Research into the 2019 Pilot of Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA)

Guy Roberts-Holmes, Siew Fung Lee, Diana Sousa, Emma Jones.

"I can’t read... I don’t know... I can’t do it... What does that mean? When can I go? Can I play yet?"

UCL Institute of Education
Foreword

The government wants to introduce yet another test to primary schools. It is not doing this to support children’s learning but to produce a score by which it claims it will be possible to measure the quality of education.

The experts of the British Educational Research Association have already said that it is not possible to test 4-year-olds and get reliable data. Now, in this report, commissioned by the NEU and produced by researchers at the UCL Institute of Education, teachers’ lack of trust in Baseline is made abundantly clear. The report reveals the impact of the new test on pupils’ first experience of schools. It demonstrates its effects on teachers’ work and sense of professionalism. In every respect, it shows that there is serious cause for concern. What is at stake in the introduction of Baseline is an entire model of early years education, long one of the most admired features of English education, and now put at risk by the same dogma that has damaged our primary schools.

The government persists in spending millions on assessment systems for which there is no evidence of value, when teachers and parents are crying out for serious investment in early years education. Through its in-depth analysis of the 2019 Baseline Pilot, the UCL report demonstrates why government would be wrong to make this ill-thought out programme a compulsory feature of early years education.

Mary Bousted
Joint general secretary, National Education Union
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Research Team

Dr. Guy Roberts-Holmes (Principal Investigator)
The research team based at UCL, Institute of Education, University College London, was led by Dr. Guy Roberts-Holmes, (Associate Professor). His research has examined the intended and unintended consequences of neoliberalism’s accountability culture upon early childhood education. The Datafication of Early Years and Primary Education (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017, Routledge) examined the development and impact of datafication upon early years accountability. With Professor Peter Moss, Dr. Roberts-Holmes is co-author of Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education: Imaginaries, Markets and Pedagogies Routledge: (2021).

Dr. Siew Fung Lee (Researcher)
Siew Fung holds a PhD in Education from UCL Institute of Education. Her interest in policy and practice stems from her work as an early years practitioner since 2002. Her current focus is on the social and economic impact of funded nursery places for ‘disadvantaged’ 2-year-olds in England. Her research interests include critical policy methodologies, policy genealogy and conceptual work in exploring possibilities in education.

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Diana Sousa holds a PhD in Education with an emphasis on Early Childhood Education and Democratic Practices from the UCL Institute of Education. She has worked as an educator in a variety of early childhood settings and is now a Senior Teaching Fellow on the MA in Early Years at UCL Institute of Education. Her research interests include the critical examination of dominant discourses within early childhood education.

Dr. Emma Jones (Researcher)
Emma is a Lecturer in Gender and Education at the UCL Institute of Education. She was also the Research Officer for The Introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment project and report, led by Dr. Alice Bradbury and Dr. Guy Roberts-Holmes (2015).
Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the many respondents to the survey and particularly the staff at the case-study schools for giving up their time for the project. We would also like to acknowledge the advice provided by a number of colleagues at the UCL Institute of Education, including Alice Bradbury and Peter Moss.

Note: This research was commissioned by the National Education Union (NEU). However, the analysis presented here is the authors’ and does not necessarily reflect the views of the NEU.
This report details findings from a research study which explored the views of early years and primary teachers on the 2019 Reception Baseline Assessment pilot administered to children in their first six weeks of Reception class. Data were collected through an online survey of early years and primary teachers with 1285 respondents and in-depth interviews in six case study primary schools during September to November 2019. This research adds to existing literature on RBA (BERA 2018; Bradbury, 2019a) by exploring through in-depth case studies of Reception classrooms the consequences of the introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment. The research details the fine-grained impacts upon four year old children and their teachers and teaching assistants of this new standardised progress measure.

The key findings are:

In the survey only 3% of teachers felt that RBA had a positive impact on the Reception class ‘settling in’ period. Responses to our survey and interviews showed that teachers felt that children were aware that they were being tested and that some experienced a sense of failure. Teachers reported that RBA operates as a deficit measure of what some four year olds ‘don’t know and can’t do’, especially with regards to formal school-based early literacy and numeracy and that for some children this created anxiety and stress.

RBA was considered developmentally inappropriate for some four-year olds during their first six weeks of settling into Reception class.

Teachers reported that the RBA represented a level of unfairness towards some four year old children because it did not take into account a wide range of contextual variables, such as children’s date of birth, gender, family background, levels of confidence, whether or not they were EAL (the test is in English only), SEN and whether or not the children had attended a nursery. Only 20% of teachers believed that RBA provided an accurate picture of children’s current attainment and 84% of our survey respondents stated that RBA was an unreliable or inaccurate way to measure children’s progress over 7 years of primary school.
69% of survey respondents disagreed that ‘Reception Baseline Assessment has helped to develop positive relationships with the children in Reception’. In the case-study schools, teachers described their current routines for ‘settling in’ new pupils that developed positive relationships through observation, meaningful dialogue and activities and play. 85% of the schools surveyed reported that they have existing on-entry assessments and all six case-study schools had on-entry assessment in place. Teachers stated that these existing on-entry assessments system were carefully aligned with the holistic EYFS. In contrast the RBA and its short narrative assessments did not provide useful information.

Teachers felt conflicted and anxious in attempting to meet the formal testing demands of the RBA and at the same time trying to settle and develop positive interactions and relationships with their new pupils. In the survey and in the case study interviews this repositioning of Reception teachers away from their caring pedagogic values of observing and listening to young children and towards a screen-based scripted standardised test, led to professional unease, frustration and stress.

A minority of respondents thought that as a standardised test RBA, offered a measure of consistency across schools. Survey respondents with length of service under 3 years (13%) regarded the RBA more positively than respondents with 3-12 years (2%) and over 12 years (3%).

RBA took teachers away from the classroom which disrupted their settling in routines and relationship-building with children. 83% of survey respondents stated that their workload had increased with RBA. 80% of teachers reported that RBA took 20 minutes or more per child to complete whilst 29% of respondents reported that the test took 30 minutes or more to complete. Some teachers used their PPA (planning, preparation and assessment) time to conduct the RBA test.

Teachers reported staffing constraints and pressures in completing RBA. Some schools bought in supply teachers to cover lessons and to help them conduct RBA. Schools which could not afford to buy in additional support resorted to re-deploying staff from other year groups and support staff from additional needs pupils. Establishing consistent day-to-day classroom routines became difficult for Reception teachers who were out of class administering the RBA. This in turn had a negative impact on teaching assistants who were left to manage the class on their own.
## Abbreviations and Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BERA</td>
<td>British Educational Research Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>DfE</td>
<td>Department for Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>DH</td>
<td>Deputy Head Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL</td>
<td>English as an additional language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EYC</td>
<td>Early Years Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EYFS</td>
<td>Early Years Foundation Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EYFSP</td>
<td>Early Years Foundation Stage Profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IELS</td>
<td>International Early Learning and Well-Being Study</td>
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<tr>
<td>RBA</td>
<td>Reception Baseline Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>NFER</td>
<td>National Foundation for Educational Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Nursery Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFSTED</td>
<td>Office for Standards in Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPA</td>
<td>Planning, Preparation and Assessment time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RT</td>
<td>Reception Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEND</td>
<td>Special Educational Needs and Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA</td>
<td>Standards and Testing Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>Teaching Assistant</td>
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<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>A ‘write-in’ comment from someone who filled in the questionnaire</td>
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Section 1: Background to Reception Baseline Assessment

Research into the 2019 Pilot of Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA).
Section 1: Background to Reception Baseline Assessment

Timeline

1997
Baseline assessment introduced by Labour government

2002
Baseline withdrawn, in favour of Early Years Foundation Stage Profile

2015
Baseline reintroduced by coalition government

February 2016
Critical report on Baseline published by ATL and NUT

April 2016
Baseline dropped

2017
Conservative government announces plans to restore Baseline

March 2018
Announcement of successful bidder for the new baseline – the National Foundation for Educational Research

June 2018
Critical report on Baseline by an expert panel of the British Educational Research Association

2018/19
Trialling of the test material

September 2019
National pilot tests (over one-third of schools decline to take part)

September 2020
Introduction of statutory Baseline Assessment

2027/28
Baseline scores used as basis on which to measure school performance, Reception to end of KS2
Section 1: Background to Reception Baseline Assessment

What is Reception Baseline Assessment?
Currently children’s progress in primary schools is measured between the end of key stage 1 (year 2) and the end of key stage 2 (year 6) and is used alongside other information to hold schools to account for the performance of their pupils compared with their peers in other schools. The new Reception Baseline Assessment extends this standardised progress measure in literacy and maths to the beginning of the Reception year when children are four years old. It is intended that RBA will to be taken in the first half term of the Reception year. This will provide ‘a snapshot’ of four-year old children’s attainment in terms of literacy and numeracy skills when they arrive at school enabling the Department for Education (DfE) to measure the progress that they make by the end of year 6. In the words of the Standards and Testing Agency RBA will provide

‘an on-entry assessment of pupil attainment to be used as a starting point from which a cohort-level progress measure to the end of key stage 2 (KS2) [i.e. at 11-years-old] can be created’ (STA 2019, 4).

This will also enable the DfE to remove statutory end of key stage 1 assessments from 2023, as they will no longer be the starting point for measuring primary children’s progress. From 2027, the DfE anticipates, Baseline scores will be used as a basis from which to measure and compare primary school performance, from Reception to end of KS2.

The RBA is not intended to:
- provide on-going formative information for practitioners
- be used in any way to measure performance in the early years, evaluate pre-school settings or hold early years practitioners to account
- provide detailed diagnostic information about pupils’ areas for development (STA, 2019: 4).

Links
The RBA has clear links to the key stage 1 and key stage 2 literacy and numeracy curricula against which progress will be measured. The RBA therefore has a considerably reduced and narrowed curriculum focus compared to the holistic EYFS Profile.

The RBA consists of mathematics tasks including
- early calculation (early addition/subtraction)
- mathematical language
- early understanding of shape.

It also involves Literacy Communication and Language tasks including
- early vocabulary
- phonological awareness
- early reading
- early comprehension.
The Test

In March 2018 the DfE announced that the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) had won the competitive tender (£9.8 million) as the sole national provider. The NFER state that their development of the RBA is ‘an age-appropriate, activity-based assessment of a pupil’s attainment in early literacy, communication and language and early mathematics skills and is very similar to the on-entry checks that many schools already carry out with their reception pupils. It is a task-based assessment, delivered in English, using physical materials that children can easily handle such as plastic shapes and picture sequencing cards. The wording of each task has been carefully designed to maximise accessibility and to be child-friendly.’

The RBA is a prescribed and scripted computer-based test which endeavours to ensure the consistency of the standardised test. It uses an online scoring system. The test includes algorithmic routing, which supposedly ‘helps to prevent pupils from being presented with too many activities in which they are unlikely to be successful. It also helps to reduce the time required for the assessment and the possible discomfort that pupils may feel if they are unable to complete an activity’ (NFER, 2019).

RBA can be administered by a reception teacher, reception teaching assistant or other suitably qualified practitioner, working one to-one with each child. It is anticipated that time required to administer the reception baseline will be approximately 20 minutes per pupil and that the assessment can be paused and restarted as appropriate. Each item of the test requires a single objective binary yes/no decision to be made by the person administering it. Responses are recorded by the practitioner via an online scoring system. Scoring is automatically calculated by the system. (STA 2019, 9). The DfE plans to record the numerical results as ‘a single raw score out of 45 for each pupil. This score will not be made available to schools. Raw scores will be recorded in the national pupil database and used to create a cohort level progress measure for schools at the end of key stage 2’. This score will be used as an accountability measure to compare primary school performance from 2027. In response to criticism that the RBA must serve some useful purpose for teachers, the STA (2019) decided that school will receive ‘a series of narrative statements to describe how each pupil performed on the different content domains.’ (The statements are computer-generated.)

