



How Readiness is Constructed via the Good Level of Development

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Aims of the presentation

- To consider how the Good Level of Development (GLD) creates a ready/unready binary
- To explore the impact that the GLD has on children and teachers

Introduction to research

What beliefs do teachers hold about 'school readiness'?

How is 'school readiness' constructed within the classroom?

What tensions emerge between these beliefs, policy frameworks and pedagogical practice?

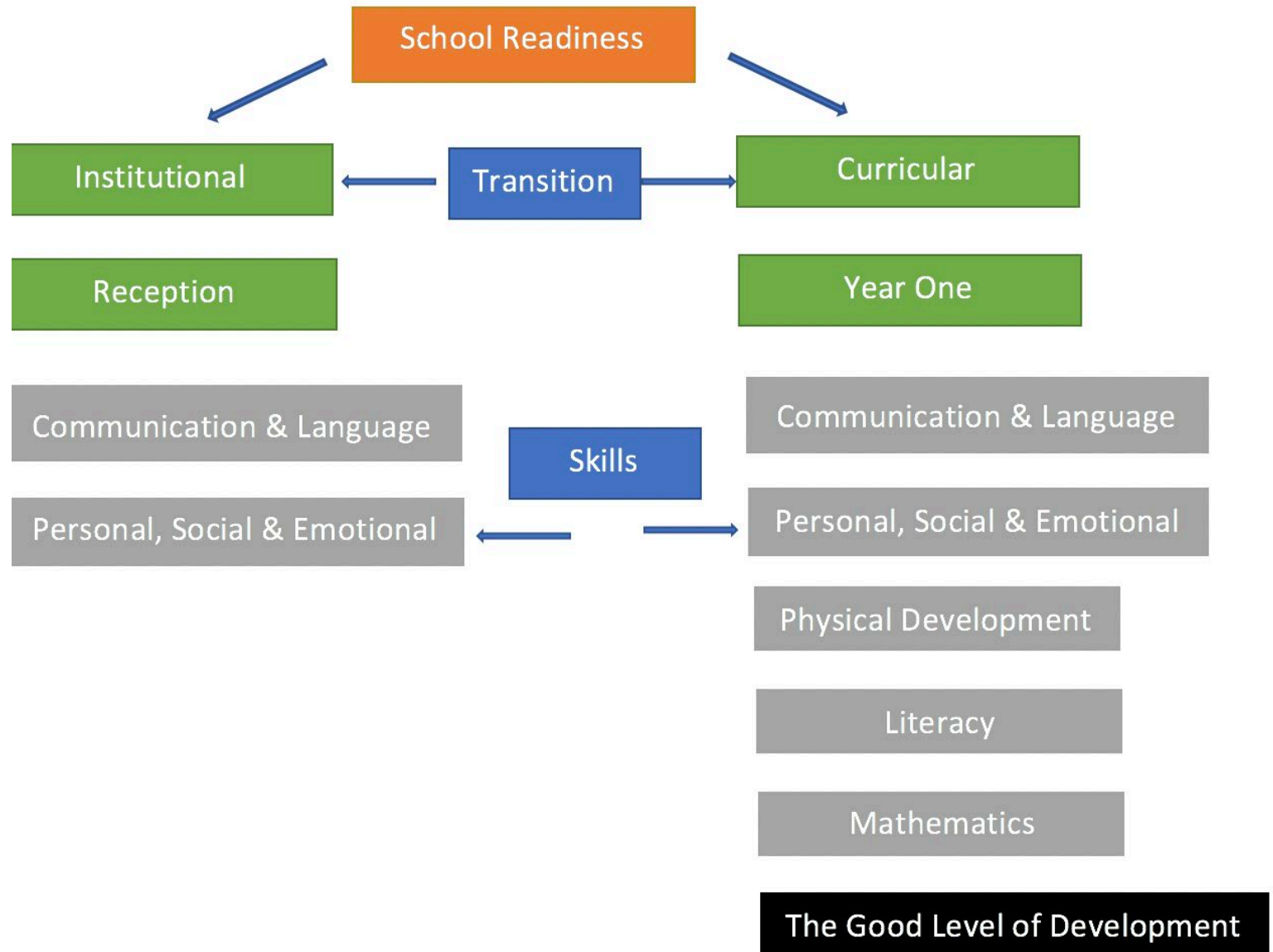
Readiness and the Early Years Foundation Stage

