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School readiness and the good level of development: Policy constructions in English early childhood education

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses how school readiness has been historically and discursively constructed in Early Childhood Education (ECE) policy in England over the past four decades. Using Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' framework and Foucauldian concepts of governmentality, the paper explores how school readiness has shifted from a globally contested notion into a narrowly defined policy construct bound up with neoliberal economic goals and performativity pressures. Central to this shift is the Good Level of Development (GLD) assessment, undertaken at the end of the Reception year, which positions school readiness as both a vehicle for raising standards and a solution to economic inequality. Through historical-discursive analysis, the paper highlights how school readiness in England has been constructed through neoliberal logics of data-driven performativity and accountability mechanisms which have significant implications for teachers and children. The GLD functions as a measure of children's attainment but also as a technology of governance, influencing pedagogical decision-making and narrowing the curriculum. The paper concludes by exploring alternative constructs of school readiness that reposition transition into school as a relational, bi-directional process grounded in children's lived experiences and teachers' professional knowledge.

KEYWORDS

early childhood education, good level of development, governmentality, neoliberalism, performativity, policy, school readiness

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper addresses how school readiness in England has been constructed through the Good Level of Development (GLD) assessment as a narrow, outcome-driven policy measure tied to neoliberal economic goals.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper reveals that the GLD functions as a technology of governance that narrows curriculum focus toward measurable literacy and mathematics outcomes while undermining holistic, play-based pedagogies traditionally valued in early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the twentieth century, school readiness has become a widely established 'policy problem' in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The term school readiness is a nebulous concept, ill-defined and contestable, and there is no consensus about what it means for a child to be ready for school. However, attempting to define school readiness as a globally homogenous concept is arguably an impossible task in consideration of the hugely diverse and complex nature of multiple different social, political, economic, and cultural childhood (and child) contexts, and the education systems which operate within them. Adding to the complexity, policy discourse that works at a global level is, at times, contradictory in how school readiness is understood within the field of ECE. The World Bank (2010) describes school readiness as being the 'specific skills and concepts which if developed well in children in the early pre-school years help them to enhance their social competence, adjust better in school and learn the skills of literacy and numeracy more effectively, and in a more sustained manner'. UNICEF has focused on fulfilling a 'children's right to education' agenda promoting the view that 'education is not a static commodity to be considered in isolation from its greater context; it is an ongoing process and holds its own inherent value as a human right' (UNICEF, 2007, p. xii). As such, UNICEF (2012, p. 8) provides a more holistic and socio-cultural understanding specifying that the 'definition of school readiness understands the child, family and school as embedded within social, cultural and historic influences'.

While some international bodies emphasise a holistic understanding of children's transition into educational settings, England's policy context explicitly constructs school readiness through an assessment known as the Good Level of Development (GLD), a distinction crucial to this paper's analysis. At the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), when children are four- to five-years old, assessments are made in the form of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) (DfE, 2024a, p. 14) which provides relevant parties with information regarding a child's 'progress against expected levels, and their readiness for Year 1'. The government uses the GLD as a measure of school readiness which is defined as children achieving 'at least the expected level within the following areas of learning: communication and language; physical development; and personal, social, and emotional development; literacy; and mathematics' (DfE, 2024a, p. 8). The results of the EYFSP are reported to the Local Education Authority and the Government, and comparisons are made between

different demographic data sets regarding the number of children who have reached the GLD and are assessed as being school ready.

It is fundamentally important here to note that some of the children are still not at the compulsory school starting age when they are being assessed against the outcomes required for the GLD. The Reception year (age 4–5) is the final year of the EYFS and the first year of primary school, and although the compulsory school starting age is 5 years old in England, the reality for most children is a school starting age of 4 due to a one-point entry into school in September. At a global level, the average compulsory school starting age is 6 years old (World Bank, 2025). This raises serious questions about the appropriateness of the timing and nature of high-stakes formal assessments like the GLD when working with such young children.

England's effective school starting age of 4, combined with high-stakes assessment for four- and five-year-old children, represents one of the most intensive systems of standards and performance measures globally, and is one which works to govern those working in ECE (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 124). Ball (2003, p. 216) argues that the way that performance is measured encapsulates the 'quality or value of an individual or organisation', but it is the 'issue of who controls the field of judgement' that is central to political discourse. This is important as mechanisms of accountability can be created through the way data is measured, which in turn can work to construct policy problems and frame the corresponding solutions (Ozga, 2020). The GLD is an example of a measure of productivity as it forms the basis of data that is reported to the government and is publicly available on the Department for Education website. Making schools and teachers visible through comparative data mechanisms such as the GLD are 'dominant techniques of governing' and can increasingly regulate and control the education of young children (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016, p. 601). This standardised, data-driven mechanism with distinct policy and practical implications is distinctive in comparison to other international contexts and, as such, deserves further interrogation to understand how a school readiness agenda is operationalised through specific policy technologies at a national level.

Using elements of Bacchi's (2009) WPR framework and Foucauldian concepts of governmentality, this paper will critically analyse how school readiness is discursively constructed in policy (rather than defined) through neoliberal technologies of performativity and accountability. The focus of this paper is on the English policy context; however, many of the identified issues have international relevance for ECE, and this analysis is therefore an important contribution to the field of educational policy studies. The paper offers a unique contribution to the field by identifying how school readiness has been constructed through discourses of performativity and accountability in England over the past four decades. This is important for several reasons. Firstly, the paper presents a historical-discursive analysis that illuminates how school readiness has become increasingly formalised and outcome-driven in English ECE using the GLD as a tool of governance and performativity. Secondly, the paper will explore the implications of this policy technology on children and teachers and consider how school readiness in England has been constructed in a way that positions children as deficits and teachers as accountable to outcome-driven standards. Finally, alternative constructs of school readiness will be considered, drawing on holistic approaches to children's transitions into school, and how more meaningful dialogue with policymakers can be established.