The STA claims that RBA ‘has been designed to be an inclusive assessment, accessible to the majority of pupils on entry to school and has been designed so that pupils with SEND and those learning English as an additional language can participate’ (STA, 2019, 11). However, as a standardised test only available in English, the extent to which RBA can be considered as ‘inclusive’ is compromised.

Reception Year, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the Reception Baseline Assessment.

The Reception Year of schooling is located within the final year of the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage). The EYFS, first introduced in 2008, merges the concepts of education and care and has its own play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum for all children aged birth to five. Defending the EYFS against government proposals to change it, Pascal et al (2019) write:
‘The evidence clearly indicates that personal, social and emotional development underpins all areas of learning and creates an effective learner for life confirming that this area is the building block for life-long learning and needs to be centrally placed in the EYFS.

The evidence clearly shows the inter-related processes of learning and development for all seven Areas of Learning and the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning at this stage.

The EYFS should continue to promote the importance of a balanced teaching approach which incorporates play-based and relational pedagogic approaches alongside more structured learning and teaching, especially when children are in transition between EYFS and Key Stage 1.

The EYFS should emphasise the importance of all children experiencing more opportunities for play, language consolidation and extension and opportunities to develop their wider learning dispositions and capacities. (Pascal et al, 2019, 56).

At the end of the Reception year, all children are assessed against the Early Learning Goals (ELGs), based upon teachers’ observations over time in a range of contexts that makes visible what young children are capable of learning in supportive and collaborative relationships. The ELGs define the level of progress children are expected to have met on completion of the Foundation Stage and this forms the basis of their EYFS Profile.

There is extensive evidence that departures from this approach, towards school readiness and ‘schoolification’ of the early years, do not allow for young children’s ‘basic emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and the opportunity to develop their metacognitive and self-regulation skills to be met’ (Whitbread and Bingham, 2011, 4). However, Early Years education, including the Reception year, is under increasing top down pressure from ‘school readiness’ policy initiatives to prepare children for the more ‘traditional’, didactic primary school National Curriculum which begins in Year One (Moss, 2012, Kay, 2018, Wood, 2019). The DfE has proposed revisions to the EYFS which are currently under consultation for possible implementation in 2021. Expressing concern about the character of possible revisions, Pascal et al (2019) warn that ‘care must be taken that delivery of the EYFS is not skewed towards particular Areas of Learning at the expense of others because all Areas of Learning are interconnected.’ In this context of flux and contested change, the RBA operates to strategically increase the reach and spread of the National Curriculum’s KS1 and KS2 standardised testing of literacy and maths: it would take such an approach into Reception classes and, potentially, the EYFS more generally. The RBA’s reduced and narrowed curricular focus is problematic and in tension with the current, holistic EYFS with its child centred socio-cultural approach to early learning and child development.
Section 1: Background to Reception Baseline Assessment

Baseline Initiatives, Baseline Research

The DfE has made two previous attempts to introduce a national standardised Reception Baseline Assessment to be used for accountability. First, in September 1997, a pilot of The National Framework of Baseline Assessment was carried out, in which all primary schools had to choose from one of 90 local baseline assessments. This form of baseline assessment became statutory in September 1998. However, it failed as a comparable performance measure and was withdrawn in 2002. In September 2015 the DfE made a second attempt to introduce Reception Baseline Assessment but once again the various assessment instruments failed to provide a comparable performance measure between schools. This, combined with professional protests, made the DfE withdrew RBA as a statutory assessment in April 2016. National research on the 2015 RBA pilot concluded that RBA:

1. Was inaccurate and problematic as the basis for school accountability.
2. Had potentially damaging effects on children relating to low expectations and labelling.
3. Increased teachers’ workloads without providing useful information.
4. Had negative impacts on relationship building in the first term of Reception.
5. Had cost and resource implications for schools.’ (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2016, 53).

Regarding the 2019 RBA pilot more than 7,000 primary schools, or two in five eligible schools, decided not to use the pilot (Ward, 2019). There is an increasingly widely shared concern that standardised tests such as the RBA have a range of unintended and negative consequences on some children. It is possible that over time, the standardised RBA test could have similar inadvertent and unfortunate effects upon four year olds as the current high stakes SATs. For example, in a recent survey of primary school headteachers, eight out of 10 reported an increase in children presenting with well-being difficulties due to the pressure to perform in primary school SATs, (Weale, 2017). In 2019, more than eight out of 10 teachers said that mental health among pupils in England had deteriorated over the previous two years – with rising reports of anxiety, self-harm and even cases of suicide – against a backdrop of inadequate support in schools. (Weale, 2019). Bradbury (2019) found that 96% of senior primary teachers had some concerns about the effects of standardised tests on the well-being of pupils. Jarvis (2016, 15) noted that for many early years children, especially boys, the relentless pressure to perform at such a young age was developmentally inappropriate and ‘resulted in a ‘tsunami’ of mental health problems’.

In relation to the current version of RBA a BERA expert panel has demonstrated that the proposed 2020 RBA will produce data that is ‘flawed, unjustified, and wholly unfit for purpose’ (Goldstein et al., 2018: 30). It will not lead to accurate or fair comparisons being made between schools for the following reasons:

- Any value-added calculations that will be used to hold school to account will be highly unreliable.
- Children will be exposed to tests that will offer no formative help in establishing their needs and/or in developing teaching strategies capable of meeting them.
• This is an untried experiment that cannot be properly evaluated until at least 2027, when the first cohort tested at reception has taken key stage 2 tests.

The BERA expert panel argue that the tests have ‘dubious validity’ because:

• just a few month’s difference in age in the early years produces pronounced developmental differences, yet plans for the RBA do not take this properly into account,

• pupil cohorts within primary schools are statistically small, and often have uneven distributions of younger and older children, which makes it hard to draw valid comparisons between schools,

• pupil mobility, teacher turnover, and the likelihood of a change in head teacher will all muddy the issue of accountability – either pupil data will be missing, or schools may be held to account for pupils they have not taught continuously in the seven years since the data was first collected,

• it is widely recognised that a range of contextual factors – such as parents’ educational levels, family income and having English as an additional language – affect both attainment and relative attainment, but under the government’s current proposals no such factors will be taken into account (BERA, 2018).

The panel concludes that ‘ultimately, the reception baseline assessment will do little to help secure positive outcomes for pupils, teachers or parents in either the short or long terms’. Other associations have added further criticisms. The Association for Professional Development in the Early Years (TACTYC) has noted that it is ethically problematic to test children and for schools, parents and children themselves not be told their scores:

‘young children will be used as unwitting subjects in an experiment…this raises serious questions regarding the rights of parents to the data held on their child – and to give permission for the data to be generated in the first place. This is data produced and held without parental consent or oversight, regarding children who are not even yet of statutory school age’ (2019).

As a way of attempting to overcome these ethical objections the DfE has proposed that the RBA will produce simple narrative statements about each child’s performance. However, such generalised statements may unintentionally contribute to the labelling and grouping of children, with low expectations being set for some children – particularly the summerborn, those with English as an additional language and those with special educational needs. Children ‘could be unnecessarily labelled as low-ability at the very beginning of their education, with the risk that premature judgements about their abilities may then become ‘self-fulfilling’ (BERA, 2018, 4).

BERA is not alone in its criticisms. According to a recent YouGov poll of 2,028 parents, the majority of parents (65 per cent) disagreed with RBA testing children in English and maths when they first start school (Gibbons, 2020). Bradbury (2019) carried out research with 288 headteachers on the impacts of both the SATs and the RBA. Almost four in five headteachers (79%) believed that testing pupils in reception is an inefficient way to measure future progress, while three-quarters (74%) believed it was not possible to reliably test four-year-olds. The use of baseline assessment as a means of judging schools’ achievements was also criticised: 73% of Bradbury’s respondents thought that baseline assessment was an unfair way to measure the
future progress of schools and only 12% agree baseline assessment is an age-appropriate way to gauge school-wide progress.’ Bradbury (2019) concluded by stating that RBA was ‘unnecessary, unhelpful, inaccurate and inappropriate for young children. It is also seen as open to gaming and as a waste of money that will produce meaningless data, which will not be available to schools or useful to teachers.’

The Research Study

Given the above historical policy context and research literature, the National Education Union (NEU) commissioned this present research to explore what early years and primary teachers thought about the 2019 RBA pilot and its impact upon their schools. The research was conducted independently by a research team at the UCL Institute of Education. The following questions guided the research and report:

• What motivated some schools to take part in RBA pilot while others did not?
• To what extent do teachers believe RBA provides accurate, reliable and valid data?
• How has RBA impacted teacher professionalism?
• How has RBA pilot impacted teacher workload?
• How has RBA pilot impacted children’s ‘settling in’ period?
• To what extent RBA is a financial worthwhile investment in early years education.

The research was carried out in the autumn term of 2019, using a mixed methods approach involving a nationwide survey and six case studies of primary schools. The research bases its claims on both the large scale quantitative survey with its associated write-in survey comments and on teachers’ in-depth experiences of using RBA in the case study schools. The case study material in particular highlights the complexities and ambiguities in the implementation of baseline within a grounded classroom and school context.

Online Survey

The survey was distributed via the NEU email database using the UCL Opinio web-based survey tool and was available for a period of 3 months. The data was exported from UCL Opinio and analysed using SPSS, a quantitative data analysis software programme. The survey consisted of 19 questions about staff perceptions and experiences of the RBA and is set out in Appendix. Most questions required staff to respond to statements about the RBA by selecting, ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, disagree’, ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘don’t know’. Respondents were also given opportunities to supplement their choice by adding written comments to each answer. 1285 people answered a minimum of four questions and 1032 completed the survey in full. This equates to an 80% completion rate. In this report, all percentages are reported as a proportion of those that answered the question rather than the absolute frequency.
**Demographic Survey Data**

The majority of survey respondents were Reception Teachers or EYFS Coordinators (53.8%). A further 27.2% were KS1 or KS2 Teachers, while 5.0% were Teaching Assistants and 4.6% were Nursery Teachers. 5.2% were Senior Leaders.

The majority of survey respondents worked in either Maintained Primary Schools (64.3%) or Primary Academies (29.6%).

Most respondents had more than 12 years’ experience (54.2%) while a further 40.2% had been working in schools for between 3-12 years. Only 5.6% had less than three years’ experience.

Overall, 60% of our survey respondents said that their school was taking part in the RBA pilot in 2019 whilst 40% of our sample had decided not to take part. So, our sample is not strongly dissimilar to the national picture - 73% of primary schools took part in the pilot and 27% decided not to do the pilot.

**Interviews in Case Study Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study School</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Ofsted Category</th>
<th>Piloting RBA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>South London</td>
<td>Community 2 form entry</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>South London</td>
<td>Academy 2 form entry</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>South West London</td>
<td>Community 1 form entry</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>East London</td>
<td>Community 2 form entry</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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<td>School E</td>
<td>North London</td>
<td>Community 2 form entry</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>South Coast</td>
<td>Church of England. 3 Form entry</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>No</td>
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</table>

**Sampling**

Case study interviews were conducted by three researchers in 6 primary schools in London and on the South Coast. The sample included a selection of schools with similar Ofsted ratings in a variety of locations in order to: first, establish a basis of comparison by balancing similarities with differences (Ball et al. 2012) and secondly, to consider situated contexts that may shape and influence teachers and pupils’ experiences of the RBA. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that we had an equal mixture of
Section 1: Background to Reception Baseline Assessment

schools piloting and not piloting Reception Baseline Assessment (see Table 1). The case study schools were located in a wide socio-economic range indicated by their differing percentages of free school meals (FSM) claimed. In School A and C, the percentages of FSM pupils were roughly three times the national average of 15.8% (DfE 2019b) and in School B, School D and School F, the percentages were twice the average. School E was broadly in line with the national average. Throughout the fieldwork, in both interviews and survey data, there were frequent comments that referred to pupils with English as an additional language (EAL). In School A, the percentage of EAL pupils was three times the national average of 21.2% (DfE 2019b) and in School C and School D, the percentages were twice the average. School B and School E were broadly in line with the national average. In School F, the South Coast school, the percentage of EAL pupils is lower than the national average.