- Frames development through the lens of educational psychology
- Trajectories of development are linear
- Concepts of readiness are dominated by prescribed learning outcomes (GLD) rather than on a 'readiness to learn' construct which encompasses competencies such as motivation, emotional maturity, intellectual ability and health
- The Good Level of Development (GLD) is a data measure of 'school readiness'
- Reductionist and homogenises development

Defining 'school readiness'

The lack of consistency over what 'school readiness' means, and of particular relevance, which transition it is directly linked to highlights the need for clarity.

Builds on Wickett's (2016) work around institutional and curricular transitions.





One in three reception children aren't 'school ready', warns Teach First

Thousands Of Children Start School 'Not Ready For The Classroom', Parents' Smartphone Habits To Blame

'Kids know how to swipe a phone but haven't a clue about conversations.'

Thousands of under-fives not 'school ready', study claims

*Is this the
'Best Start in
Life' for all
Children?*

Framed rhetorically as a way of ensuring children have the 'best start in life' (Field 2010; Allen 2011), the 'school readiness' agenda aims to break the cycle of poverty at the most 'cost-effective' point and prepare children for the formal learning of Key Stage One (Kay 2018).

Does the way the GLD is constructed and used as a measurement of 'school readiness' further marginalise already disadvantaged children by positioning them in a deficit position as they enter Year One?

The Creation of the Ready/Unready Binary

- Children who achieve the GLD = 'ready for school'
- Children who do not reach the outcomes required for the GLD = 'unready for school'
- Children who are 'unready' for school are seen as being not only 'different' to those who are 'ready', but also in some way inferior as they are judged as being at a lower stage in their expected development
- This in itself becomes an act of marginalisation and a way of denying the developmental complexities and variations of young children who will have a wealth of different social and cultural experiences.

Achievement of the GLD by pupil characteristics (DfE, 2018)

Pupil characteristics	% Reaching the GLD
All children	72%
Autumn born	81%
Girls	78%
Boys	75%
English as an Additional Language	66%
Summer born	61%
Children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM)	57%
Gypsy/ Roma	34%
Traveller with Irish heritage	31%
Children with a Special Education Need (SEN)	24%

In the *Improving School Readiness: Creating a better start for Manchester* (Public Health England, 2016) report, two distinct categories of ready and unready groups of children can be identified:

Children ready for school	Children not ready for school
Girls	Boys
Children not in receipt of FSM	Children in receipt of FSM
White, British children	Gypsy/Roma children
Non-SEN children	SEN children
Children from middle/high income families	Children from low income families
Children with supportive parents	Children with non-supportive parents
Children who access high-quality early education	Children who do not access high-quality early education

This demonstrates how through the binary categorisation, and the clear connotations behind the phrases ‘good level’ and ‘low level’ of development, the ‘less privileged’ group of children are also those who are less likely to be ‘school ready’.



The Reductionist Nature of the GLD

- Children are identified as being 'unready' for school, based on the failure to achieve the required prescriptive outcomes
- Acknowledgement of what children who are 'emerging' can do has been removed from the *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013)
- Narrowing of the curriculum and focus on Maths and Literacy - the ELGs, specifically those linked with 'readiness', become privileged
- What is valued and what is ignored? – Creativity vs Maths and Literacy
- Potential target for intervention – despite the claim that 'Children develop at their own rates, and in their own ways'
- Context is stripped away as family backgrounds, the child's lived experiences, and other factors are ignored in order to focus on the domain of the GLD

