

In January 2017, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) commissioned an Ofsted-wide review of the curriculum. Its aim was to provide fresh insight into leaders' curriculum intentions, how these are implemented and the impact on outcomes for pupils. This report shines a spotlight on the Reception Year and the extent to which a school's curriculum for four- and five-year-olds prepares them for the rest of their education and beyond.

Contents

Executive summary	4
Key findings	5
Recommendations	7
Reception – a unique and important year	8
The curriculum	12
Teaching	16
Language and literacy	19
Mathematics	24
Assessment and the early years foundation stage profile	26
Initial teacher education	29
Methodology	31
Annex A: Schools visited	32
Annex B: Online questionnaire	34

Executive summary

A good early education is the foundation for later success. For too many children, however, their Reception Year is a missed opportunity that can leave them exposed to all the painful and unnecessary consequences of falling behind their peers.

During the summer term 2017, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) visited successful primary schools in which children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds¹, achieved well. This report examines the provision in their Reception Year and the extent to which it was preparing four- and five-year-olds for their years of schooling and life ahead.

Reading was at the heart of the curriculum in the most successful classes. Listening to stories, poems and rhymes fed children's imagination, enhanced their vocabulary and developed their comprehension. Systematic synthetic phonics played a critical role in teaching children the alphabetic code and, since this knowledge is also essential for spelling, good phonics teaching supported children's early writing.

The teaching of early mathematics was not given the same priority. However, it was clear what children could achieve. The schools that ensured good progression frequently used practical equipment to support children's grasp of numbers and, importantly, to develop their understanding of linking concrete experience with visual and symbolic representations. More formal, written recording was introduced, but only when understanding at each stage was secure and automatic.

The schools visited understood that teaching had different purposes. Play, for example, was used primarily for developing children's personal, social and emotional skills. They learned to investigate the world around them, both physically and imaginatively. However, around two thirds of the staff inspectors spoke to confused what they were teaching (the curriculum)

with how they thought they were supposed to teach it. This seemed to stem from misinterpreting what the characteristics of effective learning in the early years foundation stage (EYFS)² – 'playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically' – required in terms of the curriculum they provided.

The EYFS profile (EYFSP)³ is a mechanism for statutory summative assessment at the end of the foundation stage. However, in nearly every school visited, the staff felt that the EYFSP was burdensome. Many teachers devised tasks simply to tick off elements of the early learning goals so that they could provide evidence of children's achievement. By default, these tasks – and ticking them off – became the Reception curriculum, with a significant loss of focus on learning, step by step.

Reception and Year 1 teachers agreed that the vital, smooth transition from the foundation stage to Year 1 was difficult because the early learning goals were not aligned with the now-increased expectations of the national curriculum. Progression and continuity in mathematics were seen as particularly problematic.

The strongest performing schools, however, had found ways to improve their assessment processes and support transition. Checks of children's phonics knowledge, standardised tests (for reading, for example) and scrutinies of children's work provided the essential information that Year 1 teachers needed. Such information was quick to collect and more useful for them.

These successful schools made sure that they gave reading, writing and mathematics in their Reception classes sufficient direct teaching time every day, with frequent opportunities for children to practise and consolidate their growing knowledge. The headteachers made sure that their curriculum was fit for purpose, so that children were equipped to meet the challenges of Year 1 and beyond.

¹ In the context of national outcomes at the age of five, as reported through the early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP), 'disadvantaged children' refers to those who are known to be eligible for free school meals.

² 'Early years (under-5s) foundation stage framework (EYFS)', Department for Education, March 2014; www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2.

³ 'Early years foundation stage profile: handbook 2017', Department for Education, October 2014; www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-handbook.

Key findings

- **The headteachers recognised that a successful Reception Year was fundamental to their school's success.** They were clear that children's achievements up to the age of five can determine their life chances. They did not accept the view that some will 'catch up later'.
- **In the schools visited, leaders and staff had significantly increased their expectations for how reading, writing and mathematics are taught** since the implementation of the 2014 national curriculum. Many headteachers expressed considerable concern that simply to meet the early learning goals (ELGs) was insufficient preparation for children's learning in Year 1 and beyond. They therefore designed their Reception curriculum to give children the necessary foundations for the rest of their schooling. **These schools were clear that Reception children need more than a repeat of their pre-school experiences in Nursery or earlier.**
- **There is no clear curriculum in Reception.** Most leaders and staff in the schools visited acknowledged that there was little guidance about what four- and five-year-olds should be taught, beyond the content of the ELGs. They therefore determined their own curriculum, above and beyond the statements in the EYFSP, to prevent staff using the ELGs as their sole framework for teaching.
- **Many of the schools visited found the processes of the EYFSP burdensome.** Headteachers were keen to reduce teachers' workload by recognising that, although some assessments were best made from observations, others were not.
- **The headteachers prioritised language and literacy** as the cornerstones of learning. They ensured that sufficient time was given to developing children's spoken language and teaching them to read and write.
- **Reading was at the heart of the curriculum.** Children read out loud frequently from carefully selected books that closely matched their phonic knowledge. **Story time was a valued part of the daily routine.** Staff recognised it as essential in developing children's language, vocabulary and comprehension.
- **In schools visited where writing was of a high standard, the children were able to write simple sentences and more by the end of Reception.** They were mastering the spelling of phonically regular words and common exception words. These schools paid good attention to children's posture and pencil grip when children were writing. They used pencils and exercise books, while children sat at tables, to support good, controlled letter formation.
- **Most of the schools had designed their own mathematics curriculum, based on the Year 1 national curriculum programme of study. This provided a strong basis for more complex learning later.** However, leaders were much clearer about their expectations for children's literacy than for mathematics.
- **All the schools visited planned a judicious balance of direct whole-class teaching, small-group teaching, partner work and play.** They were clear about and valued the contribution to children's learning from each.
- **Play was an important part of the curriculum** in all of the schools visited. The headteachers knew which aspects of learning needed to be taught directly and which could be learned through play. However, except for literacy and mathematics, **the schools were not clear about the time they devoted in a typical week to the different areas of learning.**

Key findings continued

- **Headteachers took the continuing professional development (CPD) of staff seriously.** Many of the schools that were using a specific reading and/or writing programme bought in regular training to ensure that all staff taught the programme effectively. Leaders said this provided important induction, particularly for staff who were new to the school.
- Most leaders felt that **newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were not well prepared to teach mathematics, reading and writing in Reception.** They often had little experience of teaching Reception during their initial teacher training.