We interviewed the following staff: 3 Head teachers, 4 Deputy Head teachers; 2 EYFS Co-Ordinators; 9 Reception Teachers; 2 Nursery Teachers; 1 Teaching Assistant. The rationale behind this comprehensive list of participants is that as part of the school community their roles are directly and indirectly impacted by the introduction of the RBA. For example, Nursery Teachers and Teaching Assistants often move between classes year on year within the school, having the likelihood to perform RBA at some point in their career. Additionally, the RBA has the scope to influence the work of Nursery Teachers, as children leave nursery classes with an assessment to start reception classes with another.

Interviews were conducted using standard interview schedules which were largely based on the survey questions. This close relationship between the survey questions and the interview questions ensured that the findings from both datasets were congruent and mutually supportive. The interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes and were recorded and transcribed professionally for analysis. Qualitative data was analysed using the themes generated by the research questions. These are represented in the findings sections which combine data from the survey and the interviews. Write-in comments from the survey were used to further explore case study material.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted within the ethical guidelines provided by the British Education Research Association and the UCL Institute of Education. Care has been taken to ensure anonymity of all respondents and the security of data. Schools were recompensed with funding for either a half day or full day of teaching cover (depending on the number of interviews) in order to reduce the impact of the research on the children.
Section 2:
RBA’s impact on teachers’ ability to build relationships during the ‘settling-in’ period
In this section, we discuss the varied responses of school staff to the RBA in terms of their views on the importance of building positive relationships at the start of Reception through ‘settling-in’ procedures and routines. Our overall finding is that RBA has a significant impact on children’s ‘settling in’ period as a direct result of classroom time being set aside to administer the test. Teachers were not able to spend as much time getting to know their children, build relationships and establish routines in this crucial time period – a problem reflected in a teacher’s comment: ‘I was taking time away, and me being away from the group would have an emotional effect on them, then that poses questions - hang on, are we meant to be administering a test, when actually your children need you?’ (EYC1, School A). In both the case studies and survey comments staff expressed their views on the impact of the RBA on pupils’ wellbeing and on how pupils were selected for the RBA based on their ‘readiness’ for testing.

2.1 RBA’s impact on building relationships

The first few weeks of Reception class is known as the ‘settling in’ period and is usually viewed as a crucial time for pupils’ early school experiences: it is children’s first experience of a formal education in a primary school setting. Building positive relationships between teachers, support staff, children and their parents is key for a successful start in school life. In the language of the EYFS, ‘Children learn best when they are healthy, safe and secure, when their individual needs are met, and when they have positive relationships with the adults caring for them. Practitioners must respond to each child’s emerging needs and interests, guiding their development through warm, positive interaction’ (EYFS, 2017, 9 &16). However, in the survey, a majority of respondents (69%) disagreed that ‘Reception Baseline Assessment has helped to develop positive relationships with the children in Reception’ (Figure 2.1). Responses to this question varied by role - a higher proportion of nursery teachers (90%) disagreed than reception teachers and senior leaders. A small proportion (15%) of respondents agreed that there had been a positive impact. This proportion rose slightly, to 24%, among those with under 3 years of service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agreed/agreed</th>
<th>Disagreed/strongly disagreed</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
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Figure 2.1: RBA Pilot Has Helped To Develop Positive Relationships with Children in Reception
Current routines for ‘settling in’ new pupils

Teachers in our case-study schools described their current routines for ‘settling in’ new pupils in the first few weeks – routines focusing on activities that developed positive relationships through play and social interactions:

We kept those first three weeks quite clear. We did Peppa Pig’s birthday and we did lots of kind of ice-breaking, getting-to-know-you activities. We did lots of really simple games. [...] Just kind of learning names, very simple things like that. Singing nursery rhymes, doing lots of building and construction (RT1, School A).

The parents can come and the parents can stay. There’s tea and coffee in the kitchen so they can stay for as long as they need and if their child’s upset sometimes they stay for a while but they’re out of sight. Because they’ve [children] had a home visit, they’re really looking forward to it. They’ve been to school -we have getting-to-know events - they’re familiar with the environment and it goes quite smoothly and because we have only three or six new children at a time then the adults can support the new children, which works well. [...] So, we do the staggered entry based on friendships that we know already exist, which helps a lot with the settling in (DH1, School B).

I know how crucial it is to have all members of staff in class in order to have inside and outside open and therefore give children the choice where to settle. Settling new children is a fine art and is not a time that can be disrupted by unnecessary tests. It is known that unsettled children are not able to ‘perform’. The prime areas are the foundation for developing initial confidence. Testing literacy and maths skills is not appropriate in the first weeks (W).

Positive aspects of the RBA

It is notable that respondents with length of service under 3 years (13%) regard the RBA more positively than respondents with 3-12 years (2%) and over 12 years (3%) – though it will be noted that 13% is still a low proportion. Our survey results suggest that early years teachers with 0-3 years’ experience are more supportive of RBA than teachers with more than 3 years’ experience. They are more likely to report that the 2019 RBA pilot helped them to develop positive relationships with the children they teach; that RBA is an accurate basis to measure children’s development over the course of primary education and that it provides an accurate picture of children’s current attainment. We also found that early years teachers with 0-3 years’ experience were less likely to agree that RBA devalued their professional judgement.
Section 2: RBA’s impact on teachers’ ability to build relationships during the ‘settling-in’ period

Thus the RBA was seen by some respondents as a positive structured experience which allowed the teachers to spend a ‘luxury’ 1:1 quiet time with their children and for children ‘to come and play a ‘game’ with their teacher’:

And actually, what is interesting is that when I’ve got this box in my arm and I’ve got a child at the door, so many were like, ‘Can I go next? Can I come?’ They’re so excited, there’ll be almost a queue and I’ll have to say, ‘This child first and then you and then you’. (T1, School A)

Children appear to enjoy the 1:1 time with their new teacher (W).

The baseline tests enabled me to spend quality 1 to 1 time with each child individually in a quiet setting where we could talk and get to know each other. This has helped develop my relationships with the majority of the children in my class. (W)

The children just accept it and some are keen to have their turn (particularly the maths with the bears). They like showing what they can do and are mostly unaware of errors. (W)

Gives some nice 1-1 time, talking to the children and getting to see how they tackle questions. I have a queue of children asking when it is their turn to do it. (W)
Children enjoyed the activities and it provided teachers with the opportunity to spend some time with each individual child. The activities gave a very good indication of the children’s starting points, immediately highlighting who may need additional challenge / support. (W)

A teacher in School A articulated how working on a one-to-one basis with pupils can be useful for maths teaching:

So when I work with children in maths, for example, I tend to involve them in one-to-one activities as much as is possible. That does vary, sometimes we go into the learning environment with them and set up a shop, and that kind of thing, and we involve other children. But in terms of finding out what they know and challenging them, often that happens on a one-to-one basis. And they love that time that you have together because, again, I feel I’ve done my practice that is positive, and that I know how to build good relationships with children. (EYC1, School A)

It is possible that some teachers found the one-to-one format of RBA helpful in observing pupils’ individual learning areas and in highlighting specific areas for ‘additional challenge / support’. ‘For new teachers/ new to early years it could give some guidance’ (W, MPS, O12, Non-RBA), and it is ‘sometimes useful to have a framework to work to, if teachers are new to the Key stage’ (W).

### 2.2 ‘Those crucial first few weeks when building relationships and modelling routines and rules are very important’: the RBA’s impact on ‘settling-in’

However, for many respondents, the RBA was viewed as seriously disruptive to building positive relationships at the start of school term. One teacher reported that ‘we didn’t start actual teaching until it had been completed’. Others said:

Our setting with 45 children and 3 adults was 1 adult out of the equation for 2 weeks to do baseline. This gave the children a disrupted and patchy education and it was hugely stressful and led to an exhausting time for staff. (W)

Some of the children are coming to school upset and unsettled though this is probably due to them being in a new class with a different teacher. However, it also means the teacher is not able to spend time building relationships with the class and finding out about their interests which could help them settle in. (W)

DH1 at School B explained the fragmentary impact on school staff and pupils’ social relationships as a consequence of implementing the RBA:

They’re starting to build new friendships and if they know that one person keeps leaving for half an hour they might be wondering what’s going on. […] Time out for them away from developing relationships with their friends and settling in, which is really important and with adults and with the team.
Section 2: RBA’s impact on teachers’ ability to build relationships during the ‘settling-in’ period

and learning about their new environment and then also there’d be one less adult to interact with the group. (DH1, School B).

Spending 20 mins outside the classroom per child in different intervals takes you away from bonding and forming relationships with the other 29 children you have in the classroom. Which meant that building those initial relationships took longer which affected some children’s settling time, which affected their learning. (W)

Routines have not been established as early and are not as robust as a result. My relationship/early attachment with the children wasn’t as strong as I spent most of my time completing baseline assessments rather than interact and engage with groups of children. (W)

The inconsistency of routines upset several children. Children were unsettled leaving carers in the mornings for a markedly longer time. The baseline assessment takes reception teachers away from their class during those crucial first few weeks when building relationships and modelling routines and rules are very important. (W)

Indeed, the survey and case study interviews illustrated the contextual complexity and contradictory processes of implementing the RBA within schools. The following sections outline the varied impact of RBA on pupils and teachers.

2.3 ‘I can’t read it’ ‘I don’t know’ ‘I can’t do it’: Impact of RBA upon Pupils’ wellbeing

In the survey, a significant proportion of respondents (49%) agreed that the RBA had a negative impact on most children – this was a judgment based on respondents’ observation of pupils’ experience of being ‘tested’, ‘Lots of children noticed if I was clicking no, or giving them a x on my list and got upset they had got it wrong. They were very aware they were being ‘tested’. (W). (There was some variation by role for some of these opinions: a larger proportion of Nursery teachers (65%) agreed that the RBA may have a negative impact on most children than EYFS coordinators or Senior Leaders.)
Section 2: RBA’s impact on teachers’ ability to build relationships during the ‘settling-in’ period

The responses to our survey and interviews showed that young children are aware of their own ‘failure’ and this creates unnecessary stress and anxiety for pupils and parents. In this respect children taking Baseline are part of a common experience: pupils of every age are increasingly being required to learn things for which they are not ready, and this leads to shallow learning for the test, rather than in-depth understanding which could form a sound basis for future learning’ (Hutchings 2015, 5). At School A, a teacher commented on her pupils’ experiences of the RBA test:

They’ll be really excited to go somewhere else out of the classroom, because it’s new. And then quite often, once you’re maybe a few questions in, some of them are fine but you can tell that that excitement disappears when they see the reality of what they’re doing [...] you can see they just become quite quiet towards the middle and end of the assessment (RT1, School A).

From looking at children’s downward glance, for example when they are unsure or they are slightly … their face slightly drops when I know and when they know that they are not getting something correct (EYC1, School A).

It takes time to develop the relationships in the Early Years by supporting and developing play in a child centred way not with pre-set questions which many young children will find threatening and stressful. (W)

Children confused, some anxious, some distressed. (W)
We don’t think it’s beneficial to test children so young because we are committed to safeguarding children’s mental health (W).

Teachers in the case study interviews mentioned that they were careful in their reaction to pupils’ answers, ‘I say, ‘That’s great!’ No matter what their answer is because I am concentrating on the PSED [Personal, Social and Emotional development] side of things, that is really the most important thing for them right now’ (DH1, School C) and ‘I am just saying, ‘Thank you for your response’ rather than ‘Well done’” (EYC1, School A). EYC1 commented that some pupils ‘have actually asked to do the test again’:

It’s when they see me leave the room and they’re so conscious of, “Where are you going? What’s happening? What are you doing?” and “Can I do my test?” And it’s like, “Well, we’ve done that.” “But I’ll do my test again.” “Well, we did it once already, we don’t need to…” It’s just having to explain those things to children, which doesn’t get any easier really. (EYC1, School A)

Children saying, “I can’t read” “I don’t know” “I can’t do it” “what does that mean” “can I go yet?” “When can I go?” “Can I play yet?” (W)

For some survey respondents, pupils’ discomfort and stress were seen as directly linked with the formality and content of RBA. These findings seemed to be inconsistent with the STA’s (2019) assurance that routing was carefully designed to prevent ‘pupils from being presented with too many activities in which they are unlikely to be successful … and the possible discomfort that pupils may feel if they are unable to complete an activity’.

