School Readiness: A Culture of Compliance?

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

The University of Sheffield

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education

Submission Date

February 2018

Abstract

'School readiness' is at the forefront of current Early Childhood Educational policy and is seen politically as a way of narrowing the attainment gap and breaking the cycle of poverty, and preparing children for the formal learning of Year One. However, there is no clear definition of what 'school readiness' means for teachers and children. Without this in place the phrase is left open to interpretation and contradictions, resulting in key divisions between policymakers and the Early Childhood community as to what being 'school ready' means. Furthermore, when 'school readiness' is positioned within policy as 'academic readiness', conflicts and tensions arise between traditional Early Childhood pedagogical practices and the realities of working within a framework where there is a clear emphasis on Mathematical and Literacy outcomes.

Viewed through a socio-constructivist lens, 'readiness for school' is seen as a fluid construct, dependent on the beliefs of those working with children. The aim of this research was to explore the beliefs of two Reception teachers using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) that acknowledges teachers as being part of a collective activity system. Within this methodological framework, teachers are seen as thinkers and actors whose purposes, values and knowledge are displayed within the activity systems they inhabit. The ways in which 'school readiness' was constructed through pedagogical practices were identified, and the tensions and contradictions that emerged between these practices and the beliefs of the teachers were explored in depth.

An Internet survey questionnaire was used as a way of providing a broader understanding of teacher perceptions around constructs of 'school readiness'. Interviews with the two participants were carried out to illuminate specific beliefs about 'school readiness', and to identify how teachers conceptualised the construction of 'school readiness' in the classroom. The analysis of these interviews focused on 'manifestations of contradictions' (Engeström & Sannino, 2011) within the data that highlighted tensions between beliefs, pedagogical practices, and curricular and assessment policy frameworks.

The findings from the research illustrate the complexities of 'school readiness' as a transitional concept, and the reductionist nature of using the Good Level of

Development (GLD) as a measure of 'school readiness'. Using 'school readiness' as a performativity and accountability measure serves to subjugate both teachers and children, and further marginalises already marginalised groups of children if they fail to reach the GLD.

This study reiterates the importance of providing a clear definition with regards to what 'school readiness' means, and whether it refers to the institutional transition into school, or the curricular transition from Reception into Year One. The research also furthers the debate around the outcomes children are expected to reach by the end of Reception as a measure of 'school readiness', particularly those focusing on more instrumental skills such as Mathematics and Literacy.

Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank Professor Elizabeth Wood and Dr Liz Chesworth for their unending support throughout this process. They have consistently challenged my thinking and provided continuous guidance and support, helping me to develop as a teacher, researcher and academic. I am eternally grateful for everything you have both done for me.

Thank you to the school, teachers and children, and everybody who took the time to participate in my research. It goes without saying that I couldn't have done this without you and I am grateful to the time you generously gave to help me.

Thank you to my two wonderful colleagues and friends, Gail and Charlotte, for making me laugh (a lot) and helping me to believe in myself. I have loved working with you both and will have very fond memories of our time together. We just need to write that sitcom now …

Thank you to the 'Friday lunch group' for helping to keep me grounded and reminding me there is more to life than thesis writing. I feel incredibly lucky to have such true friends in my life.

Finally, thank you to my family. My parents … for everything you have ever done for me. To Richard for giving me the space and support to complete this journey. To my two boys, Ben and Joseph, who have spent years of their childhood patiently waiting for me to 'finish my work'. I could not have done this without you all by my side. This is for you.

Table of Contents

List of Tables, Images, Figures and Diagrams

Tables

Table 1 - The Four Theoretical Perspectives of 'School Readiness' (Meisels, 1998)

Table 2 - A small sample of examples of different definitions of 'school readiness'

Table 3 - Mapping the questions to a discursive framework

Table 4 - Adapted from Hyatt's (2013a) Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame

Table 5 - Trajectory of curricular policy documents in England

Table 6 - Achievement of the GLD by pupil characteristics (DfE, 2016)

Table 7 - Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Groups of Children

Table 8 - The Activity System (Engeström, 1996, p.67)

Table 9 - The Activity System as a research framework (Engeström, 1996, p.67)

Table 10 - Data collection methods

Table 11 - Participant information

Table 12 - Supplementary research questions and research methods

Table 13 - Categories of Responses and Examples

Table 14 - The interview schedule

Table 15 - Category of responses (Dockett & Perry, 2004, p.175)

Table 16 - Responses linked to 'knowledge' category

Table 17 - Responses linked to 'social adjustment' category

Table 18 - Responses linked to 'skills' category

Table 19 - Responses linked to 'disposition' category

Table 20 - Responses linked to 'rules' category

Table 21 - Responses linked to 'physical' category

Table 22 - Adapted from Engeström and Sannino's (2011) 'Types of discursive manifestations and contradictions'

Table 23 - Occurrences of linguistic clues

Table 24 - Emerging themes from interview data

Table 25 - Types of contradictions (Engeström, 1987, p.104)

Table 26 - Mapping the research question to the Activity System

Table 27 - EYFSP Attainment by each early learning goal included in the GLD (DfE, 2016)

Images

Image 1 - Example of cursive writing in the handwriting book (Child A)

Image 2 - Example of cursive writing in the handwriting book (Child A)

Image 3 - Example of cursive writing in the handwriting book (Child B)

Image 4 - Example of cursive writing in the handwriting book (Child B)

Image 5 - Example of 'early edit' in the Reception writing books (Child C)

Image 6 - Example of 'early edit' in the Year One writing books (Child C)

Image 7 - Example of 'early edit' in the Reception writing books (Child D)

Image 8 - Example of 'early edit' in the Year One writing books (Child D)

Image 9 - "Once upon a time there was some superheroes and some baddies, the end."

List of Abbreviations

BCS - Birth Cohort Survey
BERA - British Educational Research Association
CDA - Critical Discourse Analysis
CHAT - Cultural Historical Activity Theory
ECE - Early Childhood Education
ELGs - Early Learning Goals
EPPE – The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education
EYFS - Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage
EYFSP - Early Years Foundation Stage Profile
GLD - Good Level of Development
LEA – Local Education Authority
OECD - Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development
OfSTED - Office for Standards in Education
PIRLS - Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study
PISA - Programme for International Student Assessment
PVI - Private, Voluntary and Independent (sector)
TIMSS - Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
REPEY – Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years
WPR - What's the Problem Represented to be?

Chapter 1

Introduction

Introducing the Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to explore teacher beliefs about 'school readiness' and how 'school readiness' is constructed within a Reception classroom. The research explores perspectives of two teachers working in the same school in north-west England with the aim of identifying tensions and contradictions between personal beliefs about 'school readiness' within the context of Early Childhood Education (ECE), and pedagogical practices that take place in the classroom.

In England, Reception is the first year of a child's primary school education. The compulsory school age is five years old which is low compared to other countries in Europe, the most common starting age being six years old (DfE, 2014). Yet, as a result of a one-point date of entry into Reception in September, the reality for most children is a school starting age of four. As a consequence, many children in Reception who have not reached the compulsory school age are expected to achieve prescribed outcomes across seven areas of learning:

- Communication and Language
- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Physical Development
- Mathematics
- Literacy
- Understanding of the World
- Expressive Arts & Design

As the final year of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), Reception has been positioned as the 'transition' year between the Early Years curriculum and the more formal Key Stage One of the National Curriculum (Faulkner & Coates, 2013, p.23). However, over the course of the last few years, 'school readiness' has crept to the forefront of ECE policy, and Pascal *et al.* (2017) argue that this increased prominence and the 'accompanying schoolification of early years pedagogy' are political actions

that reflect a shift in beliefs about the purpose of ECE within policy making (p.6). In 2010, the Department for Education (DfE, 2010a) published the *Business Plan 2011 - 2015* in which it was announced that indicators of 'Readiness to progress to next stage of schooling' would be developed (p.22). In the same year Dame Claire Tickell was invited by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government to carry out a review of the EYFS in order to focus on 'getting children ready for education and to increasing the attainment of children from deprived backgrounds' (DfE, 2010b). This discourse marks a clear shift in emphasis as the Early Years becomes a place for 'readying' children for school, and one which Moss (2013) argues locates the problem of 'readiness' as being within the child rather than the system (p.14). The focus of 'school readiness' is dependent on the performance of the child and what they know and are able to do to 'negotiate school expectations', rather than schools being held accountable for being ready for the child (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012, p.53).

Standards of performance at the end of the EYFS are judged through the use of the Good Level of Development (GLD) as a measure of 'school readiness', and Moss (2013) argues that these prescribed outcomes are liable to lead to a 'schoolification' of the Early Years (p.10). 'Schoolification' is a term that holds considerable negative connotations as a system that fails to honour the 'traditions and practices' of ECE through the delivery of 'structured content and prescribed pedagogical practices' (Kagan, 2013, p.138). This is further exacerbated by the Government's assertion that 'a good foundation in Mathematics and Literacy is crucial for later success, particularly in terms of children's readiness for school' (STA, 2013), highlighting a clear link between 'school readiness' and academic outcomes.

Pertinent to this debate is the assertion that teachers have to deal with 'new kinds of complex problems, in a situation where knowledge and tradition are being called into question in various ways' (Höijer *et al.*, 2006, p.357). Through the identification of the tensions and contradictions between existing beliefs and the political 'shifting landscape' (Clandinin *et al.*, 2009, p.145), a key aim of the research was to explore what these problems are and the impact that they have on teachers and their classroom practice, and on the children they work with. It is acknowledged that the role of the teacher within the classroom is complex and dynamic when we consider

the many different interactions that take place with different people and in different contexts (Kay, 2015a).   This study was approached using a socio-cultural perspective that captures the interactions and relationships between the teacher and the collective dimension of the classroom as an activity system, as well as considering contextual factors such as the use of tools as mediating artefacts (Lund, 2008, p.34).   Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1999) enables the exploration of these collective classroom activity processes and positions the use of tools as mediating artefacts at the forefront of the research (Kay, 2015b).   This framework allows the examination of how teachers conceptualise the object of their activity in order to construct an outcome of 'school readiness', and how they draw on different aspects of the activity system to achieve this.   Furthermore, CHAT addresses the social and collective dimensions of a teacher's practice, and enables the exploration of the contextual and collective activity processes that take place and the tensions and contradictions that may arise through these interactions.

Constructs and Conceptions of 'School Readiness'

Kagan (1990) argues that two constructs of 'school readiness' have dominated discourse, that of 'readiness for learning' and 'readiness for school' (p.273). Distinguishing between the two, 'readiness for learning' is conceptualised as a 'developmental progression' reflecting the ability of a child to learn specific pre-determined curriculum content (Scott-Little *et al.*, 2006, p.154) and Kagan (1990) suggests that there are multiple factors affecting this construct including 'motivation, physical development, intellectual ability, emotional maturity, and health' (p.273). Conversely, 'readiness for school' is considered to be 'a fixed or prerequisite set of physical, intellectual, and/or social skills needed in order for children to be able to fulfil the requirements of the school environment' (Scott-Little *et al.*, 2006, p.154). Debates surrounding these two constructs of 'readiness' are strongly influenced by developmental ideas, which in turn are influential on beliefs about whether a child is ready to make successful transitions (Vogler *et al.*, 2008, p.7).

A. Brown (2015) contends that 'readiness' is multi-dimensional, and includes 'the skills of the child, family and environmental factors, behavioral and cognitive aspects of a

child's development, the child's adaptation to the classroom, and the characteristics of the educational and community systems available to the child and family' (p.183). These dimensions are encapsulated in the four conceptions of readiness identified by Meisels (1998) that frame 'the readiness equation' in a certain way: The empiricist/environmental, the idealist/nativist, the interactionist, and the socio-constructivist perspectives (p.12).   The four theoretical perspectives have been summarised and displayed in *Table 1*.

Table 1 - The Four Theoretical Perspectives of 'School Readiness' (Meisels, 1998)

Perspective	Tenet	View of 'readiness'
Idealist/Nativist	Development cannot be accelerated beyond a child's natural potential	Readiness is influenced by biology rather than the environment
Empiricist/Environmentalist	Focuses on the skills and knowledge that prepare children for school Early Childhood Education (ECE) is seen as the vehicle for equipping children with what they need to be 'school ready'	Emphasis is placed on 'readiness for school' rather than 'readiness for learning'
Interactionist	There is a two-way interaction between the child and the environment	'School readiness' is a multi-faceted construct that includes the family and the wider community
Socio-constructivist	Importance is placed upon social and cognitive competencies that enable the child to become a self-regulated learner	'Readiness' is embedded within a child's social and cultural context There is no single definition of 'readiness' as it is reliant on the personal beliefs of those working with the child

The idealist/nativist perspective holds the view that a child's development cannot be accelerated beyond their natural potential, and within this context a readiness to learn cannot be forced but must be allowed to emerge in due course (Meisels, 1999, p.47). External influences such as parental attitudes, the socio-economic environment and

educational experiences are set aside, and instead the focus is placed upon 'the internal dynamics of the child' (p.13).   Subscribing to an idealist/nativist position assumes that an 'inner time clock' drives a child's development and consequently 'readiness' is influenced by biology rather than environment (May & Kundert, 1997, p.74).

The empiricist/environmentalist model focuses exclusively on the learning of skills and knowledge that prepare the child for school, on what the child can do, for instance, recognise shape and colour names, and how they behave (Dockett & Perry, 2002a; Meisels, 1999).   Through this lens, ECE is seen as a vehicle for equipping children with the skills, knowledge and experiences that they need to be 'ready for school' (Brown, C., 2010, p.136).   This perspective is reflected in the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2014/2017) asserting that it 'promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's 'school readiness' and gives children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life' (p.5).   This model aligns with Kagan's (1990) construct of 'readiness for school' rather than 'readiness for learning', as concrete skills and experiences are valued as 'precursors to successful school experiences, rather than as ends in themselves' (Meisels, 1998, p.10).

Scott-Little *et al.* (2006) assert that from an interactionist perspective, 'school readiness' is a 'multi-faceted construct that includes the capacity of families, early care and education programs, and the broader community to support children's early learning and development, and the capacity of schools to effectively educate children once they start school' (p.155).   Dockett and Perry (2009) contend that 'understanding children's readiness for school must go beyond assessing children's skills and abilities and judging how well children will fit within the existing structure of school'.   Instead, 'school readiness' should be seen as a complex set of interactions between individuals, families, schools and the wider community (p.25).   The relationship between the school and the child is instrumental in promoting 'readiness' as each influence the other.   The child is seen to contribute to their own learning and to the environment within which they operate, whilst the environment and those within it has a 'reciprocal influence on the child' (Dockett & Perry, 2002a, p.71).

A socio-constructivist perspective emphasises the importance of social and cognitive competencies that will enable the child to become a 'self-regulated learner capable of establishing adequate social relationships with other participants in the teaching/learning process' over the mastering of a set of pre-requisite skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p.168). 'Readiness' is seen as being embedded within a child's social and cultural context, and that the development of thinking and memory are the outcome of these specific cultural experiences (Gredler, 1992, p.14). Viewed through a socio-constructivist lens, 'readiness' is defined by the 'beliefs, expectations, understandings and experiences of those in the school, and the community in which the school exists' (Dockett & Perry, 2002a, p.71). Scott-Little *et al*. (2006) argue that from this perspective there is 'no one absolute definition of "readiness"' as multiple forces influence personal beliefs about what skills, knowledge and abilities are needed for later academic success in school (p.155). Therefore, 'school readiness' is viewed as a fluid construct that is 'defined by the social setting in which the child resides' (Brown, C., 2010, p.136).

Shallwani (2009) argues that 'school readiness is a socially constructed notion grounded in beliefs about society, its systems, and the roles different members play' (p.8). Research carried out exploring parent and teacher beliefs about readiness suggest that views vary about what skills and dispositions are important, and what 'school readiness' actually means (Smith & Shepard, 1988; Graue, 1992; Dockett & Perry, 2002a). Based on findings from her own research that examined the idea that 'readiness' is a set of meanings constructed by people in communities, families and schools, Graue (1992) highlights that 'the social interpretations of readiness and the ensuing instructional setting varied so widely that a single definition would be impossible to construct' (p.239). When we view 'readiness' through a post-modern lens, the co-existence of different points of view means that a 'one-size-fits-all definition' is too simplistic to accommodate the diversity and subjectivity of these multiple truths and perspectives (Myers, 2004, p.19). It can be argued that the diversity of the beliefs and values of teachers highlights that there is 'no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that exists outside history or society that can provide foundations for truth, knowledge and ethics' (Dahlberg *et al.,* 1999,

p.23).   Alongside these diverse personal beliefs and value systems, other factors fundamentally influencing pedagogical practices include policy, curriculum and practice guidance, and the experience of initial and continuing professional development (Stephen, 2010, p.19).   This begins to highlight some of the complexities involved in conceptions of 'school readiness', particularly when this agenda is then constructed in certain ways through current educational policy frameworks, explored in more depth in the next chapter.

Defining 'School Readiness'

Graue *et al.* (2002) assert that 'readiness is lived through others' perceptions and interpretations' (p.350).   As a result, the perceptions and interpretations that attempt to define 'readiness' have been the subject of much debate resulting in a multitude of meanings (Kagan, 2007, p.14).   Within an English educational context, this is highlighted in the OfSTED document *Are You Ready? Good Practice in School Readiness* (2014) where it is stated that 'the precise characteristics of school readiness and the age of the child to which it applies are interpreted variously by the providers we visited. There is no nationally agreed definition' (p.6).   This is echoed in the report *State of the Nation 2015: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain* (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015) which asserts that 'The lack of a common-sense, clear, shared understanding of what constitutes school readiness between parents, public health officials (health visitors), local authorities, schools and early education providers is a wasted opportunity' (p.16).   In addition to this, it is also unclear whether 'school readiness' refers to transition into Year One, or at the start of entry into Reception (OfSTED, 2014, p.8).   As a consequence, Local Authorities and other children's services have been left to establish their own definition of what 'school readiness' means.   This lack of coherence is exemplified in *Table 2* which presents a snapshot of the different definitions of 'school readiness' as specified in local government policies.

Table 2 - A small sample of examples of different definitions of 'school readiness'

Local Authority/Organisation	Definition of 'School Readiness'
Derbyshire County Council (2015)	I can settle happily without my parent or carer. I can tell friends and grown-ups what I need. I can take turns and share when I am playing. I can go to the toilet on my own and wash my hands. I can put on my own coat and shoes and feed myself. I can tell a grown up if I am happy, sad or cross. I know that what I do and say can make others happy or unhappy. I am curious and want to learn and play. I can stop what I am doing, listen and follow simple instructions. I enjoy sharing books with grown-ups.
Essex County Council (2014)	School Readiness will be determined on entry to Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum and will be a retrospective measure of the three Prime Areas of Learning and Development which include Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development and Communication and Language.
Hampshire County Council (2013)	Children are 'school ready' when they are resilient and confident, with a keenness to learn and have effective personal and social skills.
North Yorkshire County Council (2014)	Have strong social skills Can cope emotionally with being separated from their parents and carers Are relatively independent in their own personal care Have a curiosity about the world and a desire to learn
West Cheshire Children's Trust (2017)	Ready to separate … Ready to communicate … Ready to listen … Ready to socialise … Ready to learn … Ready to be independent …

Personal and Professional Context

Viewing this study through a socio-cultural lens, it is important to acknowledge that as the researcher I am also located within the research, and therefore it is pertinent to adopt a reflexive approach to help identify my own thoughts, beliefs, values and identity within 'professional, cultural and political contexts' (Bolton, 2006, p.204). What follows is a narrative that explores my own positionality with regards to aspects of the 'school readiness' debate.

In 2004, at the beginning of my teaching career, I worked in a Year One classroom. The school was situated in an area of socio-economic deprivation and had children on roll who came from troubled and chaotic home backgrounds, many of whom entered Nursery and Reception with limited language and social skills.   The philosophy of the school was a 'quality first' approach to teaching and learning, where lessons were interactive and engaging, and role play provision was present in each classroom up to Year Six.   At the time, the recommended advice from the Local Authority was that a Foundation Stage approach should be adopted in Year One until the end of the Autumn term to help ease transition for children into the more formal aspects of Key Stage One.   My own classroom was set up to ensure children were able to access resources independently, and alongside the small group work activities they were required to do, there were plentiful opportunities throughout the day for the children to play.   At this time, there was no talk of 'school readiness', instead there was a clear focus on transition where the priority was to prepare a child emotionally rather than academically for Year One.

In 2008, I decided to take a part-time position in the Nursery class knowing very little about the EYFS or theories of learning and development.   The Nursery class was part of an Early Years unit shared with Reception, so activities and resources were set up for both classes to access.   My own learning curve was steep as my teaching qualification had been gained through the Graduate Teacher Programme which was mainly classroom based, and not as 'theory focused' as other teaching qualifications. Whilst the children in the Reception class participated in more adult-led activities, the emphasis within the Early Years unit was always on play-based learning.   End of year data was a concern because of the nature of the school we were in, and there were pressures, particularly in Reception, for the children to achieve the expected attainment.   However, the culture of the classroom was always to prepare children so they were able to access learning opportunities, rather than being forced to undertake tasks for which they were not yet ready.

A few years into my teaching career I wanted to further develop my understanding of ECE and enrolled on the MA at the University of Sheffield.   For my final dissertation, I focused on how children's interests can be used to support learning.   I had become

interested in home education and had read about the democratic schooling approach of A. S. Neill's Summerhill School, and so decided to carry out my research exploring how three families who were home educating used their children's interests to support learning. What consistently emerged from my conversations with all of the families was the idea of 'readiness'. One of my participants described how she watched and waited for her children's interests to develop, stating "I'm holding their space and I'm appreciating what's going on and valuing what's happening and protecting them to be able to do that ...... holding their space so they can get on and naturally develop" (Kay, 2013). The idea of living for the moment, enjoying and celebrating what children can do rather than constantly pushing them on to the next stage of learning was very powerful and provocative to me as a researcher, a teacher and a mother.

Reflecting on these personal and professional experiences I am reminded of a question that my supervisor has posed numerous times over the course of this thesis: Ready for what? My doctoral work has focused on the impact policy frameworks have had on the Early Years, and I have taken a critical stance against the 'top down' pressures being placed on children and teachers. My beliefs about teaching do not easily align with the constraints being placed on teachers to ensure children reach the GLD, particularly when I consider the learning outcomes for Literacy and Mathematics are often unachievable for certain children at that particular point in time. Further frustrations arise when I remember the children I worked with, some of whom came to school with multiple issues and complexities, yet would still be expected to reach the same outcomes as their more fortunate peers.

Having taught in a number of classrooms, I recognise that they are dynamic, fluid, and complex systems full of interaction and activity as teachers grapple with the differing needs of the children in their class. Discovering CHAT (Engeström, 1996) enabled me to frame this research and unpick the multiple influences and interactions that take place in the collective dimension of the classroom as an activity system. Furthermore, CHAT has also helped to identify any tensions and contradictions between teacher beliefs and practice. Acknowledging that there are clear tensions between my own beliefs and the requirements expected of me as a teacher, I am

interested in how other teachers navigate the demands placed upon them to get children 'ready for school'.

Core Research Question and Supplementary Questions

Core Research Question:

What beliefs do teachers hold about 'school readiness', how is 'school readiness' constructed within the classroom, and what tensions emerge between these beliefs, policy frameworks and pedagogical practice?

Supplementary Research Questions:

How is 'school readiness' defined in Government policy in England?

What do teachers in the Early Years perceive 'school readiness' to be?

How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom?

What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practice?

What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and policy frameworks?

Thesis Structure

Chapter 2 – Policy Analysis

In this chapter, I undertook a policy analysis using elements of the 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) (Bacchi, 2009) approach as an overarching framework. For the purpose of the analysis, the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DfE, 2014/2017) was selected as the core policy document, along with the *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013a) and the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (EYFSP) (STA, 2016). Hyatt's (2013a) Critical Policy Discourse Analysis frame was used to uncover how policy discourses construct 'school readiness' and how language is used in these constructions.

Chapter 3 - Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as a Research Framework

Here I outline how Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Engeström, 1996) was used as a methodological and conceptual framework and how the research was structured. Using this framework helped to highlight the many different forces and influences that are at play within a classroom at any given point in time, and how teachers navigate these forces to ensure children achieve the outcome of 'school readiness' by the end of Reception. This was also a useful tool to identify the tensions and contradictions within the data which became a key focus for this research.

Chapter 4 - Methodological Considerations

This chapter describes the methodology used and provides a justification of the methodological framework, the research location and sample, an overview of the research design, the data collection methods, the ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness.

Chapter 5 - Findings and Analysis

The key findings of the research are discussed in relation to the supplementary research questions, and tensions and contradictions that emerged from the data are explored in depth.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

In this chapter, CHAT is used again to frame the discussion using the key tensions that emerged from the data to form the basis of the discussion.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

In the final chapter I consider the limitations of the study and the implications for future research. I also discuss the contribution to new knowledge that this research has brought to contemporary debate.

'School Readiness': The Best Start in Life?

The 'school readiness' agenda has become a prominent driving force in current education policy.   This chapter will examine how the regulatory nature of policy discourse defines 'school readiness', 'school readiness' practices and the 'school ready' child, which is then interpreted and delivered by the teacher.   This will help to lay the foundations for an in-depth exploration into the tensions and contradictions regarding the traditional practices of Early Years pedagogy and the political shift towards an emphasis on more formal approaches in the Early Years in order to 'ready' children for school, played out alongside a culture of accountability and performativity.

The impact that the political climate has had on the teacher and classroom activity is a relatively new phenomenon when it is considered that governmental interest in the Early Years in the United Kingdom began to emerge after the publication of the Education Reform Act in 1988.   Prior to the Education Act (DfES, 1988), infant and primary education in the 1960's and 1970's had followed a progressive and child-centred ideology endorsed by the Plowden Report (1967), with an emphasis on 'exploration, discovery, hands-on experience, child-initiated activity, and the importance of choice, independence and control' (Aubrey *et al.*, 2003, p.14). Stevenson (2011) argues that the 1988 Education Reform Act was a key 'neoliberal moment' and that 'the future trajectory of educational policy was set on an entirely different course' (p.182).   The market-driven ideology of neoliberalism reduces everything to money, management and technical practice, and is at odds with democratic practice that embraces diversity, critical thinking, curiosity and the recognition of multiple perspectives (Moss, 2007).   Clandinin *et al.* (2009) refer to this as a 'shifting landscape' whereby teachers are 'caught in the squall' as new policies are implemented with an increasing focus on standardised accountability (p.145).   In England, this accountability takes the form of the outcomes-driven *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DfE, 2014/2017) curricular

framework, and the current summative assessment procedure of the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (DfE, 2015a), the results of which are reported to the Government. Roberts-Holmes (2015a) argues that these factors are 'disciplinary technologies leading to an intensification of 'school readiness' pressures upon the earliest stage of education' (p.304). As part of this thesis, the following analysis will explore how 'school readiness' is constructed within ECE policy, what the 'school readiness' pressures are, and how they impact on teachers and children.

Bacchi's WPR Approach

In order to make sense of the 'messy' nature of policy development, the 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) (Bacchi, 2009) approach was used as an overarching framework. Bacchi (2009) advises that as a starting point to the analysis a specific piece of legislation is selected, and that this in itself is an 'interpretive exercise' and a way of reflecting particular interests and concerns (p.20). With this in mind the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DfE, 2014/2017) has been selected as a policy framework that all providers in receipt of the Early Years funding in England are required to follow. The *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013a), a non-statutory document that provides the collection of statements specifying the expected level of development for each area of learning, and the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (STA, 2016) that guides the completion of the end of year assessments in Reception, were also included as key documents in this analysis.

Within the WPR framework, policy is defined as 'prescriptive texts' that provide 'points of entry to the problematisation and problem representations that require scrutiny' (Bacchi, 2009, p.34). WPR uses a set of six questions to interrogate policy texts and processes:

> 1)   *What's the problem represented to be?*
> 2)   What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
> 3)   *How has the representation of the 'problem' come about?*
> 4)   What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought of differently?

