



Association for Achievement and
Improvement through Assessment

Assessing children's attainments in the foundation stage

Guidance produced by the Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment (AAIA) Summer 2007

The wording of the Primary SEF Part 3, specifically the prompt about 'learners' progress relative to their starting points' in Part 3a, requires that schools provide an **indication of children's attainments on entry to school**. In addition, schools are often asked at the time of inspections for evidence of on entry attainment.

Related to this are questions about the **use of baseline assessments and tests**, including computer based assessments, for gaining an indication of children's attainments on entry to school and later in the foundation stage.

For the purposes of tracking progression beyond the foundation stage, further questions arise about the **relationship between foundation stage assessments based on the early learning goals and attainment in terms of National Curriculum levels**.

This guidance has been prepared to support schools in responding to these questions within the context of appropriate practice within the foundation stage and to support them in developing effective assessment practice for the early years. During its preparation, AAIA has been in discussion with both OFSTED and the NAA. The guidance is written with reference to current requirements and documentation although the foundation stage will be subsumed into the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2008.¹ The guidance will therefore be updated as appropriate with the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Please note: In this document, all quotations from DfES, OFSTED, QCA, NAA and PNS sources appear in italics.

¹ In September 2008, the Early Years Foundation Stage will bring together the foundation stage and Birth to 3 Matters within one comprehensive stage. Current documentation such as the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* will be superseded by new guidance. The early learning goals will remain, with one change for Linking sounds and letters. The Foundation Stage Profile will be renamed the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile but will remain unchanged apart from two points in the scale for Linking sounds and letters that will be altered in line with the changed early learning goal.

What is the appropriate way of assessing children's attainment on entry to school?

The *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* provides a framework to support practitioners in developing an appropriate curriculum for young children and in developing practice that encourages child initiated play based learning. The guidance also contains the educational outcomes for children in the foundation stage in the form of the early learning goals for the six areas of learning, and stepping stones that map progression towards the early learning goals.

By the end of the foundation stage, children's attainments in relation to the early learning goals should be summarised using the *Foundation Stage Profile*. Assessments for the Profile should be based upon cumulative evidence from children's day to day learning and, while the Profile should be completed by the end of the reception year, it is designed to be built gradually over time on the basis of teachers' on-going observations and other relevant evidence.

The Profile Handbook (Qualifications and Assessment Authority 2003) states:

Throughout the foundation stage, as part of the learning and teaching process, practitioners need to assess each child's development in relation to the stepping stones and early learning goals that form part of the Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage. These assessments are made on the basis of the practitioner's accumulating observations and knowledge of the whole child. By the end of the final year of the foundation stage, the Foundation Stage Profile will provide a way of summing up that knowledge.

The use of the Foundation Stage Profile rests on the assumption that teachers build up their assessments throughout the year on a cumulative basis, from ongoing learning and teaching. The Profile has been designed to reflect this process and can be completed periodically throughout the year, using the evidence from ongoing assessment, to record the achievement of particular items in the scales.

Any assessments made early in reception or in nursery for the purpose of providing a picture of children's attainment on entry will be part of this on-going process of assessment and monitoring. Early assessments are best made once children have had time to settle into their new environments and practitioners have had time to get to know them. In any case, given that practitioners' assessment should be made on the basis of evidence obtained over time and over a range of contexts, it will not be possible to gain a first indication of children's attainments immediately. In addition, for some areas of learning where parts of the curriculum are only visited periodically (for example, aspects of Knowledge and understanding of the world), it may not be possible to make early assessments.

In summary, initial assessment should build up a picture over time for curriculum areas where evidence is available. While the primary purpose of these initial assessments is to support next steps in children's learning, once the assessments have been made, they can be summarised to give a picture of the attainments of a class or year group. This summary can be used in your SEF to give an indication of starting points and is acceptable for inspection purposes as evidence of initial attainment. For example, it would be possible to state that x% of children are working within the blue band of the stepping stones and y% are working within the green band, or attainment could be quantified in a similar way in relation to the 'development matters' in the new Early Years Foundation Stage. In order to show progress, this information could then be related to similar summary information at a later time, for example in relation to the scale points in the Foundation Stage Profile when the children reach the end of the foundation stage.

