E mbattled early years teachers, many already feeling under pressure to abandon their play-based pedagogy in favour of a more formal approach, were dealt a further blow at the end of last year. Many in the sector interpreted Ofsted’s Bold Beginnings report, which promotes earlier exposure to more formal learning, as an attack on free-flow and child-initiated practice. A further report, Grouping in early years, released this January – ‘a necessary evil’, issued by the Institute of Education in December, found that early years teachers were concerned about increased pressure to group children by ability in order to meet curriculum expectations further up the school.

Experts point to overwhelming evidence that a broad-based early years curriculum, with a particular emphasis on physical, social and emotional, and language and communication development, makes positive contributions to the learning of subjects such as reading, writing and maths. A more formal approach, on the other hand, has not been shown to achieve the same long-term results.

Early Excellence’s review of the Reception year in England, published last May, concluded that rather than moving away from play-based learning in Reception, schools should extend it into Year 1. However, Reception teachers have reported pressure to adapt their practice.

‘All schools are feeling pressure to take a more formal approach, particularly in Reception, and particularly if they are serving less-advantaged communities where outcomes are lower,’ says Professor Chris Pascal, director of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood.

‘The most Ofsted report has contributed to this, but pressure is coming from the whole system,’ she says. ‘A more formal and directive teaching approach, with a primary focus on literacy and maths, is seen as the solution. Often nursery-aged children continue to receive a play-based experience, but Reception classes are more vulnerable to pressures.’

Lack of funding, as well as the inspection process, is adding to the pressures that schools are experiencing. ‘There is no shortage of evidence that an investment in improving life chances is never better placed than in early years,’ says Hugh Greenway, chief executive of The Eliot Foundation, a multi-academy trust specializing in the primary sector. ‘But moral purpose is nothing if you haven’t got money to match it. As a primary school, you need the confidence to shift your budget out of Years 5 and 6 to early years, but if you feel the cold spectre of Ofsted on your shoulder, will you be able to do that? It takes real courage to stand up for the joy of learning for all children.’

SUPPORT NETWORKS

Almost a quarter of primary schools in England are now academies, but there are fears that academization can threatens quality early years provision. A report from the Family and Childcare Trust earlier this year expressed concerns that since academies do not have to engage with local authority early education networks, they could lead to a further weakening of such networks of support, already under pressure from lack of funds.

‘I think academies are not necessarily more inclined to take a more formal approach in the early years, but because the early years element of provision is a small part of the school, it becomes vulnerable to whole-school pedagogic policies and practices,’ says Professor Pascal. ‘Early years staff may not have access to an early years specialist; the local authority schools would have had, who could protect early years practice.’

Some academies are not prepared to support children with special educational needs or disabilities. A House of Commons Education Committee report last year found the success of MATs was patchy: while some produce excellent results, a considerable number are failing to improve.

One early years teacher who left the academy she worked at says that took hours to prepare and mark. ‘Children were issued with homework policy meant young had, who could protect early years practice. Failing them comes to be about standards and scores and performance, and this preocupation permeates into Reception and beyond.’

As concerns grow about the over-formalisation of Reception learning, Charlotte Goldhirst hears how some academies are protecting early years

FURTHER READING

- Bridges W (2011) Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change. Nicholas Brealey
- Ayres AJ (2005) Sensory Integration and the Child: Western Psychological Services
- Ephgrave A (2012)’ Book%202012%20Chapter1%20.pdf

Clockwise from top: outdoors activity at St Mary’s CE Primary School; girls building at Westwood Primary School, Suffolk; the den at St Mary’s; the role-play area at St Richard’s Catholic Primary School, Dover; and whiteboard writing at Trinity Anglican Methodist Primary School, Bristol (see Case studies)

being in an academy chain by employing early years lead to install an evidence-based approach across all their early years provision.

ST MARY’S ACADEMY TRUST

Rebecca Openshaw is early years lead at Barnsley-based St Mary’s Academy Trust, where she is able to use inset days and other training opportunities to inculcate staff with the principles of early education.

‘I have meetings for any early years term,’ she says. ‘This week we looked at shape, space and measure, indoors and outdoors. We have done a lot of work in our settings on outdoor provision, ensuring opportunities for children who are outdoor learners.’

Her own school, for example, raised money to build a ‘hobbit den’, with wonky windows and doors and a bird-house chimney. ‘We have shelves where children can access explorer kits and encourage them to think critically about what they want to use,’ she says.

Ms Openshaw has also run inset days for staff across the whole Trust, including heads, with workshops focusing on issues including outdoor provision and early communication and language. Staff have undertaken Thrive training, which draws on advances in neuroscience, attachment theory and child development to support children’s social and emotional development. ‘Children learn best when they feel safe and secure,’ says Ms Openshaw. ‘We aim to build a love of learning.’

They are not alone in developing practice they feel is best for young children. See Case studies, opposite.

EYFS BEST PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS

As concerns grow about the over-formalisation of Reception learning, Charlotte Goldhirst hears how some academies are protecting early years

- Some academies gather together in multi-academy trusts (MATs), allowing them to share good practice and resources, for example specialised staff support for children with special educational needs or disabilities.
- A House of Commons Education Committee report last year found the success of MATs was patchy: while some produce excellent results, a considerable number are failing to improve.
- One early years teacher who left the academy she worked at says that took hours to prepare and mark.

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Case study: Active Learning Trust

The 21-school group focuses on quality provision and learning through play at its pre-school, nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 classes.

Kerry Read is EYFS lead for Active Learning Trust. ‘I feel my role has had an impact on the school, the staff and the children. It has been agreed by the children – these include not climbing any higher than your feet flat on the floor!’