5)   *What effects are produced by this representation of this 'problem'?*

6)   How/where is this representation of this problem produced, disseminated and defended?   How could it be questioned, disrupted or replaced? (Bacchi, 2009, p.2)

Due to limitations with the thesis word count it was not feasible to address these questions in turn, so key questions (*italicised*) were selected in order to draw out policy narratives regarding the constructions of 'school readiness' in the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) and wider policy directives.   As a way of focusing the analysis, the work of Blestas (2012) was adapted and the following questions were devised from Bacchi's framework to guide the discussion:

- How did 'school readiness' come to be seen as a 'problem' for the government?
- What forms of governing practice are enabled where 'school readiness' (or 'unreadiness') is constructed in this way as a problem?
- What are the effects of this formation for teachers and children? (p.40).

Due to the complex nature of the discussion, rather than being answered in turn, the questions are addressed in a holistic way throughout the chapter.

Drawing on Foucauldian analysis, Bacchi (2009) acknowledges that the WPR framework poses a challenge when considering 'agency' (p.45) and with this in mind it was deemed necessary to be cautious using a Foucauldian lens for the policy analysis.   The purpose of this thesis is to critically engage with issues of 'school readiness' from teachers' perspectives, and to identify tensions and contradictions between the ways in which 'school readiness' is constructed within political discourse, and in the classroom.   Discussed in more depth in the following chapter, using CHAT as a methodological framework positions the teacher as a 'social subject' who contributes to the collective activity system through unique contributions based on their knowing, being and doing (Stetsenko, 2013, p.9).   Furthermore, it was recognised that the exploration of the tensions and contradictions that emerge between policy and practice may reveal spaces for resistance, or different interpretations and iterations of classroom practice, and this forms the basis of the Analysis and Discussion chapters.   As Giddens (1984) argues, 'Action depends upon the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs

or course of events' (p.14) and that this 'action logically involves power in the sense of transformative capacity' (p.15). Newton (1998) contends that based on this perspective, Foucauldian work can be criticised for not providing the means to explore how 'active agential selves' can make a difference within discursive practices (p.426).

Language and discourse are often positioned as a mediating artefact within the CHAT framework, and as a way of interrogating political discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995) was viewed as being a suitable alternative to a Foucauldian approach. The aim of the analysis is to reveal how 'school readiness' is constructed within policy discourse, and how this construct is 'shaped and characterised ideologically through relations of power' (Hyatt, 2013a, p.837). An important task, therefore, is to identify the ideology driving the process of educational policymaking in ECE, and how policy is affected by this ideology. Therefore, in order to 'disassemble the contextual backdrop of educational policymaking' (Liasidou, 2012, p.89), Hyatt's (2013a) Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame, a CDA-based orientation, will be utilised.

Hyatt's Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame

Ball (1993) presents two different conceptualisations of policy: policy-as-text and policy-as-discourse (p.10). More recent approaches to policy analysis focus on the latter, positioning discourse as a 'central concept', a process that also involves the 'production, reification and implementation of policy' (Hyatt, 2013b, p.44). Policies are 'textual interventions into practice' posing 'problems to their subjects', and creating circumstances in which 'the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed' (Ball, 1993, p.12). As Bacchi (2000) argues, the premise behind a 'policy-as-discourse' approach is that problems are created through the very same policies that are offering the solutions (p.48). Discourses are viewed as 'socially and culturally formed', offering certain perspectives that come to be considered as 'normal', and others as 'deviant' or 'marginal' (Hyatt, 2013a, p.837). Boag-Munroe (2010) asserts that CDA can be used within the CHAT activity system to 'understand the interaction of documents and speech within activity', and the way policy documents shape the work of teachers (p.120). Using Hyatt's frame will

uncover how policy discourses 'represent and construct' 'school readiness', and how language is used as a 'discursive agent' in these constructions.   As a way of framing the discussion, the questions taken from the WPR framework have been mapped to aspects of the Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame and represented in *Table 3*. This analysis of discursive practice will involve a combination of the macro- and the micro- as mutual requisites mediating 'the relationship between the dimensions of social practice and text' (Fairclough, 1992, p.86).

Table 3 - Mapping the questions to a discursive framework

Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2014/2017), Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (DfE, 2016), Early Years Outcomes (DfE, 2013a)		
Question (adapted from Blestas, 2012)	**Method (Hyatt, 2013a)**	**Themes**
How did 'school readiness' become to be seen as the problem?	Policy drivers, levers and trajectories Warrant Interdiscursivity and intertextuality Modes of legitimation	Neoliberalism Impact of Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD)
What forms of governing practice are enabled when 'school readiness' is framed as a problem?		Ready/unready binary Assessment practices Good Level of Development Early intervention
What are the lived effects of these formations on children and teachers?		School starting age Introduction to formal schooling Instrumental outcomes in Mathematics and Literacy

This policy analysis is part of an overall empirical study and therefore it was deemed pertinent to be selective regarding the elements of the Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame.   Hyatt (2013a) advises that the frame is not meant to be an 'all-encompassing, universal tool', and that users should select 'aspects of the frame that are useful' (p.837).   With this in mind, *Table 4* highlights the elements that have been utilised as part of this analysis, and offers a brief summary to explain how these have been applied during the process of analysis.

Table 4 - Adapted from Hyatt's (2013a) Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame

Key Element of Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame	Summary
Drivers, levers and trajectories	What are the drivers of a particular policy? What are the intended aims of the policy? What policy levers are put in place to implement policy?
Warrant	*Evidentiary warrant* - how does policy provide evidence to support presented conclusions? *Accountability warrant* - how does policy articulate 'grounds for action based on results'? *Political warrant* - how does policy justify those actions as being required for the basis of the 'public good'?
Interdiscursivity and intertextuality	How are particular constructions re-enforced and legitimised by referencing other genres and discourses
Modes of legitimation	*Rationalisation* - Reference is made to the value and usefulness of social action

What is 'School Readiness' Meant to Achieve?

Hyatt (2013a) asserts that as a starting point to the analysis it is useful to identify the intended aims, drivers and levers of the policy as a way of understanding its 'evolution', and the way it is 'interpreted in different contexts' (p.838). In order to understand how the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) constructs 'school readiness' it is pertinent first of all to examine the key drivers and levers that surround this policy. As a way of exploring the wider context, key policy documents were examined that have influenced the 'school readiness' agenda in ECE, represented in *Diagram 1*.

Diagram 1 - Key policy documents that have influenced the 'school readiness' agenda in ECE
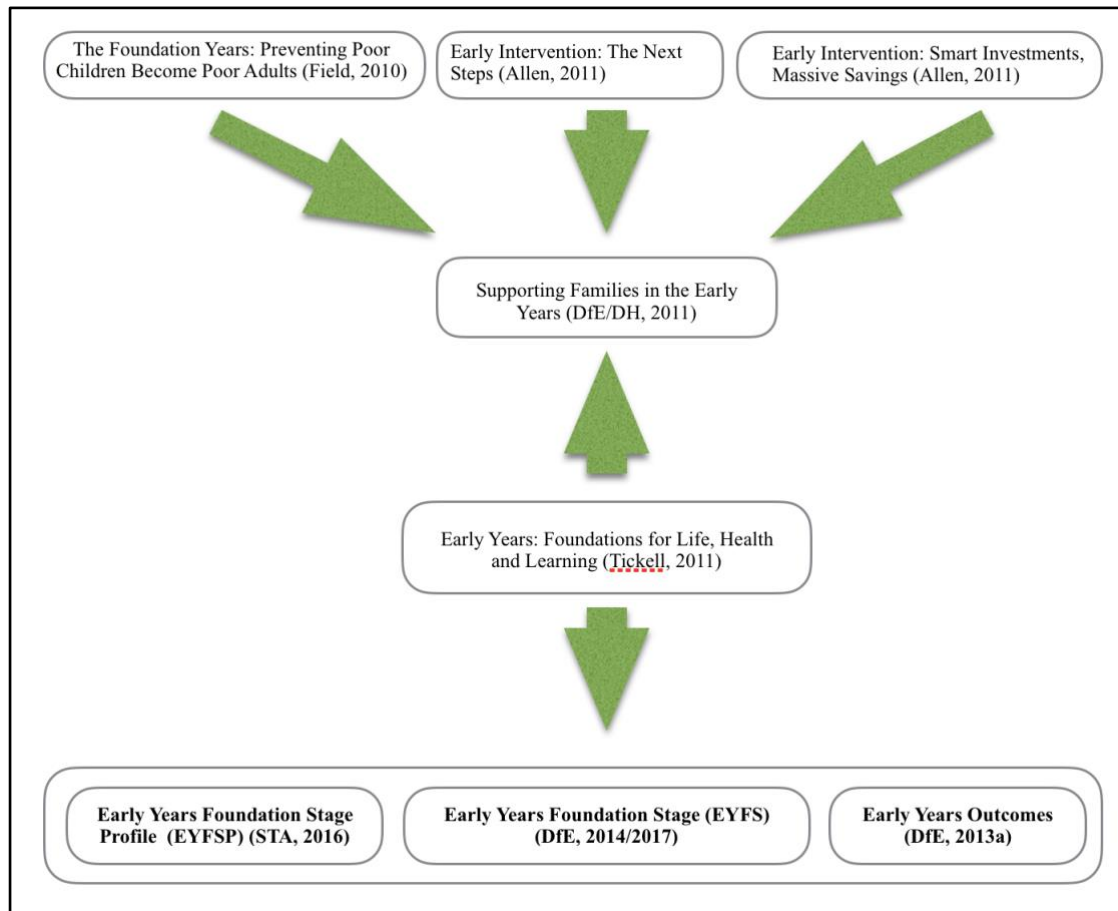
What follows is a discussion centring on two key themes that emerged from these documents regarding the aims of the 'school readiness' agenda which brings attention to the interdiscursive nature of ECE policy:

1)   To break the cycle of poverty through investment at the most 'cost-effective' point in time
2)   To prepare children for the formal learning of Key Stage One

A dominant discourse across all the policies that have been examined as part of this analysis has been the overarching goal of ensuring children have 'the best start in life' (Allen, 2011; DfE/DH, 2011; Field, 2011).   It is not contested that this is a 'good thing' and a worthy driver behind both economic and educational policy.   However, Langston (2014) highlights how the interdiscursive nature of education and economics creates a 'tension' between ECE as an entity that is beneficial to children, compared with the view that it is for the 'greater benefit of society' (p.18). This analysis,

therefore, will interrogate whether the way 'school readiness' is constructed in policy is 'the best start in life' for *all* children, particularly disadvantaged and marginalised children who are at the heart of this policy agenda.

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

Arnold *et al.* (2008) argue that 'Globally, socio-economic status has consistently been found to be one of the most critical influences on children's developmental outcomes' (p.28). Parenting, constructed through the responsiveness of parent-child interactions and the quality of the home-learning environment, is a key factor explaining socio-economic status gaps in child outcomes and inequality in 'school readiness' (Waldfogel, 2013). The relationship between poverty and 'school *un*readiness' is explicitly stated in *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Become Poor Adults* (Field, 2010) (*Figure 1*). Referring back to the WPR framework, the 'problem' is starkly presented as a 'political warrant', targeting disadvantaged children and suggesting that, as a result, they will be unable to benefit from the resources that are available to them once at school. In this context, 'school readiness' becomes a political agenda, a way of addressing the gap between children living in socio-economic disadvantage and their more affluent peers.

Figure 1 - Evidentiary and political warrant
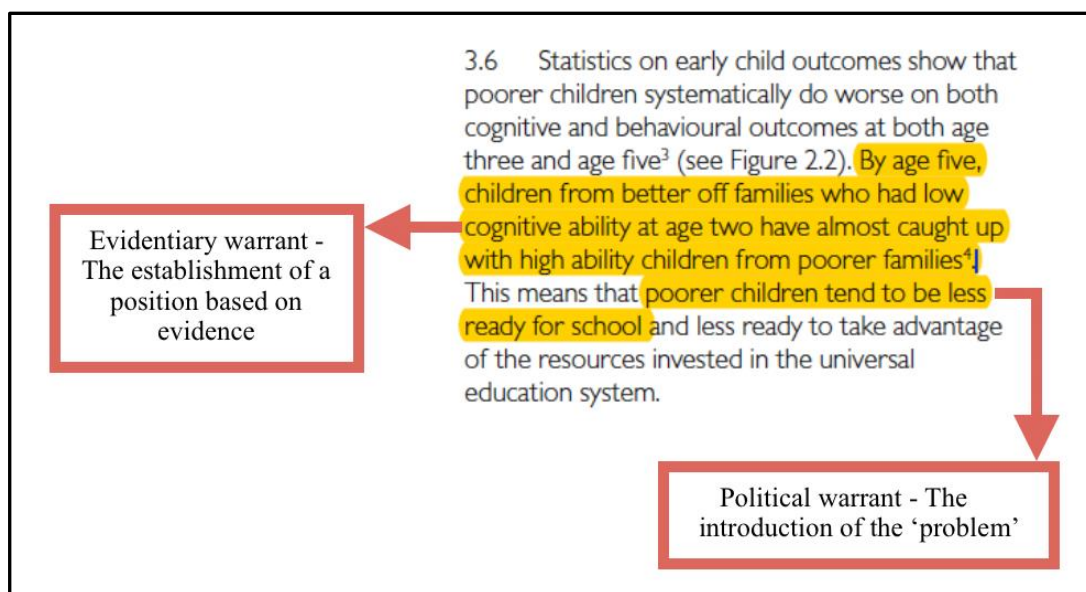
This segment also presents what Hyatt (2013a) refers to as an 'evidentiary warrant' whereby conclusions are based on evidence, in this case Feinstein's (2003) report *Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children in the 1970 Cohort*, that draws on data from the 1970 Birth Cohort Survey (BCS).   Considering Hyatt's (2013a) argument that 'evidence is not a neutral entity', rather it is 'embedded in ideology', it is interesting to note that this report uses the BCS study as an evidence base for the purpose of informing economists of the process of 'human capital formation'.   *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility* (Cabinet Office, 2011) highlights how 'Children at the age of five living in poverty are the equivalent of around eight months behind their peers in terms of cognitive development' (p.6) and this ultimately impacts on social mobility leaving 'the country's economic potential unfulfilled' (p.5).   When viewed in a national context, *State of the Nation 2015: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain* (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015) states that 'less than half of the poorest children in England are ready for school' (p.vi) describing social mobility as the 'new holy grail of public policy' (p.iv).   Osgood (2009) argues that this creates a 'particular discursive landscape' which positions ECE and the 'school readiness' agenda as 'central to the economic prosperity of society' (p.735).   'School readiness', therefore, is viewed by the Government as a social panacea, a way of breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing future economic burdens on the welfare state.

This 'political warrant' is also illustrated in *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Become Poor Adults* (Field, 2010) (*Figure 2*) as a justification for a strategy of early intervention.

Figure 2 - Political warrant

• Why should this be so? *The Foundation Years* argues that the exclusive concern of the adult world about how financial poverty affects children's life chances has prevented a more comprehensive understanding of why life's race is already determined for most poor children before they even begin their first day at school. The single purpose behind all of our recommendations is to break that cycle and prevent poor children from becoming poor adults.

Neoliberal discourse

Political warrant - justification for the 'good of society'

Justification for a strategy of early intervention

Describing life as a 'race' is reminiscent of neoliberal discourses of 'competition', evoking thoughts of 'winners' and 'losers', particularly poignant when framed in a way that suggests some children are already 'losers' before they even start school, and that parents/caregivers have failed. Early intervention to ensure children are ready for school gives those from disadvantaged backgrounds the chance to catch up with their more affluent peers and stand a better chance of not necessarily winning the 'race', but at least managing to take part. Hence, 'breaking the cycle' of poverty by targeting children before they arrive at school frames ECE as a 'technology for ensuring social regulation and economic success', positioning the child as the 'future solution to our current problems' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p.vii).

The current 'school readiness' agenda is seen to be a solution to the cycle of poverty and a way of ensuring children grow up to be financially contributing members of society. The recognition that there is a significant gap between children depending on their socio-economic circumstances also highlights the need to support families to ensure children are ready for school and give them the best possible start to their educational career as way of narrowing the attainment gap. This discussion that follows will explore in more depth whether the focus on 'school readiness' in ECE, and the incumbent intervention strategies, helps to address these key political and social issues.

Investment in ECE and the Model of Early Intervention

As part of this focus on investment in ECE, a model of early intervention is a key policy lever in the implementation of the 'school readiness' agenda, something Gillies (2014) asserts has come to 'occupy an increasingly ideological role in the context of contemporary austerity politics' (p.219).   It is argued that in order to narrow the gaps for 'under-achieving children' action has to begin much earlier, and pre-school and parenting policy has been constructed to play a prevalent part in this (Pascal & Bertram, 2013, p.12).   A speech given by the then Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg (2011) acknowledged the relationship between a child's socio-economic background and their readiness for school, and re-iterated the Government's commitment to improve social mobility through investment in the Early Years and by addressing the issue of 'school readiness'.   Investing in 'readying' children seen to be at risk of not succeeding in school by providing them with the knowledge and skills to achieve standardised measures of academic achievement is a way of reducing the burden on social and educational services in the long term (Brown, C., 2015, p.207).   This is re-enforced in the *Improving School Readiness: Creating a Better Start for Manchester* (Public Health England, 2016) report where the financial return that will be gained from an investment in the Early Years, specifically 'school readiness', is prevalent. The report argues the case for an investment in 'school readiness' stating 'The costs of delivery per child are outweighed by the benefits to the individual, taxpayers and others through improved educational outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, reduced crime and increased taxes paid due to increased earning as adults' (p.8).   This economic argument, Moss (2014) argues, is the 'story of neoliberalism', offering a 'comprehensive worldview about how all human life can and should be reduced to a set of economic relationships and values' (p.63).

The Allen Review (2011) and the Field Review (2010) were instrumental in pushing a model of early intervention to ensure 'school readiness'.   In a speech about opportunity, given after winning the general election in 2015, the Conservative Prime Minister pledged his commitment to these interventions stating:

And because all the evidence shows if you focus on the early years you have the best chance of transforming a child's life, we will look at how we can create a much more coherent offer to support children and parents in the early years, bringing together all those services targeted at getting children school-ready by age 4 (Cameron, 2015).

ECE is seen as being central to the 'treatment' and a 'key solution to long-standing social problems, ensuring disadvantaged families are implicated and targeted' (Simpson *et al.*, 2015, p.97).   Early intervention is a policy lever, intended to ensure children are 'school ready' so they have the best start when they begin school.   Both policy documents discussed here strongly advocate that the political focus should be about children from low-income families being able to access high-quality care and education as a way of narrowing the attainment gap.   It is argued that effective early intervention helps to break the inter-generational cycles of social problems, not only because this is a key period of development, but also because parents can be 'more receptive to state or third sector intervention when children are young' (Bate, 2017, p.26).

The analytical process in *Figure 3,* taken from *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (Allen, 2011), highlights the proposals that children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, should be targeted at a point that will potentially be the most successful in economic terms, through a model of intervention (p.xvi).   Re-iterated in *Early Intervention: Next Steps* (Allen, 2011) it is suggested that the period from conception to a child starting school is a time of preparation in order to 'make' children ready for school (p.67) (*Figure 4*).

Figure 3 - A model of investment and intervention
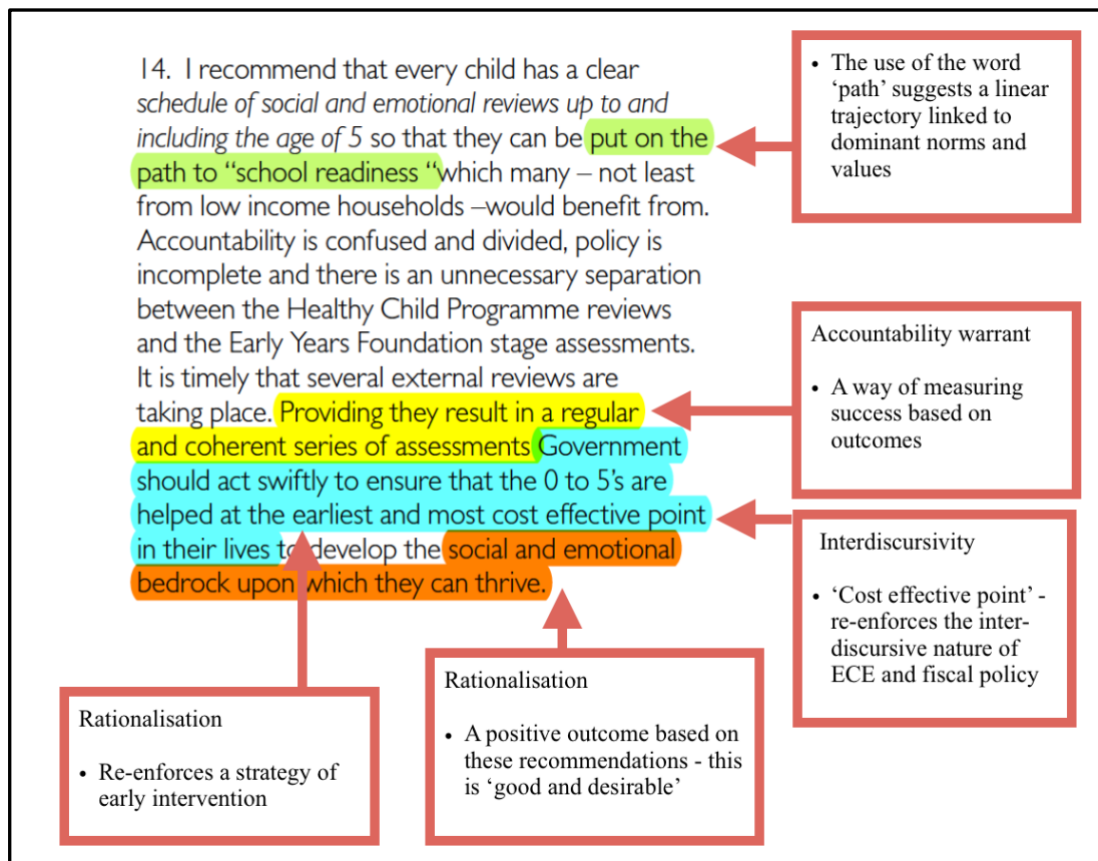
Figure 4 - Preparing children for school from conception
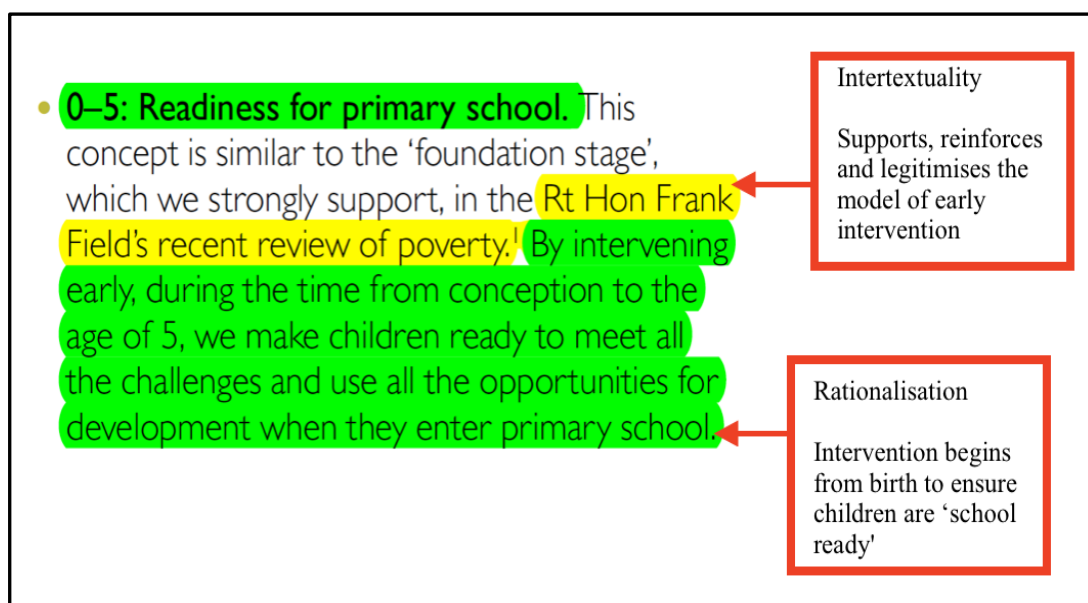
Figure 3 again draws attention to the interdiscursivity of the 'school readiness' agenda

whereby the importance of the child being 'school ready' is placed within an economic

context and financial investment is justified as a long-term money-saving exercise (Kay, 2015a).   Furthermore, the failure to be on the 'path to "school readiness"' is discursively positioned as an environmental problem stemming from a child's family background (Allen, 2011, p.xvi).   The family and individual are, therefore, positioned as a site for intervention to address poverty whilst the government are responsible for ensuring poor children and their parents get help through investment in local services (Simpson & Envy, 2015, p.167).   Through these assessments, children who deviate from the 'path' of 'school readiness', or in other words, do not achieve the determined outcomes, are identified and interventions put in place to ensure they are put back on track.   This demonstrates how assessment policy in ECE defines what is 'normal' and how children who do not demonstrate this 'normal' developmental trajectory are 'abnormal, pathological and in need of intervention' (Prout, 2005, p.50).   The potential for these assessment processes to re-enforce the inequalities they are trying to address will be explored in more depth in the final section of this chapter.

In September 2017, there was a national roll out of thirty hours of free childcare for working families, seen as 'a potentially powerful tool to ensure the school-readiness of large numbers of children and to increase maternal employment' (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015, p.20).   However, here again we see neoliberal ideology driving Early Childhood policy highlighted in the publication *More Great Childcare: Raising Quality and Giving Parents More Choice* (DfE, 2013b, p.6) (*Figure 5*) where it is asserted that childcare is a way of preparing children for the 'global race'.

Figure 5 - Highlighting dichotomy within policy discourse
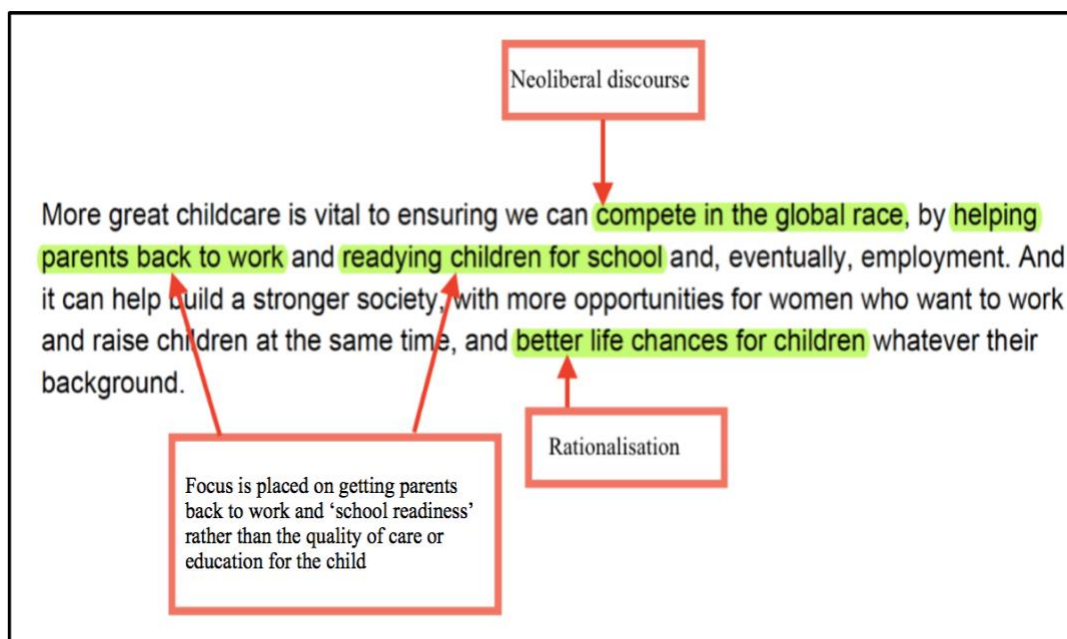
Lloyd (2015) argues that recent governments have displayed an inability to separate ECE policy promoting children's life chances through learning and development, and childcare policies aimed at supporting family economics and working parents (p.147). The government has explicitly targeted 'working parents' as a key driver behind this policy (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2015), which Johnes and Hutchinson (2016) argue prioritises parental employment over the 'potential purposes of Early Years provision' running the risk of having a negative impact on narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children (p.9).   The rhetoric is very clear in *Figure 5* that the two main priorities are getting parents back to work and ensuring children are 'ready for school', but Wild *et al.* (2015) argue that the focus of this policy is on availability and choice of provision for parents, rather than the quality of education the children will receive (p.237).   They go on to assert that in *More Great Childcare: Raising Quality and Giving Parents More Choice* (DfE, 2013b), readying children for school involves meeting cognitive and behavioural outcomes, rather than fostering a happy and engaged learner (Wild *et al.*, 2015, p.241).