Should a baseline assessment be carried out when children enter reception?

In order to plan for children's learning, it is clearly essential that practitioners make assessments early in the reception year. (This information should be used in conjunction with assessment information received from practitioners in nursery or other early years settings.) However, this does not mean that practitioners have to use one of the baseline assessment schemes that were a requirement in reception before the introduction of the Profile. To avoid potential confusion, assessments made early in reception are better described as initial assessments rather than baseline assessments. An approach to initial assessments is outlined above (see above - **What is the appropriate way of assessing children's attainments on entry to school?**).

Specifically with regard to baseline assessments, OFSTED guidance states that:

Inspectors are aware that baseline assessments are no longer required and will not expect schools to take a particular approach to an "entry assessment".

The guidance goes on to state that:

Inspectors will, however, evaluate the contribution that assessment makes to the quality of teaching and learning and the progress made by pupils' but that 'OFSTED does not require schools or settings to organise themselves in a particular way in respect of assessment, planning or any other aspect.

Inspection of the foundation stage in maintained schools and funded nursery education settings
OFSTED 2002

The use of baseline assessments also raises issues of workload. It was in relation to workload that Margaret Hodge, then Minister of State with responsibility for the foundation stage, wrote to CEOs in March 2005 saying that she was:

concerned that some LEAs may be placing unnecessary burdens on reception teachers by asking for other assessments to be made in addition to these (statutory FSP) requirements. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some areas reception teachers are being asked to complete, for example, baseline assessments or assessment against the Key Stage 1 curriculum as well as the Foundation Stage Profile. I would be grateful for your co-operation in ensuring that reception teachers are not asked to undertake additional non-statutory requirements.

Are tests an appropriate way of assessing children during the foundation stage?

Assessments of children in relation to the early learning goals and stepping stones should be based upon evidence of what children can typically do independently. This requires evidence gained from the observation of children over time and over a range of contexts. This evidence should be obtained predominantly from the observation of children in activities that are child initiated.

Tests are therefore not an appropriate way of gaining evidence as they are by their nature one off assessments that do not reflect development and learning in a range of contexts over time and are not child initiated. They also assess only isolated aspects of children's attainments and cannot provide even partial evidence in relation to most of the stepping stones and early learning goals.

The following quotes summarise the position of the National Assessment Agency:

Where supplementary assessments are being undertaken, practitioners, senior managers and moderation managers need to ensure that they do not undermine the principles of effective early years pedagogy. Testing of children in the foundation stage, and use of test data to make judgements in the foundation stage profile, are not supported by NAA or DfES.

Implementation and moderation of foundation stage profile 2006
National Assessment Agency (NAA) Annual Monitoring Report 2006 (QCA/06/2959)

Products such as interactive games based software that children complete independently and which claim to enable practitioners to complete aspects of the FSP as the result of a one off response are not consistent with this advice. This is not a substitute for collecting evidence from observations. Similarly, products such as test materials that require foundation stage children to respond to a series of pre-set questions using a computer screen or a booklet are contradictory to NAA guidance. The results of these one off responses cannot be considered to be equivalent to the attainment of specific scale points.

NAA's position on the process of assessment is that evidence is collected as an on-going process through:

- *The practitioner's knowledge of the child*
- *Information from a range of contributors*
- *Observation of self-initiated activities*
- *Collection of anecdotal significant moments*
- *Focussed assessments*

When making a judgement for the FSP, practitioners should draw on at least 80% of evidence from knowledge of the child, observations and anecdotal assessments, and no more than 20% of evidence from adult directed or focused assessments.

Judgements are made through assessing behaviour that is demonstrated consistently and independently in a range of situations. It will need to demonstrate the child's confidence and ownership of the specific knowledge, skill or concept being assessed.

No supplementary assessments are required in addition to completing the FSP nor is there any expectation that they should take place.

National Assessment Agency (NAA) advice regarding use of supplementary materials to support making and recording judgements for the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) July 2006

Is there any national information indicating children's attainment in nursery or on entry to reception?