The 'Deficit' Position

- Assessing children against these developmental frameworks creates an environment whereby, at the age of five, children are already being grouped by performance and ability, and are classified as being either 'ahead' or 'behind' in relation to their peers
- Language - children are consistently referred to as working 'below typical levels' or that they arrive into the setting with 'low levels' of attainment, or 'developmental delay' (OfSTED, 2014)
- Children who are assessed as 'emerging' at the end of Reception may be destined for a pattern of 'lower-than-expected attainment' as they move through the school system
- **Do children who start Year one in this deficit position ever catch up with their peers?**

The Failure of the Child

- Failure to achieve these outcomes becomes the fault of the child, rather than any deficiencies in the expectations of the policy frameworks.
- Children enter Reception with a range of different skills and experiences yet there is an expectation that all children reach the same point by the end of Reception regardless of their starting points
- Interventions were in place to support the children, but they were still finding phonics and reading difficult - interventions often took the children away from the continuous provision on offer in the classroom

The Pressure of the GLD

Pressure being placed on children to achieve the GLD

Words such as "railroading" and "pushing" were used by one of the participants to recount what it was like teaching some of the children the outcomes needed to reach the GLD

This dilemma was also described as a "real uphill battle" and that there was a "lot of ground to make up", particularly when working with children who had come into Reception with limited communication and language skills

One of the teachers also explained how children would "crumble" and get "upset and really stressed out" particularly when faced with the more difficult writing tasks

What impact is this having on children's self-esteem and motivation to learn?

Pushing down of outcomes – the ‘earlier is better’ approach

Foundation Stage Profile (QCA, 2008)	Early Years Outcomes (DfE, 2017)	National Curriculum Year One Level Descriptors (QCDA, 2010)
<p>9. Communicates meaning through phrases and and simple sentences with some consistency in punctuating sentences</p>	<p>Expected: They write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others</p>	<p>Level 1: Pupils writing communicates meaning between simple words and phrases</p>
<p>9. Recognises, counts, orders, writes and uses numbers up to 20</p>	<p>Expected: Children count reliably with numbers from 1 to 20, place them in order and say which number is one more or one less than a given number</p>	<p>Level 1: Pupils count, order, combine, and decrease quantities when solving problems in practical contexts</p>
<p>9. Uses a range of strategies for addition and subtraction, including some mental recall of number bonds</p>	<p>Expected: Using quantities and objects, they add and subtract to single digit numbers and count on or back to find the answer They solve problems, including doubling, halving and sharing</p>	<p>Level 2: Pupils count sets of objects reliably, and use mental recall of addition and subtraction facts to 10</p>