The discursive construction of 'school readiness' discussed in this section highlights how early intervention is used to improve the socio–economic prospects of future generations, and how this becomes problematic when policy is driven by the need to

see a return on government investment rather than a consideration of what is best for young children.   The next section will explore the second theme in this analysis, how 'school readiness' is constructed within the EYFS as a way of preparing children for transition into the more formal pedagogy of Year One.

Preparing Children for Formal Learning

In 1989 the government introduced the English Primary National Curriculum, which saw six- and seven-year old children being assessed for 'value added' progress at the end of Key Stage One.   As the year group that precedes Key Stage One, this was to have an impact on children in Reception by bringing the 'boundaries of schooling' to the forefront of Early Years educational policy, drawing attention to the needs of four- and five-year olds in Reception classrooms (Aubrey *et al.*, 2000, p.85).   As a consequence, the *Desirable Learning Outcomes* (SCAA, 1996) document was published that laid out six areas of learning directly linked to National Curriculum assessment level descriptors, demonstrating an emphasis on preparation for the National Curriculum rather than a consideration of a developmentally appropriate curriculum (Lindsay & Desforges, 1998, p.4).   This is significant as it was the first time that universally prescribed outcomes had been imposed on children this young. *Table 5* displays the trajectory of curricular policy documents in England that followed on from the *Desirable Learning Outcomes.*

Table 5 - Trajectory of curricular policy documents in England

Year	Policy Document	Description
1996	Desirable Learning Outcomes	Specified learning outcomes for children in Reception
1998	Baseline Assessment	The first iteration of the Baseline Assessment carried out on entry into Reception
1999	Early Learning Goals (ELGs)	Children worked towards achieving these goals by the end of Reception
2000	Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS)	Provided a nationalised and regulated standard framework
2003/ 2008	Foundation Stage Profile (FSP)	The Early Learning Goals (ELGs) formed the basis of this summative assessment policy
2008	Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage	A single curriculum framework for children from birth to five

	(EYFS)	
2012/ 2014/2017	Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (revised EYFS)	A revised version of the 2008 EYFS based on the recommendations made by the Tickell review
2015	Baseline Assessment	The second iteration of the Baseline Assessment carried out on entry into Reception
2015	Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)	A slimmed down version of the ELGs used to assess individual children at the end of the EYFS
2020	Baseline Assessment	The third iteration of the Baseline Assessment. 2018-19 will be spent trialling, 2019-20 will be a pilot with statutory delivery of the assessment in 2020.

Wood and Attfield (2005) argue that the emphasis on outcomes rather than process highlighted an 'explicit political agenda' that focused on providing children with a 'head start into Key Stage 1' (p.21).   Policymakers had started to focus on Early Years provision as a way of ensuring 'school readiness', raising standards and ultimately achieving higher test outcomes (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012, p.21).   Discourses around the importance of 'high quality' education were becoming more prominent as a way of ensuring 'lasting cognitive and social benefits in children' through the achievement of pre-defined learning goals, placing early learning and development on the national policy agenda for the first time (DfE, 2011).

At the end of the twentieth century there was a pressing need for a 'coherent curriculum' for the three- to five- year old age range, clearly delineating 'elements of progression' that would provide a robust alternative to the *Desirable Learning Outcomes* (SCAA, 1996) (Anning, 1998).   A report written by Bertram and Pascal (2000) identified that, because of the lack of regulation of the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector, there were inconsistencies in the quality of preschool provision. Furthermore, the lack of a well-defined curriculum framework for the under-fives had led to the National Curriculum being pushed down into the Early Years (p.51).   This 'coherent curriculum' came in the form of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (CGFS) (QCA, 2000) which provided a nationalised and regulated standard framework for children aged three to five, the core aim of which was to

provide a 'smooth path from birth into compulsory schooling' (Faulkner & Coates, 2013, p.22).

The CGFS (QCA, 2000) framework followed a 'standards-based' agenda with the requirement that children worked towards the *Early Learning Goals* (ELGs) (QCA, 1999) which formed the basis of the summative assessment known as the *Foundation Stage Profile* (FSP) (QCA, 2003/2008) at the end of Reception.   Summative assessment data was based on formative assessments taken over the school year, along with the teacher's knowledge of the child, enabling teachers to monitor children's progress against the ELGs.   In 2008, the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DCSF, 2007) was published as a single curriculum framework for children from birth to five, building on principles laid out in the CGFS and merging with the *Birth to Three Matters* (DfES, 2002) framework.   The FSP (QCA, 2003/2008) remained as the main assessment tool at the end of Reception.   With the publication of the EYFS it was generally felt that policymakers had listened to the voice of the professionals and that this new framework underpinned the beliefs of many Early Years specialists (Anning, 2009, p.69).   However, Wood and Hedges (2016) assert that despite 'explicit cautions about a linear model of progression', the focus of the EYFS shifted from how children typically develop, to the learning outcomes children should achieve by the age of five, with an 'instrumental policy emphasis on improving school readiness' (p.392).

In the government-commissioned review *The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning* (2011) Tickell highlights the tension between those who are concerned children should be 'free to enjoy their early years without pressure' and the danger of failing to prepare children for 'realities of the school environment, where skills such as Literacy are at a premium' (p.19).   The aim of this review was to reduce the bureaucracy involved in administering the EYFS framework (DCSF, 2007) and shift the focus of the Early Years towards 'getting children ready for education', reducing the number of ELGs, and increasing the attainment of children from socially deprived backgrounds (DfE, 2010b).   As part of the terms of reference for the review, a letter from the then Children's Minister, Sarah Teather, stipulates that a key issue of the

review was to prepare children for 'formal learning' as they move into Key Stage One (*Figure 6*).   It is also pertinent here to draw attention to the evidence that supported this review presented in *The Early Years Foundation Stage Review (*DfE*, 2011)*, and how it came mainly from government-commissioned reviews and reports emphasising the self-referential discourse used in policymaking (*Figure 7*).

Figure 6 - Terms of reference for the review of the EYFS (Teather, 2010)

Learning and Development Requirements

- What does the evidence tell us about how children are best supported in their early learning? What are the implications of this evidence for the approach taken to support children of different ages?

- Based on evidence about what promotes all aspects of children's wellbeing, learning and development from age 0 - 5, how should they best be prepared to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by more formal learning in primary school?

- In the context of the above, should we continue to have early learning goals, and if so how should these be framed?

Figure 7 – Evidence of self-referential discourse

33 School Curriculum Assessment Authority (1996) Nursery education: Desirable outcomes for children's learning on entering compulsory education. London: SCAA and DfEE.

34 Ball, C. (1994) Start right: The importance of early learning. London: Royal Society of Arts.

35 Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. Sammons, P. Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2008) Final report from the primary phase: pre-school, school, and family influences on children's development during Key Stage 2 (age 7–11), Effective Pre-School and Primary Education 3–11 project (EPPE 3–11). Research Report DCSF RR061. London: DCSF.

36 DFES (2006) The Early Years Foundation Stage – consultation on a single quality framework for services to children from birth to five. London: DfE.

37 DFES (2006) The Early Years Foundation Stage – consultation on a single quality framework for services to children from birth to five. London: DfE.

38 DFES (2007) Regulatory Impact Assessment for the Early Years Foundation Stage and Registration of Early Years Provision. London: DfES.

39 DfE (2010) Childcare and early years providers survey 2009. London: DfE.

40 Of these, 1,671,500 places were provided by full day care settings (including full day care provided by children's centres), sessional providers, after school and holiday clubs and childminders and 770,600 places were registered in early years education in maintained school.

41 DCSF (2009) Provision for Children Under Five Years of Age in England. London: DCSF.

42 DfE (2010) Childcare and early years providers survey 2009. London: DfE. To note that for brevity the analysis in this report is largely divided between the childcare (full day care, full day care in children's centres, sessional, after school clubs, holiday clubs and childminders) and early years groups (nursery schools, primary schools with nursery and reception classes, primary schools with reception but no nursery classes). As a result terminology such as 'nursery schools' is used rather than integrated provision such as Children's Centres.

43 DfE (2010) Childcare and early years providers survey 2009. London: DfE.

44 DfE (2010) Childcare and early years providers survey 2009. London: DfE.

45 DfE (2010) Childcare and early years providers survey 2009. London: DfE.

46 DfE (2010) Childcare and early years providers survey 2009. London: DfE.

47 DfE (2010) Childcare and early years providers survey 2009. London: DfE.

48 DfE (2010) Childcare and early years providers survey 2009. London: DfE.

49 Ofsted (2011) The impact of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). London: Ofsted.

50 Ofsted (2010) Ofsted Annual Report 2009/10. London: Ofsted.

51 Ofsted (2009) Ofsted Annual Report 2008/09. London: Ofsted.

52 Ofsted (2011) The impact of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). London: Ofsted.

Three prime areas (Personal and Social Development, Physical Development, and Communication and Language) and four specific areas of learning (Mathematics, Literacy, Understanding of the World, and Expressive Arts and Design) were devised to 'cover the knowledge and skills which are the foundations for children's school readiness and future progress' as well as providing an 'appropriate baseline for the National Curriculum' in Mathematics and Literacy (DfE, 2012a, p.1). The revised EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) aimed to simplify the curriculum, reducing the number of ELGs from 69 to 17, but one of the over-riding purposes of the revised framework was to prepare children for school (*Figure 8*).

Figure 8 - The rationale for the Tickell review of the EYFS (Tickell, 2011, p.85)

> **Background**
>
> The proposed re-articulation of the areas of learning and educational programmes assumes that the themes, principles and commitments of the EYFS remain as the basis for the framework and therefore do not require further consideration. The following annexes focus solely on the fourth theme, learning and development, and take account of:
>
> - recent research (primarily the findings from a government commissioned literature review: *Early Years Learning and Development* (Evangelou et al, 2009);
> - lessons learned from implementing the EYFS, the Every Child a Talker (ECAT) programme and the Communication, Language and Literacy Development (CLLD) programme;
> - experience of disseminating and supporting the implementation of National Strategies guidance and resources, notably Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD) and *Learning, Playing and Interacting*;
> - children's achievement and outcomes at the end of the EYFS as measured by the EYFS Profile;
> - responses to the call for evidence for the EYFS Review; and
> - how children can be best equipped to begin the National Curriculum in Year 1 (i.e. school readiness).

Reiterated in *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE/DH, 2011, p.62) (*Figure 9*), these statements highlight the emphasis that was now placed on 'school readiness', and present a clear rationale for the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2014/2017) (*Figure 10*) whereby ECE is seen as a vehicle for equipping children with the skills, knowledge and experiences that they need to be 'ready for school' (Brown, C., 2010, p.136). This approach to ECE again neatly aligns with the empiricist/environmentalist model that focuses exclusively on learning skills and knowledge that prepare the child for school, on what the child can do, for instance, recognise shape and colour names, and how they behave (Dockett & Perry, 2002a; Meisels, 1999).

Figure 9 - Teaching should focus on 'school readiness'

> 147. In the consultation on reform of the Early Years Foundation Stage, the Government has made clear its view that teaching in the early years should be focused on improving children's 'school readiness', guiding the development of children's cognitive, behavioural, physical and emotional capabilities, so that children can take full advantage of the learning opportunities available to them in school.
>
> Accountability warrant - teaching towards an outcome of 'school readiness'

Figure 10 - The construction of 'school readiness' in the EYFS
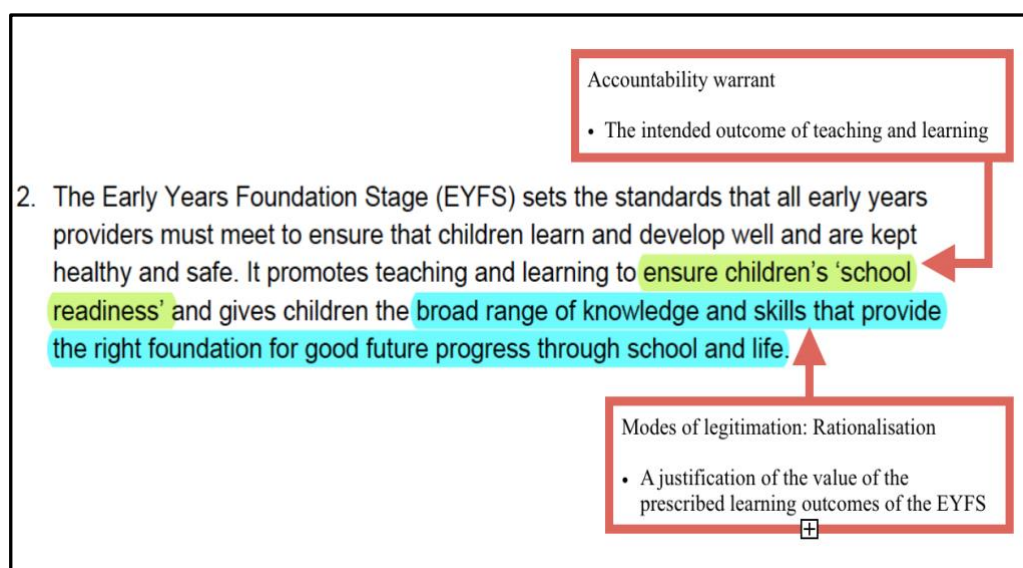
Guidance from Wilshaw (2014), chief inspector of the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), echoes this warrant of accountability in a letter to Early Years inspectors by stating that school inspectors should focus on 'evaluating whether children are being adequately prepared for the start of their statutory schooling' and to observe 'how effectively adults teach children to develop skills, knowledge and understanding'. Whilst there is still an emphasis on providing children with a range of knowledge and skills in-keeping with traditional Early Years philosophy, the value of this comes from 'readying' children for school, rather than the acknowledgement of a child's achievements.

As a way of ensuring children have the 'broad range of knowledge and skills' specified in the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) it is asserted that children should be introduced to more formal teaching practices as they reach the end of Reception. Policymakers argue that an earlier start into school for children from disadvantaged backgrounds provides an opportunity to 'make up the deficit in their academic skills' (Sharp, 2002, p.1). This is highlighted in the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2017a, p.9) (*Figure 11*), and *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE/DH, 2011, p.18) (*Figure 12*).

Figure 11 - Policy expectations working towards transition

Figure 12 - Further policy expectations working towards transition

The government has sometimes been scathing in its attitude towards the nature of the Early Years highlighted in 2013 by the then Education minister, Liz Truss, who declared that she had observed "too many chaotic settings, where children are running around", instead, advocating that children be involved in "structured play" that the "teacher is clearly leading" (Chapman & Chorley, 2013, online).   Despite the evidence, policymakers have ignored the call to delay formal schooling, often reverting to the rhetoric of school as being a place of formal instruction, enunciated by Gove's (2013) declaration that England "move towards an education system which believes, right from the early years, in The Importance of Teaching".   Within the two extracts above, the shift towards a more formal approach to learning is presented as an 'expectation' rather than a recommendation.   Here we can see how rhetoric sets down the discursive foundations designed to shape the work of teachers, so that at the end of Reception children are taking part in more 'adult-led' activities in order to 'ready' them for Year One, and any alternative will put them at a disadvantage.

Additionally, this expected shift in pedagogy, as presented in *Figure 11,* appears to be a means to an end, the act of preparing children for more guided learning with an adult, than any educational benefits this may have for the child whilst they are still in Reception.

An early introduction to formal schooling does not, however, appear to improve academic achievement in the long term, but this is further problematised when research findings highlight how this approach could actually be damaging to children's self-esteem and self-confidence in themselves as learners. Work carried out in Northern Ireland by Walsh *et al.* (2006) comparing the quality of learning experiences for children following a traditional curriculum and a 'more developmentally appropriate, play-based and child-centred curriculum' (p.201), found that the latter appealed more to the 'children's level of interest and enthusiasm' whilst the formal curriculum seemed to put children 'under pressure to complete tasks in a certain time and fashion' (p.213). Sharp (2002) suggests that early introduction to a formal curriculum may have a 'negative impact on children's self-esteem and motivation to learn' (p.18). This creates a troubling context when a more formal approach is being re-enforced through the outcomes-driven expectations of the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) and the consideration that pressures to achieve these outcomes may be impacting on pedagogical approaches in the Reception classroom.

A number of organisations have petitioned for formal schooling to be delayed and the EYFS to be extended until children are aged six or seven.   The "Too Much, Too Soon" campaign, made up of a large group of ECE experts, has called for 'an extension of informal, play-based pre-school provision and a delay to the start of formal 'schooling' in England from the current effective start until the age of seven' (Whitebread, 2013). The Cambridge Primary Review (Hofkins & Northen, 2009) asserts that this would give children enough time to establish positive attitudes to learning and to begin to develop the language and study skills essential to their later progress (p.17).   BERA and TACTYC (2014) have also advised the EYFS should be extended to 'support a better transition from early years to primary in line with the majority of developed countries' (p.1), supported by research carried out by Sylva *et al.* (2004a) which found an extended period of high quality pre-school provision had the 'strongest effect on

development' (p.iv).   Whitebread *et al.* (2012) assert that whilst in some European countries there is still an emphasis on providing children with 'rich, stimulating experiences', increasingly an 'earlier is better' approach is adopted in England with a particular focus on the formal skills of Literacy and Mathematics (p.3).   However, in spite of these arguments, there are wider international pressures emanating that reinforce the human capital discourse underpinning school readiness, and that specifically foreground attainment in Mathematics and Literacy.

The Importance of Mathematics and Literacy

The Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD) (2012) acknowledges that there is widespread debate about the 'correct curriculum approach' for children in ECE, and that areas of learning that receive most focus in official curricula are Mathematics and Literacy delivered as a way of privileging readiness for school.   It argues that countries in the 'social pedagogy tradition' include Literacy and Mathematics but do so in an 'open and holistic curriculum', even beyond the Early Years into early primary classes (p.83).   Indeed, the *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006) report warns against the global pressures of formal ECE provision, arguing that early education is being driven by 'an instrumental and narrow discourse about readiness for school' (p.219).   However, in contradiction to this perspective, the OECD has been responsible for defining what competencies are important when building human capital, and has become a major influence in global education policy due to the 'measure and compare' approach of the skills of each nation (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p.718).   The process of education, as such, is transformed into an entity that provides the child with the 'commodity of credentials' in order to gain employment, earn financial capital, and ultimately become a consumer in the market that defines society (Brown, C. *et al.*, 2015, p.139).   Within the context of ECE this becomes problematic when we consider that the 'knowledge economy paradigm and a vision of children as 'human capital'' does not necessarily align comfortably with the ECE tradition of play as a medium for learning (Nyland & Ng, 2016, p.474).   Jensen *et al.* (2010) argue that 'The international political focus on learning in early childhood education and care – primarily on language and social competences – aims to bring

preschool closer to school' and go on to assert that there is an emerging tendency to focus on narrow objectives and a 'readiness for school' agenda (p.252).

The emphasis placed on 'school readiness' within the curriculum rather than 'broader understandings of life-long learning dispositions, wellbeing and holistic learning' has led to what Roberts-Holmes (2015b) asserts is the 'schoolification' of the Early Years (p.72).   Flewitt and Roberts-Holmes (2015) argue that 'discourses of economy have dominated neoliberal national and global arguments for educational transformation' and that Mathematics and Literacy are commonly seen to be the panacea for the 'social ills of poverty, unemployment and poor health' (p.96).   A speech given by the then Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan (2016) makes reference to the 2013 OECD survey of adult skills and how "England was the only country in the developed world where the Literacy and Mathematics levels of 16- to 24- year olds were no better than amongst 55- to 65- year olds", even though the basic education of other nations had improved generation on generation.   Despite placing obvious importance on the global OECD rankings of the UK education system, Morgan then goes on to assert that in 2010 the government had "inherited an education system which was more concerned with league tables than time tables".   At the end of her speech she claims:

> *... we now have a system with academic rigour at its core; with the freedom for teachers and school leaders to innovate; with new qualifications that are pegged to the highest-performing nations in the world; and with higher levels of Mathematics and Literacy than ever before.*

This reflects the ideological level of influence of the OECD, and the need for actors to 'win or maintain the acceptance of other member countries' (Alasuutari, 2005, p.6). Although the OECD has no formal control over its members, it has become a powerful player in western market democracies and has successfully implemented direct forms of governance, particularly within the education system.   A key driving force in the significant use of data in policy processes, the OECD has positioned itself as a centre of 'technical expertise, data collection and data analysis' at a time when data has become central to governance at global and national level (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p.716).   This collection of data is carried out by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the International Association for the Evaluation of

Educational Achievement's (IEA's), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), which Lingard *et al.* (2013) argue has had considerable global impact on national education systems (p.540).   The OECD decides the criteria by which a country's performance is compared and assessed, thus forming what Alasuutari (2005) refers to as an 'epistemic community' (p.6) that creates a 'global field of education policy' as a 'single space of measurement and comparison' (Lingard *et al.*, 2013, p.549).   The influence of the OECD has permeated educational policy in England as the government strives to compete on the global stage, and this pushes down into the Early Years as an 'earlier is better' approach is adopted as a way of gaining a 'head start' in the race to the top.

Morris (2016) argues that 'the growing tendency in England to see education through the prism of PISA has served to redefine the purposes of schooling and has contributed to a serious narrowing of the curricula provided to pupils' (p.6).   The use of these comparative human capital assessment instruments reflects the 'widespread contemporary imagination of education as a global 'race' for economic competitiveness' (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p.717).   The 'singular and narrow conception of the aims of education' presented within the OECD assessment frameworks removes what it means to be a human being with complex and wide-ranging needs to the perception that children are solely 'sources of human capital, as measured by PISA' (Morris, 2016, p.27).   As a result of this drive to compete globally, the state develops an 'intervening role' to ensure education providers respond to 'the market and the disciplines of competition' and Ingleby (2013) argues that this helps to explain the rise of a 'bureaucratic standards-driven education' in the Early Years (p.126).   The Early Years curriculum becomes a space where skills and attributes are taught to ensure children become 'neoliberal subjects', exemplified in the emphasis placed on Mathematical and Literacy outcomes that are considered 'fundamentally important for employment' (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015, p.337).   A 'low stakes' curriculum that focuses on 'ways of knowing' rather than 'ways of being' enables the curriculum to be easily regulated through 'high stakes' accountability at a national and global level (p.127). Within this educational context, children are decontextualised,

their achievements based on the preparation for future employment rather than the holistic development of the child as a person in their own right.

A review of international literature by Dockett and Perry (2013) exploring 'trends and tensions' relating to starting school and 'school readiness' draws attention to the fact this phenomenon is not just confined to the English-speaking world with the inclusion of articles from Asia, Europe, Scandinavia and Africa (p.165).   The review highlights the importance of Literacy and Mathematics within the 'school readiness' agenda as an international trend, as is the reciprocal relationship between 'school readiness' and early Literacy and Mathematical achievement (p.167).   When we examine the ideological shift towards more technical approaches to ECE, particularly in countries that have historically practiced a social pedagogical tradition, the global influence of the OECD on Early Childhood curricula can be clearly seen.

Sweden, which traditionally has strong roots in a 'holistic, socio-pedagogical approach', has recently revised its pre-school curriculum which includes more specific goals in Language/Literacy, Mathematics, Science and Technology, relating clearly to the assessment priorities of the OECD (Oberhuemer, 2013, p.178).   After a poor international ranking of children's reading skills in 1994, Danish education policy began to mirror contemporary trends of accountability, effectiveness and quality in other OECD countries and started to promote the image of teaching as a 'transmission of discrete skills' (Jensen *et al.*, 2010, p.248).   Findings from research carried out by Otterstad and Braathe (2010) in Norway day care centres indicate a shift away from a social pedagogy towards a 'readiness for school' discourse that perceives children as 'investments into economic and neoliberal rationales' (p.3029).   Paananen *et al.* (2015) identify that in the *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006) publication it is stated that children are 'entitled to express their views in all matters that affect them' (p.219) whereas in *Starting Strong III* (OECD, 2012) the participation of the child is presented as being important 'in order to facilitate effective learning of different curriculum elements' (p.88).   Otterstad and Braathe (2010) assert that this highlights a clear shift away from children's participation and autonomy into 'a learning paradigm reflecting mapping and controlling of the individual child' and that 'international neoliberal discourses' are forcing Early Years professionals in Nordic countries to 'become more

acquainted with preparing for schooling discourses' (p.3026). The following section sets out how the assessment requirements in the EYFS construct the 'school ready child' in line with these wider contemporary neoliberal trends.

The 'Good Level of Development'

Western Early Childhood Educational frameworks partition child development into categories, usually focusing on the physical, cognitive, social and emotional areas of development that children are then expected to progress through by achieving certain 'developmental tasks' (Shallwani, 2009, p.4).   The EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) is based on a linear trajectory of child development centred around seven areas of learning and development.   The *Development Matters* (DfE, 2012b) document provides guidance for practitioners implementing the statutory requirements of the EYFS specifying that children develop at their own rate and the development statements should be seen as a 'typical range of development' rather than necessary steps for individual children. The *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013a) (*Figure 13*) document maps 'typical behaviours' to the age of the child establishing what knowledge and skills are 'expected' at each stage of development.

Figure 13 - The construction of 'normality'

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) requires early years practitioners to review children's progress and share a summary with parents at two points:

- between the ages of 24 and 36 months via the progress check; and
- at the end of reception via the EYFS profile.

This document is a non-statutory guide to support practitioners. It can be used by childminders, nurseries and others, such as Ofsted, throughout the early years as a guide to making best-fit judgements about whether a child is showing typical development for their age, may be at risk of delay or is ahead for their age.

Constructing an 'understanding of what is 'normal'

Currently, at the end of the Reception year, the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (DfE, 2015a) provides a summative assessment of whether children have achieved the ELGs and are 'meeting expected levels of development, or if they are exceeding

expected levels, or not yet reaching expected levels ('emerging')' (DfE, 2014/2017, p.15).   Whilst it is well-documented that there is no clear definition of 'school readiness' in an English policy context, the government uses the GLD (STA, 2017) as an assessment measure of 'school readiness'.   The GLD equates to children who achieve at least the expected level within the prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development; physical development; and communication and language) and in the specific areas of Mathematics and Literacy by the end of Reception (STA, 2017).   The outcomes children are expected to meet in these five areas in order to be assessed as being 'school ready' are represented visually in *Diagram 2.*

Diagram 2 - The 'School Ready' Child as defined by the GLD (STA, 2017)

Mathematics

Counts reliably numbers from one to 20, places them in order and says which number is one more or one less than a given number.

Uses quantities and objects, add and subtract two single-digit numbers and count on or back to find the answer.

Solves problems, including doubling, halving and sharing.

Uses phonic knowledge to decode regular words and read them aloud accurately.

Literacy

Reads some common irregular words.

Demonstrates understanding when talking with others about what they have read.

Reads and understands simple sentences.

Communication & Language

Listens attentively in a range of situations.

Follows instructions involving several ideas or actions.

Listens to stories, accurately anticipating key events and responding to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions.

Gives their attention to what others say and responds appropriately, while engaged in another activity.

Answers 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences and in response to stories or events.

Expresses themselves effectively, showing awareness of listeners' needs.

Uses past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future.

Develops their own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events.

The 'School Ready' Child

Moves confidently in a range of ways, safely negotiating space.

Shows good control and co-ordination in large and small movements.

Physical Development

Handles equipment and tools effectively, including pencils for writing.

Knows the importance for good health of physical exercise, and a healthy diet, and talk about ways to keep healthy and safe.

Manages their own basic hygiene and personal needs successfully, including dressing and going to the toilet independently.

Confident about trying new activities, and says why they like some activities more than others.

Personal, Social & Emotional Development

Shows confidence when speaking in a familiar group, will talk about their ideas, and will choose the resources they need for their chosen activities.

Says when they do or don't need help.

Talks about how they and others show feelings, talks about their own and others' behaviour, and its consequences, and knows that some behaviour is unacceptable.