There is no national data that provides any indication of children's attainments either during nursery or early in reception. In relation to attainment on entry, the Primary National Strategy states:

Attainment on entry (birth to four)

Children may attend funded provision from birth, from statutory school age (the term after the child's fifth birthday), or at any point between according to parental choice. Attendance may be regular, periodic or episodic. The range of experience chosen by parents will profoundly affect the time spent in a funded setting. It is therefore most unlikely that a single national measure of attainment on entry could be devised. There are no additional current or planned national data collections upon which further statements about average, below average or above average attainment on entry to the Foundation Stage could be made.

Attainment on entry to a reception class

Most children's attainment will vary considerably across Birth to Three Matters, the six areas of learning and the 13 scales of the Foundation Stage Profile during the final year of the Foundation Stage. Progress will depend on their particular strengths and interests and the time they have spent in a funded setting. Progress can be tracked over the 3 terms in a reception class using the Foundation Stage Profile. It may not always be appropriate to do this, for example, where children are still working within Birth to Three Matters or the stepping stones.

Attainment at the end of the Foundation Stage

National data collection is at the end of the Foundation Stage through the Foundation Stage Profile ... There are currently no plans for national data collection prior to the end of the Foundation Stage. Practitioner judgements about nationally expected levels may be made in the context of Birth to Three Matters and the stepping stones of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage.

Primary National Strategy: Foundation Stage Profile data – attainment on entry

http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/features/foundation_stage/fsp_data/attainment

Given that there are no national data about children's attainments during the foundation stage, it is not possible to make statements about children's attainments in relation to national averages. While there may be an expectation that children's attainments are within the stepping stones/development matters but close to the early learning goals by the time that they begin the reception year, children's attainments will depend on a number of factors, including their age, the time at which they begin reception and their previous experiences both within education and more widely. In using the stepping stones/development matters/early learning goals to provide an indication of children's attainments on entry to school (see above - **What is the appropriate way of assessing children's attainments on entry to school?**), it will therefore be necessary to place these indications within the wider contexts provided by such factors, as relevant for particular children or groups of children.

What is the relationship between Foundation Stage Profile assessments and National Curriculum levels?

In an attempt to show progression from the foundation stage into key stage 1, some published materials relate Profile scores to National Curriculum levels. Such attempts often utilise the fact that the maximum score on a Profile scale is 9 and level 1 in the National Curriculum point score system also has a value of 9. However, this is entirely coincidental. The first is a raw score obtained directly from assessments of children for the Profile, while the other is a point score value from a scale that is essentially arbitrary (level 1 could equally well have a value of 12 with level 2 having a value of 18, etc.).

The position of the National Assessment Agency is made clear in the following statement:

Some LAs and commercial companies have produced materials that attempt to equate FSP scale points to national curriculum (NC) sub-levels Any equation of FSP scales or scale point scores to NC levels or invented sub-levels is a spurious and ultimately inaccurate exercise.

Implementation and moderation of foundation stage profile 2006
National Assessment Agency (NAA) Annual Monitoring Report 2006 (QCA/06/2959)

Clearly there will be a relationship between the assessment outcomes from the two systems and the higher that children's assessments are on the Profile the more likely they are to have higher outcomes at the end of key stage 1. However, this does not mean that there is any equivalence between scores derived from the two assessment systems. National Curriculum levels cannot be attributed to children in the foundation stage when they have not been taught to the National Curriculum programmes of study.

Although there is no equivalence between Profile scores and National Curriculum levels, there are clear links between the two stages in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. The Primary National Strategy offers the following guidance:

The Foundation Stage areas of learning can be mapped on to subject-based key stage 1 curriculum. The links are clearly shown in What does the practitioner need to do? for each of the early learning goals in Curriculum guidance for the Foundation Stage. How schools organise the curriculum in key stage 1 is for them to decide and there is sufficient flexibility for schools to adapt the content and pedagogy to their children's needs. The National Assessment Agency (NAA) has produced Continuing the learning journey. This is designed to promote awareness and understanding of the Foundation Stage and the Foundation Stage Profile. It provides support and guidance for teachers on using the Foundation Stage Profile information to plan children's progression in Year 1.

Primary National Strategy: Foundation Stage Profile – frequently asked questions
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/faqs/foundation_stage/1145599/#1145627