



Association for Professional Development in Early Years

OCCASIONAL PAPER 12 - What is 'early reading' for under-threes? A reflection on 'conversations' with graduate practitioners in England: A response to Ofsted's 'Early reading' training video

Dr Karen Boardman (Edge Hill University)

Introduction

Early reading as a concept has been the subject of conflicting viewpoints and contested debates for many decades. The emphasis placed by policy makers is largely focused on teaching children to read *early* by means of phonics as the preferred method of teaching. Given that Rose (DfES, 2006) originally suggested in his *Independent Review of the teaching of early reading* that 'for most children, high quality, systematic phonic work should start by the age of five' (p.29), in fact it appears that young children are participating in formally taught phonics sessions begin much earlier in various nursery settings and reception environments. Most children now begin their school years in reception at the age of four, and not the term after the age of five. Consequently, the current DfE and OfSTED policy on teaching phonics to support children with reading is now impacting on provision for under-threes as a top-down pressure within the school readiness agenda.

In response to the OfSTED training video, this Occasional Paper suggests an alternative approach in supporting under-threes with early reading, which is not focused on teaching phonics. It will highlight that the policy driver from OfSTED is reducing early years children to being 'school ready', which is not how the EYFS was intended to be interpreted or implemented.

OfSTED and early reading

Simmons HMI (Regional Director for the South West) explains the OfSTED stance on the importance of teaching children to read, beginning with teaching phonics in the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS: DfE, 2017) in the 2018 OfSTED video entitled *Early Reading* (www.youtube.com/ofstednews). This video is shared with all OfSTED registered settings and highlighted as part of its *Big Conversation* regional training events alongside other themed videos including *Vocabulary and Reading* and *OfSTED Curriculum Workshops*. This video link, together with *Getting them reading early. Distance learning materials for inspecting reading* (OfSTED, 2014), appears on its website.

Simmons (2018) states within the video narrative that:

The most important thing you can do is to teach [children] to read fluently, which starts in the EYFS. Teachers need to be very clear about the phonic teaching they are going to provide – to break the phonic code.

Every child needs to master the phonic code as quickly as possible – first, fast and furious.

It will only be those [children] with severe cognitive difficulties that cannot be taught the phonic code.

These statements highlight that this narrow focus is often the origin of confusion amongst practitioners working with under-fives and particularly for those professionals working with under-threes.

Early reading is entrenched within this discourse of teaching phonics, but this is not early reading for under-threes and, therefore, ought not to be the leading focus within the *EYFS* (DfE, 2017). Currently, the *EYFS Early Learning Goals* for 'reading' and 'writing' clearly prioritise phonic knowledge above all else. This emphasis on phonics remains within the pilot revision of the *Early Learning Goals* (DfE, 2018).

This sustained narrative from OfSTED and the DfE is in complete contrast to how very young children learn and could be detrimental to provision and pedagogy for under-threes (Boardman, 2017). For example, Melvin, et al. (2019) suggest that the globally renowned approach within early years education is based on the 'three core qualities' of 'holistic', 'child-centredness' and 'play-based', offering 'voice and choice in their activities' (p.143). The adult-directed focus on phonics could only be 'effective in reinforcing learning' if the activities 'are relevant to the child and build on previous experiences in a meaningful and engaging way' (Featherstone 2010: 134). Being formally taught phonics systematically in groups (out of the context of continuous provision and a play environment), learning in a fast and furious way neither relates to young children's real-life experiences nor adheres to the principles of the EYFS. In their independent research report, Clark and Glazzard (2018) state that the evidence suggests this approach may not actually be working.