Recommendations

All primary schools should:

- make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the Reception Year
- attach greater importance to the teaching of numbers in building children's fluency in counting, recognising small numbers of items, comparing numbers and solving problems
- ensure that when children are learning to write, resources are suitable for their stage of development and that they are taught correct pencil grip and how to sit correctly at a table
- devote sufficient time each day to the direct teaching of reading, writing and mathematics, including frequent opportunities for children to practise and consolidate their skills
- use the EYFSP as a guide to end-of-Reception expectations rather than to define what should be taught.

Initial teacher education providers should:

- make sure that all primary trainees have sufficient knowledge of Reception, so that they understand progression from the early years foundation stage onwards
- devote a greater proportion of their training programme to the teaching of reading, including systematic, synthetic phonics as **the** route to decoding words, and the composition of numbers, so that all newly qualified teachers are competent and confident to teach early literacy and mathematics.

The Department for Education should:

- review the scope and breadth of the statutory EYFS framework to ensure that schools better understand the nature and purpose of the Reception Year and what should be taught
- review the content of the EYFSP so that there is greater alignment between the ELCs at the end of the Reception Year and the national curriculum for Year 1
- streamline the EYFSP and associated moderation processes so that they reduce teachers' workload around assessment and become more useful for benchmarking the knowledge and understanding children need for the rest of their formal education
- raise the profile of early mathematics teaching, similar to the investment made in early reading and the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics, by supporting the development of appropriate schemes and resources.

Ofsted should:

- review and update the guidance for inspectors about evaluating the quality of early years provision in Reception
- sharpen the focus placed on the teaching of reading and numbers during the inspection of schools, including schools inspected under section 8 of the Act⁴ and initial teacher education providers
- use the findings of this survey to help shape the new education inspection framework for September 2019
- report regularly on reading in primary schools, aggregated from routine inspections, to identify good practice and highlight the importance of this subject as the gatekeeper to a broad and balanced curriculum.

⁴ Education Act 2005, section 8; www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/section/8.

Reception – a unique and important year

1 The Reception Year holds a unique and important position in education. It marks a significant milestone in a child's life, representing both a beginning and an end. For parents, it is the end of early education and care, at home and/or across multiple settings, and the start of school. For school leaders and teachers, it is the crucial bridge between the EYFS and, for most schools, the start of the national curriculum.⁵

2 Reception is commonly referred to as the first year of school but, unlike other school years, it is not compulsory. In England, formal schooling does not start until the school term following a child's fifth birthday. Despite this, nearly all parents decide to send their child to Reception.⁶

3 Nearly 95% of the school staff who responded to Ofsted's survey questionnaire believed that Nursery and/or Reception signalled the start of school. Leaders clearly believe that the moment a child starts attending their school, in whatever capacity, their educational journey has begun. While Year 1 may be the official start, it is clear that the Reception Year is more commonly recognised as the beginning of a child's formal education.

The term 'Reception' refers to leaders and staff 'receiving' children into their school. While many children will have already had some form of pre-school provision, the Reception Year is often their first experience of full-time education. It is a time when leaders and staff establish the rules, routines and expectations of learning that will serve children well and follow them through the rest of their formal schooling.

The research is clear: a child's early education lasts a lifetime. Done well, it can mean the difference between gaining seven Bs at GCSE compared with seven Cs.⁷ What children are taught during Reception – the curriculum – is therefore hugely important. Such rewards are by no means guaranteed.

⁵ The Reception Year is part of the EYFS. This statutory framework sets the standards of learning, development and care for children from birth to five years. All schools and Ofsted-registered early years providers, including childminders, pre-schools, nurseries and school reception classes, must follow the EYFS guidance. Schools that are maintained by the local authority (maintained schools) must follow the national curriculum; www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum.

⁶ In 2015/16, there were 16,189 maintained schools with Reception classes in England, teaching 654,700 Reception-aged children.

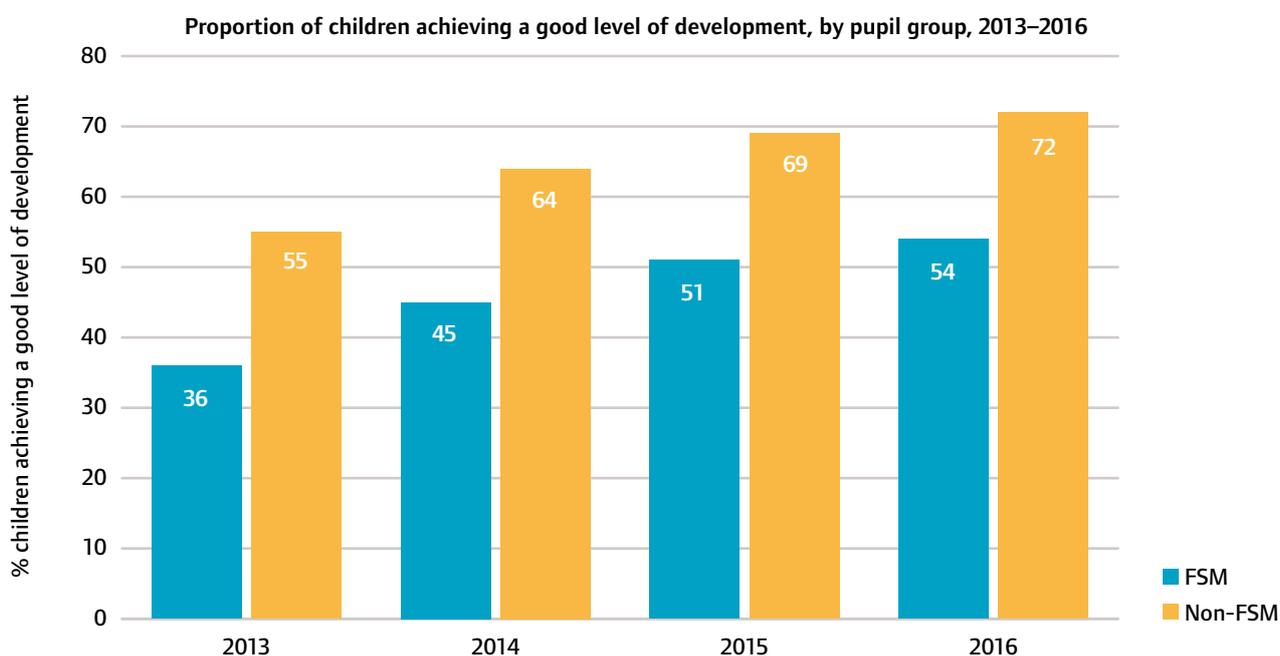
⁷ 'Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16', Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project, Department for Education, September 2014; www.gov.uk/government/publications/influences-on-students-development-at-age-16.