The next section begins with an overview of 'What's the Problem Represented To Be?' (Bacchi, 2009) as the methodological approach adopted in the policy analysis. As part of the analysis, I map out a history of discourse, identifying neoliberal themes that are prevalent in the trajectory of ECE policy since the end of the twentieth century. I take inspiration from Doherty's (2007, p. 199) suggestion that a 'two directional critique' is applied when using governmentality as an analytical prism. A backwards reading of educational policy

facilitates the search for ambitions and deliberate objectives, while examining policy in a forward direction can unearth 'the technical forms, organisational arrangements, practices and forms of knowledge that are mobilised in making political reason operational and material'. An historical trajectory of curriculum and assessment policy is presented to highlight how education reform to raise quality and standards has driven the increasing formalisation of ECE. Concepts of performativity and accountability are interrogated and how these policy technologies have become informal techniques of government to direct the actions and conduct of teachers in particular (neoliberal) ways. To conclude, I propose that examining school readiness as a construct, for instance something produced through discourse and policy technologies, rather than a concept that needs to be defined, opens a space where alternative constructs of school readiness can be considered in a more meaningful way, for teachers, children, and policymakers.

METHODOLOGY

To make sense of the 'messy' nature of policy development, the 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) (Bacchi, 2009) approach was used as an overarching framework. Bacchi (2009, p. 20) advises that as a starting point to the analysis a specific piece of legislation is selected, and that this is, in itself, an 'interpretive exercise' and a way of reflecting interests and concerns. The *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DfE, 2024b) has been selected as a policy framework that all providers in receipt of the early years funding in England are required to follow. The *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (DfE, 2024a) that guides the completion of the end-of-year assessments in Reception was also included as a key document in this analysis. These two documents are relevant as they set out the policy expectations of the GLD for children and teachers. A historical trajectory of the policy assemblage used in the broader analysis can be found in Appendix A.

Within the WPR framework, policy is defined as 'prescriptive texts' that provide 'points of entry to the problematisation and problem representations that require scrutiny' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 34). WPR uses a set of six questions to interrogate policy texts and processes:

1. *What's the problem represented to be?*
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. *How has the representation of the 'problem' come about?*
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? *Can the problem be thought of differently?*
5. *What effects are produced by this representation of this 'problem'?*
6. How/where is this representation of this problem produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted or replaced? (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2)

Four key questions (italicised) were selected to draw out policy narratives regarding the construction of school readiness in the EYFS (DfE 2024b) and the wider policy assemblage. As a way of focusing the analysis, the work of Bletsas (2012) was adapted and the following questions were devised from Bacchi's framework to guide the analysis:

- How did 'school readiness' come to be seen as a 'problem' for the government?
- How has school readiness in England's ECE policy been constructed as a governing practice?
- What are the effects of this construction of school readiness?
- Can school readiness be constructed in a different way?

The next section will explore in more depth some of the key concepts of the WPR approach to policy analysis.

GOVERNMENTALITY, POLICY AND DISCOURSE

Policy can be defined as a set of intentions, purposeful and problem focussed, setting out what needs to be done to bring about the desired goals (Doherty, 2007, p. 198). Drawing on the work of Foucault, Ball (2015, p. 307) differentiates between policy as text, the process of interpretation and translation of policy by teachers, and policy as discourse, which is 'the ways in which teacher subjects and subject positions are formed and re-formed by policy' and how they are expected to 'speak, listen, act, read, work, think, feel, behave, and value in particular and specific ways'. Ball argues 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 narrowed or changed'. In other words, policy is something that is 'acted upon', but that action is constrained by policy rather than determined by it (Ball, 1994, p. 12). Exploring Ball's trajectory of policy sociology and the implications for the field of education policy analysis, Lingard and Sellar (2013, p. 269) summarise that 'policy as discourse frames what can be said and who can speak' whereas 'policy as text' provides possibilities of agency as teachers are able to mobilise knowledge in their enactment (or mediation) of the policy.

The WPR framework offers a conceptual and practical method for policy analysis which can then be further interrogated through the framing of governmentality to identify the deployment of power ('govern') and rationalities (ways of thinking) that mobilise power in the form of knowledge (Dean, 2010). Key to the WPR approach is that we are governed through problematisations, and that analysis of the problem representation needs to be analysed rather than 'problems' per se (Bacchi, 2009). The analytical focus is on the '*knowledges* through which rule takes place, and the influence of experts and professionals *on and through these knowledges*' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 26). In other words, the WPR approach moves beyond identifying and solving problems to critically examining how these problems are constructed and understood through policy and expert knowledge, and how they can wield forces of power that influence the everyday practices and decision making of teachers. This policy analysis will bring into focus how the state governs the population, but also how groups govern each other, and individuals (teachers) govern themselves.

Since the 1990s, there has been a wealth of educational research drawing on the work of Foucault, including concepts of governmentality, as a way of understanding 'how education policy discourses and practices on the level of the state become internalised and embedded on the level of the self' (Fimyar, 2008, p. 8). Foucault (1982, pp. 789–790) used the term 'conduct of conduct' to explain how governing is to 'structure the possible field of action of others'. Foucault argued that government is not just about political structures or state management but is a way of directing the conduct of individuals or groups. Dean (2010, p. 38) purports that a key starting point when using governmentality as an interpretive frame to analyse policy is to consider the 'problematisation', that is calling into question some aspect of the 'conduct of conduct'. This involves exploring 'outside of policy' and, rather than simply viewing policy as a tool of government, policy is conceived to form a particular view of government and how problems are managed through them (Bacchi, 2023). For instance, the emergence of social issues such as poverty and unemployment as identified problems that need to be fixed is itself something that needs to be examined (Miller & Rose, 1990). Rather than assume that specific conditions generate a government response, the emphasis is placed on the contested nature of 'problems' and how particular policies have come to be assumed as necessary responses (Bacchi, 2009).