2.4 ‘They need to be able to sit for twenty minutes’: ‘Readiness’ for testing

Goldstein (2017, 16) has noted the detrimental effects of school accountability on children’s well-being:

‘The problem is at the moment the accountability component dominates everything else and it distorts the curriculum, it distorts learning, it distorts children’s behaviour. There is lots of evidence now about the stress that children go under. Assessments should not be doing that to children. Assessments should be encouraging children to learn’.

His comments matched those of several teachers in the case study schools, who commented on how RBA appeared to build in expectations of particular social behaviours for young pupils with which they should be equipped when they come to school. These processes change what it means to be a new Reception pupil – which now involves arriving at school equipped with new ‘readiness’ for testing. An early years teacher in School A regarded the new expectations as contradictory to the nature of Reception, ‘because it’s that idea of coming into Reception and hitting the ground running’. The deputy head for School C commented that in order to sit through the RBA, pupils need skills in speaking and listening, as well as a capacity for phonics and maths:
Well, they need to be able to sit for twenty minutes, at least. I mean, that’s if you’re doing it in one fell swoop; they need to be able to sit. They need to be able to maintain their attention; they need to be able to listen to adults and follow instructions; they need to know their letter sounds, to a certain extent. I mean, that’s what they’re [RBA] trying to find out (DH1, School C).

This has led to some schools abandoning the RBA. As one Reception teacher explained ‘Our school stopped the trial half-way through due to its tremendously negative affect on pupils, teacher workload and overall setting of the child’ (RT, A, O12, RBA).

A similar decision was reached by other teachers, who concluded that RBA was doing more harm than good. ‘We withdrew from the baseline pilot as we felt it unnecessary to put so much pressure on our youngest learners. We feel there are better, more human ways, of getting to know the whole child. Children do not learn in a linear way and using the baseline to track progress would put further stress on children and teachers which is completely unnecessary. (W).

‘Some of them were excited and engaged with the assessment but some were intimidated and scared. They knew they were being assessed whether they were aware of it or it was subconscious. Many were scared of ‘getting it wrong’. They are 4 YEARS OLD! When there have been reports out recently about older children feeling so much stress and anxiety about tests, education and learning I do not think this is a wise move which will positively change the tragedies we are already seeing. It is simply embedding it earlier. We are going in the wrong direction here! (W)

2.5 ‘You know they can’t do it or they can’t concentrate’: RBA’s impact on pupils

The RBA regime appeared to introduce a degree of ‘performativity’ (Ball 2016, 1052) when it came to teachers selectively grouping and labelling pupils as ‘higher ability children’ and ‘struggling’ children for the purpose of administering the test. In a way, the ranking reflected new forms of early pedagogical relationships which will form part of teachers’ assessments of children at the start of reception. Comments from the survey and case-study interviews showed that the teachers selected or grouped pupils ‘based on the abilities of the children’, administered in ‘an intelligent way’, ‘a sensitive way’, ‘in the nicest way that I can, with lots of smiles and praises and they feel like they’re having some special time’.

A lot of them struggle to settle in, which is understandable because of their age. So, yes, I would be keener to assess those that struggle more, probably a bit later on. If they’re not used to the classroom environment yet, they wouldn’t be used to being in another room that they’re not familiar with, like a quiet place. So, yes, that would influence the decision, probably, based on the abilities of the children that I could see, straight off and what I’d got from the home visits, as well. (RT1, School B).

So obviously, I started with higher ability children, just because I felt like they would have kind of a higher ability and there were those children who I knew would have the stamina to concentrate. And that was mainly just so actually they would be patient with
Section 2: RBA’s impact on teachers’ ability to build relationships during the ‘settling-in’ period

I was trying to get to grips with the questions. Because you’re a bit more robotic the first couple of times I’m reading the questions. (RT1, School A)

I would worry about those children who are going to struggle. And how quickly do you stop the test? Do you actually go through with it or do you just click ‘no’, ‘no’, ‘no’, because you know they can’t do it or they can’t concentrate, or that kind of thing? (EYC1, School A)

‘What it does is label them before they get going.’

It was apparent that many teachers felt conflicted as they worked to adapt to the regime of testing. Respondents to the survey commented on the RBA’s potential to label children early on in their school life:

Children change so much in three years in a primary school and every child learns differently and at different speeds. Sometimes they click suddenly about something they didn’t really get before. I think it seems a shame to decide what results children are going to achieve just from Reception early results. It will mean that children are labelled early on. (W)

Children need time to settle, build confidence, gain familiarity of the setting, other children and adults. Testing makes no sense to the child, and should they ‘perform’ badly, they are then tagged with a label that misrepresents the unique child. (W)

A baseline assessment in Reception will likely label a child as learning disabled or more able from very early in their schooling. Children need a good start and solid year of schooling in foundation stage before they are assessed (formally) or labelled. This is just another tool to grade the school and is nothing to do with pupil profiling. (W)

It is not fair to label the children’s ability in the first few weeks of starting school. Learning is a journey with peaks and troughs and teachers’ professional judgement should be respected and trusted. (W)

We label too much. Predicted grades at GCSE are based on KS2 SATs scores which is ridiculous. The idea that all children can achieve a certain level at a certain age takes no account of child development, the statistical data from standardised tests or even common sense. Children who don’t reach the required standard are left feeling like they are not good enough. Surely we don’t need more of this for younger children. (W)

Respondents were aware of the RBA’s potential to increase tendencies towards labelling and, given the timing of the RBA, many viewed labelling as a worrying development which would affect children even in the first months of Reception.
2.5 The impact of RBA on pupils with English as additional language (EAL), diverse backgrounds and different educational needs

According to the STA (2019, 11):

‘During’ the development of the reception baseline, the Standards and Testing Agency will make provision to overcome barriers to fair assessment for individuals and groups, wherever possible. Assessments are required to meet Ofqual’s regulatory framework which states, ‘An assessment should minimise bias, differentiating only on the basis of each pupil’s level of attainment. A pupil should not be disadvantaged by factors that do not relate to what is being tested.’

However, some teachers commented that despite this statement, the RBA represented a level of unfairness towards children from different backgrounds, particularly in the case of EAL children.

So, talking about the Language, Communication and the LCL section. The first image, there was quite a lot going on in there. So, some of the language requirements, for example, “striped t-shirt”. Is this a test to see whether they can speak English or is it a test of their actual ability? So, I have some issues over that, with our children; lots of our children do come from poor language backgrounds so it’s not really testing their ability, it’s testing their ability to speak English. (DH1, School C)

EAL children, for example, are finding it more difficult to sequence a story from the CLL one. (RT1, School D)

The test was so narrow especially for children who have EAL. Being unable to name a word from a picture gives me no indication of the wealth of other vocabulary that child might actually have. The word they could not name might never have been one they had encountered before. (W)

I think definitely EAL children, because I’ve got two girls who have absolutely no English. Another boy who is EAL, but actually English is spoken a lot at home, but he’s non-verbal. So I think it’s not a very visual test, really. There are pictures but, for a child who’s got no English, they’re going to struggle. And actually, it can probably make them feel quite inadequate. Because you’re reading all these questions to them and they know and I know it’s not making sense for them. (RT1, School A)

The majority of my class are EAL so did not understand the language of the questions. Many of my children couldn’t answer lots of questions so I had to pretend they’d done well as they were getting worried. I handed out praise, high fives and stickers but still felt like I was being cruel. Not a useful teaching tool. (W)

There were many comments in the interviews and survey responses which reflected respondents’ serious concerns about assessing pupils with EAL through the English language script of RBA and the specific wording of its questions: the format and language of the test presented a real barrier for EAL pupils in understanding and responding to the questions:
Section 2: RBA’s impact on teachers’ ability to build relationships during the ‘settling-in’ period

Summer born children, pupil turnover, family and home experiences

Some respondents remarked on the impact of RBA on summer born children and how it could be seen as ‘unfair’ and ‘unreliable’. Others commented more generally on the relevance of the notion of tracking children’s progress from Reception to key stage 2 when some schools have a high turnover of children due to changes in family arrangements and housing mobility:

I … don’t understand what the correlation is going to be between this and Year 6… I can’t see what you are doing with a child in Year 6 and what they do here. Let alone the fact that we have very fluctuating populations, there is a fair chance that at least 50% of the children that are here in Reception won’t be here in Year 6 – their families will have moved or gone elsewhere, so I don’t understand it completely, I don’t understand what all those things are supposed to show, I don’t understand how it’s going to show progress. (RT2, School D). Another teacher noted: ‘In many inner city schools, the turnover of children from Reception to Year 6 is high. It does not provide an accurate progress measure and is therefore not a good use of money. (W)’

One of the teachers in School E gave a powerful example of a child’s real-life experience.

We’ve had children that their parents will have died in that time… that happened last year… you know, all sorts of huge things that can happen that doesn’t mean it’s a… linear progress just doesn’t go like that and it shouldn’t necessarily be. So, it’s worrying that perhaps … So, when we have our meetings at school, and talk about how the children were doing, for example when we had a child last year whose dad had died, we were able to explain why. She missed a lot of school and obviously, in terms of her emotional development, you know, she’s had these huge things to deal with so we would not expect her to be reaching the Early Learning goal for writing or number necessarily, you know. There’s other things that have happened that take priority in her life. (RT2, School E)

Notably, some pupils joined Reception from the home environment with minimal nursery experience. The head teacher of School A explained that for these pupils who were new and unfamiliar to a formal school environment, the testing experience can be challenging:

These children found it really very difficult joining Reception because they haven’t been in formal setting and therefore it is a barrier they have to overcome. Getting used to structure. Getting used to adults that are not… aren’t home. That they have been with the childminder so they found it difficult. We had loads of tears and loads of determined children not to stay. It was like, ‘I’m not staying today. I’m going home’. (HT1, School A)
You get a list of [new pupils coming from] lots of nurseries or children’s centres, then you get something where it just says ‘childminder’. So, they’ve possibly been with a childminder, or no one, or no nursery at all. Are we going to do the test with them? I don’t know. (EYC1, School A)

Most children on entry to my setting have very poor language and support from home therefore they were unable to provide reasonable answers to the questions asked having a negative impact on their confidence. No matter how much the teacher tries to take this away, the children were put under undue stress to answer inappropriate questions. (W)

Teachers were concerned for pupils with SEND and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP):

The assessment was targeted at higher ability reception aged children, leaving those with SEN, EHCP, EAL needs not considered. The content of the assessment was way above the level of what we would have expected children to be, on entry to reception ... Some children haven’t been in an education setting before. (W)

Children have come in to my class with very few existing skills because they may be new to the country or have SEND however, some can meet their ELGs by the end of the year or age appropriate levels by the end of their school life which would not be the expectation if you solely use baseline assessment to predict. (W)

The responses demonstrated teachers’ perceptions of children’s lived complex realities and how RBA, as a decontextualised accountability test, with its specific interest in ‘what works’ overlooks children’s social contexts of learning and their individual circumstances at home and in school.