Reception – a unique and important year continued

6 For too many children, the Reception Year is far from successful. It is a false start and may predispose them to years of catching up rather than forging ahead. In 2016, around one third of children did not have the essential knowledge and understanding they needed to reach a good level of development⁸

by the age of five. The outcomes for disadvantaged children were far worse. Only just over half had the knowledge and understanding needed to secure a positive start to Year 1. The gap of 18 percentage points between disadvantaged children and their better-off counterparts, while narrowing, still remains unacceptably wide.⁹

Figure 1: Proportion of children achieving a good level of development, by year and by eligibility for free school meals (FSM)



Source: Table 3, SRF50/2016 table 1

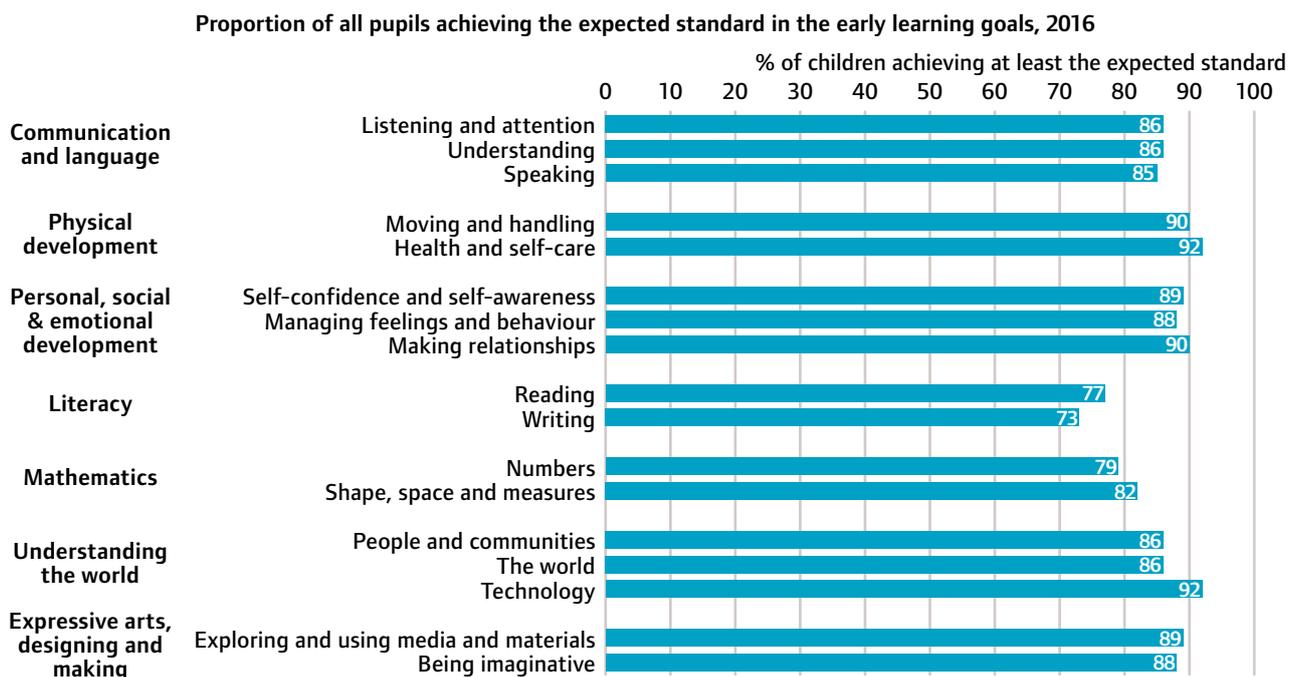
⁸ A child achieves a good level of development, as defined by the government, if she or he meets the expected level in the early learning goals in the prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development; physical development; and communication and language) and in the specific areas of literacy and mathematics.

⁹ SFR 2016 EYFSP 2015–2016; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2015-to-2016.

Reception – a unique and important year continued

7 Put simply, by the end of Reception, the ability to read, write and use numbers is fundamental. They are the building blocks for all other learning. Without firm foundations in these areas, a child's life chances can be severely restricted. The basics need to be taught – and learned – well, from the start.

Figure 2: Proportion of children achieving at least the expected level in each early learning goals, 2016



Source: Table 3, SRF50/2016

8 Success in reading, writing and mathematics is built on a strong foundation in the prime areas of learning.¹⁰ Increasingly, children are arriving in Reception personally, socially and emotionally ready to learn – that is, able and eager to take on the increased challenges of the specific, content-led areas of the wider curriculum.

9 Not all schools, however, are successful in using the Reception Year to build on children's earlier learning. In 2016/17, the quality of early years provision was inadequate in 84 schools and required improvement in a further 331 of those inspected that year. A review of 231 (56%) of these inspection reports found common themes cited as areas for development.

These included:

- the need to provide a sufficiently challenging curriculum for the four- and five-year-olds
- the need to ensure that teaching built adequately on the learning children had undertaken previously
- the need for leaders and staff to have sufficient ambition and high expectations for all children
- the need to move children on more quickly from their starting points, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics.

10 The EYFS defines the prime areas of learning as: communication and language; physical development; and personal, social and emotional development. The specific areas of learning are: literacy; mathematics; understanding the world; and expressive arts and design.



Reception – a unique and important year continued

The curriculum

10 The Chief Inspector has recently said about the curriculum:

‘A good school achieves a careful balance. Balance is the constant challenge when schools plan. Time is limited. Therefore choices need to be made about what to do when, how much depth to pursue, which ideas to link together, what resources to draw on, which way to teach, and how to make sure all pupils are able to benefit as each new concept, construct or fact is taught.