Attention also needs to be given to policy rationalities and technologies. Rationalities are rationales used to justify a particular way of rule, to make a course of action thinkable and practicable for both practitioners and those who are receivers of the applied practice (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Technologies are the mechanisms through which governing takes place and include specific instruments of performativity produced to shape the conduct of individuals and groups. In an educational context this could be performance data, school league tables, and curricular and assessment policies. Finally, exploring how subjectification occurs and with what effects is also a useful objective of governmentality. In the context of ECE, this can be conceptualised as follows:

> a process by which all participants involved in the education system come to embody and espouse the behaviours and outcomes desired by the state, accepting them as normal and necessary, whether these be, for example, developmental stages or learning goals or some notion of 'readiness'.
>
> (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 118)

Through the workings of governmentality, teachers can end up owning the values, assumptions, and goals of policymakers, and in effect they end up governing themselves (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). In an ECE context, this can be exemplified through curriculum and assessment outcomes (i.e., the GLD), which are now taken for granted and part of the normality of being an early years practitioner, and ensuring children achieve these goals becomes part of the professional identity embodying the policy-practice demands. By focusing on the problematisations, rationalities, technologies, and subjectification of governmentality, the neoliberal discourses that have emerged from policy and other texts to understand the construction of school readiness in England can be interrogated. Furthermore, how ECE policy formulates, reformulates, and regulates teachers within the Reception classroom, and the subsequent impact on pedagogical practices and decision-making can also be considered.

The governmentality orientation of rationalities recognises the role of discourse as a governing practice, allowing us to reveal how governing may take place at a distance (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Discourse determines what is included and excluded from debate and practice, producing its own 'regime of truth' in which 'knowledge and power are inextricably bound together' (Atkinson et al., 2011, p. 9). Here, discourse is defined as a 'body of ideas, concepts and beliefs that have become established as knowledge or as an accepted way of looking at the world' (Doherty, 2007, p. 193). From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse constructs the topic, governing the way a topic can be meaningfully discussed, and influencing how ideas are put into practice and used to control and regulate how people behave (Hall, 1997). Further to this, discourse does not exist discretely as one statement or one text, and when a regularity is defined between 'objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices' a 'discursive formation' emerges (Foucault, 2002, p. 38). Discursive formations are conceptualised as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 2002, p. 49) which then have a 'tangible, concrete effect in structuring practices, relations of power and subjectivity' (Doherty, 2007, p. 195). This notion of formation suggests that policy can be 'both bounded and can be composed of multiple and even competing discourses' (Petersen, 2015, p. 66). The purpose of this analysis is to look critically at the current dominant discourses of school readiness and uncover how these have been produced over time as a particular form of truth. This will work to uncover ideological influences and ambitions of texts and policy to reveal social relations of power, regulation, and subjectification.

The next section utilises the specified policy documents as a starting point and then traces back, through policy and other discursive practices, to identify how the 'problem' of school readiness took shape in England, how the GLD came to be a governing practice in

ECE policy, and the implications of this construct on teachers and children. Finally, drawing on international literature and practices, I consider alternative constructions of school readiness.

HOW DID 'SCHOOL READINESS' COME TO BE SEEN AS A 'PROBLEM' FOR THE GOVERNMENT?

Question 1 (What's *the problem represented to be?*) considers 'what is the problem?' represented to be in a specific policy but also examines how proposed policy interventions designed to address the problem reveal how the issue is being considered. This section will examine how school readiness is framed as a 'problem' to be solved through investment in ECE and how this is situated within wider neoliberal policy agendas.

Recent academic literature has highlighted how school readiness has been driven by a neoliberal agenda of datafication (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016), performativity and accountability (Roberts-Holmes, 2014; Kay, 2018, 2022) and as a vehicle to develop children's human capital (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Human capital is defined as the knowledge, skills, health or values that people possess rather than their physical or financial assets, and therefore investment in education is vital to improve a child's ability to earn more money in adult life (Becker, 2002). Historically, policy discourses in the English-speaking world (i.e., England, USA, Australia and New Zealand) often present school readiness as a strategy for economic growth, whereby investment in ECE should yield a financial return in the future (Bruner, 2004; Kay, 2018; Wright, 2017). More recent global trends highlight how low- and middle-income countries are also conceptualising school readiness as a formation of human capital (Arias et al., 2021; Sosu & Pimenta, 2023; Spier et al., 2019), which lays the foundation for school success and subsequent labour market (Mahon, 2016).

In 2011, a speech given by the then UK Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg (2011) acknowledged the relationship between a child's socio-economic background and their readiness for school and re-iterated the English Government's commitment to improve social mobility through investment in the Early Years and by addressing the issue of school readiness. A Government strategy publication, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility* (Cabinet Office, 2011, pp. 5–6) highlights how 'Children at the age of five living in poverty are the equivalent of around eight months behind their peers in terms of cognitive development' and this ultimately impacts on social mobility, leaving 'the country's economic potential unfulfilled'. The *Social Mobility and Child Poverty* Commission's report *State of the Nation 2015: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain* (2015, p. vi) states that 'less than half of the poorest children in England are ready for school' describing social mobility as the 'new holy grail of public policy'.

This is re-enforced in the *Improving school readiness: Creating a better start for London* (Public Health England, 2015) report where the financial return that will be gained from an investment in the Early Years, specifically school readiness, is prevalent. The report argues the case for an investment in school readiness stating 'The costs of delivery per child are outweighed by the benefits to the individual, taxpayers and others through improved educational outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, reduced crime and increased taxes paid due to increased earning as adults' (p. 8). Within this policy context, the 'problem' is presented as being specific groups of children, particularly those living in poverty, boys, children with a Special Educational Need, and children with English as an Additional Language, who are less likely to be school ready, and therefore are less likely to contribute financially to the economy when they are adults. When school readiness is equated to future success and social mobility, the importance of the child being school ready is placed within an economic context and financial investment is justified as a long-term money saving exercise (Kay, 2018). This,

Moss (2014, p. 63) argues, is the 'story of neoliberalism', offering a 'comprehensive worldview about how all human life can and should be reduced to a set of economic relationships and values'. The narrative of economies positions ECE as a vehicle of productivity with the purpose of developing human resources, a core tenet of neoliberal thinking.