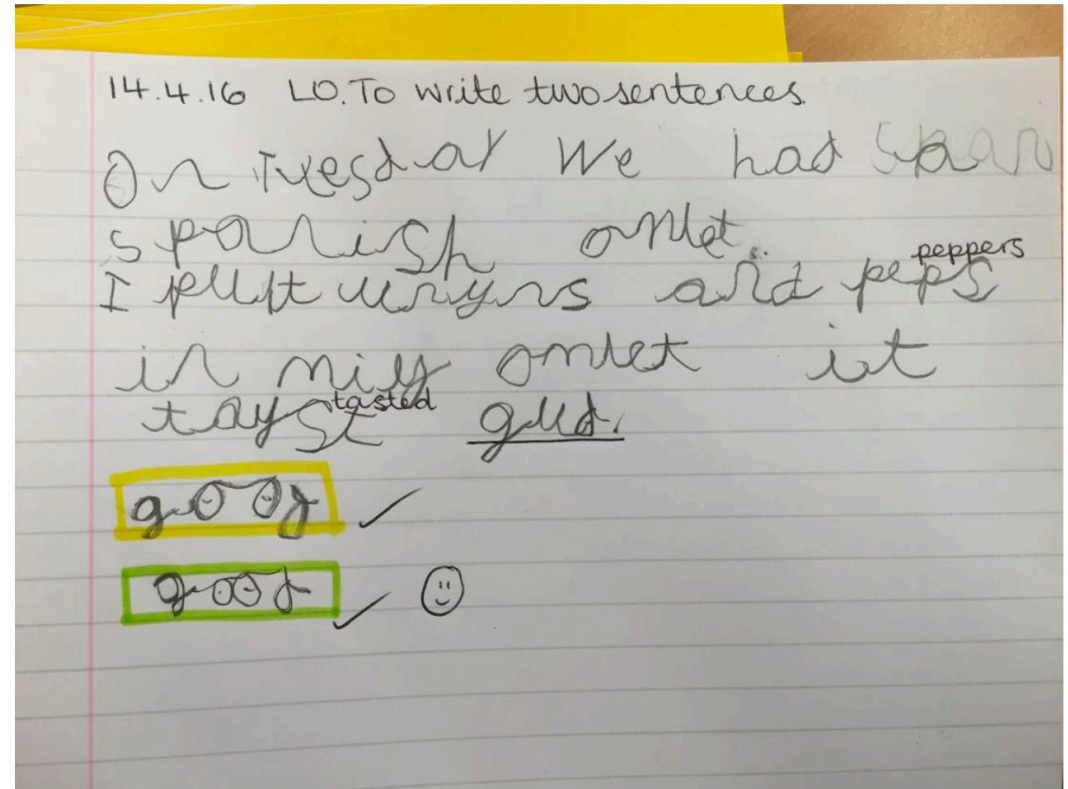
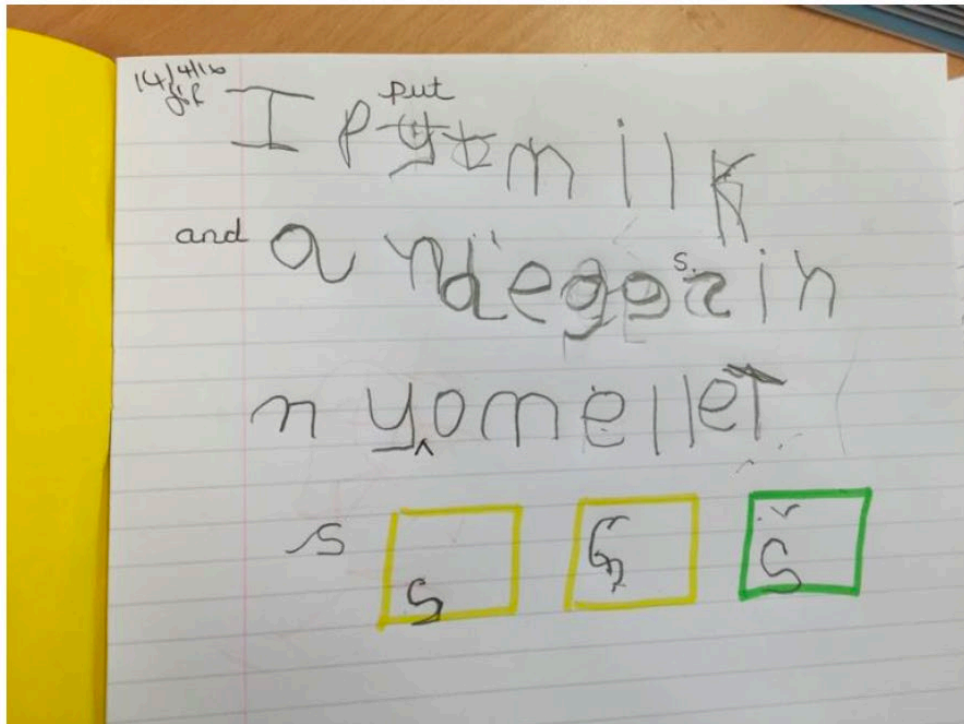
- In 2013, 51.7% of children achieved the GLD but by 2016 this had jumped to 69.3%, the biggest improvements seen in all aspects of Literacy and Mathematics (DfE, 2016)
- The increase in percentages of children achieving these outcomes could suggest that teachers are focusing on the outcomes children need to achieve in order to reach the GLD, in particular the outcomes linked to Writing
- Does this data demonstrate an ongoing 'schoolification' of the Early Years?