Works as part of a group or class, and understands and follows the rules.

Plays co-operatively, taking turns with others.

Adjusts their behaviour to different situations, and takes changes of routine in their stride.

Takes account of one another's ideas about how to organise their activity.

Shows sensitivity to others' needs and feelings, and forms positive relationships with adults and other children.

There is clear evidence to show that measuring 'school readiness' using the GLD is problematic as year-on-year results show children find the 'expected' outcomes difficult to achieve, and are therefore assessed as having failed to reach the 'school readiness' benchmark (DfE, 2012c; DfE, 2015b; DfE, 2016). Particularly pertinent to this discussion is that there are specific groups of children (*Table 6*) who struggle to meet the 'expected' outcomes of the GLD and are entering Year One in a deficit

position.   Reading, Writing and Numbers are the three areas of learning that children find most difficult, resulting in the lowest percentage of attainment across the EYFSP (DfE, 2015b, p.3).

Table 6 - Achievement of the GLD by pupil characteristics (DfE, 2016)

Pupil characteristics	% Reaching the GLD
All children	69%
Autumn born	79%
Boys	62%
Summer born	59%
Children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM)	54%
Children with a Special Education Need (SEN)	23%
Gypsy/ Roma	24%

Children who do not achieve these outcomes are assessed as 'emerging' rather than working at the 'expected' level at the end of Reception.   In this current context, children who are assessed as 'emerging' are now conceived as working at a lower level of development through the construction of normative expectations.   This is of concern when we consider the statements of 'expected' levels of development that are constructed within this discourse have shifted downwards over the past fifteen years and are now more academically difficult for children to achieve.   The following three representations (*Figure 14, Figure 15 & Figure 16)* display the outcomes from the old *Foundation Stage Profile* (QCA, 2008) and the old National Curriculum level descriptors (QCDA, 2010) for Writing, Reading and Mathematics, making comparisons between these outcomes and the current *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013a).

Figure 14 - Mapping and comparing reading outcomes

Emerging literacy - removed from the current assessment profile

Change in discourse from 'read' to 'decode'

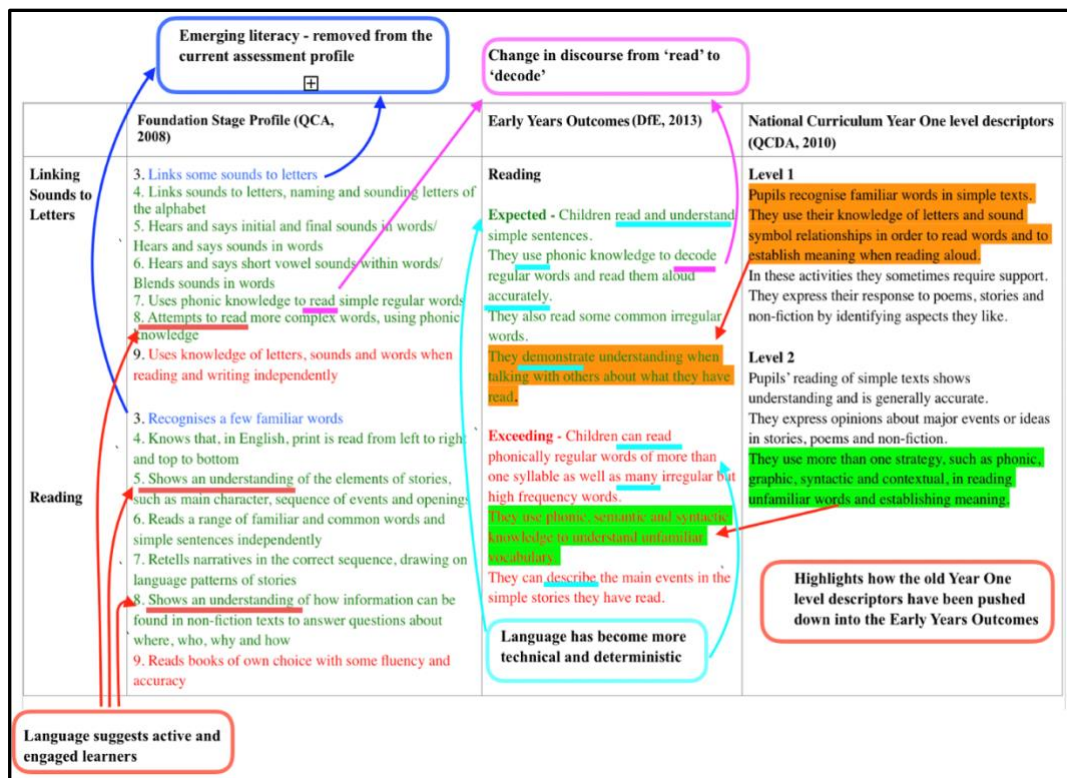|	Foundation Stage Profile (QCA, 2008)	Early Years Outcomes (DfE, 2013)	National Curriculum Year One level descriptors (QCDA, 2010)
Linking Sounds to Letters	3. Links some sounds to letters 4. Links sounds to letters, naming and sounding letters of the alphabet 5. Hears and says initial and final sounds in words/ Hears and says sounds in words 6. Hears and says short vowel sounds within words/ Blends sounds in words 7. Uses phonic knowledge to read simple regular words 8. Attempts to read more complex words, using phonic knowledge 9. Uses knowledge of letters, sounds and words when reading and writing independently	**Reading** **Expected -** Children read and understand simple sentences. They use phonic knowledge to decode regular words and read them aloud accurately. They also read some common irregular words. They demonstrate understanding when talking with others about what they have read. **Exceeding -** Children can read phonically regular words of more than one syllable as well as many irregular but high frequency words. They use phonic, semantic and syntactic knowledge to understand unfamiliar vocabulary. They can describe the main events in the simple stories they have read.	**Level 1** Pupils recognise familiar words in simple texts. They use their knowledge of letters and sound symbol relationships in order to read words and to establish meaning when reading aloud. In these activities they sometimes require support. They express their response to poems, stories and non-fiction by identifying aspects they like. **Level 2** Pupils' reading of simple texts shows understanding and is generally accurate. They express opinions about major events or ideas in stories, poems and non-fiction. They use more than one strategy, such as phonic, graphic, syntactic and contextual, in reading unfamiliar words and establishing meaning.
Reading	3. Recognises a few familiar words 4. Knows that, in English, print is read from left to right and top to bottom 5. Shows an understanding of the elements of stories, such as main character, sequence of events and openings 6. Reads a range of familiar and common words and simple sentences independently 7. Retells narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories 8. Shows an understanding of how information can be found in non-fiction texts to answer questions about where, who, why and how 9. Reads books of own choice with some fluency and accuracy		

Language has become more technical and deterministic

Highlights how the old Year One level descriptors have been pushed down into the Early Years Outcomes

Language suggests active and engaged learners

Figure 15 - Mapping and comparing writing outcomes

Emerging literacy removed from current assessment profile

Similarities between expected outcome and old Level 1 outcome

	Foundation Stage Profile (QCA, 2008)	Early Years Outcomes (DfE, 2013)	National Curriculum Year One level descriptors (QCDA, 2010)
Writing	1. Experiments with mark-making, sometimes ascribing meaning to the marks 2. Uses some clearly identifiable letters to communicate meaning 3. Represents some sounds correctly in writing 4. Writes own name and other words from memory 5. Holds a pencil and uses it effectively to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed 6. Attempts writing for a variety of purposes, using features of different forms 7. Uses phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words 8. Begins to form captions and simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation 9. Communicates meaning through phrases and simple sentences with some consistency in punctuating sentences	**Expected -** Children use their phonic knowledge to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds. They also write some irregular common words. They write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others. Some words are spelt correctly and others are phonetically plausible. **Exceeded -** Children can spell phonically regular words of more than one syllable as well as many irregular but high frequency words. They use key features of narrative in their own writing.	**Level 1** Pupils' writing communicates meaning through simple words and phrases. In their reading or their writing, pupils begin to show awareness of how full stops are used. Letters are usually clearly shaped and correctly orientated. **Level 2** Pupils' writing communicates meaning in both narrative and non-narrative forms, using appropriate and interesting vocabulary, and showing some awareness of the reader. Ideas are developed in a sequence of sentences, sometimes demarcated by capital letters and full stops. Simple, monosyllabic words are usually spelt correctly, and where there are inaccuracies the alternative is phonetically plausible. In handwriting, letters are accurately formed and consistent in size.

In order to achieve point 9 in the old version of the FSP, points 1 - 8 had to be achieved. This is now an expected outcome in the current EYFSP.

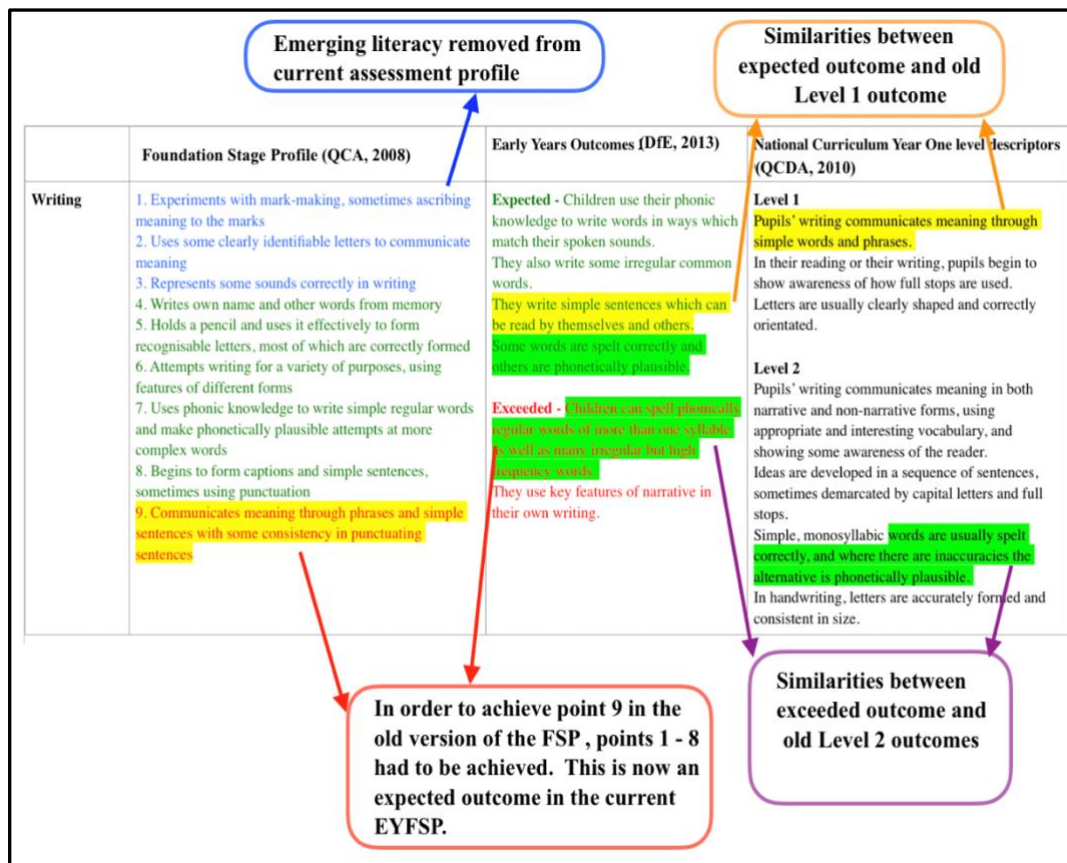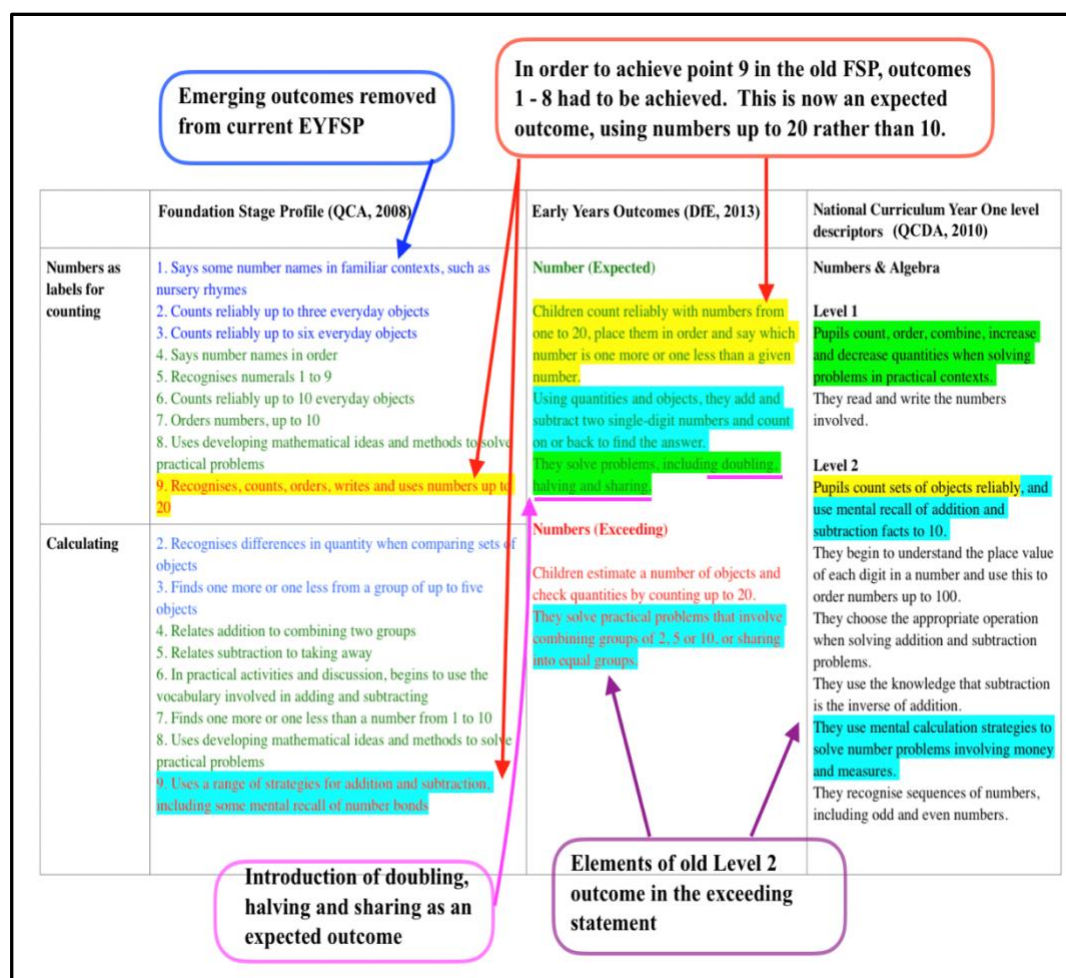**Similarities between exceeded outcome and old Level 2 outcomes**

Figure 16 - Mapping and comparing Mathematical outcomes

As can be seen in all the tables, the acknowledgement of what children who are 'emerging' can do has been removed from the *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013a). This is in spite of recommendations made by Tickell (2011) that the revised EYFS 'should define what emerging, expecting and exceeding means for each early learning goal' (p.58). The *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile 2017 Handbook* (STA, 2016) states 'Where children have an outcome of 'emerging' for an ELG, it is likely that this will not provide full information about their learning and development at the end of the EYFS', and advises that there should be 'conversations' between Reception and Year One teachers to support transition (p.20). Furthermore, the *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013a) specifies that the document should be used as a 'guide to making best-fit judgements' regarding whether children are developing typically (expected), are ahead for their age (exceeding), or are at 'risk of delay' (emerging) (p.3).

Kummen (2011) argues that when a child is identified as being ready (or unready) for school through the classification of knowledge and behaviours associated with specific developmental standards, educational policy relies on a 'ready/not ready' binary (p.210).   This is highlighted in Tickell's (2011) review of the EYFS where the notion of 'school readiness' was explored from the position of children being 'unready' for school when they enter Reception or move up into Year One (p.19).   She acknowledges that 'school readiness' is often interpreted as formal learning, explaining that the antonymic reference to 'unreadiness' is in order to 'avoid the more ambiguous and emotive connotations' linked with 'school readiness' (p.19).

However, if we consider the dominant discourse of assessment, it can be argued that the binary created is driven by the GLD ('ready for school'), and the 'lower level' of development descriptor ('unready for school').   The significance of binaries is that one of the two terms 'holds the superior position' (Derrida, 1976, p.77) and the more valued of the two defines 'the cultural standard of normalcy' (Kummen, 2011, p.210). If we place this within a process of 'othering', children who are 'unready' for school are seen as being not only 'different' to those who are 'ready', but also in some way inferior (Price & Tayler, 2015, p.20) 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.

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 (*Table 7*).   This demonstrates how binaries can be constructed through analysis of the assessment data using the GLD as a measure for 'school readiness', and how specific groups of children can be identified as 'not ready for school'.   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'.

Table 7 - Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Groups of Children (Public Health England, 2016)

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

Bradbury (2013) argues that this 'tripartite' way of assessing children using 'emerging', 'expected' and 'exceeding' re-enforces the 'bottom-middle-top' schema where only the 'good learners' will achieve 'exceeding'. This then has the potential to create 'disparities' as those 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 (p.151). Children who are assessed as 'emerging' in the context of the GLD, are therefore positioned as being a potential target for intervention, despite claims made throughout the *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2012b) guidance that 'Children develop at their own rates, and in their own ways'. With this in mind, the following section explores whether the 'school readiness' agenda and the predefined outcomes of the GLD work for all children, or whether these policies further re-enforces the societal inequalities they are trying to address.

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

When readiness is viewed through an idealist/nativist or empiricist/environmentalist perspective, the responsibility of 'being ready' is placed upon the individual rather than the socio-cultural environment within which the child exists (Dockett & Perry, 2002a, p.70). Luria and Vygotsky (1956) assert that it is 'wrong to reduce the

development of the child to the mere growth and maturation of innate qualities' arguing that children have a much more complex line of development formed through participation in cultural interactions and activities (p.144).

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. The GLD is based on a 'short-term test-driven regime' that labels young children as failures, being 'deficit' to the 'norms' with all the 'implications of reduced expectations' (Roberts-Holmes, 2015b, p.73). Furthermore, the system of scoring children as being either 1 (emerging), 2 (expected) or 3 (exceeding) is a 'crude and simplistic classification system' and with the ever-increasing expectations being placed on Mathematical and Literacy achievements, a high level of children are being left behind (p.76). As a result, children who do not achieve a GLD at the end of Reception enter Year One in a 'deficit position', destined to trying to catch up with the peers whose 'cultural experience predisposed them to be successful in this environment' (Evans, 2015, p.34). The use of these 'universal stages of development' as a way of classifying children disregards context and ignores social and cultural understandings which ultimately end up 'replacing the richness of children's lived lives, and the inescapable complexity of concrete experience' (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, p.36). Rather the child is coerced into being a certain kind of child, arguably the 'ideal learner', positioned in a way that is both agent, 'obliged to protect the prosperity off the nation', as well as subject through which 'interventions are inscribed' (Sonu & Benson, 2016, p.236).

Lenz Taguchi (2010) states that 'the more we seem to know about the complexities of learning, children's diverse strategies and multiple theories of knowledge, the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities and diversities of this learning and knowledge' (p.14). Biesta (2010) argues that the complexities that children bring into the classroom are being reduced by organised schooling through the "channelling" or "taming" of human learning by a range of differing measures. Only the outcomes that are selected are considered to be valuable, thereby serving to 'reduce the complexity of human learning and bring

this learning under control' (p.7). Therefore, it could be argued that the ELGs, specifically those linked with 'readiness', 'validate the learning and development trajectories that are officially considered to be important' (Evans, 2013, p.178).

Osgood (2016) asserts that these dominant discourses privilege some groups of children over others, and further marginalise already marginalised groups (p.159) as can be seen clearly in the year-on-year results of the GLD. When framed in this way, constructs of 'readiness for school' based on the achievement of an outcomes-driven GLD could be seen to exclude the very children and families that policy-makers are trying to address in their early education reforms (Brown, C., 2010, p.137). Issues of power and social injustice are ignored when the focus of 'school readiness' discourse is placed on 'micro-level child and family characteristics' rather than 'macro-level systemic and political factors' (Shallwani, 2009, p.6). The ascendancy of neoliberalism has seen the emergence of what Gillie (2008) refers to as the 'new politics of parenting', marked by a shift away from the welfare state towards a 'social investment model' positioning parents, specifically mothers, as having an essential role to play in 'positive social mobility' and 'social equity' (Simpson & Envy, 2015, p.168). Inaction by parents to do this is then used as a reason for educational failure, in this case, the child who is not 'school ready', which distances the government from social responsibilities and places greater pressures on parents to fix problems such as inequalities in educational attainment which, as individuals, would be impossible for them to do (Wright, 2012, p.290). Furthermore, Lingard *et al.* (2014) argue this 'highly reductionist' education policy that focuses on improving test scores as the 'only sound basis for undertaking educational reform' means that schools with children from poorer communities have to focus more on these test score improvements at the potential expense of 'socially just curriculum provision' (p.726).

This chapter has explored in some depth the discursive ECE landscape and the deterministic nature of policy constructs around 'school readiness' which teachers are expected to adhere to. To summarise, I refer back to the three questions that were used to frame this discussion: *How* did 'school readiness' come to be seen as a 'problem' for the government? What forms of governing practice are enabled where 'school readiness' (or 'unreadiness') is constructed in this way as a problem? What

are the effects of this formation for teachers and children?   As part of this analysis I have argued that the key drivers behind this policy are twofold, and both are steeped in neoliberal ideology of globalism and economics.   Firstly, ensuring children are 'ready for school' is seen as a way of narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers in order to 'break the cycle of poverty' so all children grow up to be citizens who contribute financially to society. Secondly, the belief that introducing children to formal learning earlier rather than later is to give them a head start in the 'race to the top' and to position England as a key player in the global market.   However, problems emerge when the GLD is used to measure 'school readiness', and year-on-year results consistently show specific groups of children are not reaching the expected outcomes benchmarked as an indicator of 'school readiness'.   It has been highlighted how the outcomes that children find difficult to achieve are Mathematics and Literacy, particularly Writing, and it must be questioned whether constructions of 'school readiness' within the classroom are focusing on more instrumental and technical skills and knowledge to ensure children reach the expected benchmarks.   Other issues arise when the deterministic nature of measuring 'school readiness' through the use of the GLD ignores the complexities of the social and cultural diversities of the youngest children in the school system.

It is therefore questioned whether these expectations are at odds with the personal beliefs of teachers and their personal philosophies of ECE, and how teachers work within this discursive landscape.   Using CHAT as a methodological framework positions the teacher as a potential 'transformative agent', navigating tensions between their own beliefs about 'school readiness' and how policy frameworks are used to construct 'school readiness' in a complex and dynamic classroom environment.   The next chapter will explore in depth how CHAT was used to frame this research, exploring the beliefs of teachers as mediating artefacts in the construction of 'school readiness', the role of the teacher, and the use of the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness', positioned as the outcome of the activity system.

Chapter 3

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as a Research Framework

As discussed in the previous chapter, contemporary curriculum and assessment policy frameworks are positioned as a site of 'content, coherence, and control', a way of ensuring children achieve 'educational and school readiness goals' (Woods & Hedges, 2016, p.388).   This creates a turbulent dichotomy as the messy and complex nature of the classroom, and the unpredictability of working with young children, is set against a backdrop of the prescriptive GLD and 'school readiness' agenda.

As I began to consider how 'school readiness' is constructed in a Reception classroom and explore the concept of teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices, I recognised that there were multiple forces at play that were influencing, or had the potential to influence, these beliefs.   The aim of this chapter is to highlight what these different forces and influences are within the classroom, and how teachers have to navigate these to achieve an outcome of 'school readiness' by the end of Reception.   As a way of exploring the interactions between the teacher and the different social and collective aspects of pedagogical practice, and the tensions and contradictions that emerge between the beliefs of teachers and these practices, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1999) was used to frame the research.

Socio-cultural theory and CHAT both arise from the work of Vygotsky and draw on ideas around cultural development through 'physical and psychological mediational tools', with an emphasis on the collective rather than the individual (Ellis *et al.,* 2010, p.2).   In a CHAT context, the function of the mediating tool is to 'serve as the conductor of human influence on the object of the activity', ultimately leading to a change in the object (Vygotsky, 1978, p.55).   These tools can either be tangible (a pen or whiteboard) or symbolic (concepts or beliefs), shaping the way teachers engage in classroom practice and the way they think about the activity (Kay, 2015a).   The focus is shifted away from the activity outcome ('school readiness'), redirecting the

gaze to the 'mediation of the subject's or participant's activity by physical or psychological tools' (Ellis, 2010, p.95), in this instance, the teacher's beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practices.

The activity system is a 'constant mutually shaping dialectic' (Edwards, 2011) and is made up of key components represented in *Table 8* (Engeström, 1996, p.67).   Due to limitations of word count, the elements of *division of labour* and *community* are not included in this study but this gives more scope for further research in the future, discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

Table 8 - The Activity System (Engeström, 1996, p.67)

Subject	The individual or group whose viewpoint is adopted
Object	The problem space at which the activity is directed
Tools	Mediate the object of activity
Community	Participants of an activity who share the same object
Division of Labour	The division of tasks between the community
Rules	Regulate the actions and interactions within the system

The relationship between the different elements of an activity system, and the interactions with each other, can also be represented diagrammatically (*Diagram 3*) (Engeström, 1987).

*Diagram 3 - An activity system* (Engeström, 1987)
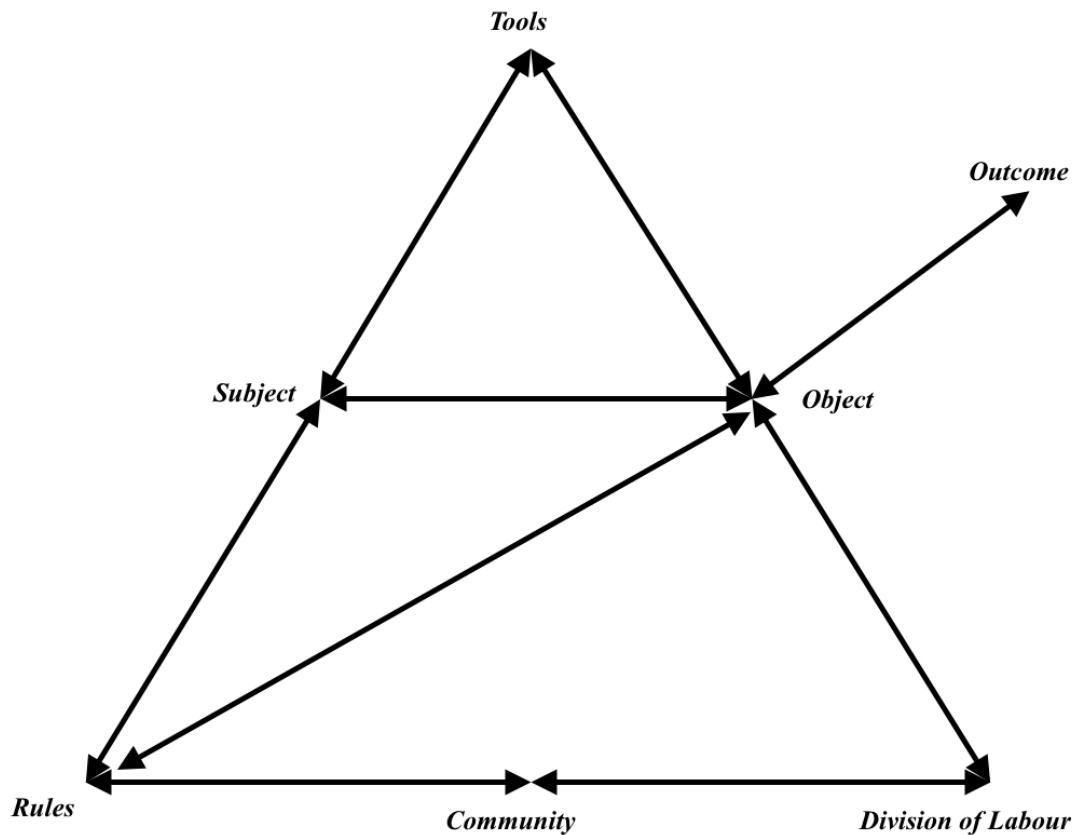
As teachers participate in external activity, their experiences are internalised and then these internal constructions are used to shape new external activities (Saka *et al.,* 2009, p.1000).   The benefit of using the CHAT framework is that the researcher is able to study 'the process or activity of engaging with a task rather than the outcome or product' (Ellis, 2010, p.95).   This is useful as it allows the interactions between the individual (the teacher) and the wider contextual aspects of an activity to be examined (Saka *et al.*, 2009, p.1022).   Furthermore, the framework enables the exploration of the 'multiple influences on teachers' belief enactment' (Fives & Beuhl, 2012, p.487), the wider context within which the teacher works, and the outcome of these enactments.   For the purpose of this research, the framework for the activity system (pedagogical practices) becomes the basic unit of analysis and the bi-directional relationship between the *subject* (teacher) and the *object* (the GLD) will be explored through the examination of the *rules* (policy frameworks) and *tools* (teachers' beliefs).