Of importance to the field of ECE is that, in England, teachers must navigate these competing policy discourses, considering the emphasis on technical skills such as Mathematics and Literacy embedded within a neoliberal agenda of human capital, whilst working with established and historically valued practices in the early years that celebrate children's diverse experiences (Bradbury, 2019; Archer, 2022; Kay, 2024). Positioning children as human capital is problematic as this does not comfortably align with the ECE tradition of holistic methods (e.g., play) as a medium for learning (Nyland & Ng, 2016). As such, pedagogical tensions are created as teachers become pulled towards adult-led formal activities to deliver the measurable outcomes linked to school readiness rather than building on and connecting children's interests and funds of knowledge with curriculum goals (Wood, 2019). The way school readiness is constructed as a solution to future economic concerns narrows the purpose of ECE but also risks diminishing traditional pedagogies that focus on children's diverse experiences and identities.

HOW HAS THE SCHOOL READINESS IN ENGLAND'S ECE POLICY BEEN CONSTRUCTED AS A GOVERNING PRACTICE?

This section (*Question 3: How has the representation of the 'problem' come about?*) draws on Foucault's concept of genealogy which allows us to discover how a 'problem' took on a particular shape (Bacchi, 2009). Genealogy 'conceives human reality as an effect of the interweaving of certain historical and cultural practices, which it sets out to trace and explore' and helps subjects to understand the 'conditions of their present existence' (Tamboukou, 1999, p. 203). What is important is that key decisions in time can be identified and how these impact on the trajectory of the problem, providing insights into the power relations that allow for some problem representations and the silencing of others (Bacchi, 2009). With a specific focus on power and on bodies, genealogy aims to interrogate how individuals are normalised through culture and by constructing 'normality' are turned into 'meaningful subjects and docile objects' (Olssen, 2006, p. 14). The techniques and artefacts deployed to construct this normality are defined by Ball (2016) as a policy technology identified as three dominant discursive constructions: performativity, market, and management. In this paper I focus on performativity and the resulting accountability pressures faced by teachers. A culture of performativity in the 21st century has significant cost to teaching professionals including loss of autonomy, limited participation in pedagogical and curriculum decision-making, and a lack of personal development opportunities (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Focusing on performativity as a policy technology offers a useful starting point to map the 'history of the present' (Dean, 2010, p. 53) to understand how school readiness has been discursively constructed and what it means to be a school ready child. Furthermore, utilising governmentality will unearth how policy governs teachers and their classroom practices.

Due to the complexity of the analysis, Diagram 1 visually depicts how performativity as a policy technology underpins dominant discourses and how they interact with each other, according to the different agendas. This representation will formulate the basis for the discussion in the next section with a focus on the key themes that emerged from the policy analysis.

In the next section I uncover the historical-discursive construction of the school readiness agenda in ECE policy in England and argue that the GLD is a core policy technology of performativity and accountability for both teachers and children in the Reception classroom.

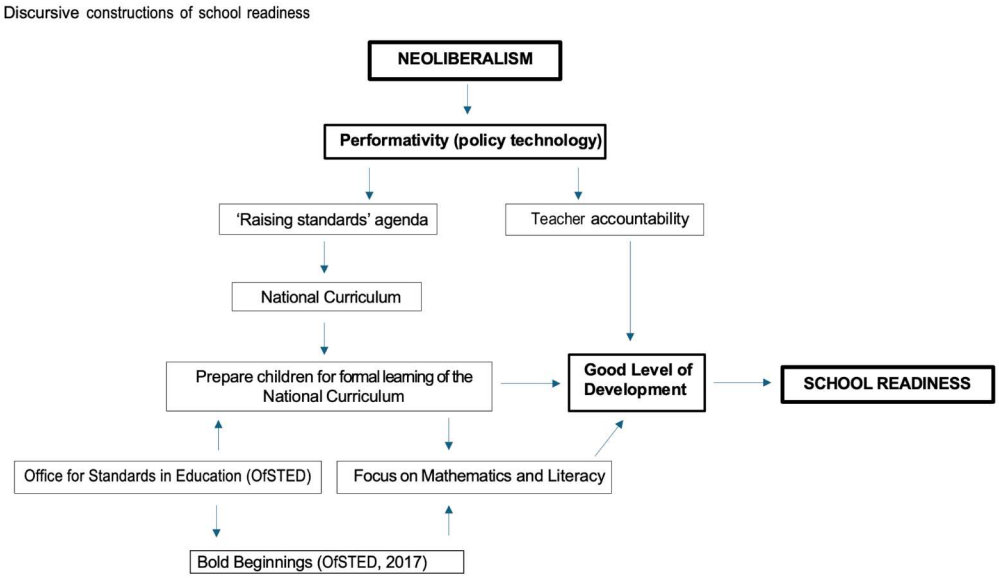

DIAGRAM 1 A thematic mapping of the discursive constructions of school readiness.

Using governmentality as an interpretive frame I consider how teachers are governed through these (often competing) discourses. I begin by examining the historical trajectory of educational policy in England and the emergence of the centralised education system aimed at raising standards and narrowing the attainment gap.

Introduction of the National Curriculum

The introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act has been described as a key neoliberal moment (Stevenson, 2011). Prior to this Act, there had been a decade of confrontation and crisis between the teaching profession and the Conservative government, who viewed the child-centred philosophy of progressivism as a 'levelling down of standards' (Whitty, 2008, p. 166). The publication of the Black Papers (Cox & Boyson, 1975, 1977; Cox & Dyson, 1969a, 1969b, 1970) identified failing standards because of a progressivist approach (Lowe, 1997, p. 51). New Right educationalists, politicians, and academics claimed there was a link between the increased levels of violence and truancy in schools and the progressive methods being used in the classroom and called for a return to more traditional ways of teaching that would 'raise moral standards in schools' and offer a 'curriculum that identified the pre-eminent position of British culture' (Maguire et al., 2006, p. 74). In 1976, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan gave a speech on education at Ruskin College in Oxford, in which he hinted at the centralisation of control over education policy, emphasising the economic and industrial responsibility schools held to society (Silcock, 1999). Callaghan declared, "parents, teachers, learned and professional bodies, representatives of higher education and both sides of industry, together with the government, all have an important part to play in formulating and expressing the purpose of education and the standards that we need" (Callaghan, 1976). The speech was based on a document known as the 'Yellow Book' (Chitty, 1989) that highlighted public and media discontent over the performance of schools, in particular, the lack of discipline and the failure to achieve satisfactory results in the formal subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The Ruskin speech marked a discursive shift towards a proactive governmental role within the education system, one that would challenge the autonomy of

teaching professionals and learner-centred approaches through a significant increase in centralised standards-based policy objectives (Riley, 1998).