### 2.6 ‘We’ve been under pressure not to teach until it’s done’: Teaching and curriculum

The survey and case study interviews revealed complex day-to-day negotiations that teachers must accomplish in balancing classroom teaching, attending to ‘settling in’ priorities, carrying out on-entry assessments and at the same time implementing RBA. The implication of this material is that the RBA introduced inconsistencies within the first six weeks of school through new testing routines, at a time when teachers are expected to focus on providing emotional support so as to settle their new pupils, complete their own on-entry assessments and observations, and teach phonics and maths, albeit minimally:

That actually we want children to be settled, we want children to be happy, we want children to be playing. And one of my phrases that I often use when I meet parents is, “We know that that’s what children do best, is play.” And then saying, “Well actually, for twenty minutes a day we’re going to sit on the carpet together and we’re going to learn a standard, it’s going to be phonics. And there is going to be an element of assessment for that,” as well as, “oh, and guess what, we’re now doing a new test, which involves taking children out of their play-based environment.” (EYC1, School A)
Section 2: RBA’s impact on teachers’ ability to build relationships during the ‘settling-in’ period

I had to do it during teaching time (no release due to budget constraints) I spent the time I would usually have spent observing the children and setting routines etc carrying this out. We waited a couple of weeks to give the children time to settle into the environment before we did it but it then meant we have been later starting things like structured phonics and maths teaching. (W)

We’ve been under pressure not to teach until it’s done (W)

We don’t teach phonics or maths until we have done it (W)

It did mean we made less independent observations and less adult presence to support children’s settling in period. We started phonics teaching much later than usual. (W)

Some schools carried on with their teaching activities; a reception teacher commented on how it could influence her pupils’ answers for the RBA:

Next week we’re going to learn the phonics sound ‘nnn’, the letter ‘n’. And one of the questions is about, “What is the first sound in ‘nut’?” And we’re teaching the children now to listen for initial sounds, whereas most children didn’t get that question right ... Whereas, if I was to do that in the last week of the half-term, in two weeks’ time, I think a lot of children would know the answer now. Because we’ll probably in the lesson talk about, we’ll use the example of ‘nut’, they already know is ‘nut’ ... those children tested in Week 6, we’re also then testing them on what they’ve learnt in the first six weeks. (RT1, School A)

Throughout the survey and interviews, respondents expressed concerns about the adverse effect of testing pupils in the first six weeks of the school year. The focus of the test on phonics and early maths tends to reduce the breadth of Reception pupils’ introduction to formal education. The findings further highlighted the intensification of teachers’ and teaching assistants’ work in providing emotional support for ‘settling-in’ pupils and increased workload at an extremely busy and stressful time of the school year. There were particular concerns about the adverse impact of the RBA on Reception children’s wellbeing – something which added to teachers’ own stress and to the tensions they experienced around the test. Importantly, teachers were also under pressure to delay teaching phonics and maths until they had conducted the RBA for their pupils.
Section 3:
What Reception Baseline Assessment contributes to teachers’ knowledge of children

Research into the 2019 Pilot of Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA).
In the survey, the majority of respondents (77%) disagreed that, ‘Reception Baseline Assessment has provided useful information I wouldn’t otherwise have had about children in Reception’, while 11% agreed. In terms of the results from the RBA, the majority of survey respondents did not indicate – by the survey’s stop date on 1 December 2019 - that they had received the narrative statements. ‘I have not yet received narrative commentary on the outcome and this will be interesting to see how it helps us to inform our planning for each individual child’ (W). Some survey respondents, however, were able to describe the narrative statements that they had received:

I feel the information received from these assessments are generally noticed [anyway] through children’s observations in the first 6 weeks of play. I feel that the narratives received after carrying out the assessments are quite general; these narratives could be gained from assessment of children engaging in well planned activities in the settings. (W)

My biggest problem with it was the reports at the end. They were completely useless to me as they were so vague and as I didn’t make notes as I was doing it (as would have taken even more time with each child) I then had to redo all my baseline assessments myself to have some form of data to use (W).
Section 3: What Reception Baseline Assessment contributes to teachers’ knowledge of children

3.1 ‘What the child can do across the whole early years curriculum’: using the schools’ own baseline

The respondents in 85% of the schools surveyed reported that they have an existing on-entry Reception Baseline Assessment; all case-study schools have on-entry assessment in place. The respondents in the survey clearly preferred their school’s informal on-entry assessments, which were seen as more appropriate for Reception age children, providing useful knowledge of their pupils based on ‘teacher observation and parental contribution’ that teachers could use to inform planning and support teaching. A respondent pointed out that, ‘Schools already baseline children entering in reception, so media panic about “exams for 4 year olds” is extremely unhelpful. As with SATs, there is nothing inherently wrong with assessing children it is the way in which the resulting data is used to hold schools and staff to account and the consequent narrowing of the curriculum which should be questioned’. Respondents commented about the appropriateness and the informality of their assessments, which were holistic, and emphasized ‘what a child can do’: School’s own is far more appropriate for 4 year olds, observations of children during their self-initiated play and not a narrow series of narrow assessments in a formal way more appropriate to much older children. It also tells us more about what the child can do across the whole early years curriculum which consists of so much more than Literacy and Maths. (W)
Section 3: What Reception Baseline Assessment contributes to teachers’ knowledge of children

It is not helping me and is just a tick box exercise. I trust my own professional judgement more in assessing the children to give an accurate baseline and find it much more useful to get the whole picture of a child through observational assessments, especially concentrating on the prime areas which underpin all of the specific areas. (W)

My preferred Baseline assessment is, and always has been, my own informal method which, in my opinion, gives valid and valuable results and insights into the workings of each child. It allows for all of the adults to give their input into the assessment, giving the role of each and every member of staff a valid purpose which they all value and is in line with every piece of statute legislation regarding EYFS I have ever read. (W)

Observational based methods which include the prime and specific areas of the EYFS

Many respondents in the survey and interviewees used their on-entry baseline with reference to the EYFS Development Matters criteria, which include the prime and specific areas for assessment. Methods mentioned included detailed observations during social and play interactions, discussions with parents, home visits and nursery reports.

Every adult does long observations on their key children in those first few weeks to really get to see where they are and what they need support with. And then basically the first couple of weeks are just spent playing with the children and getting them, you know, children who are struggling with boundaries of setting, focusing on them, children who are struggling to make friends, children who are distressed, have problems separating. (T1, School B)

You can capture interesting moments of their sort of emotional journey throughout their day or throughout their week. And certainly, their first few weeks in terms of their settling into Reception. And to just things like making friends with other children and how they are behaving with each other, and how they are responding to their new school [...] some of our children come from quite deprived backgrounds. So it gives them quite an emotional challenge. And so those prime areas become so significant for them. (EYC1, School A)

We use observational based assessment to assess our children’s starting points, deliver an appropriate curriculum based on their needs (holistic approach - including emotional needs) and this is how we also measure progress. Baseline assessment is time-consuming, and doesn’t tell the practitioner anything that they don’t already know. It also places too much emphasis on English and maths, which we don’t feel appropriate for very young children. A more holistic approach to assessment is needed. (W)
Assessment for Learning

Early years teachers emphasised the importance of assessment for learning in building positive pedagogical relationships with children, planning for lessons and informing their practice. The assessment was conducted through careful listening, and observation, followed by teaching that built on children’s interests and competencies. Respondents stated that assessment for learning was central to finding out what children could do and that this information was used to develop and expand children’s knowledge.

I would probably say that just assessing in general is very important but, obviously, in the younger years, because they’re only just starting school, you’ve got to see … Obviously, baseline, you’ve got to see where they’re starting from. So, obviously, it is important to start assessing them right from the start. (RT1, School B)

We do all sorts of things in the early weeks and years, we get learning journeys, we are always observing, gathering information, we sit with them and think about what they have learned, we talk to them about what they have learned. (RT2, School D)

This test is obviously the opposite of what we would do in a normal situation in a classroom where we would absolutely follow the child’s interests in what they are interested in. (RT2, School D)

For some teachers, the RBA was a deficit model of assessment with a focus on aspects of formal early literacy and numeracy and the re-routing of questions activated when children could not (or did not want) to answer. This was frustrating for teachers and went against their child-centred pedagogical approach.

“It scratches the surface of a child’s knowledge. Some children find it boring and others don’t understand the questions. In particular, it does not do justice to the knowledge and abilities of the very young children i.e. those who have just turned four.” (W)

“I’m just angry because, why should I be made to make a child fail? I’m put in a position where I’m almost encouraged to make a child fail, make a child feel bad about themselves. That’s not why I’m a teacher. I would question my own teaching ability and whether I still wanted to do that. I have to make thirty children feel bad about themselves I would not do it, I think. Yes. Okay”. (NT1, School B).
3.2 Whole team approach to current baseline: bridging home and school experiences

Many schools used home visits as a starting point in forming relationships between the home and school, and to share information between teachers, pupils and parents. The Deputy Head at School B explained how home visits form an important part of their baseline procedure: ‘it’s all just getting as much information we can about what the children are interested in from the parents and also helping us with our baseline’:

We basically find out what the children are interested in and what they really enjoy, anything that worries them. We go through the different curriculum areas and ask key questions about their understanding of number, their interest in the natural world, their experiences; do they get taken to the library? [...] Those conversations are really crucial just for building that relationship because that relationship is fundamental in supporting the children with their learning. That is really important to us. The way we record our learning is using iPads and an app called Tapestry, which is all about bringing together home and school learning. So, we upload observations and we tag all the curriculum areas and we assess everything and parents can upload home experiences ... It’s a really lovely way to see what they’ve been doing at the weekend, so that continues. And if we build that good relationship by going in the home at the beginning I think that really helps for that to develop. (DH1, School B)

We’re learning things about their home situation. This is invaluable information, that we get from there, because it helps us to facilitate the provision that we put in place for them because we’ve got some information about what they’re used to, the context. Lots of our children just live in one room, for example, in a multi-occupancy house. So, having that context is really important because we understand the child better. Obviously, everyone has hard lives and some of our parents have really difficult lives. Not that we’re going in there to judge them, it just gives us information. (DH1, School C).

For some schools, baselining involves a whole team approach in partnership with school staff from both Reception and Nursery, pupils and parents, ‘It’s in partnership with the parents. It’s based on observations for two weeks from six members of staff. It’s very thorough. It’s moderated with the nursery’ (DH1, School B):

The whole early years team contribute to the baseline conversations and when the teachers are stuck on different areas of learning and they haven’t seen a child talking about, you know, their knowledge of the natural world they’ll ask the rest of the team, ‘Do you know how their understanding is in this area? And the team say, ‘Oh, yes I had a great chat with them about dah dah dah.’ So, the way we work now is the whole team contributing to get that big picture. Yes, it’s a very contrasting way of working [from the RBA]. (DH1, School B)
3.3 The RBA as a positive test in terms of its ‘objective’ and ‘quantifiable’ aspects

Some respondents to the survey considered ‘the objective nature’ of the RBA positively; likewise the 1-1 time that was spent with each pupil:

As the Assessment is the same for all children across the country, it provides a very clear indication of children’s starting points and allows for a more objective, quantifiable view (W).

It was good to have uninterrupted time to observe children and observe how they approach tasks ... Some children enjoyed the one-to-one attention and time alone with an adult. The portal is user-friendly and the training is good. (W)

I didn’t mind doing the Baseline Assessment, I thought the questions were fair and did help me have some idea of their current understanding for Maths and Literacy. (W)

I do like the fact that due to the script and the activities, we are sure that our assessment is consistent across our year group and other schools (W).

The comments from some of the survey’s respondents reflected a preference for a standardised assessment that is ‘objective’, ‘quantifiable’, ‘fair’ and ‘consistent across our year group and other schools’.

These views, were however, in a minority.