Most importantly, these decisions must be rooted in a solid consensus about what education should deliver for each pupil. What is the body of knowledge that a child needs so that they will flourish in the future and not be left behind?’¹¹



11 In all the schools visited, foremost in leaders’ minds was the need to prepare children for the demands of the years ahead by enabling them to become successful and well motivated. These leaders had a clear vision for the Reception Year in their school. While their thoughts about the specific characteristics of the Reception Year that were deemed important varied, typically, leaders said it needed to:

- prepare children for the demands of Year 1, including the increased expectations of the 2014 national curriculum
- secure the essential skills of reading, writing and mathematics, as the gatekeepers for successful learning across all other subjects
- start quickly, from the first week of the new academic year
- build on children’s learning from the end of nursery and/or pre-school
- instil a day-to-day routine so that children felt safe, secure and happy
- connect to the wider school community through Reception children’s participation in whole-school events and celebrations, setting the rules and expectations early on for behaviour in the school as a whole
- develop children’s confidence, concentration and ability to listen and follow instructions
- continue the effective working relationships forged with parents
- generate a love of learning and an enjoyment of school.

Reception – a unique and important year continued

12 A typical observation from a headteacher was:
‘Reception is the first time that our children attend school on a full-time basis so we introduce them quickly to whole-school life... our culture of high expectations starts early and follows [children] through until they reach Year 6. We have the same learning and behavioural expectations from the start of school as we do at the end. High standards in reading, writing and mathematics are a given, but the wider, social experiences of the school community are also important... Reception children join the whole-school assembly by the start of the third week of term and are having lunch in the hall with us even more quickly. These are important opportunities to bond everyone together as one community so that we have absolute consensus about what it means to be a successful, hardworking member of this school.’

13 The leaders in these successful schools recognised that, to achieve well in subjects such as English, mathematics, science and the humanities, children need a strong foundation in the prime areas of learning.

14 Some schools recognised that the broader experiences and opportunities they offered children formed part of their curriculum:

- the beginnings and ends of each day
- snack and lunchtimes
- hygiene routines
- outdoor learning
- the use of the school hall for physical education.

15 In these schools, everything provided was considered a part of their curriculum, maximising children’s learning at all times. This is exemplified by staff in one Reception class revising their approach to snack times, which had become an important part of the curriculum.

Leaders had decided to stop allowing children free, independent access to snacks throughout the day. The teachers believed this former approach had hindered children’s language, communication and social skills, because they were not required to ask questions or engage in conversation during these times. Children still had access to water



Reception – a unique and important year continued

bottles independently, but snack time was planned and timetabled as a communal activity. Teachers prompted children to ask questions and remember their manners. It was a time to teach by counting plates and cups; describing the appearance or taste of new fruits and vegetables; singing a song; or reflecting on what children had been doing so far that day. Leaders believed this change in approach was supporting the children to communicate more clearly and interact more confidently than previously.

16 Most leaders and staff acknowledged that Reception practice needed to be different from pre-school or Nursery provision. In over three quarters of the schools visited, leaders and staff said that their practice was guided rather than governed by the principles of the EYFS. They did not believe that the curriculum (or educational programmes) described in a single document could encompass the entire range of learning from birth to five successfully. In particular, they felt that the EYFS did not distinguish between the vastly different contexts in which children were learning: with a lone childminder working in her own home; in a small day-care setting operating in the village hall; in a nursery or primary school.

17 Although the leaders and staff visited considered the statutory framework to be useful for developing pre-school provision, most of them felt that it was not clear about the purpose, place and expectations of the Reception Year in schools. Headteachers in particular said that Reception teachers now needed higher expectations of their children and teaching approaches that were different from those in other early years settings. This was because:

- the new national curriculum in 2014 had increased expectations, particularly in English and mathematics
 - the statutory ratio of staff to children in most Reception classes – typically, one teacher and one teaching assistant to 30 children – is higher than those for younger age-groups within the EYFS
 - increasing numbers of disadvantaged two-year-olds now attend provision, including in schools, so that many more of them are ‘primed to succeed’ by the time they enter Reception.
- 18** As a result, most of the leaders made every effort to incorporate the early years, and particularly the Reception Year, into the wider curriculum – and curriculum policies – of their schools, rightly taking just as much ownership over the content and delivery of the Reception curriculum as they did for the rest of the school.
- 19** In the schools visited in which outcomes by the age of five were above the national average, and in which this trend continued across the school, leaders and staff focused resolutely on doing certain elements of the Reception curriculum exceptionally well:
- making language a priority, embedding spoken language, vocabulary development and listening comprehension into all aspects of their work
 - teaching reading in a systematic and structured way, building up children’s phonic knowledge and skills explicitly
 - providing regular story times where children could be taught to understand what they had heard

Reception – a unique and important year continued

- teaching writing composition by building on children's spoken language and their comprehension of stories
- teaching spelling and handwriting directly
- deepening children's understanding of core mathematical concepts rather than moving them on too quickly to formal calculations and written algorithms
- securing children's personal, social and emotional readiness to learn, including resilience, perseverance, concentration, the ability to listen, to take turns and to cooperate.

20 These leaders and staff were clear about what needed to be done in their schools. The heightened expectations of the 2014 national curriculum had helped both to inform and validate their aspirations for Reception children. These expectations also had an impact on how these children were taught, even when this did not reflect prevailing early years practice.

21 Further, the middle managers in these schools who oversee different subjects such as music or science knew that their roles and responsibilities did not begin in Year 1 but encompassed the Reception Year or earlier. This supported the development of a coherent, whole-school curriculum and helped to build up children's knowledge in different subjects step by step.

Professional development

22 Headteachers knew that a successful Reception Year was fundamental to their school's success and that to get this right required significant investment in staff development. Consistency was considered to be highly important. Leaders were clear that all staff had to be teaching reading, writing and mathematics in the same way so that children's experiences built seamlessly and consistently on previous learning.

23 All the schools visited took professional development seriously. Internal training programmes were commonly provided through practice sessions, peer coaching and mentoring, team teaching and observation. Leaders often developed their own in-house training programmes for NQTs. These were focused on what they saw as the significant gaps in NQTs' knowledge and understanding, as well as on initiating them into the school's ways of working.

24 Many schools that used specific programmes bought in regular training and updates from external experts to ensure that all staff taught literacy and mathematics effectively and consistently. They said this was important induction and ensured that all new staff were trained. Leaders who had subscribed to external training said that it was most successful in turning around the reading and/or writing practices in their school when it was:

- delivered by recognised experts in their field
- focused clearly on improving the quality of teaching
- delivered in their own school
- followed up with in-class support
- delivered at frequent intervals across the term/year
- applied quickly with a teacher's own class of children
- presented in manageable chunks that were frequently repeated until they were embedded into day-to-day practices
- allocated time for staff to practise their new-found teaching skills so that, as for children, these skills became automatic
- regularly reviewed, with clear pointers for improvements.