Table 9 and *Diagram 4* provide a visual representation of the way the research was mapped to the CHAT framework.

Table 9 - The Activity System as a research framework (Engeström, 1996, p.67)

Subject	The individual or group whose viewpoint is adopted	Teacher
Object	The problem space at which the activity is directed	The Good Level of Development as a measure of 'school readiness'
Tools	Mediate the object of activity	Teacher beliefs
Community	Participants of an activity who share the same object	
Division of Labour	The division of tasks between the community	
Rules	Regulate the actions and interactions within the system	Policy frameworks

Diagram 4 - An activity system representing pedagogical practices (Engeström, 1987)
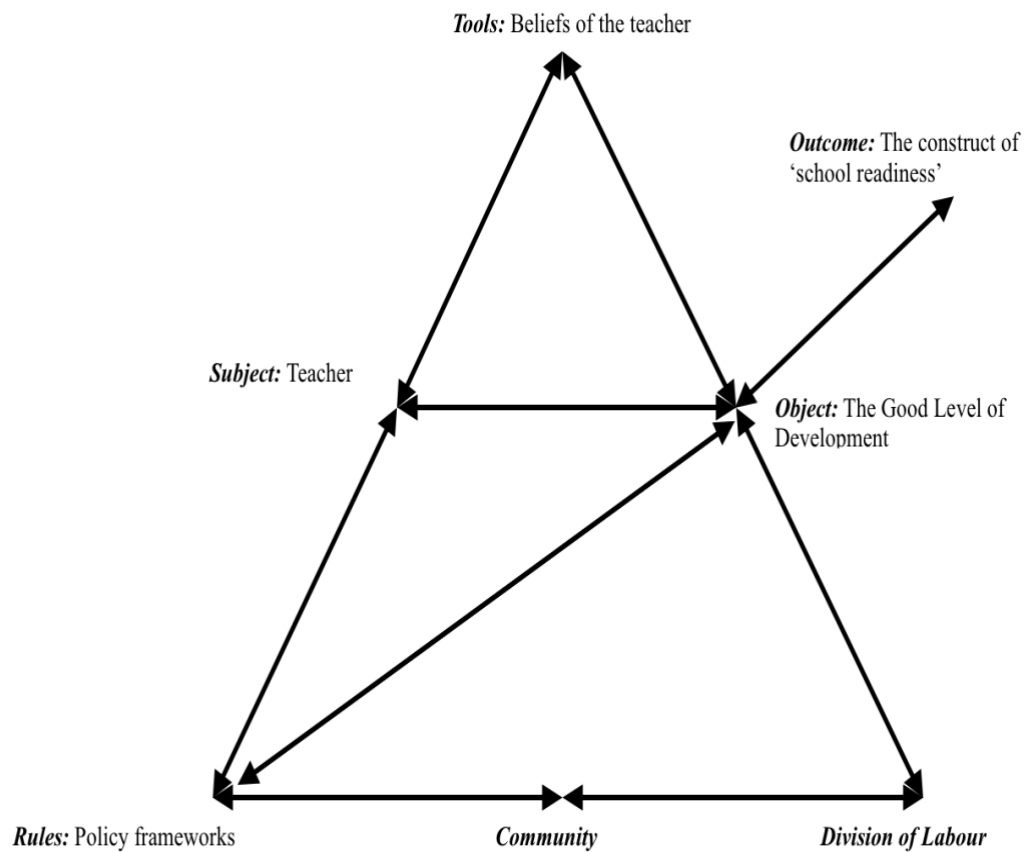
The beliefs of teachers as a mediating tool will be particularly scrutinised to help identify any contradictions within the activity system between *subject*, *object* and *outcome* (Kay, 2015a), covered in more detail in the Analysis chapter.   According to Engeström (2001), contradictions are 'historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems' whereby the primary contradiction permeates all other elements of the activity system.   When a new element is introduced to the system secondary contradictions can emerge where the new system collides with the old (p.137).   Extending on this, four levels of contradictions are proposed by Engeström (1987):

1)   Primary inner contradictions that occur within each component of the activity system (e.g. within the community)
2)   Secondary contradictions that arise between the constituents of the activity system (e.g. between the community and the subject)
3)   Tertiary contradictions that arise when a new method or technology is introduced to help achieve the object
4)   Quaternary contradictions that occur between the central activity and neighbouring activities (p.104)

Contradictions, however, are not seen as a negative force within the activity system, but rather are 'starting places' that open up new ways of understanding (Foot, 2014, p.17).   Wilson (2014) argues that as contradictions become 'increasingly disruptive and challenging', participants reflect on the situation and begin to look for solutions. Using CHAT as a framework enables contradictions to be identified, and opens up possibilities for change and learning as part of the research process (p.23).   This will help to identify whether tensions between teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices allow for transformative agency within the contemporary classroom, explored in more depth in Chapter Seven.

In order to make sense of the dialectical nature of pedagogical practices as an activity system, what follows is an in-depth examination of the pertinent elements (*subject, tools, rules* and *object)* of the framework.

The Activity System as Pedagogical Practice

Pedagogy in the English context for Early Years education is defined by the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) and other prominent reviews such as the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (EPPE) (Sylva *et al.*, 2004b) and *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) projects.   Commissioned and funded by the British government, the EPPE and REPEY studies have been highly influential in determining the pedagogical approaches that teachers should use to work towards helping children achieve the outcomes and standards specified in the developmental framework, discussed later in more depth.   Consideration also needs to be made of the way teachers internalise and interpret these standards and the action required to facilitate learning and development to ensure the outcomes are met.   From a psychological perspective, Lomov (1982) asserts that this process of internalisation reflects reality and ensures the regulation of activity, whilst establishing the adequacy of the activity to the conditions under which it occurs (p.78).   This is interesting when we consider possible conflicts between teacher agency and the constructions of 'school readiness' placed within a pedagogical framework that plans for specific outcomes.   Tensions between a play-based pedagogy and the constructs of 'school readiness' within the Reception classroom will be discussed in more depth in this section.

Pedagogy, Policy Discourse and Readiness

The government funded *Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning* (SPEEL) (2002) project sought to identify the components of effective pedagogy practiced by adults working with young children within the context of the Foundation Stage framework (Moyles *et al.,* 2002, p.2).   This report defines pedagogy as being 'the behaviour of teaching', encompassing the thoughts and actions of the teacher, and operating a 'shared frame of reference between the practitioner, the young child, and his/her family' (p.5).   Alexander (2008) expands on this definition of pedagogy to include the 'theories, beliefs, policies and controversies' that inform and shape teaching practice (p.3).

According to Neaum (2016) there are two competing policy discourses prevalent in the debate around 'school readiness' and pedagogy.   As discussed in the policy analysis in Chapter Two, there is the 'dominant' discourse which is embedded within the market driven ideology of neoliberalism, aligning with an 'instrumental view of early years as a place to ready children for schooling'.   Conversely, the 'alternative' discourse positions the child as taking an 'active role in the construction and acquisition of learning and understanding' that Neaum argues 'underpins philosophy and practice' in England (p.244).   This is reminiscent of Bernstein's (2000) framework which differentiates between the two discourse positions and the contrasting pedagogical practices and contexts: the performance model and the competence model (p.44).   Within the performance model, the teacher, through a 'visible pedagogy', explicitly regulates the framing of subjects, skills and procedures that are taught, and the performance of the learner is graded and compared.   The competence model is a more informal approach where the teacher responds to children's individual needs through an 'invisible pedagogy' with latent or unfocused learning outcomes (Bernstein, 2000).   Bernstein (1975) defines the basic difference between visible and invisible pedagogies as being 'the manner in which the criteria are transmitted and in the degree of specificity of the criteria'.   An invisible pedagogy adopts an indirect method of transmission and criteria that is fluid and diffused, whereas a visible pedagogy has specific criteria and an explicit manner of transmission (p.9).

It can be argued that the 'school readiness' agenda in the Early Years is positioned at the junction of these conflicting discourses, and the different pedagogical expectations result in tensions and contradictions when transformed into classroom practice (Neaum, 2016, p.247).   Roberts-Holmes (2012) affirms that Reception classes are the site of 'two competing discourses and ideologies' whereby policymakers are concerned with improving standards through more formal methods, and the 'distinct pedagogy' of Early Years education (p.40).   However, Wall *et al.* (2015) highlight how, in England, pedagogy in the Early Years is not explicitly defined by policymakers, but is guided towards being 'child-centred with a mix of pedagogical practices' where adults support children in mastering tasks or concepts (p.7).   Within the current context of

the EYFS, approaches to teaching sit on a 'continuum' rather than adhere to the dichotomy of two explicit pedagogies. Teachers decide how 'formal or informal, structured or unstructured, dependent or independent' learning should be based on the individual needs of the child at that particular point in time (OfSTED, 2015a, p.5).

The EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) defines the *rules* of the activity system (pedagogical practices), and cultivates certain contradictions by specifying particular objectives that align with the performance model, whilst maintaining that children should be treated as individuals with different needs and abilities, which fits within a competence model. This is exemplified where it is asserted within the EYFS framework that teachers should 'shape activities and experiences (educational programmes) for children in all early years settings' and also that children need to work towards the ELGs that prescribe the 'knowledge, skills and understanding' required by the end of Reception (p.5). Assessments are made in the form of the Foundation Stage Profile which provides relevant parties with information regarding a child's 'progress against expected levels, and their readiness for Year 1' (p.14). This data is then reported to the Local Education Authority (LEA) and the Government, and comparisons are made between schools with regard to the number of children who have reached the GLD and are considered to be 'school ready'. Hence, the centralisation of control over what is taught and the accountability agenda initiated in discourses of assessment positions the EYFS within the framework of a performance model (Rogers & Lapping, 2012, p.247). Alternatively, the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) also presents elements of a competence pedagogic model, where it is stated that 'Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests, and stage of development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all of the areas of learning and development' (p.8). These contradictions create a 'pedagogic schizoid position' (Bernstein, 2000, p.71) for teachers as they wrestle with the expectations of reacting to children's individual needs, interests and abilities, whilst simultaneously meeting the policy demands of a 'school readiness' agenda. Using CHAT as a theoretical framework has helped to identify possible tensions and contradictions between teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practice, and notions of 'school readiness' within the classroom.

Whilst government ECE policy in England does not adhere to one particular pedagogical approach, there is an emphasis on 'sustained shared thinking' and scaffolding, and a play-based approach to learning (Wall *et al.,* 2015) drawn from findings of the EPPE and REPEY projects.   The progressive and traditional notion of play as innocent and instinctual, viewed as a way of underpinning attitudes to learning, communication skills and natural creativity, aligns well with Bernstein's idea of the 'invisible pedagogy' (Stirrup *et al.*, 2016, p.2).   However, over the course of the last twenty years, Government policy has re-contextualised play as a vehicle for achieving fixed learning outcomes and preparation for school.   Rogers and Lapping (2012) support this view, arguing recent policy discourses that instantiate pedagogies of play 'constitute a similar, physically loaded, disaggregation and reconstitution of the elements of both invisible pedagogies and competence models, repositioning them as traces within the more 'visible' practices of performance pedagogies' (p.247). Aligning pedagogical practices as the activity system within the CHAT framework has enabled the exploration of the complexities of Early Years pedagogy, and the problematic nature of play when positioned within policy discourses.

What follows is further exploration of how national policy directives for pedagogy and the re-contextualisation of play contributes to notions of the EYFS as a site for 'school readiness'.   As a way of framing this discussion a visual map (*Diagram 5*) has been constructed to highlight how the government funded EPPE (Sylva *et al.*, 2004b) and REPEY (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) projects have influenced the EYFS.   The EPPE project was a major longitudinal study in England and Northern Ireland, exploring young children's development between the ages of three and seven.   REPEY drew upon findings of the EPPE project to 'identify the pedagogical strategies which in the Foundation Stage support the development of the skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable children to make a good start at school' (p.16).   This statement is important as it clearly highlights the dominant aim of these studies, to identify the most effective way of achieving the outcomes set by the government identified as supporting a child's 'school readiness'.

Diagram 5 – The influence of EPPE and REPEY on the EYFS
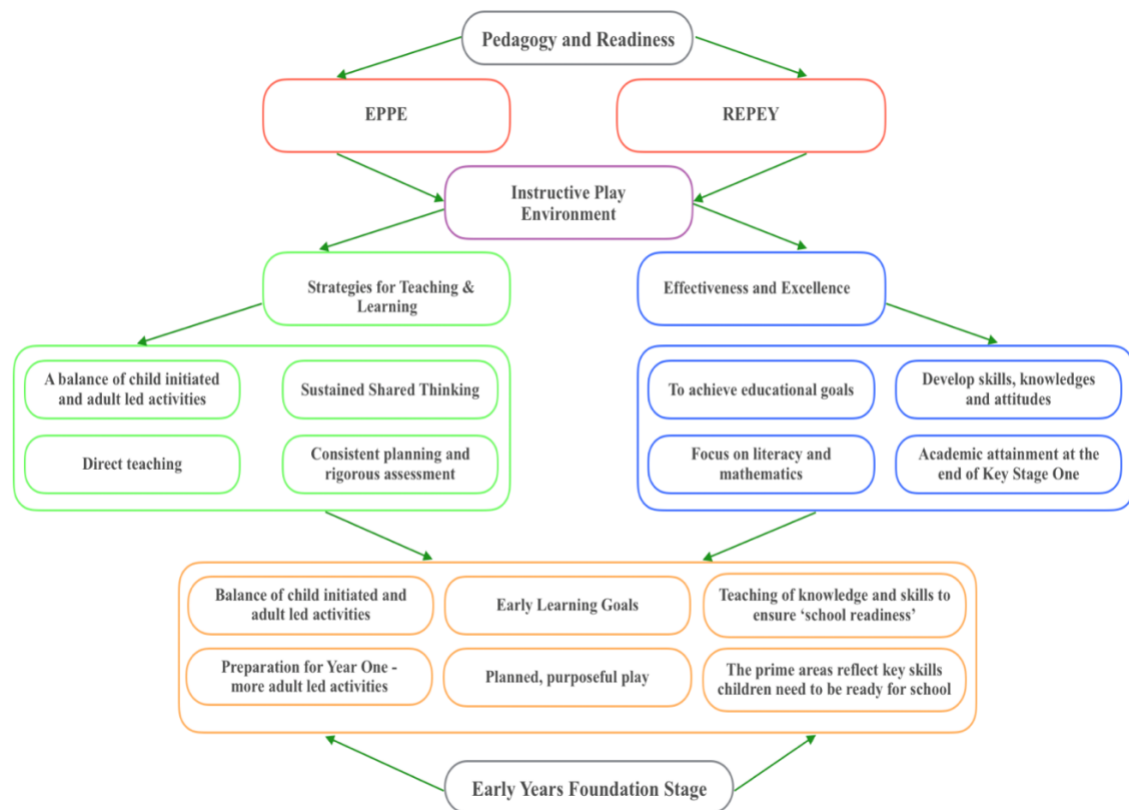
A key theme emerging from both the EPPE and REPEY projects is that 'excellent and effective' practice is defined through teaching and learning strategies that support cognitive and social development, siting the Early Years as an 'instructive play environment'. The role of the adult is prominent in supporting children's learning and development through the planning of purposeful play, adult-led and child-initiated activities, 'sustained shared thinking', and observing and responding to children's individual needs and interests. The teacher is positioned as a pro-active participant in the planning, managing, and assessing of a play-based learning environment, resulting in play being moulded into a vehicle for evidencing outcomes and contributing to children's progress (Wood, 2009, p.168). The next section will explore in more depth discourses around quality and effectiveness and the re-contextualisation of play as a vehicle for learning within a culture of performativity and accountability.

Quality and Effectiveness

The *Sustainable Development Goals* published by the United Nations (2015) specifies that by 2030 its goal will be to 'ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'. However, it is pertinent here to interrogate how 'quality' and 'effectiveness' are presented in political and educational discourse as something Evans (2016) describes as a 'particular form of logic' (p.65). The World Bank and the OECD have gone some way in defining this 'form of logic' as a market technology focusing on managerialism and performativity through the use of targets and performance indicators, and the comparison of educational outcomes (Paananen *et al.*, 2015, p.692). Ball (2003) argues that the 'measures of productivity or output' encapsulate the 'quality or value of an individual or organisation', but it is the 'issue of who controls the field of judgement' that is central to political discourse (p.216).

Policymakers who prioritise funding and accountability have dominated the international focus on quality in education over practice and, as a consequence, quality has been conceived 'not as what it actually is but as how it can be measured' (Alexander, 2008, p.3). Furthermore, Paananen *et al.* (2015) argue that the models used to measure quality draw heavily on children's outcomes and fail to acknowledge multiple perspectives (p.690). Evans (2016) asserts that 'quality' and dominant concepts of 'readiness' interact through 'predictable and deterministic relations' and the use of 'technical and mechanistic vocabulary' such as 'standardization', 'performance', 'targets' and 'outcomes' (p.66). The *Starting Strong IV* (OECD, 2015) report warns that the measurement of child outcomes to determine 'school readiness' is an act of "schoolification" which may result in the focus shifting away from the participation of the child and specific pedagogical approaches traditionally suited to young children (p.169).

The *Improving School Readiness: Creating a better start for London* (Public Health England, 2015) publication states that 'High-quality early years education significantly improves child health and educational outcomes' and has an impact on 'school readiness', 'future academic attainment' and 'future productivity' (p.20). Here

'quality' is presented within a 'narrative of investment' (Paananen *et al*., 2015) and the financial returns that can be gained are identified as the basis of this framework. Moss (2014) argues that in this context, quality describes 'assemblages of 'human technologies' believed to ensure delivery of predetermined outcomes', and a 'promise of achieving conformity to desired norms' (p.22). An 'outcome-driven approach' considers activities that have a long-term pay off as being more important than activities that may seem 'frivolous or pointless' because they are not linked with later life success (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, p.53). This is highlighted in the EPPE report where it is specified that a key indicator of quality is how 'effective pedagogy in the early years involves both the kind of interaction traditionally associated with the term "teaching", and also the provision of instructive learning play environments and routines' (Sylva *et al.*, 2004b, p.38).

EPPE and REPEY demonstrate a clear alignment between 'quality and effectiveness' and the neoliberal ideologies of New Labour and subsequent governments, and they continue to have a pervasive influence on ECE policy. The current OfSTED *Early Years Inspection Handbook* (2015b) re-enforces the discourse by presenting the outstanding grade descriptor for the effectiveness of leadership and management as being the 'Leader's deep understanding of the curriculum and how to apply it to meet the needs and interests of children results in all staff planning highly effective activities', with the aim of ensuring 'children are exceptionally well prepared to move on, including, where appropriate, to school' (p.33). 'Highly effective activities' are framed here as a way of ensuring 'school readiness', and when this is aligned with the outcome-driven agenda of the prescribed EYFS curriculum, it raises questions as to how this impacts on the traditional notion of play within the Early Years classroom. It is therefore argued that neoliberalism and the global race towards a 'world-class' education system, and a future functioning workforce has repositioned Reception as the 'school readiness' year rather than the transitional year into school. The drive to improve educational outcomes and give children a head start into the academic requirements of Year One has taken precedence over traditional approaches to ECE, and these tensions will be explored as part of this thesis. The next section will explore in more

depth the re-contextualisation of play as a vehicle for learning within a culture of performativity and accountability.

Play as a Vehicle for Learning

Although play is endorsed by those working in the Early Years and is taken seriously by the academic community, the relationship between 'playing, learning and teaching' continues to be the subject of ongoing debate (Wood & Attfield, 2005, p.1).   Play in the Early Years is often treated as a 'hallowed concept' (Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993, p.105) and presented as a romantic and nostalgic activity ideally suited to the 'innocence of childhood' (Ailwood, 2003, p.287).   Alongside this ideology is the tradition that the child is placed at the centre of the learning process where there is 'no distinction between work and play' and teachers respond to children's 'needs, interests, and patterns of learning that emerged during play and other child-initiated activities' (Wood, 2007, p.121).   Furthermore, within a play-based classroom context, the focus is on activities rather than 'knowledge, skills, understanding, dispositions, and outcomes' (p.123).   This is in direct contrast to assertions made in the *Effective Primary Teaching Report* (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) which states the starting point for planning in Reception should be 'with the learning outcome in mind, rather than the activity' (p.37).

Based on research findings, the EPPE report states 'in the most effective centres, 'play' environments were used to provide the basis of instructive learning' and that 'the most effective pedagogy is both 'teaching' and providing freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities' (Sylva *et al.*, 2004c, p.vi).   Here we can see how play has been re-contextualised, shifting away from the *United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child* (2013) definition of play as 'non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end' (p.5), instead becoming a way in which the teacher monitors children.   The purpose of play as a medium for assessing whether children have met the learning outcomes that are specified in a pre-defined curriculum becomes privileged over the intrinsically motivated activity of the child.   The idea of play for a purpose is re-enforced in the OfSTED (2015a) report *Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?* where

it is stated 'If those in the early years sector continue to see teaching and play as separate, disconnected endeavours our future generations will continue to fall at the first hurdle' (p.5). This discourse highlights the pressures that teachers are placed under to ensure that 'play' is used as a medium for teaching, and that a failure to implement this notion will have an impact on children's learning, particularly those from a disadvantaged background.

Brooker (2011) asserts that 'The principle of 'learning through play' is now enshrined in the curriculum guidance of all parts of the UK' (p.6) and this can be seen clearly in the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) which specifies that 'Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity' (p.9). As play becomes 'purposeful' within a neoliberal 'discourse of accountability' and a framework of performativity, it is used as a way of identifying 'received absences in the child's practices' defined by an 'externally regulated curriculum' (Rogers & Lapping, 2012, p.249). Stirrup *et al.* (2016) argue that this re-contextualisation of play as being purposeful neatly endorses the 'school readiness' trope that dominates policy pronouncements (p.2). Robertson and Hill (2014) go so far as to suggest that play has been 'appropriated or repossessed, or even stolen' when aligned with the 'achievement agenda' that places early reading and phonics at the forefront of the curriculum (p.168).

Rogers (2011) describes this as the *pedagogisation* of play which has seen play become an 'instrument for learning future competencies' rather than as being something 'transformative, mimetic and life-enhancing' (p.5). Rogers and Lapping (2012) argue that 'pedagogies of play' can be understood as a way of taming the 'potentially incoherent, disordered and disruptive aspects of children's activity' and the ways in which pedagogies of play are articulated in policy is a way of sustaining 'an illusion of coherence, order and control' (p.258). Play is positioned in policy as being a vehicle for learning specific outcomes underpinned by a 'school readiness' agenda. These outcomes then form the basis of data reported to the Government and are moderated by the LEA in order to verify teacher assessments of children's attainment at the end of Reception. Roberts-Holmes (2015a) argues that this data has itself 'come to partly represent the teacher's pedagogical focus' and, despite attempts to maintain a 'child-

centred philosophy', teachers are increasingly coming to accept that their pedagogy is 'data-driven' (p.307). Identifying children's progress through checklists and curriculum performance is described by Wood (2014) as a 'technicist assessment practice' in which 'the complexities of play are lost', but by adhering to this practice teachers are able to align their pedagogy with discourses of effectiveness and performativity measures (p.153).

With this in mind, I argue that two distinct drivers influence the 'purposeful play' pedagogy and the shift to formal learning in Reception. Firstly, there is the requirement that children reach the GLD including the instrumental outcomes specified in Mathematics and Literacy that may be achieved more easily through these practices, and secondly, to prepare children for the more formal pedagogical approach that is adopted in a Year One classroom. At the time of writing, the *Effective Primary Teaching Report* (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) was published highlighting how the most 'effective' schools supported transition into Year One by introducing Year One approaches into Reception, and that the Reception layout 'evolved gradually' to support successful transition (p.38). However, this report is also deeply entrenched within a restrictive agenda of effectiveness, drawing on a narrow and limited range of evidence. The suggestion that Year One methods should be implemented into a Reception classroom epitomises the 'top down' approach that numerous policy documents seek to clarify is not desirable (Alexander, 2010; OECD, 2015; OfSTED, 2015a). A key question emerges here as to whether there is room for teacher agency within this framework, when pedagogical practices are underpinned by what Dahlberg and Moss (2005) refer to as a 'totalising discourse', used as a way of forcing 'everything and everyone into the same way of thinking and acting' (p.142). The next section will explore the role of *rules* within the activity system and how policy, as laid out in Chapter Two, contributes to a framework of accountability and performativity.

The Role of Rules within the Activity System

Within the activity system, *rules* mediate what the *subject* does in relation to the *object* of the activity and are usually embedded in well-established patterns of behaviour that reflect 'professional and cultural norms' (Foot, 2014, p.332).

Engeström (1993) states that 'rules refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system' and that human beings not only obey rules, but 'mould and reformulate them' (p.67). As part of this study, it is argued that the Early Years curriculum and the corresponding assessment policy systems are key regulators of interactions (*rules)* between the teacher and the child within the activity system. The policy analysis in the previous chapter explores in depth how 'school readiness' is constructed within the EYFS and how the GLD is used as a way of measuring a child's 'school readiness'. Using CHAT as a research framework has helped to identify tensions between the policy logic around constructs of 'school readiness' as laid out in curricular and assessment frameworks, and the complexities and diversity of classroom practice.

Smith *et al.* (2016) state that curricular and assessment policy frameworks 'govern and control how early childhood educators see and assess children and in turn develop and implement pedagogy' (p.123). The *Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2014/2017) states that it seeks to provide '**a secure foundation** through learning and development opportunities which are planned around the needs and interests of each individual child and are assessed and reviewed regularly' (p.5). However, Wood and Hedges (2016) suggest that there are tensions between the goals that are specified in curricular policy frameworks that children need to meet by the end of Reception and children's freely chosen activities based on their own interests (p.393). Based on their research findings exploring children's play experiences in reception, Moyles and Worthington (2011) argue that it is the 'prescribed curriculum' driving planning and practice (p.3). This highlights how, even within curricular policy frameworks, there are contradictions regarding 'good practice' and the expectations placed on teachers in the Early Years classroom.

In Chapter Two, neoliberalism was identified as a key theme in ECE policy, and Robertson (2007) argues that neoliberalism has 'transformed' what we do as teachers and learners (p.3), through a number of key principles being deployed which:

> *... changed the mandate (what it is that the education system should do), forms of capacity (the means through which the mandate can be realised*

e.g. fiscal and human resources) and mechanisms of governance of the education sect or (that is, the means for coordinating the system) (p.11).

Discussed in more depth in the following section, neoliberalism is seen to be a key influence on the policy frameworks (*rules)* of this activity system as teachers work within the 'prescribed' systems that are driven by global and economic competitiveness, and navigate the constraints and expectations placed on their pedagogical practices.

Neoliberalism and the Political Climate

Underpinning neoliberal policy is the idea that children are seen as human capital, with the expectation that they generate a financial return to society when they reach adulthood (Apple, 1998, p.183). Within an educational context, neoliberalism is characterised as being a mix of markets, competition and individual choice in provision of services and the allocation of children to them, and an increasingly authoritarian system of governmentality achieved through prescriptive standards and high stakes testing (Moss, 2014, p.69). The market driven ideology of neoliberalism reduces everything to money, management and technical practice, and is at odds with democratic practice that embraces diversity, critical thinking, curiosity and the recognition of multiple perspectives (Moss, 2007).