3.4 ‘It’s not going to reflect anything that would be useful’: scripted testing and closed questions

Comments from the survey suggested that the format of RBA operated as a barrier to getting to know the children, given the fact that classroom interaction time was constrained. 77% of the respondents to the survey disagreed that the ‘RBA provided useful information I wouldn’t otherwise have had about the children’. A Nursery Teacher in School B was doubtful about the usefulness of the RBA in terms of supporting pupils’ learning ‘unless they [the government] want to show progress’:

What would be the results? Would we get any of the information? Do we know? We don’t know. No. It’s a government tick box exercise and it’s not going to reflect anything that would be useful to even the government people ... You know, it’s going to make the children look like they can’t do anything at the beginning. Unless they want to show progress. So ... ‘our nurseries are fantastic because they got zero out of twenty and then at the end of the term they can do it and look at all the evidence that’s there rather than a ticker exercise’. I just think it is extra work. (NT1, School B)

The scripted nature of the test offered few opportunities for exploring learning and engaging with the knowledge of pupils: ‘It doesn’t fit in with our philosophy or ethos [that is in line with the EYFS]’, ‘Following a script did not allow an open conversation with the child’.
Section 3: What Reception Baseline Assessment contributes to teachers’ knowledge of children

It just seems like a monumental waste of a week of a practitioner’s time. I don’t know if you could hive it off to an admin assistant to be honest because you are just reading scripts and they are just answering the questions. But I am dictating the script, I am not having a meaningful dialogue about anything. (RT2, School D)

Early years practice is underpinned by socio-cultural theory in which positive sets of relationships and environments are carefully co-constructed to support young children’s learning. The digitised and scripted nature of RBA has the unintentional effect of reducing the important relationship between teacher and child to that of a datafied test in which teachers become data scanners and children data objects as if in a supermarket.

It’s as if reception children are a commodity to be scanned by staff trained only in scanning items (W)

A Deputy Head noted in an interview that the script, which discouraged conversations, was already proving to be a problem (in her own RBA tests so far), and in time might change what it meant to be a [Reception] teacher in terms of supporting and scaffolding children’s learning:

I think RT1 [an NQT] might find it more difficult to do than I do because RT1 has the open conversations in class, all the time. RT1 is having those conversations and she is following EYFS practice, of the conversation side of things. So, supporting and scaffolding their learning, through the conversations that they’re having. That valuable teacher input that provokes valuable conversations with the teacher/teaching assistant, no matter what. So, coming out of class to do the RBA, where it is really closed questioning, I think it might take RT1 longer to do it because they’re going to want to discuss with her more. For me, taking them out, as Deputy Head, we have had conversations but it’s not every day that we’re having those conversations. So, it’s a slightly different thing and I think it would be more difficult for RT1 to achieve it than me (DH1, School C).

The children wanted to chat to me during the assessments and tell me other things that linked to their lives and showed me their knowledge but the assessments were too narrow to take account of this. (W)
Section 3: What Reception Baseline Assessment contributes to teachers’ knowledge of children

The comments echo the observations of previous researchers – Ball’s reflection on changes in ‘what it means to be a teacher’ (Ball 2016, 1050) and Brown and Carr’s observation (2018, 16) that children’s stressful responses may be ‘painful’ for teachers, in terms of the shift in pedagogic roles that testing imposes, ‘where the teacher was repositioned as controller of children, as opposed to her more usual classroom involvement in helping and supporting students’. In our case study interviews this repositioning of Reception teachers, away from their pedagogic values of carefully listening to young children and towards a scripted standardised test, led to frustration and stress.

3.5 The RBA’s scoring system: ‘a single objective binary yes/no decision’

A Deputy Head at School C expressed serious concerns on the narrow range and binary scoring of the RBA, which she felt to be inconsistent with the EYFS. She questioned the accessibility of the questions:

Some of the questions could be more open. They’re very closed questions and the nature of Early Years is such that we don’t tend to ask closed questions. We tend to ask open questions, to see what the child is able to volunteer so I have a problem with that. Some of the phonetical knowledge of the cat/donkey section; the majority of our children could not access that at all. It was only three or four of our children, who had strong language backgrounds ... Others were just pointing randomly. (DH1, School C)

An Early Years Coordinator at School A had similar concerns about the narrowly prescribed answers, ‘there are things that need to be tweaked in it, certainly’:

Some of the responses from the children, for example, one of the questions asks for a child to name a particular object that I’m pointing to. And one of the things that we haven’t had any guidance on is what happens if the child mispronounces the name of that object. Quite a high number of the children that I’ve tested so far have mispronounced the name of that object [using the same word]. (EYC1, School A)
Section 3: What Reception Baseline Assessment contributes to teachers’ knowledge of children

You can’t really be subjective with it, it’s a yes or a no ... there’s one of the questions is the adult has to point to a bird’s nest and they say to the child, “What is this?” Some of RT2’s children had said, “Net.” And actually, I would have almost have been tempted to give them the answer because I think, “Oh, you do know what it is, it’s just that your pronunciation’s not quite there.” But we spoke about that and actually we’ve agreed that if they say kind of ‘net’ and it doesn’t sound exactly like ‘nest’ then it’s a no. (RT1, School A)

3.6 Barriers to getting to know the children

Many teachers (76.5%) regarded the RBA as not fit for purpose in terms of supporting and getting to know Reception pupils. Some of these concerns were about the extent of time spent away from the classroom and children, and the conditions associated with ‘testing in isolation’.

Some respondents in the survey considered the RBA as a barrier which stood in the way of getting to know their pupils at the beginning of the school year and did not provide any useful information about them.

In fact I think I knew less about most children in those first weeks as I was out of the classroom! (W)

By completing the new baseline assessment, it took me away from the class to complete the assessment within the first couple of weeks when I should be spending the time getting to know the children building a strong relationship with the children. (W)

A government tracking/monitoring device with little use for schools/teachers so far. I had to make notes as I was going through the assessment because after it is completed the ‘report’ for each child is minimal and not of particular use. Teachers know their curriculum and know what they need to find out about children’s prior learning in order to pitch activities correctly - let us get on with it! Baseline isn’t for teachers or children, it’s just for government agenda. (W)

I found it a waste of my time, I would have found out everything the assessments showed me during my group work and working in continuous provision. I feel that I have spent less time getting to know the children and teaching children in small groups. I actually feel that the RBA has prevented me from doing my job as a teacher. (W)
Some teachers were clearly concerned with the RBA’s requirement that they take time out of the classroom to assess pupils on a one-to-one basis:

When a potential new parent visited our setting to look around, the administration of this test looked awful (from a safeguarding and well-being perspective) - one child and one adult enclosed in a quiet classroom, with ‘Do Not Disturb’ on the door, carrying out a very prescriptive TEST.... (W)

It has been a formal test which has taken them away from their friends and put them in an isolated space with someone they don’t know well. (W)

3.7 ‘Bears little resemblance to what they achieve in Year 2 or Year 6’: Useful as a measure of progress?

Respondents had serious concerns about the usefulness of RBA data as a measure of future progress in terms of predicting what children will achieve in 7 years when they reach Year 6:

We have closely tracked the progress of individual pupils and what they attain in Reception. Bears little resemblance on what they achieve in Year 2 or Year 6. Last year we had exactly the same number of children reach Greater Depth in writing as their cohort did in Reception, but when we looked at the names, not one of them was the same! (W)

Did not believe it will be true reflection of children’s knowledge or skills nor tool for measuring their progress in FS and when they reach year 6. (W)
Respondents challenged the logic of linear child development and learning which the RBA seemed intent to establish through its particular technology of digital tracking:

Children are not little robots and do not all make progress in a linear manner. Keeping track of children’s progress and attainment is, of course, very important but to think that a baseline done when you are 4 years old should then dictate your progress until year 6 is ridiculous. It’s just another stick to beat teachers with when children don’t continue to achieve in a linear fashion like robots. (W)

This assessment is purely to judge the school from the supposed entry attainment to what children achieve in Year 6. Teachers cannot use their assessments to aid learning, so for the children it is pointless. It is an accountability exercise only, which will be misleading as it expects children to be like machines progressing seamlessly from A- Z without accounting for individual experiences along the way. (W)

3.8 RBA re-contextualizes data into units of measurables

Results from the survey and interviews bring into question the usefulness of RBA as an accountability tracker for measuring primary schools’ progress. Its method of delivery did not reflect the ethos of early years in terms of the EYFS framework. This was apparent in the way the test was administered, and its intention of measuring progress only through the specific areas of phonics and maths. Some of the issues raised are related to the RBA’s problematic assumption that ‘mathematical tasks’ and ‘literacy, communication and language tasks’ are measurable with Reception age pupils (STA 2019). The assumptions framed maths and phonics as deliverable components (commodities) and through an accountability narrative, re-contextualized them as units of measurables ready for use at the end of year 6 as an indicator of school-level progress.

The scripted format displaced dialogue and ignored what might seem meaningful for pupils and teachers. Indeed, 77% of survey respondents disagreed that the RBA had provided useful information about children in Reception. Other comments suggested the RBA was ineffective for teaching and lesson planning as it was limited to specific areas of learning. The format of testing itself excludes the social context of learning - how learning and knowledge relate to the world and to the capacity, or agency, of pupils to use knowledge to shape it. In measuring data in this particular way, the RBA ignores children’s experiences as irrelevant to the test.
Section 4:
RBA’s impact on workload, school staffing arrangements and resources

Research into the 2019 Pilot of Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA).
In this section we explore the varied responses from the survey and case study interviews of RBA’s impact on teachers’ workload in terms of organising and managing time for teaching and curriculum. We also consider the impact of RBA on schools’ budgets, supply costs and resources. Many teachers felt the RBA had impacted greatly on their workload as they were required to spend increasing amounts of their time implementing the RBA whilst delivering their existing teaching and baseline assessments. There is a general sense of unsettledness and confusion for teachers and pupils, at a time of the school year when putting in place ‘normal routines’ are usually of priority: ‘How do we manage that we’re meeting those children’s emotional needs, but I’m stepping out of the class regularly and making sure that their experience in our school is a high quality one?’ (EYC1, School A)
4.1 ‘Increasing my workload which I thought DfE wanted to reduce?’: organising and managing teaching and curriculum

83% of survey respondents reported that RBA had increased their workload this year as the RBA ‘did not assess for all areas of the curriculum which meant that these had to be assessed separately and added to my workload’ (W). An even higher proportion of Nursery teachers (92%) agreed that the ‘RBA has added to my workload this year’ than teachers or senior leaders. These figures are particularly concerning because a quarter of teachers in England already report working over 60 hours each week. (Weale, 2019; Allen et al 2019). The majority of survey comments identify time as an ‘important and valuable’ resource in the first six weeks of the autumn term in ‘settling the children in to their new routines’. An early years coordinator referred to managing workload as a ‘juggling act’ in ensuring a ‘quality baseline’ in terms of children’s emotional settling in:

the observations that we would normally take of them, beginning to play, beginning to interact with the learning environment, beginning to interact with the adults in the learning environment, beginning to bring their own ideas to the table, we still have to ensure that that carries on to a high quality degree. As well as myself, as the teacher, coming out of the classroom. So my workload, in a way, has doubled... It’s been a juggling act, certainly. (EYC1, School A)

Figure 4.1: RBA pilot has added to my workload this year
Section 4: RBA’s impact on workload school staffing arrangements and resources

Whilst delivering this, myself and other teachers have had to plan for sessions we are not teaching and direct staff to manage the other children. I have still had to do my own observations, with more time spent recording, levelling and moderating having to take place in my own time. (W)

It has doubled our workload. Doing just the new government one is not an option as it does not provide us with the useful information we need. (W)

So workload was doubled. Also we didn’t have ‘a quiet space’ to complete assessments so staff had to deal with all pupils whilst completing assessments. (W)

Using Planning, Preparation and Assessment time to conduct the RBA

Teachers used their PPA (planning, preparation and assessment) time to conduct the RBA test. This is ironic because PPA time was introduced to help ease teachers’ workload by giving them time during their normal working week to plan and prepare lessons and work on assessments for the children they teach. The aim of PPA time is to reduce the number of hours that teachers need to put into planning lessons and marking during evenings and at the weekend. RBA, which was presented as a device to assist teachers, now occupies that time:

Having to use all of my PPA time to complete the baseline as I cannot leave the other 29 new children with one TA. This means the work I would have completed in PPA time is being done at lunchtime or after school. After completing the baseline I will still have to do our usual on entry assessments. (W)

I had to use my PPA time to get all of the children’s information together, collect permission slips from parents and input all of the data into the RBA system. The assessments claimed to be 20 minutes, however I found it to be nearly 40 minutes if you combine the two assessments and walking back and forth to the classroom to collect the children. (W)

4.2 ‘60 children x 20 mins - 20 hours of utter nonsense’: RBA displaces classroom priorities

The STA (STA 2019, 5) approximates 20 minutes to administer the test and expects that ‘that this average will reduce over time as practitioners become more familiar with the materials and the administration instructions’. However, 80% of respondents reported that the RBA took 20 minutes or more, whilst a third of respondents said that the test took 30 minutes or more. Many teachers spoke in terms of being out of the class for two weeks. A reception teacher in School A highlighted that she spent significant time before the test on finding a suitable quiet site, and then selecting and inviting pupils:

Start to finish, each test will take almost half an hour I’d say 25 minutes to half an hour ... but then, only really a maximum of three
Section 4: RBA’s impact on workload school staffing arrangements and resources

4.3 ‘TA was left with a class of children on her own’: RBA impacts on teaching assistant and support staff

The potential for negative impact on teaching assistants and support staff - which relates to teamwork, staff morale and stress level - is troubling. This is reflected in survey comments and interviews:

I think it’s going to really impact on teacher workload and the whole teams stress level because they will be stretched further and I think wellbeing is absolutely fundamental for staff who work in early years. [...] When you take one person out of that, it stretches the whole team and the whole team feel it. Yes, I think it would have a negative impact on how the team feel and energy levels and what the team can give to the children as they’re settling. (DH1, School B).