EYFSP Attainment by each early learning goal included in the GLD (DfE, 2016)

<i>Area of Learning</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>Difference</i>
<i>Communication and Language</i>			
<i>Listening and Attention</i>	61.5%	63.3%	+1.8%
<i>Understanding</i>	62.1%	62.9%	+0.7%
<i>Speaking</i>	62.9%	66%	+3.1%
<i>Physical Development</i>			
<i>Moving and Handling</i>	70.5%	71.2%	+0.7%
<i>Health and Self Care</i>	72.2%	71.5%	-0.7%
<i>Personal, Social and Emotional Development</i>			
<i>Self-confidence and self-awareness</i>	69.1%	70.6%	+1.5%
<i>Managing Feelings and behaviour</i>	69.1%	71.5%	+2.4%
<i>Making Relationships</i>	71.2%	73.2%	+2%
<i>Literacy</i>			
<i>Reading</i>	52.8%	57.5%	+4.7%
<i>Writing</i>	50.9%	61%	+10.9%
<i>Mathematics</i>			
<i>Number</i>	56.9%	63.1%	+6.2%
<i>Shape, Space and Measure</i>	64.9%	67.1%	+2.2%

Examples - early edit

The use of handwriting workbooks and 'early editing' skills in the Reception classroom also reflects the significance of these skills to ensure children are ready for Year One





- The increase in children achieving the more complex Literacy and Mathematical outcomes year on year further troubles the traditional approach to ECE
- Both teachers talked of how prescriptive the GLD was, and how children were being placed under pressure to achieve the ELGs, and the feelings of guilt that this was often at the expense of a play-based approach to teaching
- Are the frameworks that exist in the Early Years creating 'conflicting motives' for teachers?
- Is the focus on Literacy and Mathematical outcomes at the expense of a more holistic approach to teaching?

The Power of the GLD

- Throughout the data collection period, the GLD was a dominant driving force for the teachers - overshadowed everything else within the Reception classroom
- One of the teachers made references to "fighting" to defend her data, describing how "sometimes I've won, sometimes I haven't", declaring how if she "had a choice" she would not do things the way she was being asked to
- Teachers are forced to focus on the outcomes required for the GLD that are often in conflict with their beliefs, knowledge and personal experiences
- This did not provide much space for resistance, especially as the results of the GLD were used as part of the teacher's performance management
- The power of the GLD as an accountability and performativity measure, for both teachers and children, creates a culture of compliance that is difficult to subvert.

Preparing Children



- The teachers were in agreement that if children did not have the emotional skills they would not be 'ready to learn' the instrumental skills required in Year One, and spent time providing reassurance by regularly taking the children into the new classrooms and reacting to any concerns or worries they had about the transition.
- Having the emotional resilience to cope with the curricular and environmental changes was seen by the teachers to be at least as important as achieving the Mathematical and Literacy outcomes, if not more so.
- This would suggest that teachers, whilst constrained by the policy frameworks within which they exist, have the potential to act in what Kemmis and Smith (2008) refer to as 'morally-committed ways', as they work to provide children with the capacity to make a smooth curricular and environmental transition.



Concluding thoughts

- What impact is this having on children's' self-esteem and motivation to learn?
- Do children ever 'catch up' if they begin Year One in a deficit position?
- Is the Reception year being 'schoolified' to focus on more instrumental outcomes?
- Is the focus on Literacy and Mathematical outcomes at the expense of a more holistic approach to teaching?
- Are the frameworks that exist in the Early Years creating 'conflicting motives' for teachers?
- How will this continue to shape teacher identity as new teachers qualify into this data driven system of performativity and accountability?
- Is there any room for resistance for teachers?

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