The New Labour government (1997-2010) placed a 'raising standards' agenda at the forefront of educational policy and reform, with the desired outcome that every child is given the opportunity to reach their full potential. This 'standards' discourse went hand in hand with the emergence of an accountability framework that saw teachers and schools being subjected to further performativity pressures with the introduction of OfSTED inspections and league tables. Ball (2003) defines performativity as 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)' (p.216). Within an English educational context, this means achieving a favourable grading from the government inspection service, OfSTED, and accomplishing good national test and assessment results in order to secure a high position in school league tables becoming more attractive to parents

and students in the educational marketplace (Jeffrey, 2002, p.3). Early Years teachers are not immune from this neoliberal framework of performativity and are equally as accountable as their primary and secondary colleagues, having to work with attainment targets, a prescribed and compulsory Early Years curriculum, and a standardised approach to classroom practice (Osgood, 2006a, p.188). This takes the form of the outcomes-driven EYFS curricular framework, and the current summative assessment procedure of the EYFSP, the results of which are reported to the Government.

Osgood (2006b) states that in the current Early Years climate, teachers have to navigate 'demands for accountability, performativity and standardised approaches to their practice' arguing that this is a 'pronounced movement towards centralised control and prescription' (p.6). This has led to what Wood (2004) refers to as a 'paradigm war', where tensions and dilemmas are created for teachers as they 'strive to reconcile their professional knowledge with increasingly prescriptive frameworks' (p.361). Ball (2003) argues that teachers sacrifice their own judgements and beliefs for measurable outputs and performances, labelling this as a form of 'values schizophrenia' (p.222). A culture of performativity not only makes teachers visibly accountable, but can 'carefully construct and steer teaching practice in implicit and particular ways' (Kilderry, 2015, p.635). Rather than using their own professional judgment, practitioners comply with the demands of performativity, producing what Osgood (2006a) refers to as 'a form of ventriloquism' (p.192).

Using CHAT has helped to identify what the specific tensions and dilemmas are, and whether teachers are having to sacrifice their beliefs over the performance data that is required at the end of Reception. By questioning whether the teachers' responsibilities centre on the child and their individual needs, or the adherence to the wider political agenda of ensuring children reach certain defined 'goals', a 'situation of conflicting motives' may surface (van Oers, 2015, p.20). This highlights the potential for the emergence of further contradictions when we consider the idea of transformative agency within the activity system, discussed in more depth in the next section, when teachers are 'ruled' by particular curricular and assessment controls. Further problems arise when, as an extension of their own agency, teachers consider

the agency of the children they are teaching, recognising them as 'autonomous human beings' (Campbell, 2012, p.184). In this instance, it can be questioned whether it is the child or the system that comes first when pedagogy and practice is ruled by curricular and assessment policy frameworks.

The Role of the Subject in CHAT

Within the activity system, the *subject* is the person, or group of people, whose perspective is the 'focus of analysis' (Wilson, 2014, p.22). For the purpose of this study, two Reception teachers are positioned as the *subject* within the CHAT framework, and their perspectives were explored in order to gain an understanding as to how 'school readiness' is constructed within the classroom. The notion of self is presented within the social sciences as being individualistic and autonomous with unique history and experiences, but Stetsenko and Arievitch (2004) highlight the paradox between this concept and the importance that social contexts and social interactions have in shaping the individual (p.477). Engeström (1999) contends that from a traditional social science perspective the individual may be considered as an acting participator who learns and develops, but whose actions do not have any impact on surrounding structures. This becomes problematic when trying to understand 'deep social transformations', making the need for an approach that can 'dialectically link the individual and the social structure' (p.19).

Stetsenko (2013) asserts that by the very virtue of being human, subjects 'always act and know in ways that are meaningful and that matter within their evolving life agendas and visions for the future tied up with the social dynamics and politics of our communities' (p.21). The process of teaching, including how teachers manage the challenges and conflicts they face on a day to day basis, builds on how sociocultural rules and standards are internalised and interpreted by the individual (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, p.494). Teaching takes place within a complex and dynamic environment, and this process is what Vygotsky termed internalisation and externalisation. The teacher consumes what is happening around them and interprets it accordingly (internalisation), then takes this internalisation and acts on it in 'newly informed ways' (externalisation) (Douglas, 2010, p.42). The use of CHAT as

a research framework offers the examination of teacher activity as a 'non-reductionist and ontological vision of human nature and development' embedded in social practices, interactions and human subjectivity (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, p.476).

Subjectivity

Stetsensko (2013) defines subjectivity as being 'inherently collaborative processes of individuals acting as *social subjects*', alongside the principle that these social subjects are also 'members of community practices and *agents of communal history* who enact collectivities by changing them through their own, individually unique contributions instantiated in each and every act of knowing, being, and doing' (p.9).   This viewpoint is in contrast to that of Leontiev (1978) writing in *Activity, Consciousness and Personality,* who states that 'society produces the activity of the individuals forming it' (p.85).   Stetsensko (2005) argues that this perspective appears to place society above the individual, subordinate to, and folded by society (p.78).   Edwards (2005) concurs with this view and asserts that 'CHAT has not dealt easily with the idea of the active agent' (p.180).   It is therefore pertinent to address this 'unresolved issue' when using CHAT, and work towards reconciling the view that 'individual subjectivity and agency make the very process of human development and social life possible' (Stetsenko, 2005, p.71).   Through the exploration of individual perspectives and beliefs around ideas of 'school readiness', teacher agency will be examined in more depth positioning the *subject* as an integral part of the activity system.   CHAT provides a way of navigating the complex framework within which the teachers are situated, and the impact that mediating *tools* and *rules* may have on teacher agency when the outcome of the activity is to ensure children reach the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness' at the end of Reception.

Teacher Identity

The professional status of a teacher is shaped by the decision-making process undertaken every day in the classroom, situated amidst a 'system of values and norms of a cultural educational system' (Shepel, 1995, p.439).   Coffman (2015) argues that today's teachers must have the 'knowledge, skills, and ability' to critically reflect on

the teaching and learning policies placed within this cultural system (p.323). As teachers construct an understanding of themselves as professionals within a school context they act on what they believe aligns with that construction, and then these actions feed back into the ongoing construction of teacher identity (Buchanan, 2015, p.704). From a cultural-historical perspective, the teacher, as an active participant in the classroom, produces outcomes as part of his or her role, but as part of the same process 'produces and reproduces him- or herself' as a member of the school community and therefore 'produces and reproduces the very structure of the community, of which the individual is a constitutive part' (Roth, 2004, p.4). The actions of teachers feed into the classroom and then back into their own identity, and Buchanan (2015) argues that if those actions are constrained by 'accountability policies', there is potential that identities will be shifted and this should be acknowledged by policy-makers (p.714). Furthermore, acting on professional principles rather than adhering to state-controlled educational policies, and showing resistance to these overwhelming political forces can leave teachers vulnerable in terms of performance management and job security (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2009).

Transformative Agency

Stetsenko (2005) has focused much of her work on the 'dichotomy of individual and collective planes of activity', and she acknowledges that the 'self' within the activity system is 'highly dependent on the existing array and accessibility of cultural resources as well as highly susceptible to issues of power and contestation' (p.494). As will be discussed later, possible conflicts between the beliefs of teachers about how young children should be educated and the policy frameworks within which they operate have the potential to cause serious dilemmas. Edwards (2005) suggests that these 'paradoxical tensions' put strains on the 'sense of self', arguing that 'strong forms of agency' help teachers find 'moments of stability' as they move in and out of different contexts (p.169).

Within a CHAT framework, Virkkunen (2006) theorises that individual agency can be understood as the departure from a 'given frame of action' and the ability to transform it (p.43). Stemming from the examination of 'disturbances, conflicts and

contradictions in the collective activity', transformative agency empowers the teachers' activity through the exploration of new possibilities for 'collective change efforts' (Haapasaari *et al.*, 2016, p.233) and the development of local activity and work practices (Haapasaari & Kerosuo, 2015, p.37).   Key to this theory is Vygotsky's principle of 'double stimulation' (Vygotsky, 1978) which helps to explain how agency emerges when a 'second stimulus' is constructed by the teacher in response to a 'problem involving a conflict of motives' (Barma *et al.,* 2014, p.30).   The first stimulus is triggered by a 'problematic situation' and causes the participant to mobilise a second stimulus, a 'stimuli-means', utilising cultural artefacts that are available as tools to assist the performance of the *subject* and to mediate what is culturally significant (Edwards, 2007a, p.87).   Sannino (2011) describes the principle of 'double stimulation' as being 'the mechanism with which human beings can intentionally break out of a conflicting situation and change their circumstances or solve difficult problems' (p.584).   In this context, transformative agency becomes apparent when teachers evaluate the situation within the activity system and then, based on their interpretation of the circumstances, make decisions which are then acted upon (Sannino, 2015, p.2).   Vygotsky (1997) asserts that the participant 'changes the environment with the external activity and in this way affects his own behavior, subjecting it to his own authority' (p.212).

Engeström *et al.* (2014) frame the 'consequential change actions' of transformative agency as:

> 1)   *Resisting* the proposed change, or suggestions or initiatives associated with it.
> 2)   *Criticizing* the current activity and organization.
> 3)   *Explicating* new possibilities or potentials in the activity, often relating to past positive experiences.
> 4)   *Envisioning* new patterns or models for the activity.
> 5)   *Committing* to taking concrete actions to change the activity, often formulated as commissive speech acts tied to specific time and place.
> 6)   *Taking consequential actions* or reporting having taken consequential actions to change the activity (p.125)

This provides a useful framework in which to explore teacher agency within the current educational climate of performativity and accountability, and the requirement

to ensure children are 'school ready' before they enter Year One.   A key question is whether teachers are able to mobilise the 'stimuli-means', utilising objects from their environment and adapting them according to their own needs and individual pedagogical convictions.   The mobilisation of this second stimulus can then become a vehicle for transformative action that helps to enable meaningful learning in the classroom, whilst still maintaining compliance with societal demands (van Oers, 2015, p.21).   Furthermore, questions arise as to whether practice has become an exercise in 'following the rules' laid out in policy and procedures, or if teachers are able to act in a way that is 'morally-committed, and oriented and informed by tradition' (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p.5).   The 'dialectical logic' that is embodied in CHAT sees these contradictions as 'potential growth points that allow the system to improve while affording the making and remaking of the participants and their identities' (Roth *et al*., 2004, p.51).   Roth and Lee (2007) argue that CHAT has always been 'a theory grounded in and emerging from praxis so that it aspires to be a theory for praxis' (p.206).   As a way of exploring in more depth the distinction between being an agent and being an operative, the role of praxis in educational practice will be discussed further in the next section.

Praxis

Freire (2000) defines praxis as being the 'reflection and action upon the world to transform it' (p.51).   Reflection is seen as a tool that is fundamental to the activity that unfolds within the system, and how teachers use this reflection must be understood.   Reflecting on practice is an important part of developing professional and pedagogical knowledge, and building on understandings about teaching (Miller, 2008, p.260).   Hoffman-Kipp *et al.* (2003) argue that the notion of reflection is a 'metacognitive mechanism' used by teachers as a way of regulating their practice before, during and after teaching (p.251).   However, Lektrosky (2009) warns that reflection as an act of individual consciousness does not necessarily change its object (p.86).

Stetsenko (2013) considers this thinking in her own work, stating that 'human subjectivity' cannot be reduced to being merely a reflection of the world, arguing that

critical reflection is only possible 'within a changing trajectory of engaging with the world as a social actor' (p.22). Rather than being positioned as a passive accommodation and acceptance of the status quo, critical reflection is seen as a form of 'transformative activity' that enacts 'new activity paths' in order to move beyond the status quo (Stetsenko, 2017, p.227). Therefore, human practice and the subjectivity of reflection appear as 'co-evolving and existing' processes through the constant re-enactments of active transformations of the world (Stetensko, 2005, p.83). Within the context of pedagogical practices, it is presupposed that the teacher has a clear vision of the goal of the activity system, and as an agent of 'learning-professional activity' is able to plan, design and reflect on pedagogical actions (Shepel, 1995, p.435). The idea of this 'transactional relationship' between *subject* and *object* highlights how, as the teacher works to help children achieve the GLD using pedagogical practices, the process of teaching and learning feeds back into the subjectivity of the teacher, and impacts on how the *object* of the activity is then approached in the future (Edwards, 2007b, p.7). The 'changing of circumstances and of human activity' characterises praxis as 'revolutionary practice', a central concept in Marxist theory (Bernstein, 1999, p.12).

Kemmis and Smith (2008) state that praxis is an action that is 'oriented and informed by traditions', where people make considerations about what their action will mean in the world (p.4). However, Roth *et al.* (2004) argue that whilst praxis enables human beings to create and control their lives, their activity is often constrained by 'objectively experienced material and social conditions' (p.51). Educational practice is not always guided by educational theories, but can be governed by other theories, such as psychological and sociological theories, and state and institutional policies and procedures. It is argued that when curriculum, pedagogies and assessment policies are driven by the state, professional judgement and teacher praxis could be endangered. Furthermore, when educational practice is conducted in a way that excludes the needs of the child, the teacher and the community, the teacher becomes an 'operative' of these decisions not an 'agent' (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p.6). When we place this in the context of the 'school readiness' agenda, teachers are expected to operate within an outcome-driven framework that measures and monitors

children's achievements.   Furthermore, pedagogy and 'effective practice' is defined within the EYFS and monitored through the OfSTED inspection process and the evaluation of attainment data by schools and the LEA.   However, within the CHAT framework, the teacher is positioned as an integral part of the activity system with individual perspectives and beliefs about 'school readiness', and how young children should be taught.   Roth and Lee (2007) argue that by examining these contradictions we can 'gain insights into how larger socio-political and economic struggles mediate local practices, subjectivities, and therefore learning among children' (p.204).

This overall discussion has highlighted the possibility of tensions arising between teacher agency within the activity system and the politically driven 'school readiness' agenda.   The activity system is goal-oriented and purposeful, and in light of this we must consider how teachers as the *subject* construct 'school readiness' within a Reception classroom context, and what structural forces are driving this construct. Osgood (2006b) highlights how she has identified a 'passive resistance' against the 'masculinist neoliberal policy reforms' amongst Early Years teachers and practitioners but also points out that there are feelings of 'powerlessness and fatalistic resignation' (p.7).   Therefore, it must also be questioned as to whether the forces driving 'school readiness' allow for transformative agency, demand compliance, or whether they acquiesce elements of both.

The Role of Tools as Mediating Artefacts within the Activity System

Foot (2014) asserts that in every activity system, actors use existing tools and cultural-historical resources in order to create new tools with which to 'engage, enact and pursue the object of their activity' (p.336).   *Tools* can be physical, for instance a classroom whiteboard or a pen and paper, or conceptual, such as beliefs and ideas, and the activity both mediates, and is mediated by, these *tools* and the social context of the activity (Hasan & Kazlauskas, 2014, p.10).   The *tools* that mediate the relationship between the *subject* (the teacher) and the *object* of the activity (the GLD) have been defined in this research framework as being the beliefs of the teachers.

From a Vygotskian perspective, mediation is a 'crucial means of thinking of the individual as socially, materially and historically situated, yet agentive' (Sawchuk, 2006, p.613).   However, Kuutti (1996) highlights the tensions that arise, arguing how the mediating role of the *tool* in an activity system is seen to be both 'enabling and limiting', on the one hand empowering the *subject* in the transformation process, but also restricting the interaction to be 'from the perspective of that particular tool or instrument only' whilst other potentials remain invisible (p.27).

Teacher Beliefs as a Mediating Tool

It is asserted that 'Teachers hold complex and multifaceted beliefs about a wide range of people and structures' and therefore it is important for researchers to clarify 'the specific belief or belief system under investigation' (Fives & Beuhl, 2012, p.487). Beliefs have been studied extensively across multiple disciplines, and this raises difficulties when trying to find an appropriate definition for the term, particularly when other words are used synonymously, such as perspective, orientation and attitude (Francis *et al.*, 2015, p.337).   For the purpose of clarity, beliefs are defined as the 'embodied conscious and unconscious ideas and thoughts about oneself, the world and one's position in it developed through membership in various social groups, and considered by the individual to be true' (Cross, 2009, p. 326).   This definition aligns with a socio-cultural perspective where it is seen that beliefs are created through a process of enculturation and social construction (Pajares, 1992, p.316). When framed in this way, belief systems become rich and complex with many different factors influencing and shaping the beliefs of the individual.   Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) emphasize the diversity of these beliefs through their assertion that there is 'no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that exists outside history or society that can provide foundations for truth, knowledge and ethics' (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, p.23).

Fives and Beuhl (2012) propose that beliefs act as filters of information and experience, as ways of framing situations and problems, and of guiding intention and action (p.478).   As a way of understanding the judgements, decisions and actions made by teachers within the classroom, the exploration of the content and factors that

influence teacher beliefs is central to this study. Early Years education is steeped in a historical legacy of child-centred practice that views childhood as a valuable entity in its own right rather than being simply a way of preparing children for adulthood (Walsh *et al.*, 2010, p.11). Teachers working in this sector hold distinctive beliefs about how children learn and how they should be educated, and these implicit theories guide teacher behaviour and ultimately children's learning (Spodek, 1988). Furthermore, extensive research has found that teachers have clear beliefs about 'school readiness' and the types of skills and behaviours that are important to ensure a smooth transition into school (Graue, 1992; Harradine & Clifford, 1996; Dockett & Perry, 2002b; Lin *et al.*, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2007). By exploring factors that influence the beliefs of teachers, and the possible incongruence between beliefs and practice, some of the tensions that teachers have to navigate in the current educational landscape will be highlighted.

Factors that Influence Teacher Beliefs

Osberg and Biesta (2010) state that for education to be educational there has to be a reason behind it, and this reason needs to be defined before education can take place. Furthermore, this reasoning is made by *someone* and will always reflect 'particular interests and values' (p.601). Levin (2015) asserts that, as teachers' beliefs and actions are intertwined within the situation in which they occur, including the school context and the larger social, political and economic climate, the role of context and situativity must be explored in order to understand the factors that influence beliefs (p.51). Belief systems are multi-directional, and the beliefs held by teachers, and the behaviours and actions that are drawn from these beliefs both influence, and are influenced by, the school environment in which they work (Fives & Beuhl, 2012, p.476). As has been highlighted in Chapter Two, teachers are also influenced by the wider policy context, and the accountability demands that are placed upon them.

As part of this study teachers are seen as actors and thinkers whose beliefs have been influenced by a multitude of past experiences, operating within a fluid and dynamic classroom setting. As a way of understanding how teachers' beliefs are constructed,

the following section will explore some of the influences that impact on teachers' belief systems.

Personal Experiences

Early Years teachers are part of a diverse community who have a range of different social, cultural and educational experiences and clear ideas about how young children should be educated.   Levin (2015) argues that the origins of teacher beliefs stem from both external sources, such as formalised knowledge, and internal sources such as personal experiences (p.50).   According to Richardson (1996) personal experiences can include 'aspects of life that go into the formation of world view, intellectual and virtuous dispositions, beliefs about self in relation to others, understandings of the relationship of schooling to society, and other forms of personal, familial, and cultural understandings' (p.105).   Beliefs are formed by past experiences that are deeply personal to the individual, rather than being a universal phenomenon (Pajares, 1992, p.309).   This view is echoed in findings from a nationwide longitudinal study carried out by Lin *et al.* (2003) examining perceptions of children's readiness for school held by kindergarten teachers.   They determined that beliefs about 'school readiness' are shaped by many social and cultural factors, specifically the teacher's 'own experiences as learners and teachers, school structure, school teaching conditions, the expectations of schools for children, social forces, community needs and values, children's backgrounds, and external societal attitudes toward early childhood education' (p.227).

Knowledge

Richardson (1996) states that in addition to personal experiences, the beliefs of teachers are also influenced by their own 'formal knowledge' (p.105).   She contends that when compared to neophytes in other working roles, teachers already have considerable experience within a teaching/learning environment and therefore enter the profession with 'deep-seated and often tacit beliefs about the nature of teaching, learning, and schooling' (Richardson, 2003, p.5).   In practice, beliefs can take many forms and can be embodied in such things as the teacher's expectations of a child's

performances, or theories about teaching and learning. Ng *et al.* (2009) assert that these beliefs are well established, firm and resistant to change, unlike knowledge systems, which Nespor (1987) argues, are much more dynamic and malleable than belief systems (p.321).

Formal knowledge, in particular, pedagogical knowledge relating to the practice of teaching through such things as classroom management, models of teaching, and classroom environments, have also been found to influence teacher beliefs (Richardson, 1996). Knowledge forms a system of beliefs, which in turn direct perceptions and behaviours (Deford, 1985, p.352) and is seen to be constantly changing, growing out of a 'complex, dialectic relationship with the discursive social matrix that shapes it' (Elbaz, 1991, p.5). Clark and Lampert (1986) present the view that 'Rather than looking to research on teacher thinking to tell us what knowledge teachers should have and use, we can look to it for enlightenment on the question of what kinds of knowledge teachers can use'. They argue that teachers firstly need 'contextual knowledge', in that the decisions they make are situation-specific and will be different from one day to the next dependent on the immediate situation, a particular goal, or the short term and long-term impact of such decisions. It is the role of the teacher to adapt to children who, as learners, are constantly changing within the classroom environment, with the aim of facilitating 'intellectual and behavioural changes'. Teachers also build on 'interactive knowledge' whereby relationships are formed between educator and learner through an understanding of individual interests, social and emotional needs and the enablement of autonomy within the child. Finally, teachers rely on knowledge that is 'speculative' in that 'Everything a teacher does must allow for multiple, unanticipated contingencies, most of which are beyond the teacher's control' (p.29). Teachers do not know, for instance, the events that have occurred at home before a child comes to school in the morning, or how children will react to certain stimuli or classroom provocations, but they have a duty to work pro-actively within this fluid and dynamic framework.

Nespor (1987) refers to knowledge as a 'resource' that is 'possessed by the individual that can be brought to bear on the problem at hand' (p.322). Schoenfeld (1983) expands on this idea specifying that these resources include a range of facts and

procedures that are available to the individual as heuristic problem-solving tools (p.332).   From a socio-cultural perspective, human action typically employs "mediational means" such as tools and language and it is these mediational means that shape the action in essential ways (Wertsch, 1991, p.12).   Lasky (2005) argues that the beliefs of individuals, and how they think and act is always shaped by the cultural, historical and social structures reflected in these mediational tools and, in the context of education, include such things as 'policy mandates curriculum guidelines and state standards' (p.900).   The discussion here highlights how teachers are working within complex and dynamic environments where knowledge of the individual needs of the child have to be considered alongside curricular policy and an outcome driven educational agenda.   Furthermore, curricular policy is in itself a fluid construct, dependent on the ideological drivers of the government of the day.   As has already been discussed, the OECD and neoliberal ideology has been highly influential in formulating educational policy that directly impacts on teaching practice, right down into the Early Years.

This creates a space for potential sources of tensions and contradictions when we consider the messy and complex nature of the classroom existing within a policy context of particular expectations and outcomes.   The next section will consider the potential impact of neoliberal discourses that align 'school readiness' with 'academic readiness', and how teachers are positioned within this landscape.

Tensions Between Beliefs and Practice

Rimm-Kaufman *et al.* (2006) argue that holding a set of beliefs does not necessarily mean they are acted upon in a classroom setting, rather that they are a 'framework that organise meaning and inform practices' (p.143).   Based on findings from research exploring teacher beliefs and aspirations, Priestley *et al.* (2015) assert that existing policy and practice environments exert significant influence on the beliefs of teachers (p.58) and that this becomes questionable when 'mixed and contradictory discourses' are encountered by teachers who have only a superficial understanding of what those discourses mean (p.54).   Furthermore, Goouch (2010) suggests that there is a 'strategic compliance' within the teaching profession whereby teachers, including

those in the Early Years, become 'technicians' to fulfil the requirements of politicians (p.42).   Lacey (1977) describes 'strategic compliance' as being when 'the individual complies with the authority figure's definition of the situation and the constraints of the situation but retains private reservations about them' (p.72).   However, framing teachers as 'compliant technicians' is problematic when we consider the school environment and recognise that teachers are accountable to a number of different groups of people, including the parents of the children they teach, the Senior Leadership Team, and the LEA.   As in many places of work there is a hierarchical management structure within schools, so questions arise as to whether teachers have little choice or autonomy, and are powerless to overtly resist the implementation of local and national policies.

Within this context, educational policy becomes hegemonic in the Gramscian sense, whereby the process that the teachers follow are dominated by the 'ruling classes', in this case the management team, the LEA and the Government, through a combination of 'coercion and consent' (MacDonald, 2003, p.431).   Ball (1990) argues that 'Gramsci sees ideology as the 'cement' upon which hegemony is built' (p.177).   Scott (1990) contends that ideology defines what is realistic and unrealistic for subordinate groups in order to 'drive certain aspirations and grievances into the realm of the impossible' (p.74).   As has already been highlighted, neoliberal ideology within an English educational context has created a culture of performativity and accountability that places a stranglehold on teaching practice.   By placing teachers in a position of paralysis, where they are unable to work against government policy and school expectations, behaviour can be managed without necessarily needing to change the beliefs of the teachers (Scott, 1990, p.74).   Yarker (2005) poses the question 'How far is it proper for a teacher to stay silent, or to be silenced and to disregard their personal views, in the implementation of education policy?' (p.170).   Furthermore, Fives and Beuhl (2016) argue that when teachers are pressured into engaging in practices that are misaligned with their beliefs there may be negative effects on teacher wellbeing (p.116).   This steers the debate towards teacher agency, praxis, and identity, which has already been explored in depth earlier in this chapter.

Research has highlighted how teachers view personal, social, communication and 'life' skills as more important in the Early Years than instrumental areas of learning such as Literacy and Mathematics (Heaviside & Farris, 1993; West *et al.*, 1993; Lewit & Baker, 1995; Harradine & Clifford, 1996; Lin *et al.*, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003), yet there is a clear emphasis on 'academic readiness' in current educational policy. Neoliberal policy discourse that equates 'school readiness' to 'academic readiness' is problematic in its linear and hierarchical approach to Early Years education, and the 'taken for granted' aspect of the construct of the child and their own disposition to education and learning (Moss, 2012, p.356). Policy guidelines lay out increasing academic expectations for children, which can potentially impact on teachers' understanding of 'school readiness', and the practices that are engaged within the classroom (Brown & Lan, 2015, p.2). Research carried out by Brown *et al.* (2015) on the influence of neoliberalism in ECE found that whilst teachers believe they have the freedom to instruct their pupils in a way that reflects their own beliefs about effective practice, their pedagogical choices were constrained by, as well as reflected in, the state's educational policy. Jeffrey (2002) argues that a 'performativity discourse through the experience of OfSTED inspections and the necessity to achieve pre-determined targets has shifted pedagogy towards an inculcatory approach' (p.9).

The notion of 'academic readiness' is clearly emphasised in English educational policy with a distinct focus on the teaching of phonics, Literacy and Mathematics. A report published by the *Standards and Testing Agency* (STA, 2013) asserts that the Government 'believes that a good foundation in Mathematics and Literacy is crucial for later success, particularly in terms of children's readiness for school'. The current emphasis on raising reading standards through the implementation of a synthetic phonics scheme is further intensified by the phonics based reading test, which takes place at the end of Year One in England. The phonics-screening test is linked to being 'school ready', highlighted in the Government's social mobility indicators, where it is stated that 'Children need to learn the basics of reading early in their education so they can access the whole curriculum and succeed in school' (Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2014). OfSTED reports entitled *Getting them reading early* (2011) and *Reading by six: How the best schools do it* (2010) present a discourse that supports the

ideology of 'early is best' falling into what Hyatt (2013a) describes as an 'accountability warrant', where schools and teachers are measured solely on results or outcomes which further exacerbates a culture of performativity (p.839). The concern here is that a focus on 'academic readiness' may have already become the *modus operandi* of Early Years practice as teachers work within a framework where their performance is judged on the results their pupils achieve, particularly when it is instrumental skills such as Literacy and phonics that are being placed at the forefront of the 'school readiness' agenda. This tension is highlighted in recent research carried out by Roberts-Holmes (2015a) exploring the 'datafication' of early years pedagogy, which found that the assessment shift towards Mathematics and phonics resulted in 'pedagogical shifts towards the replication of primary school performance culture' (p.307). A more instructive pedagogical approach could be found to be incongruent with Early Years teachers who believe children should learn through exploration and play.

