nursery provision. Prior to this, children had come from different private, voluntary or independent settings, or straight into school from a home context, which had created problems for the teachers who were then working with a range of assessment data. They noted a lack of consistency in the transition documentation they received, and inaccuracies in the recording of children’s attainment in the overlapping age bands:

... because you've got this set of children with transition documents saying that they're 40–60 secure ... but when you unpick it they're really not, they're more like 30–50 beginning ... that's how different the information is that we get ...

[Sarah]

Both teachers talked at length about the pressures they were under to ensure children met the GLD, and the time limitations they were faced with as children entered Reception with gaps in their learning that needed to be addressed before they could start working on the more formal approaches to teaching mathematical and literacy skills. Issues around children’s varying abilities also caused dilemmas for the teachers, ranging from ‘*their ability to talk in a full sentence*’ to using different writing and mark-making implements:

... the other one is that they have absolutely no idea how to hold a pencil and this [is] a big bugbear because it's like a foreign object ... but not even just pencils ... pencils, crayons, everything, and you can just see they've not been exposed ...

[Sarah]

Dilemmas emerged around securing *'the basics'* before more formal outcomes could be taught. Getting dressed and undressed and feeding themselves were considered foundational skills that needed to be in place before the *'school expectations'*, such as recognising and writing names and numbers. The teachers highlighted how these dilemmas meant they had a *'lot of ground to make up'* with some children so they could then focus on Reception outcomes. Children's different abilities and experiences on entry into school created additional pressures as teachers have a relatively short amount of time (9 months) to ensure all children meet the expected outcomes at the end of the EYFS, which, for Sarah, included some children who were unable to speak any English, or had limited communication skills:

... children who don't speak English who are expected all of a sudden to be able to read and write ... but it doesn't matter ... we had M in November who couldn't literally utter a word ... not even a hello or yes or anything ... and obviously he's still expected to reach the same end point as everybody else ...

[Sarah]

It is reported that the most significant concern for teachers is that children are entering school with limited communication and language skills (NAHT/Family and Childcare Trust, 2017), yet the participants in this study were consistent in their belief that these skills were fundamental to be *'ready for school'*. Communication and language skills were seen as a precursor to formal learning such as phonics and writing, and without these skills in place teachers were having to spend time filling the gaps before children were *'ready to learn'* the more advanced literacy goals. In the context of this school, these included skills such as cursive writing in lined workbooks and *'early editing'* which, the teacher pointed out, would previously have been considered Year 1 skills. Mary voiced concerns around expectations of children's writing skills, in particular how letter formation—which had previously been *'more of a Year 1 skill'* was now a focus in Reception.

A significant dilemma was created through the whole-school policy of teaching children cursive writing, beginning in Reception. Sarah struggled with this policy, which created conflict between her beliefs about how young children should be taught and some of the outcomes of teaching cursive writing. She explained how it had been flagged that children's handwriting in lower Key Stage 2 could not be read by the external Local Education Authority moderators and so a whole-school approach to writing had been adopted. Sarah was reticent about this, declaring *'I don't know the pros and cons of doing it early on ... All I know is it is hard work'* and how, if she had a choice, she would not do it in Reception as it is *'just one added thing'*. However, there were clear contradictions here as she pointed out that she had seen it work for some children, and it did seem to improve writing further up the school:

I say that but then I've seen it work ... so there's a part of me that actually if you can nail it in Reception then do it but there are children who just aren't ready, and I'll accept print ... so there's a part of me that thinks it's good ... it does actually improve the writing when they get further up the school but then there's a part of me thinking they've got a lot on their plate and that's one added complication that they could probably do without ...

[Sarah]

Despite this being a *'strict'* requirement in Reception, Sarah clarified that if children could not manage the cursive script, she did waiver, but for those who were capable, she could accept nothing else. She talked about how this requirement was *'non-negotiable'* and how she *'did fight it but lost'*.

The importance of achieving the GLD also impacted on teaching Mathematics. Sarah talked of how concepts and knowledge that used to be taught further up the school were being pushed down into the lower year groups. Skills such as writing numbers correctly are not assessed as part of the EYFSP, yet the Year 1 teacher had asked the Reception teachers to focus on this to prepare the children for Year 1:

*I was talking to the Year 1 teacher who has been in my class and she said 'you need to do some work on number formation because even if the children can write the numbers from 0–100 ... **but** if one of those numbers is backwards, they're not allowed to have it ...*

[Sarah]

Another dilemma that emerged throughout the data was the gap between Reception and the expected GLD outcomes and the curricular expectations of Year 1. Sarah pointed out how, if a child achieves the GLD, the transition to Year 1 would be much easier, but due to the curricular expectations, there is still a gap. Sarah used the analogy of a 'bridge' several times when discussing the transition to Year 1. She described the difficulties faced by children who do not reach the GLD:

*... there is a bridge to go across whether you achieve the ELG or not **but** if you don't the bridge is just so much bigger and you're constantly trying to play catch up, and because our Year 1 is so formalised I know that quickly they are going to drop behind ...*

[Sarah]

Sarah also explained how these children would be targeted for interventions during the 2-week transition period in Year 1, at the expense of experiencing the continuous provision that was on offer in the classroom. Continuous provision refers to the resources and learning opportunities that children can access as part of their daily routine (i.e., creative area, role play, sand and water, outdoor area). This enables children to learn whilst promoting independence and child-initiated learning. It was highlighted how this interventionist approach could actually '*hinder their progress*' as the groups of children who do not achieve the GLD also do not cope well with changes to their environment.

The dilemmas faced by these teachers raise questions as to whether the focus on Literacy and Mathematics outcomes is at the expense of more holistic approaches to teaching, and this was reiterated in the interview data. Both teachers talked of how prescriptive the GLD was, and how children were being placed under pressure to achieve the ELGs, and their own feelings of guilt that the focus on adult-led activities was often at the expense of a play-based approach to teaching. Whilst children were able to access continuous provision both inside and outside at numerous points during the school day, the teachers were aware of the importance of the GLD as an accountability measure and explicitly stated that this had an impact on pedagogy in the classroom. The next subsection will highlight the double binds teachers faced in their practice.

Double bind

Double binds are 'processes in which actors repeatedly face pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives in their activity system, with seemingly no way out' (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 374). Double binds are expressed using rhetorical questions, an urgent need to act and a perceived impossibility of action which the individual feels they cannot resolve alone. Discursively, there is a shift from the use of the word 'I' to the collective 'we'.

Again, the curriculum created double binds for the teachers in the study. Mary highlighted how some children will have exceeded expectations in some areas, and gave the example of children who were *'very creative'*, but might not get *'grouped in with the GLD'* because their achievement does not fall under the area of learning used to measure the GLD. Sarah also expressed her annoyance at the omission of Expressive Arts and Design and Understanding of the World in the construct of the GLD, asking *'do they not matter? ... Have we not got room for that?'* However, Mary stressed that even though these areas were not part of the GLD, it was still important as a way of considering *'the whole child'*, and Sarah asserted how they *'still always ensure the creative side of children's development takes place'*. It was also pointed out how some areas of Personal, Social and Emotional development had been omitted from the curriculum, and how some teacher observations of children's learning did not link to any of the statements, leading Sarah to declare *'there's so much more to being in school than just following the EYFS'*.

The lack of time teachers have to ensure children meet the expected outcomes of the GLD also reflected a feeling of impossibility between how teachers believe children should be taught and the expectations placed on them. Sarah described how the lack of time restricted the *'spontaneous kind of learning'* that she believed was best placed in Reception, and voiced her sadness about being *'bound to these statistics'* and the expectations of the GLD. Mary pointed out how pressure also trickles down from Year 1, but identified that Year 1 teachers also have to work with their own pressures, getting children *'ready for Year 2'*.

The transition from Reception to Year 1 was a significant focus for the teachers, as they prepared children for the curricular and pedagogical changes, highlighting another double bind. Mary and Sarah spoke about the importance of play, and how children's interests were followed as a way of engaging children, with Mary asserting that play was a way of *'building key skills'*, such as *'confidence and independence'*. However, Sarah described how the more technical skills, like *'cursive writing and sentence building'* were easier to achieve through a *'more formalised way of teaching'* and argued: *'it does change the way you do things because of the fact you are held to account'*. She also asserted how much knowledge children gained through play, and how this could be carried through to Year 1, but that it is *'difficult to translate into a Year 1 environment'*.

The teachers identified that they would not stop *'fighting for what we believe is right for children'*. Sarah articulated:

I don't think any of us are going to give up soon, but at the same time you don't want to let the children down because if you're not doing enough to get them ready or giving them the best chance to be ready, it's not going to help them in the future, is it?

[Sarah]

Focusing on the GLD was seen as a way of helping to set the children up to succeed. Sarah was aware of what changes the children would face going into Year 1 and did not want the transition to take them by surprise. Ultimately, she was *'playing the game'* for the sake of the children. However, adopting a pragmatic approach gave rise to critical conflicts.

Critical conflict

Critical conflicts are *'situations in which people face inner doubts that paralyse them'*, discursively constructed through *'personal, emotionally and morally charged accounts that have a narrative structure'* (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 374).