Reception – a unique and important year continued

Teaching

25 Most leaders in the schools visited made deliberate, informed choices about the body of knowledge their children needed in order for them to succeed. These leaders began by making sure that their staff started teaching quickly, including the specifics of reading, writing and numbers. They did not believe in a prolonged settling-in period, even when children arrived from a number of pre-school settings rather than from the school's own nursery.

26 Many schools, especially those with two-year-old or nursery provision, did not offer a staggered start over the first few weeks. Headteachers said that children were, typically, used to spending longer periods of time in a setting and being separated from parents and carers. Many had already taken advantage of the wrap-around care that schools offered and were familiar with staff as well as the general rules and routines. Parents found it difficult to make alternative arrangements and staff said it wasted valuable teaching time.



27 In the schools visited, inspectors observed Reception teachers using direct, interactive whole-class instruction, particularly for reading, writing and mathematics. Leaders and staff ignored the perceived tensions between the principles of the EYFS and teaching a whole class directly. They recognised that teaching the whole class was at times the most efficient way of imparting knowledge.

28 In every school, leaders and staff were clear about the purpose of play and understood its place in the curriculum. They were even clearer about its implementation. They knew when play was the right choice in terms of what they wanted children to learn and when other approaches might be more effective. Even within play, teachers made decisions about how structured or unstructured, dependent or independent each opportunity would be.

29 Some headteachers did not believe in the notion of 'free play'. They viewed playing without boundaries as too rosy and unrealistic a view of childhood. They believed that adults, including most parents, have always imposed limits on children's play, setting the boundaries about when to be home and where children could go with friends.

30 While leaders believed that play could be a valid part of Reception children's learning, some did not endorse providing free-flow provision.¹² In these schools, children had access to the outdoors at set times of the day. Teachers here did not believe that the outdoors should simply replicate the indoor classroom. The outdoors was used when it was the best space; for example to help children develop physical skills. Teachers focused on getting children active, raising their heart beat and teaching them to balance, ride bikes and climb. The outdoors was also used for children to explore the natural environment.

31 Schools also used games to practise children's mathematical knowledge. For example, one early years leader referred to an adult's involvement in children's play as 'playful teaching'.

16 ¹² Free-flow refers to children making their own choices about whether they learn indoors or outdoors. This means that there will be constant access to both the indoor and outdoor environments, for either the whole day or specific parts of it.

Reception – a unique and important year continued

In one activity to practise children's calculation skills, children were taking part in a team game. Each team had to roll two large dice, add the numbers on the dice together and then collect the correct number of bean bags from a bucket. It allowed them to practise some important mathematical concepts with the teacher's direction and support. Children had to:

- recognise the pattern of dots on the dice, without counting (subitising)¹³
- add two small numbers together (using knowledge of numbers within/to 12)
- collect the correct number of bean bags to represent the answer (one-to-one correspondence)
- record the answer correctly, as a numeral, on the score sheet.

32 Leaders and staff knew that most learning could not be self-discovered or left to chance through each child's own choices. Teachers appreciated that most knowledge, skills and processes needed to be taught directly, especially processes such as learning to read or write or understanding and using numbers.

33 Teaching new skills and processes was not limited to reading, writing and mathematics. For example, in one school visited, the headteacher was keen to ensure that girls became as physically active as boys, because many girls did not have the opportunity to ride bikes and use scooters at home. The headteacher was keen to dispel, at school, any gender stereotyping.

34 One headteacher expressed concern at a growing tendency to place words, numbers or mathematics resources in the sand or water areas, as if this somehow validated the importance of these areas as resources for learning in language and mathematics. In the view of this headteacher, children were at risk, during these

times, of losing the value of each different and unique play experience. In addition, without an adult present, they were not being checked or corrected if they, for example, confused one number with another.

35 All the schools visited used role play effectively to increase children's opportunities to talk. Many had more than one role play area, one creating a familiar everyday context, such as a home corner or shop, and another extending children's imagination, such as a space ship or jungle. Inspectors observed children playing together to create imaginary situations, often based on the book they were reading in class. For example, in one school, children pretended to be one of the three Billy Goats Gruff, where a nasty troll would berate them for 'trip trip trapping' over the 'rickety-racketty bridge'.



36 Teachers sometimes directed children's play until they became confident to play without adult intervention. For example, at the end of the Reception Year, children were playing confidently with traditional board games, playing snakes and ladders, doing jigsaws, building models with blocks (Lego), matching dominoes and creating complex wooden railway tracks. This was because, at the start of the year, teachers had spent time teaching children how to play, use equipment carefully and take turns. Losing games as well as winning was considered necessary learning.

¹³ Subitising is defined as the ability to recognise instantly the number of objects in a small group without the need to count them. For example, when we see the number of dots on a dice or domino we do not count each individual one. We instantly recognise the number because of the pattern they make or we recognise that the number is made up from smaller numbers e.g. six on a dice can be seen as two threes without counting the threes.

Reception – a unique and important year continued

Interventions

37 Importantly, when children were not as quick to pick up knowledge and understanding as others, they were given the extra support needed to help them keep up with their peers or catch up quickly when they arrived later in the school year. Interventions were not about introducing new teaching methods to see if they would work better. Instead, the existing content was broken down into smaller steps and children were given more time to practise and embed their new learning.



Reception – a unique and important year continued

Language and literacy

38 In the schools visited, teaching children to be literate was the cornerstone of an effective curriculum. Even in the schools where inspectors found teaching and outcomes in some areas of learning to be weaker than in others, children's progress was still at least good overall because leaders had placed reading specifically at the heart of the Reception curriculum.

Spoken language and listening to stories, poems and rhymes

39 To develop Reception children's spoken language and listening comprehension, a high proportion of the schools visited taught children to:

- follow simple spoken instructions
- speak clearly, taking turns and listening to what others say
- participate in talk on a range of topics, both through play and in a class discussion
- listen attentively to a range of stories, non-fiction, rhymes and poems
- become familiar with a few traditional and modern stories, recognising and joining in with predictable phrases, reciting some traditional and modern rhymes and poems by heart
- talk about stories they had heard and say which ones they liked
- take part in role play in familiar and everyday contexts.