The Good Level of Development as the Object-Oriented Goal of the Activity System

Whilst Vygotsky places emphasis on the physical and conceptual tools that mediate culture (Edwards, 2007b, p.7), Leontiev (2009) shifts the attention to the object stating that:

> *The main thing that distinguishes one activity from another, however, is the difference of their objects. It is exactly the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction. According to the terminology I have proposed, the object of an activity is its true motive (p.98).*

One of the basic tenets of an activity system is that is has an *object*, in this instance, the GLD. Leontiev (2009) argues that the *object* of activity system appears in two forms: first as an independent presence that drives the activity of the *subject* (the teacher), and second, as a product of reflection of the properties of the *object* (the GLD) which emerges as a result of the activity of the subject. Leontiev (1978) upheld that behind every activity there is a motive, and proposed that the *object* of the activity was its 'true motive' (p.98). Furthermore, he argued that the *subject* is

motivated not by individual needs or free will, but by objects of a 'material world' (p.55).

Edwards (2007b) contends that action is elicited by our interpretation of the *object*, and by the different possibilities of engaging with the object in 'different sets of socially and historically situated practices' (p.7). It must therefore be questioned what the salient motivations behind the object (the GLD) are, and whether those motivations align with the 'free will' of the subject (teacher). This brings to mind the work of Freire (2000) and although it may sound melodramatic to consider teachers as 'the oppressed', similarities can be seen with Freire's declaration that 'the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor' (p.47), and that of the teacher working within a 'compliant context' where teaching practices are driven by 'predetermined economic, political, and ideological agendas' (Latta & Kim, 2009, p.137). Ang (2015) argues that 'Pedagogy and supporting children's learning is a social process which best takes place in a context where the human ability to compare, judge and make pedagogical decisions is exercised, not when learning, teaching and practice is conditioned by policy and statutory requirements' (p.194). The problem arises when it is considered whether pressures to meet curricular outcomes that focus more on cognitive development and 'school readiness' have an impact on teaching in the Early Years, and, if so, how much of what the teacher does is affected by these pressures.

In the Early Years, educational policy such as the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017) frames a child's learning and development through the lens of Developmental Psychology, drawing on positivist methodologies to observe cognition, behaviour, and competence (Wood & Hedges, 2016, p.389). From this perspective, the 'developing child' is seen as an 'object of study', something that is produced for 'particular purposes within very specific historical, social and political conditions' (Walkerdine, 1993, p.453). Concepts of 'readiness' that dominate ECE policy discourses 'predefine desirable subject positions and trajectories of development' which reduces the complexities of how learning and development is experienced by the child and the teacher (Evans, 2015, p.35). This is highlighted by the deterministic nature of the GLD based on linear trajectory of outcomes and a Piagetian 'ages and stages' framework that

privileges scientific 'truths' about children's development and learning. Burman (2017) argues that 'The selection of children as objects of developmental psychological enquiry leads to failure to theorise the psychological context they inhabit' (p.5).

This is echoed in the *Early Years Learning and Development Review* (Evangelou *et al.,* 2009) where it is pointed out that linear progressions 'homogenise development' and new theories of development propose that children develop along a 'web of multiple strands' and 'different pathways' (p.29). Furthermore, Wood and Hedges (2016) argue that 'guiding development is not the same as guiding learning' and it is learning that leads development rather than the other way around (p.393). This creates added complexities when 'school readiness' is based on the achievement of prescribed developmental outcomes, specifically the GLD, rather than on a 'readiness to learn' construct which encompasses competencies such as motivation, emotional maturity, intellectual ability, and health. Further questions arise when we consider whether teachers focus on the GLD in order to produce the outcome of 'school readiness', or whether there is room to expand the object of the activity to include 'broader motives of well-being, democracy and equity' (Edwards, 2010, p.67).

Concluding Comments

The aim of this chapter has been to highlight the challenges faced by teachers working in a dynamic and diverse environment, whilst having to ensure children achieve certain outcomes by the end of their year in Reception. This is in contrast to the deterministic and prescribed way of viewing children's development within policy frameworks, as discussed in the previous chapter. Using CHAT as a research framework has enabled me to begin to make sense of the complexities of teaching as a dialectic process, and to consider how teachers navigate a landscape that is not only educational, but also political. This framework has also helped to formulate the research questions that will help to identify the tensions and contradictions that teachers face within an agenda driven by 'school readiness':

1) How is 'school readiness' defined in Government policy in England?
2) What do teachers in the Early Years perceive 'school readiness' to be?
3) How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom?

4)   What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practice?

5)   What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and policy frameworks?

The next chapter will identify how this framework has helped to inform the methods and the analytical process that has been undertaken in this research.

Chapter 4

Methodological Considerations

The purpose of this research is to explore teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness', and how 'school readiness' is constructed through pedagogical approaches, curriculum planning and assessments practices in two Reception classrooms in north-west England.   As a way of understanding this issue, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1)   How is 'school readiness' defined in Government policy in England?
2)   What do teachers in the Early Years perceive 'school readiness' to be?
3)   How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom?
4)   What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practice?
5)   What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and policy frameworks?

This chapter will describe the methodology used throughout the study and includes: (a) justification for the methodological framework, (b) the research location and sample, (c) overview of the research design, (d) the data collection methods, (e) ethical considerations, and (f) issues of trustworthiness.

Methodological Framework

Mertens (2010) argues that it is philosophical assumptions that 'form the paradigm that guides the thinking and action within the research process' (p.7).   Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a paradigm as being a 'worldview' that considers the 'nature of the "world", the individual's place in it and the range of possible relationships to that world' (p.107).   Stemming from Kant's (1914) philosophical work *Critique of Judgement*, the idea of weltanschauung (worldview) evolved to refer to an 'intellectual conception of the universe from the perspective of a human knower' (Naugle, 2002, p.59).   With this in mind, it must be acknowledged that research is not a neutral activity and researchers have their own 'values, biases and world views' through which they examine and interpret the world of their participants (Cohen *et al*., 2011, p.225).

An important part of the research process is to specify the overall epistemological stance that has been taken, including the implicit and explicit assumptions about the subject, and the nature of knowledge that is considered valid to resolve the research question.   As discussed in the previous chapter, CHAT has been utilised as a way of understanding how we are 'not isolated individuals interacting with our environment' but that the world is 'mediated by other people, and the cultural-historical context in which we live' (Wilson, 2014, p.21).   In this research context, the 'systematic investigation of social phenomena and human behaviour and interaction' (Lichtman, 2013, p.4) of a qualitative research strategy is conducive to the exploration of the beliefs of the teacher participants, and of their classroom activity.   The epistemological orientation of a qualitative research strategy places an emphasis on the way individuals interpret their social world and that there are multiple ways of investigating multiple versions of reality (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.219).   Furthermore, in an educational context, qualitative research recognises that what happens in schools and classrooms is made up of 'complex layers of meanings, interpretations, values and attitudes' (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p.26).   This approach will enable the research to focus on the dynamics of the social, political and cultural nature of the activity system enabling a deeper analysis of the observed characteristics of arising situations (Gobo, 2007, p.203).

Ontological questions and assumptions are concerned with the desire to understand what it means to be human interacting in a social world (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p.19).   Burrell and Morgan (1979) argue that the fundamental ontological question for social scientists is whether the reality being investigated is objective and external to the individual, or the product of individual consciousness and cognition (p.1).   If reality is seen as being socially constructed, individual perceptions and experiences of the social world must be investigated and interpreted using subjective and personal accounts (Sikes, 2004, p.20).   Alternatively, if the social world is considered to be an objective and external reality then it is something that can be observed and accounted for through quantifiable data, using a natural science model, and a positivist approach in particular (Bryman, 2001, p.20).   Using CHAT as a research framework acknowledges that reality is socially constructed, but is also in a state of constant

change facilitated by 'human collaborative practices' in which 'people themselves come to know, to act, and to be' (Stetsenko, 2015, p.xxii) in a time of 'overlapping matrices of socio-cultural and political-economical relations' (p.xxiii).

Within an educational research context, contending views about 'different conceptions of social reality and of individual and social behaviour' need to be examined in more detail in order to understand the issues that emerge (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p.5). This is important as the different visions of social realities, and how these realities are examined, influence the methodological framework and the data collection methods used in the research (Bryman, 2001, p.4). As a starting point, a survey was carried out in order to gain a 'wider picture' of what teachers believe 'school readiness' to be. A fundamental issue from the outset of this research was the lack of any clear definition in ECE policy about what 'school readiness' looks like, and therefore it was deemed pertinent to establish a general overview of the perspectives of teachers. The interview questions focused on exploring the individual and social processes that 'reflect how experience is constructed both internally and externally' (Salkind, 2010, p.871). Referring back to the recommendations made by Fives and Beuhl (2012), the aim of the interview was to address the 'complex and multifaceted beliefs' teachers' hold about a 'wide range of people and structures' (p.487).

The following table (*Table 10)* highlights all of the data collection methods that were used as a way of gaining an insight into teachers' beliefs and classroom practices:

Table 10 - Data collection methods

Method	*Teachers' beliefs*	*Classroom practice*
Teacher Belief Survey	√	
Semi-structured interviews	√	
Non-Participant observations		√
Document analysis		√
Reflective conversations	√	√

Research Location and Sample

The research was carried out in a school situated in an area of religious and cultural diversity, with 22% of the population coming from an ethnic minority (Oldham Council, 2012). As a Local Authority, results at the end of the Foundation Stage are statistically lower than the national average with 53.7% of children assessed as achieving the GLD, compared to 66.3% nationally (Public Health England, 2016, p.11). Gaps in 'school readiness' are mostly associated with race, ethnicity, place of birth, gender and poverty, where working class boys are also seen to be a disadvantaged group (Pascal & Bertram, 2013; Sutton Trust, 2012). In contrast, there are affluent pockets of the borough where education and skill levels are significantly higher than national averages, and a high proportion of children leave Foundation Stage having achieved the GLD (69.9%) (Oldham Council, 2014).

My intention was to find a school with a two or three form entry so I would be able to work with teachers from the research location. A purposive sampling approach was adopted as this allows the researcher to 'discover, understand, and gain insight' and therefore it was important to select a sample from which 'the most can be learned' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p.96). The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1) Trained as a teacher and have Qualified Teacher Status
2) Work within a Reception classroom
3) Work in a two or three form entry school
4) Be geographically convenient

I contacted a number of schools via email and telephone, sending out a copy of the executive summary (*Appendix A*) and teacher participant information sheet (*Appendix B*) to ensure schools were fully informed of the research project. The school which agreed to help facilitate the research was a two-form entry school, larger than the average-sized primary with a high proportion of children with special educational needs, and an average number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Initially, the two Reception teachers were the only participants, but as the research progressed it became clear that it would be pertinent to include the Year One teachers

and the Nursery teacher who was also a member of the Senior Leadership Team.   The teachers across the EYFS and Year One worked closely with each other to prepare children for transition, so it was considered that their perspectives on issues around 'school readiness' would add further depth to the data.   Biographical data was requested from each of the teachers to provide some background context (*Appendix C*), represented in *Table 11* using pseudonyms for the teachers to respect anonymity.

Table 11 - Participant information

Name (Pseudonym)	Number of years in service	Year group	Route into teaching	Teaching background
Sarah	3	Reception	BA (Hons) degree in Educational Studies/ PGCE in Advanced Early Years	Three years in Reception
Mary	16	Reception	BEd in Primary Education/ PGCE	Worked across the EYFS and KS1, and has also been KS1 leader
Claire	32	Nursery	BEd in Primary Education	Worked across the EYFS and KS1, and is a member of the SLT
Emma	3	Year One	BA(Hons) primary Education	One year in Reception prior to working in Year One
Rosa	4	Year One	Graduate Teacher Programme	Ten years working as a teaching assistant across the whole primary school

I met with the teachers prior to beginning the research to ensure they understood what was required, and to address any questions or potential issues that they had. Together we pre-arranged the research observation schedule and interview dates (*Appendix D*) to fit in with the school calendar and teacher responsibilities, and it was agreed that every other Friday morning during term time would be a suitable slot to be in the classroom to collect data.   As an act of reciprocity in recognition of the time the teachers were giving to the research project, I felt that it was important that, when not collecting data, I was on hand to help out with the classroom activities, and

interact with the children.   I believe this helped to establish a positive research relationship from the outset, and the children became used to me 'being around' the classroom.

Research Design

In order to understand the subject-object activity relationship within the context of the classroom, *Diagram 6* shows how the supplementary research questions were mapped to the activity system as part of the data collection design. In order to explore the 'complexities and contradictions of real life' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.21) *Table 12* specifies the research methods used.

Diagram 6 - Mapping the research questions to the activity system

Subject-Tools-Object

What do teachers in the Early Years perceive 'school readiness' to be?

How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom?

What tensions and contradictions are there between teacher beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practice?

Tools: Beliefs of the teacher

Outcome: The construct of 'school readiness'

Subject: Teacher

Object: The Good Level of Development

Rules: Policy frameworks

Community

Division of Labour

Subject-Rules-Object

How is 'school readiness' defined in Government policy in England?

What tensions and contradictions are there between teacher beliefs about 'school readiness' and policy frameworks?

Table 12 - Supplementary research questions and research methods

Activity Focus	Supplementary research questions	Research methods
Subject-Tool-Object	What do teachers in the Early Years perceive 'school readiness' to be? How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom? What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practice?	Survey Interview Document analysis Observations Reflective conversations
Subject-Rules-Object	How is 'school readiness' defined in Government policy in England? What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and policy frameworks?	Policy analysis (Chapter 2) Interview Document analysis Observations Reflective conversations

Data Collection

The aim of this research was to explore the beliefs of teachers about 'school readiness' and how this is constructed in the Reception classroom.   All the data were collected in the natural setting of the school, using semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, document analysis, and reflective conversations with the teachers.   A survey was carried out at the initial stage of the data collection period as a way of gaining an overview of current beliefs around 'school readiness' from a wider perspective.   The following section will explore in more depth the different data collection methods used in this research.

Survey

In order to explore the beliefs of teachers in a wider context an Internet survey questionnaire was used as a way of providing a broad understanding of perceptions around constructs of 'school readiness', and an overview of the general teaching practices in Early Years classrooms.   Surveys are a useful way of providing a snapshot of attitudes, experiences, thoughts, feelings or behaviours at a specific point in time, and enable the collection of large scale data from a representative sample in an economical and efficient way (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.257).

The survey used for this research was based on the Starting School questionnaire (Perry *et al.*, 1998) that was implemented as part of the Starting School Research Project in Australia. The Starting School Research Project was a longitudinal study that investigated the perceptions of all those involved in a child's transition to school. Permission was sought from the authors prior to the questionnaire being adapted for use in the study (*Appendix E*). The Starting School questionnaire consisted of five sections relating to the background of the participants, how schools are made ready for children, successful transitions to school and the skills and experiences that were perceived to be a prerequisite for a successful transition into school. For the purpose of this research the Starting School questionnaire was adapted to focus on aspects of 'school readiness' although many of the original statements remained in the survey (*Appendix F*). Omitted statements were linked to specific aspects of the child's home life, such as whether they were immunised, or received regular medical and dental care, that were not deemed relevant for the focus of this study.

The data from the Starting School questionnaires, combined with interview data from the Starting School Research Project, identified eight response categories (*Table 13*) (Dockett & Perry, 2004, p.175).

Table 13 - Categories of Responses and Examples

Category	Description	Example
Knowledge	Ideas, facts or concepts that need to be known in order to start school	Knowing the alphabet, counting
Adjustment	Adjustment to the school context, including interpersonal and organizational adjustment	Can talk with children and adults at school Follows directions
Skills	Small units of action that could be observed or inferred from observable behaviour	Toilets independently Identifies own possessions
Disposition	Attitudes towards, or feelings about school or learning	Excited about school
Rules	Fitting in with the school and school expectations	Lining up Coping with discipline
Physical	Physical attributes, needs or characteristics. Also includes issues about safety, health and age	Playground safety Washing hands

Family issues	Issues related to family functioning or involvement with the school	Parent–school communication Cost Parent's role
Educational Environment	The nature and/or characteristics of the school environment	Choosing a school Quality and nature of education provided How the school caters for the individual children/children with special needs

From these eight response categories the 'school readiness' survey questionnaire used in this research focused on knowledge, adjustment, skills, disposition, rules and physical as a framework for the analysis of the survey data results. As this research focuses on the beliefs of teachers about 'school readiness', the 'family issues' and 'educational environment' categories were not included in this questionnaire, but this provides scope for further research in the future.

The survey was written and presented using an online survey tool, SmartSurvey, which was then disseminated through various Early Years Facebook groups and online Internet forums. Permission was sought from group administrators prior to posting the link to the survey on the Facebook page and forums. Potential participants were informed of the research on the first page of the survey, and the ethical considerations of the research (*Figure 17*). There was no requirement to provide any personal details and participants were able to leave the survey at any point with incomplete surveys not included in the final data compilation.

Figure 17 - Information and consent from online survey

1. Teacher Beliefs About School Readiness   Page 1 of 7

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The focus of my research is centred around teacher's beliefs about school readiness, and your contribution is important in reflecting current thinking in contemporary Early Years practice. This survey forms part of a larger study being undertaken for a Doctorate of Education at the University of Sheffield. My main focus is to explore teacher beliefs about school readiness, and how these beliefs impact on practice and pedagogy in the Reception classroom. The survey is a way of getting a wider view about current beliefs around school readiness before I go into a school and work with two reception teachers in more depth. The project has been ethically approved via the School of Education department's ethics review procedure at the University of Sheffield. All the data that I collect during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and participants will remain anonymous. If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me at ljkay1@sheffield.ac.uk. Many thanks.

The advantages of using social media in this way is that relevant sample groups are easily identified by their involvement in groups linked to teaching in the Early Years. Furthermore, the Facebook groups and Internet forums provided a channel for the questionnaire to be distributed quickly to a wide audience, and the web interface of the survey tool allowed responses to be collected and analysed with relative ease. However, using social media as part of the research process is not without its challenges. The larger and more active the Facebook group, the faster the post requesting survey respondents moves down the page and as a result is less likely to be seen by people reading the page at a later time. Cohen *et al.* (2011) also warn that response rates for Internet surveys tends to be lower than paper-based surveys, as is the rate of completion of the whole survey (p.286). The survey used in this research culminated in a total of 298 responses, of which 142 were completed in full.

The 'school readiness' questionnaire (*Appendix F*) used in this survey began by asking for background information of the respondent such as length of time teaching and the number of children in the class. This was to get an overall view of the demographic and biographical information of the respondents, and as a way of shifting from the 'objective' to the 'subjective', beginning with 'non-threatening questions that respondents can easily answer' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.398). For each of the questions presented, where appropriate, participants were given the opportunity to add further comments to give more depth to their answers. O'Cathain and Thomas (2004) advise that using open as well as closed questions in a questionnaire offers respondents an opportunity to voice their opinion which helps to balance the closed questions that reflect the researcher's agenda (p.2). Using open-ended questions in a questionnaire can also cause difficulties when preparing for analysis due to having some of the features of qualitative research, but perhaps lacking some of the key strengths of this type of research. Presented on the back of closed questions, a 'legitimate agenda' is already established and O'Cathain and Thomas (2004) argue that this may 'impose constraints on responses' (p.4).

Semi-structured Interviews

Fives and Beuhl (2012) assert that teachers hold 'complex and multi-faceted beliefs' about a 'wide range of people and structures' (p.487). The rationale for using interviews was to illuminate specific beliefs about 'school readiness' held by the teachers, and to identify how teachers conceptualised the construction of 'school readiness' in the specific context of their classroom (Shepel, 2008, p.217). This is in line with Phipps and Borg's (2009) suggestion that beliefs drawn out through discussion of actual classroom practice may be 'more rooted in reality' than other methods, such as questionnaires, where teachers may present their 'idealistic beliefs' or their beliefs about 'what should be' rather than 'what is' (p.382). Priestley *et al.* (2015) assert that the beliefs of teachers are 'instrumental in shaping practice', and that these beliefs may be immune to the efforts of policy-makers attempting to change them (P.37). Using Engeström and Sannino's (2011) 'Manifestations of Contradictions' to analyse the interviews will help to highlight any contradictions between the beliefs of the teachers and their classroom practices (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009, p.507).

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the participants at various stages of the research process (*Table 14*). A set of core questions was used to ensure that the relevant aspects of the study were covered, but the nature of a semi-structured interview allowed flexibility to pursue developing themes that emerge during the process.

Table 14 - The interview schedule

Name (pseudonym)	Interview status	Research stage	Aim
Sarah	Initial interview (*Appendix G*)	First phase	To explore existing beliefs about 'school readiness'
Mary	Initial interview (*Appendix G*)	First phase	To explore existing beliefs about 'school readiness'
Rosa and Emma	Group interview (*Appendix H*)	Mid phase	To explore existing beliefs about 'school readiness'

Claire	Interview (*Appendix I*)	Mid phase	To explore existing beliefs about 'school readiness'
Sarah and Mary	Group interview (final) (*Appendix J*)	Final phase	To examine how 'school readiness' is constructed within the Reception classroom

The interviews took place between January and July 2016, following a pilot study that was used to refine the questions and obtain feedback, carried out with two students I teach on a BA (Hons) Early Years degree who were not part of the research sample. All the interviews were digitally recorded with permission from the participants, transcribed in preparation for analysis, and sent to the participants for verification and reflection on what had been discussed.

Non-Participant Observation

In order to explore more deeply the classroom as an activity system, observations took place within the naturalistic setting of the classroom, based on a non-participant approach.   This method is useful as a way of entering the activity system in order to gain a 'direct understanding of a phenomenon in its natural context' (Liu & Maitlis, 2010, p.610).   By focusing on the role of the teacher as the subject in the activity system, observations provided an insight into the dynamics of the classroom environment and the provision of resources, alongside the teaching activities.   The observations carried out were unstructured, used as a way of learning about the more intricate happenings in the classroom, shifting the focus from the 'broad canvas of activity in the setting towards specific areas' (Denscombe, 2010, p.208). Furthermore, the observations allowed me to identify issues and problems, and observe instances of how the teachers viewed certain things that occurred in the classroom.

As I was carrying out research in two Reception classrooms, the observation schedule was arranged so I was in each classroom on alternate weeks, taking place over twelve non-consecutive weeks in the spring and summer term.   Each visit took place on a

Friday morning for three hours at a time, and a total of thirty-six hours was spent in the setting.   During this time, I undertook observations in all aspects of the classroom, including whole class teaching, group work, and free play, both inside and outside.   I was not directly observing the children in the classroom, but each parent was given an information sheet (*Appendix K*) explaining the purpose of my research in the classroom, and the option to withdraw their child from any possible observations they may be involved in with the teacher.   Only one family chose to withdraw their child so I ensured that he did not participate in any observations.   As a way of recording what happened during the observations, field notes were taken by hand at the time of observation and then typed up later.

Document Analysis

The documents used in this research have been produced by others for purposes other than this research project, including lesson plans, activity plans, and assessment documents, collected in order to gain a fuller picture of the workings of the activity system.   Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) assert that in a research context 'everything is potentially a 'document'' (p.218) although Bowen (2009) advises that documents should be examined with a 'critical eye', and not treated as 'precise, accurate, or complete recordings of events that have occurred' (p.33) and with this in mind, these documents were utilised as supporting pieces of data.   Referring back to the activity system, policy frameworks and the GLD are defined as key concepts and therefore this supporting evidence was deemed to be useful.   Evidence of children's work was also collected through photographs as a way of documenting how 'school readiness' is constructed within the classroom.   In this context, the photographs enable me to 'look beyond the content' and further into the working practices of the teacher participants (Kanstrup, 2002).

Reflective Conversations

Throughout the course of the data collection, I worked closely with both Reception teachers, often helping out with small group activities and engaging in children's free flow play.   Becoming a part of the classroom activity, albeit temporarily, enabled me

to have more informal conversations with the teachers I was working alongside. Feldman (1999) argues that conversations among teachers can help to serve 'the sharing of knowledge and the growth of understanding' as part of a 'meaning making process' (p.126).   Reflective conversations that took place between myself and the teacher were written up immediately after they had taken place to ensure they were accurate reflections.   These reflective conversations were a useful way of gaining insight into the lived experiences of the teachers involved, and help to form a deeper level of understanding (Lamb, 2013, p.86).   This aligns with a constructivist perspective whereby knowledge is co-constructed through conversational interactions between researcher and teacher (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p.151).

Ethical Considerations

When carrying out any research, ethics and morals play a prominent part, but this is multiplied when the research involves the study of people (Wellington, 2015, p.112). This study was informed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011), and was approved by the University of Sheffield's ethical review panel (*Appendix L*). As specified in the guidelines, voluntary informed consent was obtained from the two initial participants (Reception teachers) prior to the research being carried out and as the research evolved, further teachers involved in the research also gave informed consent (BERA, 2011, p.5) (*Appendix M*).   The head teacher was the initial gatekeeper and an executive summary was provided giving details about the research (*Appendix A*).   Information sheets (*Appendix B*) were given to the teachers explaining what the research would entail, their role in the study, and that they could leave the process at any point.   An initial meeting was arranged between myself, the deputy head teacher and the teachers involved to go through the information sheet and to enable the teachers to clarify any questions they might have about the research.

Other ethical considerations that Wellington (2015) asserts 'should not be broken' (p.115) were put in place included anonymising all responses and pseudonyms have been used in the research.   All data has been held confidentially on a password protected laptop and is backed up to iCloud and Dropbox.   Having been a primary school teacher, I was also acutely aware of the time constraints placed on teachers so

tried to ensure the research caused as little disruption as possible.   The deputy head teacher was very supportive of the study and allowed the teachers to be released from teaching duties to undertake the interviews which helped to ease time pressures.

Trustworthiness of the Research

Denscombe (2010) argues that it is the responsibility of the researcher to persuade the reader that the data are '*reasonably likely* to be accurate and appropriate' and it is on this basis that judgements can be made as to the credibility of the data (p.299). The foundation of this research was to discover individual perceptions through the exploration of subjective and personal accounts, an approach which Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue can be seen to be 'undisciplined' and lack 'rigor' (p.289).   In response, Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue an alternative approach to the validity and reliability criteria used in quantitative research (p.114).   They propose that qualitative research should be assessed for its *trustworthiness*, made up of four criteria each of which parallels an equivalent in quantitative research:

- *Credibility (internal validity)*
- *Transferability (external validity)*
- *Dependability (reliability)*
- *Confirmability (objectivity)*

Credibility is sought through the use of 'multiple accounts of social reality', and subsequent member validation of the generated data (Bryman, 2001, p.272).   In this research context, a survey was carried out in order to gain an insight into perspectives of the wider community before the research focused in on the beliefs of five teachers in one primary school.   Various data collection methods were used as a way of triangulating the sources of data, and transcripts from the interviews were sent to participants to check the validity and reflect on any further points to be raised.

As this is a small-scale study focusing on the activity system in two Reception classrooms in one school, it is acknowledged that the detailed findings will be unique to this specific context, and no claims of transferability are being made.   However, it is asserted that the findings are detailed and rich due to the small number of

participants, which is conducive to writing what is known as a 'thick description' (Bryman, 2001, p.272). For the purpose of this research, this is achieved by describing the participants and the setting, and the results will present an 'adequate "voice" of participants', through the use of long quotes or dialogue (Ponterotto, 2006, p.547).

In order to address issues around dependability, complete records of all phases of the research process have been kept including fieldwork notes, transcripts, data analysis decisions, the research diary, and communications with the participants and other relevant parties.

Tobin and Begley (2004) assert that 'Confirmability (comparable with objectivity or neutrality) is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination, but are clearly derived from the data' (p.392). Bryman (2001) advises that the research should not be affected directly by overt personal values or theoretical inclinations which could sway the findings derived from the study (p.274). Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest that researchers should be reflexive, acknowledging and disclosing their own values, and considering the possible influence they might have on the research process (p.225). As a way of addressing this, the personal and professional rationale in the first chapter of the thesis clarifies my own positionality regarding the 'school readiness' debate. However, it could be argued that this portrayal of the described 'self' is still a personal construction within the written text that may still 'foster illusions' on the part of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 2005, p.184). Whilst this approach does not eliminate or reduce the presence of the underlying values, by making them visible those evaluating the research are able to take into account the values that may have had an influence on the work (Greenbank, 2003, p.795).