EARLY YEARS VISION

The physical environment is an important part of the Trust’s early years vision. ‘Our schools are beginning to think about their learning environments in the early years and Key Stage 1, ensuring that they support how children learn best,’ says Ms Read. ‘We have tree-climbing rules that have been taken over from the early years. Children in Reception now have extended access to the garden rather than having a specific break time, and children in Year 1 enjoy a separate, flexible playtime in the adventure playground. The school says this has given reception children longer periods of uninterrupted child-initiated time and, as a result, they are more engaged, while the behaviour of those in Year 1 has improved.’

St Richard’s has also changed timetabling and planning, giving reception children more opportunities for child-initiated learning and fewer focused tasks. Previously too much time was being spent on planning activities and making resources, and staff now lean more towards ‘in the moment planning’, following the children’s interests.

There have been challenges around rolling out this new approach. ‘Some schools are worried about how they are measured, and can get a bit formal because they feel under pressure,’ says Ms McBennett. However, the more reluctant are now seeing an impact on children’s motivation and achievement, she adds. ‘There is definitely an overall willingness from staff.’

As with all schools, funding can also be a barrier. ‘The Transition Project, for example, was an additional expense, so while we suggested it to schools, they knew some that couldn’t afford it,’ says Ms McBennett. ‘Replacing old and tatty resources is also a challenge – schools know what they want but they can’t always get it.’

St Richard’s Catholic Primary School before (inset) and after the outside area’s changes

KCSP’s academies are at the beginning of a journey, and the hope is some schools will gain enough expertise to create learning hubs to share their practice with others. ‘To me, this approach makes perfect sense and it seems to be working in practice,’ concludes Ms McBennett. ‘Children and teachers are happier, outcomes are improving and everyone seems to be more organised and systematic.’

Early years is a specialist area, so it needs someone with specialist early years knowledge and experience to lead its development, he says. ‘I am an activist who comes to raising the profile of early years.’

A visitor, for example, sees a child making bricks out of mud on a role-play building site, operating a construction site and testing the safety of their structures. ‘We communicate with parents through social media, but also in schools with Family Cafes and information sessions, for example,’ Ms McBennett says. ‘We leave boards up in every classroom so parents can see what teachers are planning. Parents regularly come into schools and take part in family learning sessions.

‘I feel my role has had an impact over the last year and a half,’ concludes Ms Read. ‘GLD [Good Level of Development] scores show that children are making rapid progress. They are creative, resilient children who can problem-solve.’
Sue Lucas joined Bath and Wells Multi-Academy Trust in September 2016 to oversee the MAT’s five nurseries, but her part-time role has now expanded to cover the whole of the EYFS across the Trust’s 19 schools. The schools in the Trust are grouped into geographical hubs, each with an early years hub leader appointed from one of the schools.

‘Myself and the hub leads have regular meetings, and we also have regular meetings with all the early years practitioners in the different schools,’ says Ms Lucas. ‘This allows people to share good practice, what they have learned through training, for example, or to collaborate on challenges they may be facing, like the implementation of 30 hours for our nurseries, or what constitutes Good and Outstanding EYFS practice for Reception colleagues.’

Early years teachers visit each other’s settings to take notes on different approaches to the learning environment, how the day is structured, the deployment of resources, and other aspects of early years provision. This support is one of the advantages of being part of a MAT where early years is valued.

‘We have that real family of schools valuing each other, learning from each other and wanting to support each other,’ Ms Lucas says. ‘There is a real commitment to high-quality CPD courses, including an annual conference on a different theme.’

A recent conference held by the MAT focused on what is effective and engaging when it comes to learning maths, while last year’s theme was creativity.

All nurseries and some schools are using the Tapestry system to engage parents in understanding how their children are learning. ‘We have noticed how effectively that has engaged parents, who are able to access it straight away and contribute to their child’s learning,’ explains Ms Lucas.

**CLASSROOM AUDIT**

Part of the journey to delivering quality early years provision has involved an audit of classroom resources, looking at how appropriate they are for the age range they are accessed by. ‘While we don’t want the Reception class provision to mirror our two-year-old provision, the underlying principles of play-based learning are the same,’ says Ms Lucas.

‘Quality resources are open-ended, not just things bought from education catalogues. We have also been looking at how we display things so what is on the wall highlights children’s learning, but is not bombarding them with lots of information, and ensuring our environment is exciting, involving, and clutter-free.’

Behaviour is another part of Ms Lucas’s role. ‘We work hard to create a calm, positive, purposeful environment where boundaries are clear and consistent,’ she says. ‘We use the principles of emotional coaching, and staff carry picture emotions fobs which the children are encouraged to use to help express their feelings and resolve difficulties between each other.’

Staff are careful in their use of praise, focusing on effort, enthusiasm, developing ideas, persistence, problem-solving and concentration.

Reflective practice is key. ‘We want to know why we are doing what we are doing,’ she says. ‘Early years is not just a watered-down version of school. Year 1 and EYFS colleagues are looking at each other’s curriculum. It works two ways – EYFS becomes aware of expectations further up the school, and Year 1 is aware of the style of learning in EYFS.’

‘It works two ways – EYFS becomes aware of expectations further up the school, and Year 1 is aware of the style of learning in EYFS’

**It works two ways – EYFS becomes aware of expectations further up the school, and Year 1 is aware of the style of learning in EYFS’**

**Some EYFS activities at Trinity Anglican Methodist Primary School, including (main picture) a group modelling a plane after a boy found a wheel, which led to a discussion of cars and then planes**