40 Leaders and staff were particularly clear about the importance of sharing nursery rhymes, stories and poems in Reception classes. Many teachers timetabled sessions at least once, and often twice, in the day to introduce children to a broad range of fiction, tune their 'listening ear', increase their levels of concentration and promote enjoyment.

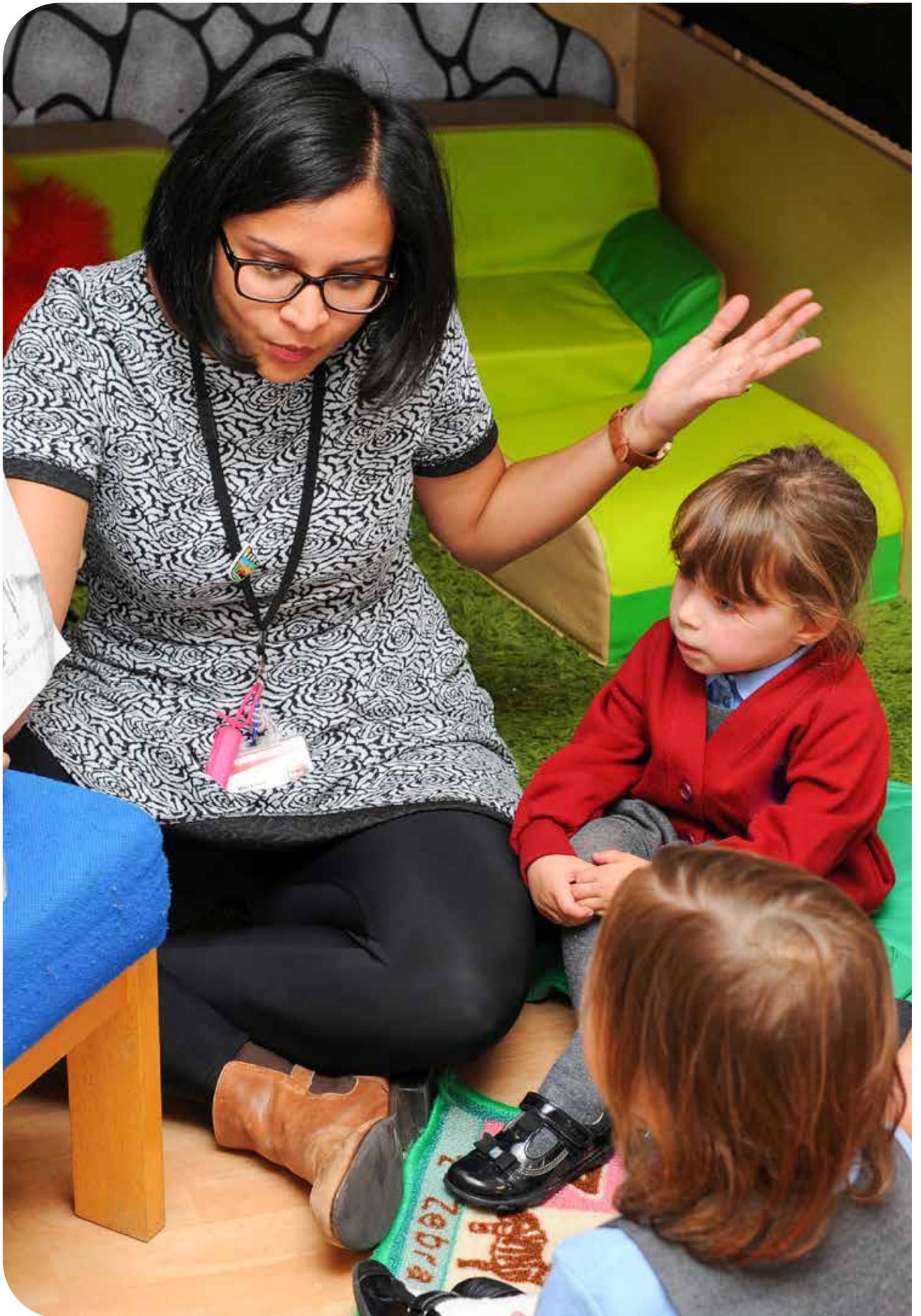


41 One early years leader referred to their 'five-a-day' read-aloud programme, engaging children in five stories, narratives and information texts each day. This included the story told during whole-school assembly, the texts shared as part of children's literacy and the text chosen for the story time before lunch and/or at the end of the school day. The children were immersed in the sounds and experiences of the stories. Leaders believed this had revived reading for pleasure and made a significant difference to children's attainment in reading and writing.

42 Nursery rhymes in particular were seen to help children to become sensitive to the sounds and rhymes in words and give them practise in enunciating words and sounds clearly. Schools with nursery classes and/or provision for two-year-olds concentrated on this before children turned four as a prerequisite to successful literacy learning in Reception. However, both those with and without pre-school provision ensured that children practised nursery rhymes in Reception.

43 Staff understood that sharing stories, alongside the teaching of phonics, formed the foundation of reading comprehension. As well as tuning in children's ears to the structures and patterns of stories, the teacher's retelling provided an opportunity to model fluency, expression and enjoyment. Importantly, reading is the context in which the typical Reception child encounters new vocabulary.¹⁴

¹⁴ 'Bringing words to life: robust vocabulary instruction', Beck, McKeown, Kuan (2002), Guilford Press.



Reception – a unique and important year continued

Assessment and the early years foundation stage profile

71 Most of the teachers told inspectors that assessing 17 separate ELGs was excessive and time-consuming. Reception teachers said they prioritised children's reading, writing and mathematics, as well as the characteristics of effective learning, because these areas were important in terms of children's subsequent learning and development. Although the EYFSP handbook says:

'Observational assessment is the most reliable way of building up an accurate picture of children's development and learning. This is especially true where the attainment demonstrated is not dependent on overt adult support.

Practitioners need to observe learning which children have initiated rather than only focusing on what children do when prompted.¹⁷

...the majority of the teachers did not agree that observational assessment was the most reliable form of assessment as stated in the EYFSP handbook. They felt that statements such as the one above lessened the importance of assessment as part of teaching.

72 Many teachers commented that assessment, undertaken as they were teaching, allowed them to adjust their activity in the moment. They believed that this promoted better progress, since the level of challenge or support could be altered quickly to meet children's needs at the time.