The focus of early reading for under-threes

Nutbrown et al. (2005) have previously argued that literacy 'learning' does not necessarily always begin in educational settings. It is now widely acknowledged that children's early literacy experiences are often encouraged and enabled by families from birth (Boardman and Levy 2019; Larson and Marsh, 2013). As such, children encounter and learn about reading in a multiplicity of ways (Clark, 2014; Flewitt, 2013; Levy 2016). It is these early sociocultural encounters and attitudes to literacy engagement, which is of influence regarding under-threes. Given that contemporary literature concurs (UNESCO, 2013; Wolf, 2008), literacy development (early reading) is associated with very early experiences and interactions with picture books, books, mark-making resources, alongside technological resources such as tablets and computers and not just focused on only traditional models of 'reading'. These latter usually have a print-based

letters and sounds bias and an extended focus on the teaching of phonics in a systematic way (OfSTED 2014; Torgeson, et al. 2006).

Early reading – what this is for under-threes

In previous papers I have defined early reading as heterogenous – providing opportunities for under-threes to be immersed in the concept of language, stories, storytelling; accessing and ‘sharing stories, reading images, accessing paper, print and screen texts, experimenting with language patterns, rhyme, rhythm and beat’ (Boardman 2019a: 116). Early reading as a concept is also absorbed in connectivity, communication and is consequential for under-threes to enable criticality of meaning and context (Boardman 2019b: 844). Early reading for under-threes is certainly not focused on print-based decoding of letters and sounds, which a plethora of literature signposts, including the revised *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS: DfE, 2017). Reading is both multimodal and communicative, especially within contemporary international societies. It is important to note that the non-statutory guidance document *Development Matters* (Early Education, 2012) is intended to support understanding and practice and does offer some support for understanding early reading provision and pedagogy for under-threes, alongside the EYFS (DfE, 2017).

UNESCO (2013) emphasise that literacy learning and research into literacy, in the broadest context, is vital for early years education and society internationally. Unfortunately, there is very little contemporary research on early reading development relating specifically to under-threes to support practitioners with their pedagogy. Yet, there are many documents shared by policy makers to ‘support’ early reading, linked specifically to the teaching of phonics within the ‘EYFS’ (DfE, 2017), which is not appropriate for under-threes – nor relevant or meaningful. For example, the controversial OfSTED *Bold Beginnings Report* (2017: 7) maintained that ‘all primary schools should make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the Reception Year’. It could be suggested that that this need not affect provision for under-threes, yet the school readiness agenda, highlighted by Moss (2017; 2019) and Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016b) to prepare children for the school environment, negates its relevance as it appears to be an established top-down approach.

Practitioners feel pressured to prepare children for school (Boardman 2019b), linked to *Baseline Assessments* and the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* data (DfE/STA, 2019), constantly working within a ‘standards driven agenda’ (Bradbury, 2013; 2018). McDowall-Clark and Baylis (2012) suggest that this ‘feels like a one-way-street, as early years practitioners react to expectations of what children should be able to do when they reach primary school’ (p.237). Hence, practitioners believe – under pressure from policy makers – that teaching phonics feels like the right approach to prepare children for school.

Consequently, practitioners in England have a multitude of policy directives including OfSTED documentation and guidance highlighting phonics regardless of the relevance for

under-threes, which is understandably confusing for practitioners.

Research Context

As part of an on-going, small-scale research project, this Occasional Paper reports on a series of ‘conversations’ with graduate practitioners based in England, to understand their conceptions of early reading provision for under-threes. The aim of the wider research project is to explore the pedagogy – perceptions, practice and provision – of experienced graduate practitioners working in a range of private, voluntary, state and independent settings. The research question ‘What is early reading for under-threes?’ is fundamental to the overall research design of this on-going project. The intention is that the findings will contribute to contemporary knowledge and understanding relating to the provision of early reading for under-threes, in collaboration with early childhood participants.