There were multiple examples across the interview transcripts that highlight some of the critical conflicts teachers face when supporting children to achieve the GLD. Children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and with a SEN were identified as being less likely to reach the expected outcomes, and this placed an emotional toll on the teachers. Sarah talked about sharing information with parents about how their children were not going to meet expected outcomes, and the '*devastation this causes*'. The teachers were also sensitive to the needs of the children and their academic and emotional readiness for Year 1, and this created significant critical conflicts:

I say that a lot but in saying that I don't want to be making them 'oh my goodness I'm going to Year 1' ... I'm not trying to scare them about the fact they're going into Year 1 ... there's a fine line isn't there between preparing them and completely worrying them half to death ... I don't want to do that ... but I do think they feel the pressure ...

[Sarah]

The expectations and pressures that are placed on children to achieve the more difficult outcomes, such as writing, also contributed to these critical conflicts. Teachers highlighted how these pressures can have an impact on the children. Sarah talked about how children were expected to be a '*certain way*' and described how she felt she was '*railroading*' them, and '*pushing*' them to achieve the outcomes of the GLD. She also raised concerns over children being aware of '*the need and drive*' behind the EYFS outcomes, and was clear that she believed children felt the pressure of the preparations for Year 1. She reiterated the difficulties of achieving the GLD, particularly in Literacy and Mathematics, and how she would not place as much emphasis on these skills if they were '*allowed more time*':

I think the children do feel it ... I think they do feel the need and the drive that's behind it and some of them rise to the occasion and some of them switch off ... some of them will crumble sometimes ... get themselves really upset and really stressed out about writing ...

[Sarah]

These difficulties created a significant contradiction between what teachers are expected to do in practice, and their own beliefs about how young children should be taught:

We're all wrapped up in this world where we've got to do it like this, or we've got to do it like that ... when actually in your heart of hearts you probably wouldn't do it like that if you had a choice ...

[Sarah]

Sarah spoke of how she just wanted to spend time watching the children play, but found this difficult due to the pressures of achieving the expected outcomes, and how this can impact on the children:

... sometimes I just want to sit in the classroom and just watch what they're doing, and you feel a bit guilty doing that don't you because you don't feel like you're doing anything but actually you're taking that raw view ... sometimes I think you know what I just want to get into your world and play with you but without having to think where we are going next ... I think the children will feel that from you ... they pick it up, don't they?

[Sarah]

The findings illuminate how pressures from above, and the need to ensure children reach the GLD, both impacted on pedagogy and practice in the classroom. The next subsection will explore the final contradiction: conflict.

Conflict

Conflicts take the form of 'resistance, disagreement, argument and criticism', and the resolution of conflicts usually means compromise or capitulation (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 373). There were not extensive examples of conflict within the interview data as the teachers tended to adapt a pragmatic approach to their role and the enactment of curricular and assessment policy within the classroom. Sarah talked about how some children were not yet accessing the Read, Write, Inc. phonics scheme, and how at that point in time there was '*no point even trying*' as the children were not up to that level. She went on to explain how, for these children, it was still about building on skills through play and accessing things on '*whatever level they are working at*', asserting: '*if they are not ready for sounds ... they are not ready ... It's as simple as that*'. Mary talked extensively about the '*whole child*' and looking at the '*whole picture*' rather than focusing on what children could not do in terms of Literacy and Mathematics. She talked about how teaching ultimately came down to '*the individual child within the class*' and how approaches need to be adapted '*depending on the child*', for those needing more support as well as those needing more challenge.

However, there was criticism of the implementation of cursive writing in Reception, as stated in the previous subsection, where Sarah explained how she '*did fight it but lost*', asserting that '*if it was my school, I wouldn't have it in Reception*'. The fact that some children failed to meet the GLD was contentious, and Sarah observed: '*if I made a curriculum and only 54% of children were achieving, I'd be thinking that there's something wrong here*'. The teachers also perceived the scrutiny of their data by external moderators as an area of conflict:

... And I'm not about the data. I hate it ... I think a lot of teachers do ... but somebody flies in and starts picking your data apart ... you're telling me they can speak, they can do this, that and the other, but they can't read ... yeah ... I am

[Sarah]

Across all four categories of contradiction, common themes emerge around children's diverse needs and abilities and the pressures and lack of time that teachers face to ensure all children reach the GLD at the end of Reception. Additional contradictions emerge from the pushing down of outcomes from Year 1 into Reception and the impact of those pressures on teachers and children. The contradictions identified in the findings (conflicts, critical conflicts, dilemmas and double binds) highlight the tensions between teacher beliefs and professional knowledge, school readiness policy discourses and pedagogical practice.

CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings. First, it is argued that the classroom is a complex activity system with internal and external influences that have significant implications for teachers and their pedagogical practices. Policy frameworks (i.e., EYFS, EYFSP)

are situated within the activity system as *rules* that teachers must interpret and enact in their daily practices. ECE policy constructs school readiness as the attainment of the GLD, and this creates a significant problem space for teachers who are working with children with diverse experiences and a range of ability across all aspects of the EYFS. Regardless of the child's starting point in Reception, all children are expected to meet the 17 ELGs by the end of the year, and this creates pressure for the teachers. The lack of time to achieve the ELGs was reported as a key issue, and consequently this had an impact on pedagogical practice as teachers shifted towards more formal methods at the expense of a play-based approach to learning, to ensure the outcomes were met. Further pressures are faced by teachers and children when, in addition to the ELGs, Year 1 outcomes are pushed down into Reception as a way of 'bridging the gap' between the EYFS and the National Curriculum, and more formal approaches to teaching are advocated by the inspectorate (OfSTED, 2017). Internal pressures also came from whole-school policies such as 'cursive writing' and 'early editing', which were implemented in Reception despite active resistance from the teachers and not being a requirement of the EYFS.

Measuring school readiness through the GLD assessment construct means that children who do not meet the expected outcomes at the end of Reception begin Year 1 in an already deficit position. The dangers of an ever-widening attainment gap are highlighted for those children who start Year 1 having not achieved the GLD, and who are in a constant state of playing 'catch up' as they move through the school (Social Mobility Commission, 2022). Children at risk of not achieving the GLD were subject to interventions in the classroom, with a focus on phonics, Literacy and Mathematics, which often took them away from their play-based learning opportunities. This created tensions for the teachers, who both believed that play and spontaneous learning was vital for young children and removing these opportunities impacted on children's personal, social and emotional learning and development.

The data illuminates how teachers grapple with these tensions, on the one hand wanting to enact pedagogical practices that were in keeping with their own philosophies on how young children learn (i.e., a play-based and holistic approach), whilst working within the assessment and curricular policy constraints of the GLD. This often led to an emotional response, where the teachers felt 'guilty' for pushing children to achieve the assessment expectations of the EYFSP, and the sensitivity that was required when talking to parents whose children were less likely to achieve the GLD. The teachers in this research adopted a pragmatic approach to school readiness, highlighting how their practice focused on ensuring children were prepared for Year 1 so they would not be 'taken by surprise' by the differences in classroom practices and routines. There was an emphasis on ensuring that children were also emotionally prepared for the transition, with trips to the classroom environment and regular circle times to address children's anxieties. This pragmatism contributes to a more hopeful narrative around teacher professional knowledge of young children. Whilst teachers 'played the policy game', they were also aware of the additional support needed by the children, drawing on their contextual and interactive knowledge. In this instance, school readiness was constructed in a contextually specific way, which was relevant to the children to ensure they experienced a smooth pedagogical, curricular and environmental transition.

This paper provides new insights into the pressures faced by teachers as they navigate the 'school readiness' agenda in England. The core aim of this research was to explore the tensions that emerge between the beliefs and professional knowledge of teachers and the school readiness policy agenda they are expected to implement. Here I refer to the assertion by Roberts-Holmes (2015) that accountability and performativity frameworks are intensifying the pressures placed on teachers to ensure children are 'school ready'. This research contributes to the debate by providing specific examples of key issues encountered by Reception teachers working in a context where the GLD is a powerful driving force.

A key recommendation from the findings of this research would be to further the debate regarding the Literacy and Mathematics outcomes that leave so many children behind before they enter Year 1. As has been discussed, these outcomes are a key focus in the Reception classroom, and have subsequently impacted on pedagogical approaches. This calls into question the appropriateness of these practices, but also the fact that this results in children beginning their time in Year 1 in a deficit position, from which they may never catch up. This is particularly pertinent when we consider the most recent iteration of the EYFS framework (DfE, 2022a), which further re-enforces the ‘top-down approach’ exemplified in the Literacy Educational Programme, which mirrors the discourse of the Year 1 Programme of Study for English.

The wealth of literature that focuses on tensions between teacher beliefs, policy and practices demonstrates that this is a key area of interest for researchers across the global education sector. Whilst CHAT has been used in the educational research landscape, the use of this theory in ECE is somewhat limited, and this paper highlights the possibilities of developing this framework further within this field. Drawing on a small sample, no generalisations can be made from the findings of this research. However, this paper makes an original contribution to the practical application of CHAT in ECE, specifically the identification of linguistic cues that provide an effective strategy to illuminate the manifestation of contradictions within textual data. Future research is now needed to harness how the identification of these contradictions can be used as ‘starting places’ (Foot, 2014) that lead to transformative teacher agency and organisational change in the collective activity of the classroom.

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I have no conflict of interest to declare with this paper.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was informed by the British Educational Research Association and was approved by the University of Sheffield’s ethical review panel.

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