Referring to Dean's (2010) proposal to consider the 'problem' and the policy response, here we can see how schools were framed as being at the root of economic inequality due to poor standards and a lack of accountability. The response by the Conservative government was to pass the 1988 Education Reform Act which signified a radical transformation in the English education system. The Act introduced the Local Management of Schools (LMS) where control over budgets was removed from Local Education Authorities and given to schools, leading to a system of local management and accountability, a National Curriculum, and Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs). With the introduction of the National Curriculum, intended to ensure children aged 5–16 received a broad and balanced curriculum, power over what was taught in schools shifted from teachers to the state. This shift in curriculum decision making repositioned schools and teachers as curriculum deliverers (Ball & Bowe, 1992) and was a huge threat to the autonomy and freedom of education professionals in determining what, when, and how subjects should be taught (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Furthermore, the standardisation of curriculum in this way enabled the establishment of performance criteria to drive school accountability and parental choice, generating assessment data that was then published in school league tables (Whitty, 2008).

This approach to education policy illustrates the tendency for liberal democracies to develop through the lines of the 'strong state' and the 'free economy', appearing to offer schools greater autonomy through the LMS, whilst controlling and coordinating them by 'steering at a distance' through the achievement of expected outputs and publicly shared and compared performance data (Whitty, 2008, p. 166). The introduction of market forces in education changed the context and delivery of education in England, and the pressures brought about by OfSTED inspections and performance tables resulted in a culture of surveillance and performativity (Hoskins, 2012). These performative technologies subjectify teachers by means of reducing, narrowing down, decontextualising, and translating teacher activities into a typically quantitative format (Englund & Gerdin, 2019). Through this frame, data becomes a way of holding professionals accountable by demonstrating how the work that they do meets the expected standards and provides an evidence-base about what works, particularly data that shows correlations between interventions and outcomes (Biesta, 2017). In addition to teacher accountability, school performance data offered accountability to consumers, which in principle put schools in competition with each other in the drive to attract invested parents, and ultimately student funding (Mattei, 2012). The implementation of centralised assessment systems and inspection regimes are the mechanisms for raising standards as teachers must be seen to be 'doing policy' by striving to deliver 'good', 'best' or 'most effective' practices (Wood, 2020, p. 333). These reforms are significant as they highlighted a clear political agenda and direction of travel and were a sign of what was to come as policymakers turned their attention to the early years.

The impact of the National Curriculum on ECE

Whilst initially outside the remit of the National Curriculum, this policy trajectory was to have a transformative impact on ECE in England as the government aimed to create a more cohesive system that linked the early years more effectively to primary school (Soler & Miller, 2003). The subsequent implementation of Key Stage 1 and SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) at age 7 identified a need to measure the 'value added' between when children leave Reception and the end of Key Stage 1. This effectively extended the performative and accountability discourse down into the early years,

positioning ECE as a preparatory stage for measurable academic progression rather than a distinct phase in its own right.

Policy intervention came with the introduction of the Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning (SCAA, 1996) which laid out six areas of learning, the outcomes of which were clearly linked to National Curriculum assessment level descriptions demonstrating an emphasis on preparation for the National Curriculum (Lindsay & Desforges, 1998). This intervention was significant as it was the first time that prescribed outcomes had been imposed on children this young and highlighted an 'explicit political agenda' that focused on providing children with a 'head start into Key Stage 1' (Wood & Attfield, 2005, p. 21). Whilst the Desirable Learning Outcomes (SCAA, 1996) framework was short lived, it was recognised that there was a pressing need for a curriculum for the three- to five-year-old age range that clearly set out elements of linear progression that would provide a robust alternative (Anning, 1998). Since the Desirable Learning Outcomes there have been numerous iterations of the ECE curriculum and assessment policy implementations represented in Table 1.

Alongside the introduction of the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DSCF, 2007a) came the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (EYFSP) (DCSF, 2007b) which assessed children across the areas of learning through the Early Learning Goals (ELGs), to provide an evaluation of development, strengths, and areas for development for each child. The data linked to the Good Level of Development (GLD) has been reported by the government in the EYFSP statistical release since 2009; however, at this point in time it was not considered a measure of a child's school readiness. In 2010, the government carried out research examining the proportion of children reaching the GLD and the achievement gap between the lowest and highest achievers. The findings highlighted that girls are more likely than boys to achieve a GLD by the end of the EYFS, pupils who are not eligible for free school meals are more likely than those who are eligible, and September-born pupils are almost twice as likely to achieve the GLD as August-born pupils (DfE, 2010a). The most recent EYFSP data (DfE 2024c) highlights how these results have not changed and the attainment gap between specific groups of children remains.

School readiness constructed through the GLD

The link between the GLD and school readiness was largely influenced by Tickell's review of the EYFS in 2011. In 2010, the Department for Education published the *Business Plan 2011–2015* in which it was announced that indicators of 'Readiness to progress to next stage of schooling' would be developed (DfE, 2010b, p. 22). In the same year, Dame Claire Tickell was invited by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government to carry out a review of the EYFS to focus on 'getting children ready for education and increasing the attainment of children from deprived backgrounds' (DfE, 2010b).

In the government-commissioned review *The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health, and Lea*rning (Tickell, 2011, p. 19) Tickell highlights the tension between those who are concerned children should be 'free to enjoy their early years without pressure' and the danger of failing to prepare children for 'realities of the school environment, where skills such as Literacy are at a premium'. The aim of this review was to reduce the bureaucracy involved in administering the EYFS framework (DCSF, 2007a) and shift the focus of ECE towards 'getting children ready for education', reducing the number of ELGs, and increasing the attainment of children from socially deprived backgrounds (Tickell, 2011). As part of the terms of reference for the review, a letter from the then Children's Minister, Sarah Teather, stipulates that a key issue of the review was how children should be 'prepared to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by more formal learning in primary school' (Teather, 2010).