Early Years Practitioners shared their responses to the research question during two focus group workshops (containing six and five participants respectively). These workshops provided practitioners with a forum to respond to the research question in their own way. This approach enabled the voices and viewpoints as ‘conversations’ of practitioners to be at the heart of the data (Bertram, et al. 2016). The practitioners all volunteered to take part in this research study after engaging in an initial survey. The participants were all female, graduate early years practitioners (all holding an Honours degree in Early Years/Early Childhood Education), working in a range of settings across England with under-threes. Their ages ranged from 21–45 years and these practitioners have between three and 24 years of experience in a range of settings.

‘Conversations’ about early reading

When discussing and defining early reading the practitioners had a variety of standpoints, yet all appear to be firmly fixated on phonics:

Reading is so important, yet, if I am going to be really honest so misunderstood. Influences are the schools and policy on reading, SSP [systematic, synthetic phonics] and we have regular visits from feeder schools to share their strategies.

I think early reading is confusing. I mean we know we need to read, share stories etc and we know we need to teach phonics, because that is how children learn to read. I have been on training for early reading with the Local Authority and a lot of this was teaching phonics.

I have no idea how to support early reading or what it is other than phonics and we need to do this daily.

I am not really sure about early reading – I know more about phonics and how to support children learning letters and sounds.

There is an overriding sense of ‘confusion’ about early reading – “I have no idea”, “I am not really sure”, “I think ...” are key themes from the focus group workshop data. It would appear that the policy guidance, the OfSTED mandate and perhaps the EYFS *Early Learning Goals* are the key factors contributing to this confusion for these practitioners.

Further conversations have taken place with individual practitioners. These follow-up ‘conversations’ illustrate how provision for under-threes is absent in the policy decisions

relating to early reading in England. Permission has been granted for these conversations to be shared and the following are extracts:

I am still so confused about what early reading is about. I understand about phonological awareness and social interaction – being responsive - communication, stimulation, enjoying environmental print and the wider environment. It's about getting children interested in letters and sounds and print. But on reflection, this is only half the picture. Having given this lots and lots of thought I am really struggling with how this supports early reading. It has taken me some time, but phonics is not really the way to support this – but I am still unsure as to what is.

Phonics is so stressful for children and parents, especially for children. We teach phonics – Jolly Phonics in our settings. The children need to understand the relationships between letters and sounds and break the code. But are they interested at this age? Is it meaningful? For some – yes, but the schools never really get back to us to let us know if it's working for the children. Our Nursery Manager really wants us to teach phonics so that the children are learning and doing something meaningful. I genuinely don't think this is reading though..... it is so confusing isn't it?

I am still going backwards and forwards with understanding that early reading is about decoding, understanding and decoding abstract symbols, interpreting. I know this needs to be taught as it is complex – the relationships between letters and words and meaning and phonic knowledge. How do children learn this if we don't teach them and this is why we do it systematically? Anyhow, we have been doing some reflecting on provision and we could do with some support. Every time I read something about early reading, it's about phonics in every text book. There is nothing else to compare this to – what are other practitioners using to support?

It is clear from these conversations that the practitioners are still very much confused about what early reading is for under-threes and how (if at all) this relates to phonics. There is evidence that practitioners feel that phonics is an important part of reading but may not always be the right approach to support under-threes. Yet, there is some overall agreement that practitioners may not know how best to support early reading, given that the advice coming from many directives relates specifically to phonics. It appears that policy makers have not given much thought to under-threes and their early reading development other than insisting upon an investment and commitment to Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) as **the** method to teach early reading in the EYFS generally. Perhaps policy makers have not fully understood how this directive may impact on provision for under-threes. However, the following 'conversation' highlights how embedded phonics is within some under-threes provision and the extent to which this is heavily influenced by the school readiness agenda:

I now understand that teaching phonics is not appropriate for under-threes, but how do you explain this to parents, leaders, managers, schools who just keep asking you when you are going to start teaching the children phonics. My setting uses the fact that we teach phonics to advertise what a great setting we are. We tell parents that we teach phonics to prepare them for school – so they will do well in school later on etc etc..