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Figure 4.2: RBA pilot has taken the following amount of time per child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Duration</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 20 minutes</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 minutes or more</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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children that I could do on the run because of the routine of the day, and needing to be present for phonics, and needing to be present at lunchtime. (RT1, School A)

For some schools, the RBA relocated teachers’ time away from the classroom which probably has the greatest potential for disrupting routines, ‘Adults have wasted time testing children instead of building vital, trusting relationships. Settling for some children has thus been a slow process. (EYC, survey)’ Some respondents viewed RBA as having a more significant impact on teachers’ workload and their professional ‘self’ rather than on pupils’ experiences, ‘I don’t think it will impact on them directly. But it is having an impact on how I manage my routines, knowing that I am leading towards a period where I will not be the circling kestrel of my EYFS setting because I will be sitting 1:1 with children’ (W).
Section 4: RBA’s impact on workload school staffing arrangements and resources

Huge negative impact. I barely got to know the class for the first two weeks as I was continually calling children to come into a corridor to do the test. My TA was left with a class of children on her own, trying desperately hard to establish routines and get to know the children. (W)

Teachers are having to spend too much time away from the whole class to complete the new baseline assessments; workload is falling onto TAs also having to manage the class as teachers are busy working 1-1. Disruption to normal routines is negatively impacting the children’s settling in period, behaviour has been affected and children have not had the opportunity to bond with their new teacher. TAs are also the only members of staff taking observations of children for their learning journeys. I am already feeling high levels of stress. (W)

For some respondents, establishing consistent day-to-day classroom routines was halted. Reception teachers’ spent time out of class administering the RBA and as a consequence teaching assistants were mobilised to manage Reception classes on their own.

This year it has taken me so much longer to get to know my class as I have had to remove them to complete a computer-based test which took a lot longer than 20 minutes!! Extra pressure has been put on my TA […] when I should have been establishing routines and expectations with them. (W)

This was a very onerous task which took me away from settling and getting to know the children and at a time of settling behaviours and learning rules and routines it left my TA with the class except the one pupil taking part in the baseline. (W)

I just feel I am missing out on time spent with my pupils nurturing and assessing other Prime areas. The baseline is exclusively maths and literacy with some communication (understanding, listening), this is not assessing the whole child. I have requested where else I should place my obs and assessment of other areas. Awaiting answer. As this test has to be done outside of the classroom, I have cover teachers or TAs looking after my class and I do not feel that this is consistent contact so early on for my pupils, they need their teacher for reassurance. (W)
4.4 ‘It’s a lot of stress on teachers’: RBA impacts on teachers’ wellbeing

Workload levels and stress were pointed to as a major problem facing those trying to keep and retain teachers in the profession. According to a National Audit Office survey, 67% of school leaders reported that workload was a barrier to teacher retention in their school (NAO 2017). Some of the effects of RBA should be understood in this context. Additional demands on time adding to workload was viewed by respondents as one of the biggest problems of the RBA. This is evident in respondents’ comments in terms of ‘stress’ impacting upon teachers’ well-being.

The stress of finding a quiet yet friendly space, an internet enabled device which actually stayed linked up to the system for the whole process, and the knowledge that you are away from your class for too long made the whole process very trying. (W)

Our setting with 45 children and 3 adults was 1 adult out of the equation for 2 weeks to do baseline. This gave the children a disrupted and patchy education and it was hugely stressful and led to an exhausting time for staff. (W)

Making the portal only accessible between 8 and 6 also adds stress because it is very hard during the day to actually STOP to do all the necessary preparation and training that could be done whilst at home at a weekend or early evening. (W)

What a terrible idea! I believe it to be inaccurate, wasteful of much needed funds and unnecessarily stressful for staff and children. (W)

We found that we have to spend time doing the assessment in our own time which we are not paid to do. It’s a lot of stress on teachers to have to complete them by a certain deadline but also having to take extra load on as well. (W)

Experiences such as these led to some of the teachers expressing concern around their increased levels of stress. This is not surprising given that there is considerable evidence to suggest that pervasive feelings of mistrust can corrode self-esteem and confidence leading to anxiety, anger and self-doubt.

It’s a lot of stress on teachers to have to complete them by a certain deadline but also having to take extra load on as well as everything else (W).
Section 4: RBA’s impact on workload school staffing arrangements and resources

Having to find 25 minutes per child out of class on a 1:1 basis in a quiet space (in a school with limited room options) whilst having to support their transition and settling into ‘big school’ has been a huge drain on the staff in my team. Having had 3 children arrive in September with very demanding needs without prior warning, having an adult taken away to complete the baselines has meant that the workload of other staff has been greatly impacted upon, resulting in staff feeling anxious and stressed about the needs of the children and the impending deadlines for both sets of baselines. (W)

These comments are reflective of a recent national survey of teachers’ well-being which found that 31% of teachers have experienced a mental health problem in the past academic year with counsellors ‘hearing daily from those struggling with the demands of ever-greater accountability, a growing testing culture and high levels of workload’ (Speck, 2018). The 2018 Pre-School Learning Alliance survey of the mental health and well-being of 2,039 early years practitioners, mostly working in the child care sector, cited mental health impacts experienced due to work: fatigue (60%), loss of motivation (58%), anxiety (57%) and insomnia (53%), while a quarter (26 per cent) had experienced depression. The practitioners noted high workloads, financial pressures from a lack of Government funding, and low pay, leading to high stress levels. The survey respondents also referred to ‘out of control’ workload pressures and ‘excessive’ accountability amid complaints about the pressures of Ofsted inspections, leading to 25% of respondents considering leaving the early years sector. Likewise, in this current research the imposition of RBA had made three survey respondents consider leaving the profession:

I handed in my resignation earlier in the academic year. One of my concerns was the Baseline testing and the constant pressures put upon EYFS to produce the appropriate data. When there was talk that the Baseline was returning, I knew it was time for me to leave teaching. (W).

Another reason to quit teaching! Absolute waste of my time and that of the children. (W).

Invest in teachers and reduce workload!! So many good teachers are leaving due lack of support, workload, stress and pressure! (W)
4.5 ‘It would be quite a lot for a newly qualified teacher to get their head around’: RBA’s impact on NQTs and their deployment

A newly qualified teacher (NQT) in School C described how she felt about her workload:

It will just be stressful, very stressful. It would just be a lot of extra things that I need to do. The start of the year is very stressful anyway because you’ve got so much to do. Obviously, the Reception class, you’re getting used to your children. You have to do focused activities in Reception, twice a week, so, that will impact on those and that will impact on what they’re learning … So, that will be an added stress and I will be leaving school later and coming in earlier. There are not enough hours in the day to squeeze everything in, either. (RT1, School C)

An experienced Reception teacher with over 12 years of teaching was not sure of NQTs administering RBA: ‘How are they going to cope?’

It’s fine for me who’s got a lot of experience in leading an early years department and in teaching in early years … schools come in all forms and shapes and sizes. And I wonder about one-form entry schools. One of our partner schools in the borough is only a one-form entry school, and that just means there is one Reception class - it is one class teacher and one teaching assistant, usually. The school that I’m thinking of, currently the teacher there is just in the middle of completing her NQT year, so she’s still a very young teacher who’s new to early years in a way. So I wonder how she would cope, for example (EYC1, School A).

School C’s Deputy Head wondered if she should re-deploy NQTs into other year groups rather starting with Reception, which in a way reproduced the hierarchical sorting of pupils with different abilities deemed ready for the RBA:

Probably; I think it would also affect our ability to put newly qualified teachers in Reception because I think it would be quite a lot for a newly qualified teacher to get their head around. I think we’d be much more likely to put them in a Year group without a form of assessment, in the first six weeks, than put them in Reception because that’s quite a lot to get your head around for an NQT particularly (DH1, School C).

The findings presented in Section 4 have highlighted the ways in which RBA has had unintended effects beyond the immediate ‘borders’ of test administration. Its presentation as ‘light touch’ is to this extent misleading. It problematically disregards situated factors that go into the administration of the test. These factors include the physical site, the catchment area, competent leadership, amount of time for preparation and testing, the teaching support afforded, and the settling of new pupils and so on. Previous research on policy enactment in schools has foregrounded the importance of contexts and processes. (Ball et al, 2012). RBA needs to be understood in the broader context of its effects.
4.6 The Impact of Reception Baseline Assessment on Teachers’ Professionalism

An analysis by role demonstrated that 90% of Nursery teachers, 76% of Reception, Key Stage 1 teachers and EYFS Coordinators and 75% of primary school leaders felt that RBA devalued the professional judgements of early years staff. This was reinforced by comments made by staff in the case study schools and in the survey itself.

We aren’t trusted as a profession, the government don’t trust us, they really don’t (HT, School F).

I think the message is that we don’t value your professional judgement and when it’s too prescribed and scripted like that, it can be really … it takes away that agency really, from teachers (DH1, School C).

Stop data driven teaching. Respect and trust early years teacher’s ongoing assessment (W).

These teachers wanted to be trusted, respected and given confidence by the Government in their professional competencies, judgements and integrity. Amongst experienced early years teachers there was a sense that RBA was corrosive of their professional identity to the point that it made them ‘feel like a failure’.

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It was useless and completely devalued teacher’s professional expertise. The government should trust early years teachers who have a brilliant understanding of how to observe and assess children without the need for formal testing. (W).

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Years and years of study & experience are devalued and expertise in working holistically to enable and educate young children is made redundant. (W).

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Years of studying and research have accounted for nothing. The EY sector is devalued, there is no understanding of what teaching in EYs entails by SLTs and it makes you, as a practitioner feel like a failure. (W).

For these experienced early years professionals, the imposition of RBA had the effect of making them feel that their hard fought for qualifications and many years of service counted for ‘nothing’.
4.7 The financial and hidden costs of RBA in austerity: ‘we are massively underfunded’

For many schools experiencing austerity, implementing the RBA imposes difficult ‘accountability-driven decision-making’ (Ball, 2016, 1054). This is largely due to RBA’s demands on already depleted school budgets, demands which further tightened limited resources within schools. These hidden costs were often obscured, unaccounted for, and left out of focus when viewing the RBA through the sole lens of its status as an accountability measure. The RBA, as already discussed in previous sections, is disruptive of setting in routines and in some schools, supply teachers were bought in as an attempt to minimise this disruption. Teachers reported that they were using their PPA (Planning, Preparation and Assessment) time, and lunch time, to collate, moderate and input the data into online systems.