TABLE 1 ECE curriculum and assessment policy iterations 2000–2024.

Date	Curriculum	Age range	Assessment	Areas of learning
2000	Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) (QCA, 2000)	3 to 5 years	Children worked towards the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) which formed the basis of the summative assessment known as the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) the end of Reception.	Personal, Social & Emotional Development (PSED) Communication, Language & Literacy (CLL) Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy (PSRN) Knowledge and Understanding of the World (KUW) Physical Development (PD) Creative Development (CD)
2008	Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2007a) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) (DCSF, 2007b)	Birth to 5 years	As above—assessed against a 9-point scale across 6 areas of learning	
2012/2014/2017/2024	Revised Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2024b)		Children reach expected outcomes across the 7 areas of learning (Bolded areas make up the GLD)	Three prime areas: Personal and Social Development, Physical Development, Communication and Language Four specific areas of learning: Mathematics, Literacy, Understanding of the World, and Expressive Arts and Design

In the revised *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2012, p. 2) there is a discursive shift where the purpose of teaching and learning is stated as being to 'ensure children's "school readiness"' and give children 'the right foundation for good future progress through school and life'. Despite criticisms about a linear progression model in ECE, the focus of the EYFS shifted from how children typically develop to the learning outcomes children should achieve by the age of five, with a clear policy emphasis on improving school readiness (Wood & Hedges, 2016). Here there is a destabilisation of the purpose of ECE as teachers become accountable to what is stated in the EYFS and the requirement to deliver desired outcomes linked to school readiness, rather than work with the more rich and complex processes of a child's holistic development.

In 2015 there is a coupling between the GLD and school readiness in the *Improving School Readiness: Creating a Better Start for London* report where it is stated:

> The good level of development (GLD) is used to assess school readiness. Children are defined as having reached a GLD at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage if they achieved at least the expected level in the early learning goals in the prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language) and in the specific areas of mathematics and literacy.
>
> (Public Health England, 2015, p. 4)

This signifies a key point in the curricular and assessment trajectory of ECE as this policy version of school readiness, directed by a raising standards agenda and embedded within the data driven GLD assessment, becomes a measure of performativity which impacts on teachers and children in particular ways (discussed in the next section). It is also explicitly stated in economic terms that a financial return will be gained from an investment in ECE, specifically school readiness. In this report, school readiness becomes framed as a social panacea, a way of breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing future economic burdens on the welfare state. Within these neoliberal economic discourses, children are decontextualised, their achievements based on the preparation for future employment rather than their holistic development.

Performative technologies have increased and intensified in ECE in England to the point where policy mechanisms put in place to control teachers and children are now normalised. Davies and Bansel (2007, p. 321) describe how in a technical-managerial conceptualisation of accountability 'the focus is no longer on the quality of professional action. Rather professionals are held accountable for the degree to which their actions meet certain standards'. The GLD is a high-stakes assessment construct, a policy technology of performativity that wields significant influence over early years educators as this forms the basis of data that verify teacher assessments of children's attainment at the end of Reception. As such, the requirement to ensure children's school readiness becomes an all-encompassing part of classroom practice, where teachers often work in contradiction to their own beliefs about how young children should learn, instead focusing on measurable outputs and performance as defined by the GLD (Kay,2024; Wood & Hedges, 2025). The next section will explore in more depth how constructing school readiness through the GLD impacts on teachers and children in the early years.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THIS CONSTRUCTION OF SCHOOL READINESS?

Question 5 of the WPR approach (*What effects are produced by this representation of this 'problem'?*) is formulated around the idea that representations of the 'problem' usually allude

to who is responsible for that problem and that one task of the analysis is to make visible this implied responsibilisation (Bacchi, 2009). This is important as it draws attention to the material impact of problem representations and, in this instance, how the lives of children and teachers are directly affected.

Specifically constructing school readiness through the GLD is problematic as year on year assessment data from the end of Reception highlights 30% of children (aged 4–5 years old) do not meet the expected outcomes required for the GLD. Those less likely to achieve the GLD are children receiving Free School Meals (FSM), with English as an Additional Language (EAL), with a Special Educational Need (SEN), summer-born, and gypsy/Roma children (DfE, 2024c). In policy terms, children who do not meet the outcomes required for the GLD are positioned as being academically and developmentally behind (not school ready) before they begin the Key Stage 1 (KS1) National Curriculum in Year One and make the EYFS/KS1 transition in a deficit position. Using policy-defined academic outcomes (such as the GLD) to measure a child's school readiness privileges some children over others and further marginalises already disadvantaged groups of children, re-enforcing the ongoing inequalities that policymakers seek to address (Kay,2018). The year-on-year assessment data highlights how, despite over twenty years of government intervention in ECE, the policy solutions implemented to address children at risk of not being school ready at the end of Reception are not working.

Of further concern is the evidence to show that statements of 'expected' attainment have shifted downwards over the past twenty years and are now more academically difficult for children to achieve (Kay,2018). The data also illuminates that the outcomes children find most challenging are linked to more formal areas of learning such as Literacy and Mathematics (e.g., Write simple phrases and sentences that can be read by others, Explore and represent patterns within numbers up to 10, including evens and odds, double facts, and how quantities can be distributed equally) (DfE, 2023, 2024c). Within the context of the GLD, the failure to achieve these outcomes, despite being more difficult today than they were in the past, becomes the fault of the child, rather than any deficiencies in the policy expectations.

The construction of school readiness through the GLD has equally significant effects on teachers and their professional practice. The use of performance related data makes teacher accountability visible but can also 'carefully construct and steer teaching practice in implicit and particular ways' (Kilderry, 2015, p. 635). Roberts-Holmes (2014, p. 307) argues that this data has itself 'come to partly represent the teacher's pedagogical focus' and, despite attempts to maintain a 'child-centred philosophy', teachers are increasingly coming to accept that their pedagogy is 'data-driven'. The Starting Strong IV (OECD, 2015, p. 169) report warns that the measurement of child outcomes to determine school readiness is an act of 'schoolification' which may result in the focus shifting away from the participation of the child and specific pedagogical approaches traditionally suited to young children. Schoolification can be defined as giving greater prominence to formal teaching activities, a reduction in free play, an increased focus on Literacy and Mathematics, and pedagogical practices associated with older age groups such as ability grouping (Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Pascal et al. (2017, p. 27) argue that the increased prominence of the school readiness agenda, and subsequent schoolification, where pedagogical practices are 'becoming more instructional, teacher directed and narrowly focussed on Literacy and Mathematics learning, with a loss of play and more individualised, creative approaches', are political actions that reflect a shift in beliefs about the purpose of ECE within policy making.