73 Most Year 1 teachers spoken to said that the EYFSP provided only shallow and unnecessary information about a child's achievements. Typically, they wanted more specific information about a child's reading, writing and mathematical ability, such as the specific GPCs children knew and their knowledge of numbers. They considered this information to be more useful in helping them to provide an appropriate key stage 1 curriculum than a discussion about all 17 ELGs. Reception and Year

1 teachers discussed an individual child's achievements across all of the areas of learning only when a child had special educational needs and/or disabilities or was showing a specific developmental delay.

One school had developed its own 'transition to Year 1' assessment booklet as a way of standardising the information passed on to a child's new teacher. It consisted of a series of checklists, particularly for children's knowledge and skills in phonics and mathematics, as well as examples of writing.

Year 1 teachers in this school were particularly keen to know which GPCs children knew – important for spelling as well as reading – and their sense of number, for example, knowledge of number bonds and their ability to partition numbers in different ways. This information allowed for a quick start to teaching and learning in Year 1 after the summer holidays.

74 Most of the schools visited used a range of assessment methods, not just observation, to build a picture of each child's learning, development and understanding, including screening tools, standardised tests and informal teacher assessment.

75 Some leaders and staff said that the statutory moderation of EYFSP outcomes did not contribute to an accurate, reliable or helpful picture of a child's achievements. These staff identified approaches to moderation as the main cause of the assessment burden, contributing unnecessarily to teachers' workload. This was because, with the exception of literacy and numeracy, many teachers were devising tasks simply to tick off and record elements of the early learning goals rather than developing a proper plan that focused on progression in learning. Teaching time was being spent on collecting and recording children's achievements, often through photographs, captions and written notes.



Reception – a unique and important year continued

A Reception teacher felt under constant pressure to provide evidence for children's learning. Photographs were taken constantly during day-to-day activities to capture children's successes. This was said to stop the flow of teaching and take staff away from working directly with children. It also meant that more time was spent at the end of the day to print the photographs, stick them into individual children's folders and write a summative statement to explain each of the photos.

One 'learning journey' included 15 photographs of a child putting on their coat, at various times across the year and with varying degrees of success. Some staff thought this was necessary to provide evidence of progress. When the teacher was asked whether they knew themselves, without 15 photographs, whether the child had accomplished this aspect of self-care and independence, they said 'yes' immediately. The headteacher believed the requirements of early years assessment and the early years moderation process was driving this unnecessary paper trail.

76 Inspectors observed that such practices narrowed the curriculum, especially when developing children's understanding of the world and expressive arts and design.¹⁸ It also distracted staff from their core purpose: teaching.

77 Five schools made particular comments about the moderation processes they had experienced. All were highly critical. Headteachers and teachers quoted specific instances when:

- a moderator did not take children's written work into account because it was recorded and presented in an exercise book; this was considered too structured and adult-led to assess a child's independent skills
- a moderator expected to see three pieces of evidence for every separate sentence within the early learning goals, because they said that teachers needed to show what children could do consistently, across a range of contexts
- a teacher's own knowledge of a child's achievements over the year was not trusted; tangible evidence was required, even when this related to knowledge or understanding not easily captured, such as how well children were motivated or engaged in their learning.

78 Teachers told inspectors that moderators often appeared to use moderation events as a way of promulgating their views about early years education rather than checking the accuracy of teachers' assessments.

Reception – a unique and important year continued

Initial teacher education

79 Inspectors asked leaders to say whether they felt newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were well trained to teach early language, reading, writing and mathematics. Responses are summarised in table 1 and highlight widespread concerns about each of these areas.

Table 1: Leaders' views on whether NQTs are particularly well trained to teach early language, reading, writing and mathematics

Area	Are particularly well trained	Are not particularly well trained
Spoken language and its comprehension	22%	78%
Word reading (systematic, synthetic phonics)	22%	78%
Reading comprehension	17%	83%
Spelling and handwriting	17%	83%
Writing composition	17%	83%
Place value	22%	78%
Calculation	29%	71%
Shape, space and measures	32%	68%
Problem-solving and reasoning	17%	83%

80 Around four fifths of the headteachers visited believed that teachers who were new to the profession were not prepared sufficiently well for teaching in Reception. They felt that NQTs' knowledge and understanding of language, reading, writing and mathematics were particularly weak and led to poor teaching and a lack of understanding about progression.

81 Some headteachers said that early years tutors in initial teacher education (ITE) promoted only one view of early years practice. They felt that this downplayed the importance of reading, writing and mathematics for the under-fives in favour of play-based pedagogy and child-initiated learning. This prevented effective progression into Year 1.

82 During spring 2017, Ofsted completed 52 inspections (stage 1) of ITE providers. These inspections identified a number of areas for improvement, some of which echo the comments headteachers made as part of this survey. These include:

- requiring all trainees to develop greater understanding of teaching and learning in Reception classes
- ensuring that all trainees are able to demonstrate that they meet all of the teachers' standards, including in their understanding of early reading, early mathematics and the continuum of learning across the primary school
- requiring all trainees to establish a clear understanding of the link between phonics and reading and an awareness of how pupils progress in this subject at key stages 1 and 2
- consistently enabling all trainees to demonstrate the same level of confidence and understanding in teaching early mathematics as they do in literacy.



83 Her Majesty's Chief Inspector commissioned this thematic survey as part of a wider review of the curriculum in England. Its purpose was to gain greater insight into leaders' curriculum intentions and how these are implemented. Findings will be used to:

- inform inspection policy
- advise policy makers, such as those within the Department for Education
- influence wider national thinking on the role and importance of the curriculum.

84 This survey focuses specifically on the Reception Year in schools. It builds on the Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2015/16 and the findings of previous early years thematic reports published since April 2014. It complements the curriculum work of other remits within Ofsted's education directorate and continues our evaluation of what works well for all children, especially those who are disadvantaged, in order to increase social mobility.

85 Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) reviewed how a sample of good and outstanding schools planned, organised and taught the curriculum in the Reception Year. They examined the extent to which the Reception curriculum prepares children for the national curriculum for Year 1 and beyond.

86 In the summer term 2017, HMI visited 41 primary schools across England (Annex A). Ofsted had judged each school to be good or outstanding for both the EYFS and the school's overall effectiveness at its most recent inspection. The schools were chosen because they typified the findings of longitudinal research into the importance of high-quality, early education; namely, that children who do well by the age of five have a greater chance of doing well throughout school.

87 Over three quarters of the schools visited had an above-average proportion of children reaching a good level of development at the end of the Reception Year, including disadvantaged children. A similarly above-average proportion of pupils in these schools also reached or exceeded the threshold of the phonics

screening check in Year 1 and met or exceeded the expected standard in the key stage 1 statutory assessments in reading, writing and mathematics. Most of these schools showed a continuing trend of above-average achievement to the end of key stage 2.