This is deeply concerning: given that advice from OfSTED and the DfE relating to early reading is readily available and accessible online, perhaps parents and families also think that this is the only approach to support their children with reading and possibly seek out settings that they feel will best prepare their children for their school years and settings that actively 'teach phonics' to their children. Roberts-Holmes (2019)

suggests that when the DfE makes performance visible within OfSTED Inspection Reports and DfE Phonics Screening Check data, this, in turn, leads to this kind of comparability and competitiveness.

In addition to these conversation snapshots, other practitioners have communicated via email and Twitter following publication of previous early reading papers (Boardman, 2019a; Boardman and Levy 2019). It appears that many practitioners are concerned by the lack of literature available to them, both in England and internationally to support early reading development for under-threes and subsequently for parents and families, other than literature prioritising phonics. It could be suggested that the guidance offered within *Development Matters* (Early Education, 2012) is perceived to have less of a focus, compared to OfSTED with their role as 'governance', given that this is non-statutory guidance. Therefore, the OfSTED guidance materials designed to support early reading may be having a more detrimental impact on provision for under-threes than is intended.

What do practitioners understand 'early reading' is for under-threes?

The practitioners in the project have some understanding that early reading includes rhyming and rhythm activities, reading stories, reading aloud to children, having access to books (printed) and many other similar activities. In addition, they understand that they do need to make provision for some letters and sounds games and environmental print but are unsure about this particular aspect overall. The graduate practitioners taking part in this study prioritise the delivery of phonics programmes of study over their own knowledge of language, literacy and early reading, as they are not confident to teach reading (Boardman 2019b). This suggests some agreement or 'obedience' with phonics as an overall approach. Yet, given the breadth of phonics literature, data and propaganda, it is predictable that outcomes have become the focus of the teaching – if phonics knowledge is to be measured as an ELG, then this will determine what is then taught.

The practitioners in this study are also very wary of multi-media as digital literacies and have not considered technology as supportive for early reading, preferring a more traditional approach of printed media. I propose that these misgivings are somewhat inevitable within this phonics approach of print-based decoding advocated by policy makers.

Reflections on early reading for under-threes

The findings from this research project and follow-up conversations indicate that early reading for under-threes and supporting *their* early reading development is still unfamiliar terrain for some practitioners. The initial survey findings emphasised that phonics activities and teaching phonics programmes of study is prevalent across provision for under-threes and it appears that this is still on-going. The tension surrounding phonics and policy makers' determination to firmly place phonics high on the reading agenda is manipulating how practitioners engage with early reading pedagogy with under-threes. Murray (2019) in her BERA Blog Post *Developing readers, developing selves*, states that the current 'conceptualisation of reading is desperately at odds

with the way current UK policy shapes the early reading experiences of our young readers'. She asserts that the 'early and exclusive phonics instruction has reshaped young children's reading landscape', which is certainly the case for under-threes.

There seems to be some agreement from the project's practitioners that teaching phonics is not necessarily the answer. Therefore, it is important to highlight that it is not good practice to teach phonics to children under-three at all. Instead, the focus ought to be on supporting very young children with their language, communication, comprehension and inspiring engagement with reading in its widest sense. Under-threes need to have quality interactions with responsive adults as a starting point. These activities need to be accessible and to be offered frequently to be sustainable, so that very young children have agency and ownership.

It is time to reconsider how best to support early reading for under-threes, rethink pedagogy and separate phonics teaching from early reading. In response to the OfSTED video, early reading begins from birth, playing and enjoying language, communication and storytelling – with responsive adults who encourage opinions, interpretations and connections with a wide variety of visual multi-modal materials.

Moylett and Stewart (2019) have recently called for visible sector-wide collaboration ahead of the revision of *Development Matters*. This is a great opportunity to ensure that the revisions retain the founding principles of the EYFS and consider early reading for under-threes, detached from phonics. The revision of '*Development Matters*' and the ELGs is an ideal opportunity to do this.

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