The dichotomy of meeting school readiness outcomes through formal learning presents 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' (Kay, 2024, p. 649). This highlights how the construct of school readiness, when defined through performativity and accountability mechanisms such as the GLD, has a direct impact on pedagogical decision

making in the Reception classroom. Teachers are increasingly having to align their practices with these performativity measures and standardised approaches to practice. Kay (2024, p. 649) highlights how 'teachers grapple with these tensions, on the one hand wanting to enact pedagogical practices that are 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 highlights how constructing school readiness through performativity measures fundamentally transforms the professional identity and agency of early years teachers.

These contradictions are intensified by OfSTED's increasing role in shaping what constitutes 'effective' early years practice. OfSTED is a non-ministerial department with the stated aims of improving lives 'by raising standards in education and children's social care' and is responsible for the inspection, regulation, and reporting of educational provision in England (OfSTED, 2022). Over the course of the past decade, OfSTED has positioned itself as a 'provider of knowledge about best practices through research-based evidence generated in their own reports' which 'further re-enforces the purpose of ECE to 'ready' children for school' (Kay, 2022, p. 5). This is exemplified in Bold Beginnings (OfSTED, 2017), a report which looked at the Reception curriculum in 'successful schools' and how well it prepared children for the rest of their education and beyond. In the context of Bold Beginnings, successful schools are those which have been judged Good or Outstanding in recent OfSTED inspections and where children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have 'achieved well' (OfSTED, 2017, p. 9), defined as meeting the outcomes required for the GLD. Key recommendations in the report centre on the teaching of numbers and an assertion that reading and phonics should be 'the core purpose of the Reception year' (p. 7). The drive to improve educational outcomes, particularly in Mathematics and Literacy, has 'taken precedence over established approaches to ECE and has repositioned Reception as the school readiness year rather than the transitional year into school' (Kay, 2022, p. 181). Formal practices, re-enforced in Bold Beginnings, are being utilised as part of a 'what works' agenda to ensure children achieve academic outcomes linked to Mathematics and Literacy as a way of accomplishing children's school readiness. Within the wider policy assemblage, OfSTED and Bold Beginnings further work to govern teachers, as leaders look to practices happening in schools judged good or outstanding and work to emulate a similar agenda.

Ultimately, the increasing policy emphasis on school readiness not only reshapes the essence of ECE but also intensifies pressures on teachers to demonstrate measurable outcomes and calls into question the fundamental values that guide our understanding of what it means to support the learning, growth, and well-being of young children.

CAN SCHOOL READINESS BE CONSTRUCTED IN A DIFFERENT WAY?

The final question in this analysis (*Question 4: Can the problem be thought of differently?*) considers whether school readiness can be constructed in a different way. Undertaking a genealogical approach also serves to unearth the competing discourses that were not adopted and opens other ways to think about the issue by drawing attention to the limitations and inadequacies in the way the problem is represented.

In this paper I have argued that constructing readiness through the GLD is a narrow and reductionist way of viewing children's entry into school. The EYFSP (DfE, 2024a) assesses each child's level of development 'against 17 early learning goals (ELGs) across all 7 areas of learning in the EYFS', which blurs the distinction between learning (i.e., acquiring knowledge and skills) and development (i.e., broader, holistic growth). In the EYFS (DfE, 2024b)

all children are expected to follow a similar developmental trajectory towards the goals exemplifying a 'development leads learning' orientation. Alternatively, viewed through a socio-cultural position, learning is understood to lead development where children are each on a unique journey. Translated into practice, it is recognised that there are variations in the rate and timing of learning, and pedagogy and curriculum decision-making is adjusted accordingly (Wood & Hedges, 2024).

Moving beyond this focus of conforming to a particular standard, transition can instead be considered as a 'set of processes' as children move from one context to another focusing on how children change their identity and agency both as individuals and members of a wider social setting (Dockett et al., 2013, p. 2). Transition into school, when adopting an ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and socio-cultural standpoint (Rogoff et al., 2018), is seen as a bi-directional process where children, families and schools work together in partnership to respond to individual needs (Peters & Roberts, 2015). Children are placed at the centre of the process with a consideration of the active role they play in their own learning and the different environmental factors that impact on their transition experiences (Murray, 2013). Furthermore, it is acknowledged that children do not enter school as empty vessels; rather, they bring with them everything they have already learnt and experienced and therefore will devise their own responses and strategies to cope with the demands of their new environment, such as rules, routines, relationships, and learning activities (Seung Lam, 2013).

It is well established in the literature that a successful transition is vital for establishing children's positive experiences of being at school, their attitudes to learning, and a sense of belonging, which ultimately impacts on their later educational outcomes (Dockett & Perry, 2013). Research has highlighted the importance of collaboration between the two educational contexts, and between home and school, with a focus on children's learning, peer, and teacher relationships, and their experience of the educational environment (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017; Morawska et al., 2024). Here, the emphasis is shifted away from the child's current abilities to create an environment where children can learn, and schools are 'ready' to recognise and draw on family and communities to create a partnership for transition (Rouse et al., 2023). School readiness therefore should not be measured at a particular point in time in terms of what children can or cannot do but rather viewed as an ongoing process that values diverse experiences and the shared responsibility of families, communities and schools in shaping successful transitions. By recognising children's transition into school as a complex, dynamic, and context-specific process, more inclusive and responsive educational strategies can be adapted rather than positioning ECE as a place to 'ready' children through the achievement of specific educational outcomes.