Many primary schools could not afford to buy in additional support and resorted to redeploying staff from other year groups and support staff from additional needs pupils. In a case study school running on limited facilities, the deputy head teacher was asked if Reception could conduct the RBA based on their current staffing arrangement, and replied ‘No, not without the school diverting resources from elsewhere’ within the school:

We will have to take support away from other children and put it into Reception to be able to facilitate it being done. However, that’s taking support away from children that need that support. (DH1, School C)
This diversion of resources was reflected in the survey responses:

The tests were carried out by other members of staffing. (W)

Foundation teacher rightly does assessment therefore other staff have to support Foundation to keep the correct ratio. (W)

I could weep. We are massively underfunded with increasing numbers of children with additional need and no staff to support them. Year on year I am witness to a decline in speech and language in our young children that has long lasting effects on their academic progress and attainment and the answer to these issues is a computer driven assessment programme?! Give us staff, give us nurseries that are able to prepare our children for school. Invest in our children. (W)

Some respondents reported that their schools bought in supply teachers to cover lessons and to help them conduct RBA at a time when most schools are running with budget constraints.

I STRONGLY AGREE that the teachers at my school have had their workload increased and it has meant employing supply teachers so that the real teacher can complete detailed assessments! (W)

The school has spent money on supply teachers to cover me whilst I conduct the RBA in a quiet space away from the classroom. (W)

It cost the school 4 half days’ supply to allow me the class teacher to complete the baseline. (W)

We have lost so much money as a school we have lost staff. Now we are understaffed and have an increased workload. How does that make sense? (W)
With Reception teachers’ absences from their class, they were also concerned about not being able to establish consistency as key persons and set expectations:

So you need consistency, especially to establish a kind of routine and to establish those expectations. It’s a bit like when there’s a supply teacher, for example, children will play up a bit, won’t they, because they think, ‘Oh well, you’re not here all the time so I can push boundaries.’ (RT1, School A)
4.8 ‘Wow! What a huge waste of money’: investing in accountability for schools

91% of respondents in the survey disagreed that the ‘RBA (costing £10 million) is a good investment in primary school education’, only a very small proportion (4%) agreed that the RBA represented a good investment. Almost all Nursery teachers (98%) disagreed with the statement.

The RBA is viewed as a distraction from the complex lives of families living in poverty in deprived areas, and the massive shortfall in early years funding:

Because of funding and austerity and all the rest of it, all of the extra resources that used to be in place for parents, when they’ve got small children and babies, particularly young parents, particularly in deprived areas, it’s all gone. So Sure Start has gone, your number of health visitors is dropping, everything that should be put into place like health visiting and stuff like libraries and all of those things, if you really, really, really believed in it, that’s what you would invest in ...now if the government really wanted to make a difference to education but you wouldn’t see the benefit of this for years, what you do is, you massively, massively invest in early years education, as in nursery schools and pre-schools and you get all of that community stuff going again.... most headteachers particularly those with nurseries would tell you that. It’s crystal clear’ (HT, School F).
Conclusion

Research into the 2019 Pilot of Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA).
Impacts on children

Teachers in our survey and in our case study schools reported that some children experienced RBA as stressful and this had detrimental effects upon their wellbeing. Teachers reported that children were aware of their success or otherwise in the RBA. This was something that teachers felt could potentially lead to the unintended consequence of some four year olds labelling themselves as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ learners. Teachers were concerned that RBA inadvertently ‘labelled’ particular children such as EAL, summer born, disadvantaged and SEN children, contributing to low expectations at the beginning of their school journey.

The RBA ratchets up the performance demanded of a child (and a teacher) during the sensitive settling in period. RBA’s intensification of accountability work involves stress, emotional upset and uncertainty for children (and teachers). The RBA contributes to a redefining of caring for children as ensuring they achieve prescribed narrow academic goals. For younger children, Goldstein (2017, 16) has noted the detrimental effects of school accountability on well-being.

RBA as a ‘flawed’ baseline measure

The wide range of contextual variables including children’s date of birth, gender, family background, levels of confidence, EAL, and SEN and whether or not the children had attended a nursery meant that only 20% of teachers believed that RBA provided an accurate picture of children’s current attainment. Children’s complex realities remain ‘a source of unmeasured bias’ in the RBA (Goldstein et al., 2018: 18) so that the RBA is likely not only to disadvantage children unfairly, but also to ‘systematically favour schools serving fewer disadvantaged pupils, and penalise schools serving higher numbers of disadvantaged children’ (Goldstein et al, 2018: 18). These complexities led 84% of our survey respondents to state that RBA was an unreliable or inaccurate way to measure children’s progress over 7 years of primary school.
Impact on Early Years teachers’ settling-in pedagogy

Our survey respondents and case study teachers felt that RBA signalled a significant shift towards formalised testing of four-year-olds’ literacy and maths. The RBA strategically connects Reception classes, working within the child-centred EYFS framework, to primary schools’ KS1 and KS2 performance measures through a sharp re-focusing of attention on numeracy and literacy. Teachers struggled to make sense of how their child-centred values, inscribed in the holistic EYFS principles and curriculum, could be reconciled with the demand to work on the basis of the tightly prescribed and narrow accountability demands of the RBA. They were concerned that by solely focusing on the ‘important’ subjects of maths and literacy, the RBA would inadvertently narrow and undermine the EYFS curriculum with increasingly little space left for teachers to improvise or be creative. There was a general sense of unsettledness and confusion for teachers and children at a time of the school year when ‘normal routines’ and relationship building need to be put in place: 69% of teachers disagreed that RBA had helped to develop positive relationships with the children in Reception. Our survey findings and case studies demonstrated that RBA did not help Reception teachers to know and understand their children in order to support their learning in a meaningful way.

Our research demonstrated, too, that RBA’s reduced and narrowed focus is problematic and in tension with the child centred socio-cultural approach to early learning and child development represented by the EYFS. In this, the RBA worked to strategically increase the reach and spread of the National Curriculum’s KS1 and KS2 standardised testing of literacy and maths into Reception classes and, potentially the EYFS more generally. In the process, RBA would establish a new norm: it would become routine to test children in the first six weeks of Reception through a screen-based script that minimises meaningful teacher-pupil dialogue and interaction.

Impacts on teachers’ workload in the settling-in period

83% of teachers reported that RBA has added to their overall workload. Schools reported an intensification of teachers’ and teaching assistants’ workload exacerbated by the timing of the RBA at an extremely busy and stressful time of the school year. RBA had increased workload by requiring teachers to spend increasing amounts of time implementing the RBA and at the same time delivering their existing teaching and EYFS baseline assessments. Some schools that had initially signed up to RBA, withdrew because of the additional workload. 80% of teachers reported that RBA took 20 minutes or more per child to complete whilst 29% of respondents reported that the test took 30 minutes or more to complete leading to reduced teacher time to build positive relationships.
Conclusion

**Teachers preferred their own on-entry assessments**

85% of our survey respondents reported that their existing school baseline assessments were purposefully linked from the EYFS whereas the RBA seemed disconnected with the EYFS. 77% of teachers disagreed that the ‘RBA provided useful information I wouldn’t otherwise have had about the children’ because the tightly scripted and formatted style of RBA operated as a barrier in developing positive relationships and getting to know and understand the children. The scripted nature of the test offered very little opportunity for exploring learning and engaging with the existing knowledge of pupils compared to their own on-entry assessments.

**Impacts on Teachers’ Professionalism**

77% per cent of respondents felt that Reception Baseline Assessment devalued their professional assessments and judgements. Teachers in our survey and case study schools felt that RBA mistrusts Reception teachers’ professional judgements. Teachers in our survey and case study schools noted that RBA was a digitally scripted test written by and for digital ‘experts’ and not by and for early years educationalists. More experienced teachers felt that RBA was corrosive and undermining of their professional identity making them ‘feel like a failure’.

Some of teachers in our study, particularly the more experienced staff, shared with us their frustrations as they struggled to both care for the individual ‘unique child’ (EYFS 2017, 3) and at the same time meet RBA’s standardised demands. It is possible that the imposition of RBA runs the risk of creating for some early years teachers the feeling that they no longer have a place in the profession.

**Impacts of RBA Costs**

Our survey and case study data demonstrated that RBA has cost implications for supply cover and the moving around of staff and time away from young children’s ‘settling in period’. In some schools supply teachers were bought in, in an attempt to minimise disruption during the ‘settling in’ period. Other primary schools re-deployed staff from other year groups as well as support staff who were taken away from their work with additional needs pupils. 91% of respondents in the survey disagreed that the ‘RBA (costing £10 million) is a good investment in primary school education’.

**BERA’s Expert Panel Report into RBA concluded that:**

‘The government’s proposals for the reception baseline assessment are flawed, unjustified, and wholly unfit for purpose. They would be detrimental to children, parents, teachers, and the wider education system in England. ... [The] proposals must be comprehensively rethought’ (Goldstein et al, 2018, 30).

Our research points towards a similar conclusion.
Appendix

Research into the 2019 Pilot of Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA).
Research survey

The DfE intends to use Reception Baseline Assessment to develop a progress measure of children’s attainment in literacy and maths across seven years of primary school starting from Reception Year in 2020 to Year 6 in 2027. We are interested to hear the views from a wide range of nursery, early years and primary teachers in KS1 and KS2 year groups as Baseline Assessment, if implemented, may potentially affect the whole primary school. So, could you help us by doing the following important and quick survey?

The research is funded by the National Education Union (NEU). All information collected will be strictly anonymous, so your name and the name of your school will not be known. The survey is being conducted under the ethical guidelines provided by the British Education Research Association (BERA) and the UCL Institute of Education.

Thanks very much indeed!

UCL Institute of Education.

Which of the following best describes your current role?

- Teaching Assistant
- Nursery teacher
- Reception Teacher
- KS1 or KS2 Primary school teacher
- EYFS Co-ordinator
- Deputy Head teacher
- Other

Which of the following best describes the school where you work?

- Nursery School
- Maintained Primary School
- Academy
- Free School
- Independent School
- Other

How many years of experience do you have working in schools?

- Under 3 years
- 3-12 years
- Over 12 years
- Not applicable
Is your school taking part in Reception Baseline Assessment pilot?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, what are the reasons your school is taking part in the Reception Baseline Assessment pilot?

Comment

My school already has an existing on-entry assessment which supports teaching and learning

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Don’t Know

Comment

If no, what are the reasons your school is not taking part in Reception Baseline Assessment pilot?

Comment

Reception Baseline Assessment provides an accurate picture of children’s current attainment

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Don’t Know

Comment
Reception Baseline Assessment is a reliable and accurate basis for the development of a progress measure across seven years of primary school

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don’t Know

Comment

Reception Baseline Assessment has had an impact on teaching in the “settling in” period

- Positive impact
- Negative impact
- No impact
- Don’t Know

Comment

Reception Baseline Assessment devalues early years teachers’ professional judgement

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don’t Know

Comment

Reception Baseline Assessment has added to workloads

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don’t Know

Comment
**Reception Baseline Assessment took approximately the following time per child**

- 10 minutes
- 15 minutes
- 20 minutes
- 25 minutes
- 30 minutes
- longer

**Comment**

**Reception Baseline Assessment has helped to develop positive relationships with the children**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don’t Know

**Comment**

**Reception Baseline Assessment has provided useful information**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don’t Know

**Comment**

**Reception Baseline Assessment is detrimental to some children’s self-confidence**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don’t Know

**Comment**

**Appendix:** Reception Baseline Assessment 2019 Pilot
Parents in my school know about Reception Baseline Assessment

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don’t Know

Comment

Reception Baseline Assessment, costing 10 million pounds, is a good investment in primary school education

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don’t Know

Comment

Do you have any further comments you would like to make about Reception Baseline Assessment?

Comment
Research into the 2019 Pilot of Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA).


Gibbons, A. (2020) Most parents oppose Reception baseline test


More Than A Score (2019) Primary school leaders deliver damning verdict on high-pressure testing. Available at:
https://www.morethanascorer.org.uk/primary-school-leaders-deliver-damning-verdict-on-high-pressure-testing/


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