88 HMI visited a diverse range of schools. Twenty-eight of the 41 schools were in the 40% most deprived areas of England. Nine schools were in the 40% least deprived areas.

89 During the visits, HMI spoke with the headteacher, the early years leader or manager, and with staff and children. They observed children's learning across the day, including in reading, writing and mathematics. They also listened to children read. HMI evaluated a range of documentation, including children's books and/or records of achievement.

90 Over the summer term 2017, Ofsted sent a short, online questionnaire to the headteacher reference groups convened by each of its eight regions (Annex B). The questionnaire was also distributed to schools and relevant stakeholders through the Teaching Schools Council. The questionnaire asked leaders and their Reception staff to evaluate the extent to which government guidance about the early years influenced their approach to the curriculum for four- and five-year-olds. The questionnaire also collected information about the context of each school's Reception classes and asked staff to share their views about the typical knowledge, skills and understanding shown by children on entry and exit from Reception. Ofsted received 208 questionnaire responses from 76 different schools.

91 In addition, HMI analysed more than 150 inspection reports of primary schools inspected in the 2016/17 academic year where early years provision, which includes the Reception Year, was judged as requiring improvement or inadequate. This information was compared with the information and observations undertaken in the 41 visits to good and outstanding schools in order to identify any differences in practice.

Annex A: Schools visited

School	Local authority
Ark Atwood Primary Academy *	Westminster
Ark Conway Primary Academy	Hammersmith and Fulham
Barclay Primary School *	Waltham Forest
Beecroft Primary School *	Leeds
Brading Church of England Controlled Primary School	Isle of Wight
Chagford Church of England Primary School **	Devon
Charnwood Primary School *	Leicester
Cleves Primary School *	Newham
Edward Pauling Primary School *	Hounslow
Glazebury CofE (Aided) Primary School *	Warrington
Howden-le-Wear Primary School	Durham
Ireby CofE School *	Cumbria
Jerry Clay Academy	Wakefield
Longton Lane Community Primary School	St Helens
Markland Hill Primary School	Bolton
Miles Coverdale Primary School *	Hammersmith and Fulham
Montgomery Primary Academy *	Birmingham
Noel Park Primary School *	Haringey
Oasis Academy Henderson Avenue *	North Lincolnshire
Old Palace Primary School	Tower Hamlets
Orgill Primary **	Cumbria
Our Lady and St Joseph Catholic Primary School *	Hackney
Our Lady and St Joseph Catholic Primary School *	Tower Hamlets
Parklands Infant and Nursery School *	Derbyshire
Ryders Hayes School *	Walsall
Shilbottle Primary School	Northumberland
Solebay Primary – A Paradigm Academy *	Tower Hamlets
St Gabriel's CofE Primary School	Blackburn with Darwen
St John and Monica Catholic Primary School	Birmingham
St John with St Mark CofE Primary School *	Bury
St John's VA Church of England Primary School, Thornham	Rochdale
St Joseph's Roman Catholic Primary School *	Southwark

School	Local authority
St Martin's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School, Fangfoss *	East Riding of Yorkshire
St Stephen's Primary School **	Newham
St William of York Catholic Primary School **	Lewisham
Stockwell Primary School **	Lambeth
The Olive School Blackburn	Blackburn with Darwen
The Olive School Hackney	Hackney
Thrupp School *	Gloucestershire
Tollgate Primary School **	Newham
Winton Primary School **	Islington

92 *denotes schools that had nursery provision for three- and four-year-olds.

93 **denotes schools that were taking funded two-year-olds at the time of the survey visit and also had nursery provision for three- and four-year-olds.

Annex B: Online questionnaire

1. School name (optional)
 2. What is your role within school?
 - a. Headteacher
 - b. Early years leader
 - c. Reception teacher
 3. How many years of experience do you have teaching reception-aged children?
 - a. None
 - b. 1-5 years
 - c. 5-10 years
 - d. 10+ years
 4. Does a teacher with current or past experience of teaching Reception sit on your senior leadership team?
YES/NO
 5. How many adults typically work in your reception class/es on a day to day basis?
 - a. One (typically, just the teacher)
 - b. Two (typically, the teacher and an additional adult)
 - c. Three (typically, the teacher and two additional adults)
 - d. Four (typically, the teacher and three additional adults)
 - e. Five or more (typically, the teacher and four or more additional adults)
 6. Does your school have two-year-old provision? YES/NO
 7. Does your school have a nursery class? YES/NO
 8. When do you consider children to start school?
 - a. Pre-nursery/two-year-old provision (two-year-olds)
 - b. Nursery (three- and four-year-olds)
 - c. Reception (four- and five-year-olds)
 - d. Year 1 (five- and six-year-olds)
 9. Do you believe that the early years foundation stage statutory framework (including the early years foundation stage profile) prepares children well for the demands of the national curriculum in Year 1? YES/NO

Please explain your answer, highlighting any particular agreement or disagreement, using a maximum of 100 words.
 10. What do you believe children should be able to do when they leave Reception?
Please list up to five answers, in order of importance.
-

11. Do you believe assessment of the 17 early learning goals is:
 - a. manageable? YES/NO
 - b. efficient? YES/NO
 - c. accurate? YES/NO
 - d. reliable? YES/NO

 12. Do you follow a particular scheme in Reception for:
 - a. phonics? YES/NO (if yes, please name the scheme)
 - b. reading? YES/NO (if yes, please name the scheme)
 - c. writing? YES/NO (if yes, please name the scheme)
 - d. handwriting? YES/NO (if yes, please name the scheme)
 - e. mathematics? YES/NO (if yes, please name the scheme)

 13. How much time (rounded to whole hours) in a typical week do you spend teaching each of the following:
 - a. listening, attention and understanding
 - b. spoken/oral language
 - c. vocabulary development
 - d. reading
 - e. writing
 - f. mathematics

 14. Do you believe there is clear and supportive guidance available to you, nationally, about:
 - a. the statutory requirements of the early years foundation stage YES/NO
 - b. the Reception Year, specifically YES/NO
 - c. assessment in Reception YES/NO
 - d. what the 'expected' standard looks like at the end of Reception YES/NO
 - e. what 'exceeding' the expected standard looks like at the end of Reception YES/NO
-

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