As specified in the introduction, England represents an extreme case of neoliberal outcome-driven reform through the GLD. Other countries view transition into school as a partnership between the diverse expertise of different stakeholders to ensure children's developmental needs are met, and there is an emphasis on smooth transitions and continuity. Crucially, these alternative constructs are operationalised through different policy technologies. In Wales, the Quality Framework (Welsh Government, 2024, p. 6) sets out that one of its aims is to 'support effective transitions from home/setting/school'. Effective and informed transitions fall under the 'Well-being' part of the curriculum, and it is specified that these should be carefully planned to 'gently nurture the skills children will need', placing the child at the centre of the transition process (p. 39). The Foundation Phase Profile Handbook (Welsh Government, 2017, p. 5) uses observational assessment to support practitioners in providing a 'developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum for all children', prioritising pedagogical responsiveness. Children's outcomes are reported to the Welsh government, but these are used to assess whether progress and development are consistent with a child's age rather than whether they are school ready. In New Zealand, the Te Whāriki curriculum adopts a holistic approach with the concept of "ko wai au? Who am I?" as a guiding transition

framework. There is a focus on the child's identity rather than what outcomes they have achieved, including the significance of the child's name and what knowledge the child brings with them into the new environment. Children are viewed not only as who they are now, but also as who they once were and who they will become (Ministry of Education, 2025). Principles that underpin transition practices include empowerment, family and community, holistic development, and relationships. Te Whāriki captures assessment of children through Learning Stories which are narratives created from structured observations and focus on the achievements of the learner in the context of relationships and the environment rather than pre-determined outcomes (The Education Hub, 2019).

Both examples provided here highlight how policymakers could move away from performance measures that result in a 30% 'failure' rate towards meaningful dialogue and shared responsibility between different stakeholders to ensure children are placed at the centre of the transition. These counter-technologies shift the focus of accountability from measurable pre-defined outcomes to the quality of relationships and pedagogical responsiveness. This demonstrates that it is possible to maintain educational quality and support smoother transitions without the deficit-based labelling inherent in England's GLD approach, potentially offering more compelling evidence to policymakers concerned with long-term outcomes rather than short-term performance metrics.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has critically examined the historical-discursive construction of school readiness through neoliberal economic drivers and performativity and accountability policy technologies. Whilst the focus of this paper demonstrates how education is deeply embedded within a narrative of economies in ECE in England, the discussion here mirrors a pervasive global neoliberal discourse that is increasingly shaping ECE agendas across diverse international contexts (See Gupta, 2017; Otterstad & Braathe, 2016; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015; Xu, 2019; Yang et al., 2022). Viewed through this orientation, children are positioned as human capital and the purpose of ECE becomes one of preparation for future productivity and employability. This is exemplified in the English policy context where school readiness is framed in policy as a way of breaking the cycle of poverty and investment in the early years is expected to see an economic return in the future (Public Health England, 2015). Mathematics and literacy are privileged in the drive to ensure children are well-prepared for future employment. Within this context, children are valued regarding their potential for economic productivity, rather than as individuals with their own diverse experiences and interests (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). As such, the purpose of schooling becomes one of upward mobility and competition rather than the nurturing of critical thinking and activism (de Saxe et al., 2020).

Even though school readiness is seen as a contested term with multiple possible definitions that are not universally agreed, school readiness in England has been discursively constructed in policy specifically through the GLD and the achievement of outcomes across the five areas of learning. Using Foucauldian concepts of governmentality, this paper has highlighted how the GLD is a mechanism of performativity, a way of governing teachers' practices and pedagogical decision-making. The school readiness policy agenda is mediated by teachers who are working with competing discourses, often prioritising academic outcomes and measurable performance linked to Mathematics and Literacy through adult-led/formal activities. Further dominant discourses of school readiness being linked to academic readiness are reinforced through OfSTED research reviews which send a powerful message to schools who will want to emulate practices that secure a strong OfSTED inspection report.

It is important to re-iterate here that the way school readiness has been discursively constructed in England is not working. This argument is evident in the EYFSP data which consistently highlights how around 30% of children do not achieve the GLD and begin Year One in a deficit position. The increasing formalisation of ECE and the academic expectations placed on children (e.g., Write simple phrases and sentences that can be read by others), some of whom are not even at the compulsory school starting age, is problematic. The data highlights how it is the more formal outcomes that children find most difficult to achieve, particularly children who are already disadvantaged. Beginning the start of their educational journey already 'academically behind' their more affluent peers further marginalises these groups of children (i.e. FSM, EAL, SEN, gypsy/Roma and summer born children). I argue that the way school readiness is constructed (and enacted) through the GLD serves to re-enforce existing inequalities rather than address them. Framing children as 'not ready for school' sets them up for a trajectory of perpetual 'catch up', and data highlights how, despite over 20 years of policy intervention in ECE, the attainment gap at the end of the Reception year continues to widen up to the point children do their GCSEs[1] (EPI, 2023).

The challenge here is that school readiness is discursively reconstructed in a way which does not further disadvantage already marginalised groups of children. To do this we need to establish meaningful dialogue between policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders, to consider alternative constructions of school readiness that privilege academic readiness to one that values children's diverse experiences and draws more effectively on their interests and funds of knowledge. We need to move beyond the current deficit-based model of school readiness in England, shifting the problem away from the 'unready child' to focus on the ready school. This would re-emphasise the importance of transition as a shared responsibility, a dynamic and relational interplay between children, families and responsible educational environments. The timing and nature of high-stakes formal assessments like the GLD need to be re-evaluated, especially given the significant impact that this has on young children and their future school trajectory. We also need to continue to advocate for a later compulsory school starting age to bring England (and on a wider level the whole of the UK) in line with the rest of the world.

This proposal could also work to reclaim teacher identity in the early years, acknowledging the breadth and depth of professional experience and knowledge that early years educators have about how young children learn and develop. By illuminating how school readiness is discursively constructed through these policy technologies we can critically reflect on how educational accountability that strives to raise standards and quality can be balanced with a more holistic view of a child's learning.

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Endnote

[1] The final exams pupils take at secondary school in England.

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APPENDIX A

HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF ECE POLICY ASSEMBLAGE