In the next chapter I will provide the details of how the data analysis was carried out and will thematically present the findings that emerged from the data.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) assert that 'Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data' and this involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read' (p.202).   The goal of this analysis is to highlight the thematic findings from the interviews to address the following three key questions:

> 1)   What beliefs do teachers have about 'school readiness'? (Survey and interview)
> 2)   How is 'school readiness' constructed in the classroom? (Interview, photographic evidence, reflective conversations and observation)
> 3)   What contradictions are there between beliefs and practice? (Interview)

What Beliefs do Teachers have about 'School Readiness'?

It has already been stated in Chapter Two of this thesis that the 'school readiness' agenda can easily be problematised when it is clearly acknowledged that there is no established definition of what this actually means for teachers.   As a way of exploring the 'bigger picture' regarding the beliefs teachers hold about 'school readiness', the survey questionnaire was used to examine the view of the wider teacher population, as well as providing some background context to the research.

Presentation of the Findings of the Survey

As discussed in the previous chapter, this survey was based on the Starting School questionnaire (Perry *et al.*, 1998) that was implemented as part of the Starting School Research Project in Australia.   The overall aims of this survey were to find out the beliefs of teachers about 'school readiness' and was framed using the category responses displayed in *Table 15* based on the work of Dockett and Perry (2004). Further questions set out to explore how the classrooms operated, including how

much time was spent on phonics and Mathematics, and in group/whole classroom activities.

Table 15 - Category of responses (Dockett & Perry, 2004, p.175)

Category	Description	Example
Knowledge	Ideas, facts or concepts that need to be known in order to start school	Knowing the alphabet, counting
Social Adjustment	Adjustment to the school context, including interpersonal and organisational adjustment	School routines Can talk with children and adults at school Follows directions
Skills	Small units of action that could be observed or inferred from observable behaviour	Toilets independently Identifies own possessions
Disposition	Attitudes towards, or feelings about school or learning	Excited about school
Rules	Fitting in with the school and school expectations	Lining up Coping with discipline
Physical	Physical attributes, needs or characteristics. Also includes issues about safety, health and age.	Playground safety

Responses from 142 respondents are included in this analysis.   All of the respondents were female and the majority worked in Nursery (39.44%) and Reception (44.37%) whilst the rest (16.2%) worked in Key Stage One or mixed year groups.   There was a range of teaching experience, with responses from teachers in their first year of teaching to those who had had over thirty years teaching experience.

The online Smart Survey software generated a downloadable report that detailed the responses, presenting the data in quantitative formats such as graphs, charts and numbers of collated responses, and the answers to the open-ended questions as a list of comments linked to the specific question.   In addition to the report, I was able to download a .csv file that was then imported into the data analysis software, NVivo.

This enabled me to start analysing the data using the framework derived from the categories of responses relating to (1) knowledge, (2) adjustment, (3) skills, (4) disposition, (5) rules, and (6) physical.   Using these categories as overarching themes, I then thematically coded the data to establish further themes that emerged.   The following section will provide the results of the responses given in the questionnaire survey framed by the category responses specified in *Table 15*.

Knowledge

The questionnaire asked respondents to list the first three things that came to their mind when they considered 'school readiness'.   Only one respondent listed 'Maths' as a response, and interestingly there were no other references to the 'knowledge' category for this question.   Respondents were then asked to rate how important given statements were concerning 'school readiness', and the results from the statements linking to the 'knowledge' response category are displayed in *Table 16*. Being able to read their own name, recognise basic colours, and count to ten were considered to be of varying degrees of importance to over half of the respondents, whereas knowledge of their address, days of the week, operating a simple computer programme, and being able to write their own name were judged to be not important when assessing whether a child is ready for school.

Table 16 - Responses linked to 'knowledge' category

KNOWLEDGE	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
Read name	33.8%	47.2%	13.4%	5.6%
Know address	81.7%	15.5%	0.7%	2.1%
Recognise letters	56.3%	33.1%	9.2%	1.4%
Say days of the week	73.9%	23.9%	6.3%	2.8%
Write name	62%	28.9%	6.3%	2.8%
Operate a simple computer programme	65.5%	30.3%	3.5%	0.7%

Count to 10	49.3%	38%	9.2%	3.5%
Identify basic colours	35.2%	46.5%	16.2%	2.1%

The qualitative comments from the survey also highlight how personal and social skills, rather than specific knowledges, are perceived by teachers to be fundamental when judging whether a child is 'ready' for school.   One respondent stated:

> *A child who can count to 10, write their name and knows their phonics is wonderful, but if they are not secure to explore an environment on their own and are upset every day leaving their parents, are they really school ready? [Survey data]*

Another respondent echoed this sentiment, only this time focused on the tension between aspects of knowledge, and the importance of independence and curiosity as prerequisites for learning, stating:

> *School readiness is often perceived by adults as being able to read, write and count. Independence and a curiosity to explore are vital to enable children to thrive and enjoy developing as a learner. [Survey data]*

When asked to rank the six categories linked to school readiness in order of importance, knowledge was placed in sixth place overall.

Out of 142 respondents, 137 teachers reported doing phonics activities at least once a week, with 99 participants specifying they did phonics on a daily basis.   Rote counting was carried out at least once a week by 130 respondents, with 81 teachers doing this daily with children.   Less than 10 respondents reported using worksheets for Mathematics and Literacy, however the majority of respondents said they did teacher-led writing and Mathematical activities with children at least once a week with around a quarter doing these daily.   Some respondents also specified that they make individual judgements as to whether children are ready for more formal skills, demonstrated in this response:

> *We aim to encourage children to participate in mark making and counting. However, we introduce them to the idea if they are interested but we don't push them. We do a letter and sounds programme to introduce them to sounds, alteration, rhyming and rhythm but it's more important to work on their PSE*

development with listening, understanding and communication skills, before expecting them to recognise numbers and letters. [Survey data]

Whilst activities linked to more instrumental skills and knowledge were reported to be done regularly, child-initiated play was also offered on a daily basis by the majority of respondents, as well as singing, creative activities, messy play and other playful provision.   Only three respondents stated that children did not get any opportunity for free play, and all children were provided with opportunities for outside play with 140 respondents reporting this to be daily.

Social Adjustment

Attributes linked to social adjustment were referred to extensively throughout the data when respondents were asked to list three things they thought of when presented with the 'school readiness' agenda.   Social skills such as sharing, taking turns, interacting, forming friendships, and solving conflict were highlighted, alongside independence, being able to separate from the main carer, and emotional maturity. As can be seen in *Table 17*, statements within this category were perceived to be much more important than the previous category, particularly those linked with interacting and playing co-operatively with other children, and being able to follow directions given to them by an adult.

Table 17 - Responses linked to 'social adjustment' category

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
The child knows how to speak to teachers	3.5%	44.4%	38%	14.1%
The child participates appropriately in large groups of children	7%	34.5%	48.6%	9.9%
The child is confident when interacting with other children	2.8%	25.4%	46.5%	25.4%
The child knows how to react appropriately to changes in routine	4.2%	40.8%	43.7%	11.3%
The child is confident when interacting with adults	2.1%	34.5%	48.6%	14.8%

The child is able to play co-operatively with others	0.7%	19%	57.7%	22.5%
The child responds appropriately to being corrected	11.3%	43.7%	35.9%	9.2%
The child can follow directions from adults' other than the parent/carer	0.7%	15.5%	57%	26.8%
The child is able to compromise with others during play	3.5%	40.1%	47.9%	8.5%
The child separates well from parent/carer	2.1%	12.7%	46.5%	38.7%
The child is able to form good relationships with peers	0.7%	2.1%	54.2%	23.9%
The child demonstrates empathy towards other children	2.1%	45.1%	41.5%	11.3%

This was also reiterated in the table that ranked the categories in order of importance, positioning social adjustment as the most important of the six categories. A number of respondents also made reference to Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs as a model for 'school readiness', with one respondent asserting:

> *Children are built with a thirst for learning .... this isn't necessarily formal academic learning. Personal, emotional and social development is learning too. Maslow's hierarchy of learning is an important indicator of school readiness. [Survey data]*

Communication and language skills were raised frequently in the qualitative comment sections of the questionnaire, and over a third of respondents highlighted the child being able to communicate their own needs was an important social skill regarding 'school readiness'. A further theme emerging from the comments was the ability to sit, listen and concentrate when appropriate.

Skills

Skills in the questionnaire mainly focused on basic life and personal skills, and nearly 80% of respondents stated that being able to go to the toilet independently was either extremely or very important, with only two respondents considering it not important at all (*Table 18*). This was also reflected in the qualitative comments with 33

respondents listing toileting, or being toilet trained, as one of the three things they linked to 'school readiness'. Further comments also highlighted the importance of self-care and being able to get dressed independently.

Table 18 - Responses linked to 'skills' category

SKILLS	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
The child can dress him/ herself	1.4%	42.3%	41.5%	14.8%
The child can eat lunch without assistance	2.8%	38%	46.5%	14.8%
The child understands the need for personal hygiene	2.1%	29.6%	50.7%	17.6%
The child can wash their hands without supervision	10.6%	37.3%	34.5%	17.6%
The child can hold a pencil correctly	39.4%	47.2%	9.9%	3.5%
The child can go to the toilet by him/herself	1.4%	21.1%	40.1%	37.3%
The child takes responsibility for personal belongings	9.2%	47.2%	36.6%	7%

A number of respondents commented how academic skills such as writing and counting were taught at school and therefore were not an essential prerequisite to starting school, and that it is the basic life skills that are important:

> *I think too much focus on school readiness seems to be surrounding academic things - e.g counting, writing their name, phonics knowledge. In reality, all this is taught, learnt and practiced at school. Although it is beneficial that they have some knowledge of this when they start school, the key basic life skills are more important to know. [Survey data]*

As can be seen in *Table 18*, holding a pencil, which would be considered a more instrumental skill, was deemed as not being important by over a third of respondents, with only five respondents believing this skill to be extremely important. In the rankings table, skills were positioned fourth out of the six categories.

Disposition

Self-esteem was considered to be either very or extremely important by over 90% of the respondents, and an enthusiasm for learning, being happy to go to school, and talking positively about school were all seen to be very or extremely important by the majority of the survey participants (*Table 19*).

Table 19 - Responses linked to 'disposition' category

Disposition	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
The child is happy to go to school	0.7%	9.2%	33.8%	56.3%
The child likes to have books read to him/her	16.2%	35.2%	31%	17.6%
The child talks positively about school	2.1%	25.4%	48.6%	23.9%
The child feels good about him/herself	1.4%	8.5%	33.1%	57%
The child wants to learn	1.4%	14.85	35.9%	47.9%
The child is eager to participate in most school activities	0.7%	21.1%	54.2%	23.9%

The dispositions referred to in the qualitative comments included confidence, curiosity, eagerness, happiness, and focus. One respondent stated:

> *Having a positive attitude, being interested in learning and being able to communicate their feelings appropriately are really important. Academic things will come later on if these things are secure. [Survey data]*

Another respondent highlighted how emotional maturity was more important than chronological age, and pointed out issues regarding summer born children.

> *Emotional age much more important than chronological age. I have children in my class who are younger but are much more mature emotionally than some of my older children and have coped much better with the transition to school. Saying that, on the WHOLE my older children are more emotionally mature than the younger ones, and it is generally my younger summer born children who still occasionally struggle to cope with being at school. [Survey data]*

The disposition of the child was ranked as being the second most important category around 'school readiness'. However, overall more people saw statements linked to the disposition category as being very or extremely important to those of social

adjustment, despite the latter category being placed at the top of the ranking table. One explanation for this is that disposition and personal and social skills would often be seen as interlinked in an Early Years context.

Rules

In this survey rules refer to a child's ability to fit in with school rules and expectations, and the statements and responses linked to this category can be seen in *Table 20*.

Table 20 - Responses linked to 'rules category

Rules	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
The child knows the rules which apply in the classroom	6.3%	26.1%	47.9%	19.7%
The child does not disrupt other children's work or play	5.6%	50.7%	32.4%	11.3%
The child knows the rules that apply in the playground	9.2%	43%	37.3%	10.6%
The child knows the rules about sharing and taking turns	4.2%	34.5%	43%	18.3%

Whilst just below 20% of participants considered knowing the rules of the classroom and how to take turns and share as extremely important, the majority of respondents placed rules as being either somewhat or very important. In the comments, three respondents highlighted how an understanding of boundaries was important from a 'school readiness' perspective. Again, a respondent pointed out that rules are something that can be taught when children arrive in school, rather than it be an expectation prior to them starting school:

> *Skills, rules and knowledge can be taught, although it is easier if children are independent with regards to self-care. Well-being is something that cannot be taught; and if they are not happy in themselves and able to be away from parents, they will struggle to pick up the other things. [Survey data]*

The rules category was positioned fifth out of the six categories in the ranking table, and deemed less important than social adjustment, disposition, physical and skills.

Physical

The physical category is linked to the physical attributes of the child and includes issues around safety, health and age.   Respondents did not consider the physical size of the child as being important, but being well rested for school was considered important by the majority of participants (*Table 21*).

Table 21 - Responses linked to 'physical' category

Physical	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
The child is physically big enough to cope with older children	*57.7%*	*38%*	*2.8%*	*1.4%*
The child gets plenty of rest	*1.4%*	*16.9%*	*35.3%*	*46.5%*
The child can throw and catch a ball	*48.6%*	*40.1%*	*10.6%*	*0.7%*

The final question on the online survey asked participants to judge whether they agreed with a number of statements linked to children being ready for school.   Over 90% of respondents agreed that age is not a good predictor of 'school readiness' (*Figure 18*) and the majority of respondents believed children could be ready to learn but not necessarily ready for school (*Figure 19*).

Figure 18 - Responses to age being a good predictor of 'school readiness'

14.5. Age is not a good predictor of school readiness			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly disagree		2.8%	4
2	Disagree		6.3%	9
3	Agree		50.7%	72
4	Strongly agree		40.1%	57
Analysis	Mean: 3.28 | Std. Deviation: 0.71 | Satisfaction Rate: 76.06		answered	142
	Variance: 0.5 | Std. Error: 0.06			

Figure 19 - Responses as to whether children can be ready to learn but not ready for school

14.1. Children can be ready to learn but not ready for school			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly disagree		2.1%	3
2	Disagree		12.7%	18
3	Agree		57.0%	81
4	Strongly agree		28.2%	40
Analysis	Mean: 3.11	Std. Deviation: 0.69	Satisfaction Rate: 70.42	answered 142
	Variance: 0.48	Std. Error: 0.06		

Further qualitative comments also refer to issues around summer born children and school starting age:

> *I do think the age of the child is very important to consider. There was a young girl who started Reception this year who was still 3 (we started 28th August). It seemed rather unfair for her to be beginning Reception as she was so young and timid. [Survey data]*

Another respondent commented:

> *... although I love working in early years, I feel that 4 years old is far too early to begin formal education and be assessed against standards ... [Survey data]*

However, over half the respondents agreed that children who did start school before they were five, were still able to learn (*Figure 20*).

Figure 20 - Responses as to whether children who start school too early do not learn

14.4. Children who start school too early do not learn			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly disagree		19.0%	27
2	Disagree		57.7%	82
3	Agree		17.6%	25
4	Strongly agree		5.6%	8
Analysis	Mean: 2.1	Std. Deviation: 0.76	Satisfaction Rate: 36.62	answered 142
	Variance: 0.58	Std. Error: 0.06		

Other Themes

Despite omitting questions linked to family/parents and the educational environment from the original questionnaire survey, these themes emerged through the qualitative comments. Respondents commented that it was important that families were ready, and that parents were educated to ensure their children were ready for school. One respondent highlighted how parents could do this:

> *… sharing stories contributes towards listening and attention, encouraging imagination and conversation, packing own book bag and carrying it to school contributes towards organisation. Praising level ability contributes towards confidence and playing games that involve turn taking and rules contribute towards sharing and negotiation. [Survey data]*

Another respondent argued that parents should also understand that children do not need to be reading and writing on entry into Reception, and that there should be "more understanding of the EYFS and what it entails". It was also pointed out that children learn from birth, and parental upbringing plays "a big part in a child's readiness for school." A final salient point is the importance of the parent's knowledge about their child's needs, and that there needs to be a "balance of parent-teacher knowledge and understanding of the child and their learning."

A further theme that emerged from the survey data was the belief that children are exposed to "too much, too soon". Respondents highlighted how there were "too many objectives to cover for children so young" and "too much emphasis on meeting targets." One respondent argued "Our country is great at finding out what children can't do at seven and think the answer is to make them do it younger" with another stating "It should be about the child and working towards them having a happier time in school." Schools being "ready for the child" was another point raised by respondents, as well as ensuring there were "quality transitions".

Presentation of the Findings of the Interviews

For this section, all five interviews were analysed with a clear focus on highlighting the teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' (*Diagram 7*). I examined the interview

transcripts and highlighted aspects of the data that pinpointed these beliefs and then arranged the key points thematically to structure the findings discussion.

Diagram 7 - Summary of interview data

Sarah (Reception) 1st Interview	Mary (Reception) 1st Interview	Emma & Rosa (Year One) Interview	Claire (Nursery/SMT) Interview	Sarah & Mary (Reception) Final Interview

The lack of clear definition regarding 'school readiness' was highlighted early on in the interviews, with Mary, Sarah and Emma commenting on their confusion over whether the research was focusing on transition into Year One, or into Reception. Conversely, Rosa stated that she thought it was the transition into "formal education". The following comments highlight this confusion:

> *When you first said you were coming I wasn't sure whether you meant entry to Reception and in fact I assumed that's what you did mean when you first came, then I quickly realised that actually you were talking about the transition from Reception to Year One .... so yes .... that was quite interesting that I assumed that it was a different way. [1st interview - Sarah]*

> *Before we started talking about it for this project my interpretation of school readiness would have been pre-Reception school readiness so thinking about children's experiences before they start in Reception. [1st interview - Michelle]*

> *I see it as being from home into Reception [Interview - Emma]*

> *... are children ready to start formal education and obviously what the expectations are [Interview - Rosa]*

Sarah went on to point out that as, a school, there is not much discussion around the readiness of children going into Year One, and the focus was on children who were coming into Reception:

> *… as a school, we've not talked that much about the readiness of Year One other than the Reception environment needs adapting to some degree .... but a lot of our focus ....   because of the fact we're trying to get the maintained nursery provision .... a lot of our focus was on are they ready to come .... actually come through the door of school .... [1st interview - Sarah]*

A key theme that emerged from all interviews was the importance of communication, language and understanding, and the ability to be able to follow instructions and talk to adults and peers. Sarah made the point that these skills were a prerequisite for doing phonics and learning letter sounds stating:

> *... before you can even think about showing them symbols and letters and sounds and actually getting them to write, they've got to be able to articulate it before they can learn what it looks like so to speak .... [1st interview - Sarah]*

This was echoed by Claire, the Nursery teacher and member of the SMT, who stated:

> *... well-developed communication really .... whether it's verbal or non-verbal and all of those .... the understanding .... you know .... all the elements of it really because if they don't that's when you get the behaviour issues and then that becomes a barrier to learning and I think that's absolutely key [Interview - Claire]*

Both Year One teachers, Rosa and Emma, also highlighted an expectation that children should be able to communicate effectively on entry into Reception:

> *... to be able to speak, so that you can clearly understand what they are saying .... I would expect them to be able to ask a question .... and to be able to communicate obviously how they are feeling .... [Interview - Emma]*

Mary spoke a lot about children's experiences before coming to school, reiterating throughout the interview the importance of children being taken to different places and exposed to new ideas and activities:

> *It's their experience ... what the parents have perhaps done with them ... whether they have had a sheltered life up until coming to school or whether they have been to every play session, visits to the library ... trips to the park ... parents that talk to them about everything that happens ... that sort of enables them to be school ready .... [1st interview - Mary]*

Sarah also specified she believed that the ability to hold a pencil and having some understanding of basic counting and number skills was important on entry into Reception. Mary focused more on personal and social skills, and the importance of children being able to separate from the main carer and settle quickly into the routine, maintaining it was important to ensure basic skills were in place before more formal skills were taught:

> *.... those are the basics before we start to then look at perhaps school expectations of .... recognising and writing your name ... numbers ... those things are great but you kind of need all the other things in place first before moving onto those ... [1st interview - Mary]*

Claire re-enforced the importance of personal and social skills and argued that if these were not in place on entry into Reception then time would be spent teaching these skills, stating:

> *... when you've got 60 children arriving in Reception and they haven't got those skills that's when everything becomes very difficult ... you spend a lot of your time then doing that where really you know you could be pushing on the learning ... [Interview - Claire]*

Independence in self-care was also prominent in the interviews with the Reception teachers, with Mary stating that children need to able to toilet themselves independently, get dressed and undressed and feed themselves at lunchtime.

When asked what skills children needed for the transition into Year One, Sarah focused on formal skills such as being able to recognise sounds, write words and sentences, number bonds to ten and an idea of addition and subtraction, with children working at a higher level being able to double and share.   Mary spoke of how children needed to be independent, particularly when working on formal writing and Mathematical tasks, and to be able to self-regulate their behaviour during carpet time:

> *... they are very independent in doing the things that they want to do, for example, making something in the creative area they can go off and do that ... but for example ... if it was to complete a piece of writing ... we talk about the ideas but we still have children coming back asking 'what do I do next?' or 'how do I do that?' and so it's working on developing those independent skills ... [1st interview - Mary]*

Interestingly, Sarah talked about the children having the personal and social skills to support each other as they moved into the different learning environment of Year One:

> *... they've got the caring aspect as well and I hope they take with them the ethos of the class, of the school where it's ok ... you can make these mistakes .... it's ok ... that supportive kind of atmosphere because I think they're going to need that if they move to a different environment ... [1st interview - Sarah]*

From the perspective of the Year One teachers, Rosa said she would again expect children to be able to communicate, and Emma expressed that she would like children

to be able to write a sentence, be able to count to 20 forwards and backwards, and practically be able to add one more and take one away, although the children would not be expected to record this formally.   Emma based this expectation on what she knew Reception children could do already stating:

> *I would expect a child to be able to write a sentence coming from Reception into Year One ... seeing what I can see is going on in Reception now I would expect them to be able to sit down and write a sentence [Interview - Emma]*

Emma also pointed out the curricular gap between Foundation Stage and Key Stage One, and how children still struggle with the expectations of Year One in spite of achieving the GLD:

> *... but given that they had reached such a GLD this cohort, they were expected to just fly as soon as they got to Year One but they still find it very difficult ... I thought it took a long time before they started to go ... [Interview - Emma]*

Rosa expanded on this, also reiterating what Mary said about children in Reception lacking independence in more formal tasks, and explaining how this was problematic in Year One:

> *Rosa: I think they were just very needy when they came up and like you say the writing but obviously once you'd done the phasing in and then you start with your recording of things and it was always ... they've always done it in small groups in Reception so it's a big ... so now it's one adult to 31 children ...*
>
> *Emma: ... And having to work independently was a big ask for them [Interview - Emma/Rosa]*

Concluding Comments

The results of the survey have highlighted some of the issues being faced by the wider Early Childhood Community regarding 'school readiness'.   Personal and social skills, and the disposition of the child, are considered to be a foundation for starting school and the ability to access learning opportunities.   Whilst skills around personal care were desirable, instrumental skills and knowledge were seen to be something that was taught at school rather than a prerequisite for 'school readiness'.   Respondents expressed concerns around summer born children and the "too much, too soon" agenda, and the responsibility of the school to be 'child ready'.   The interview data reiterated the importance of communication and language as a fundamental

foundation for learning, but also problematised the gap between Reception and Year One, which will be discussed in more depth later.

How are Reception Children Prepared for Year One?

The originally intended question for this section was 'How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom?'   However, upon analysing the data it became clear that, for the teachers, the focus was not on 'school readiness' but rather 'preparing' children for Year One.   This was highlighted early on in the interview with Sarah who explained how the term 'school readiness' was not used in the school environment:

> *I probably came across it most when I was training ... so you know talking about getting these children ready to be able to access the National Curriculum ... there was a lot of talk around that ...   but since I've come to actual work in a school it's not really been mentioned actually ... we don't talk about it ... we talk a lot about readiness for Year One, but it's not necessarily classed as school readiness ... it's always this big preparation for them to get into Year One [1*st* interview - Sarah]*

As will be discussed later, this encompassed the expectations of the GLD, but there was also a lot of discussion around preparing the children emotionally for the environmental transition.

For this part of the analysis, I examined the two individual interviews with Mary and Sarah (Reception teachers) and the final group interview with both teachers.   I also considered the photographic evidence used as an aide-memoire, and drew on some observations and reflective conversations that had taken place during the course of the research.   Specific examples of activities undertaken to prepare children for Year One were thematically drawn from the data to build a picture of how children are prepared for Year One.

Formal Skills

Sarah explained how phonics is carried out every morning and the children do guided reading in groups rather than 1 - 1.   Children participate in Read, Write, Inc. which is vertically streamed to ensure ability needs are being met and to provide challenge.

Cursive writing is taught from Reception onwards as it was recognised further up the school that handwriting was an issue when external assessors could not read children's handwriting. Examples of cursive writing from two children can be seen in the following images:

Image 1 - Example of cursive writing in the handwriting book (Child A)
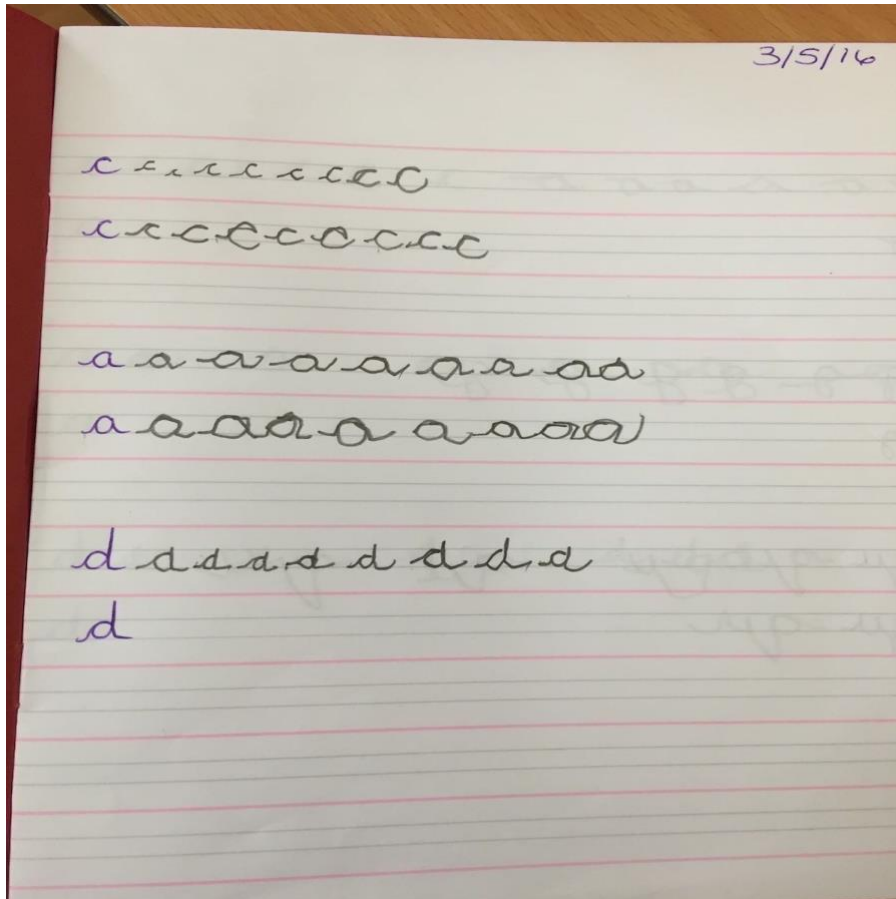
Image 2 - Example of cursive writing in the handwriting book (Child A)
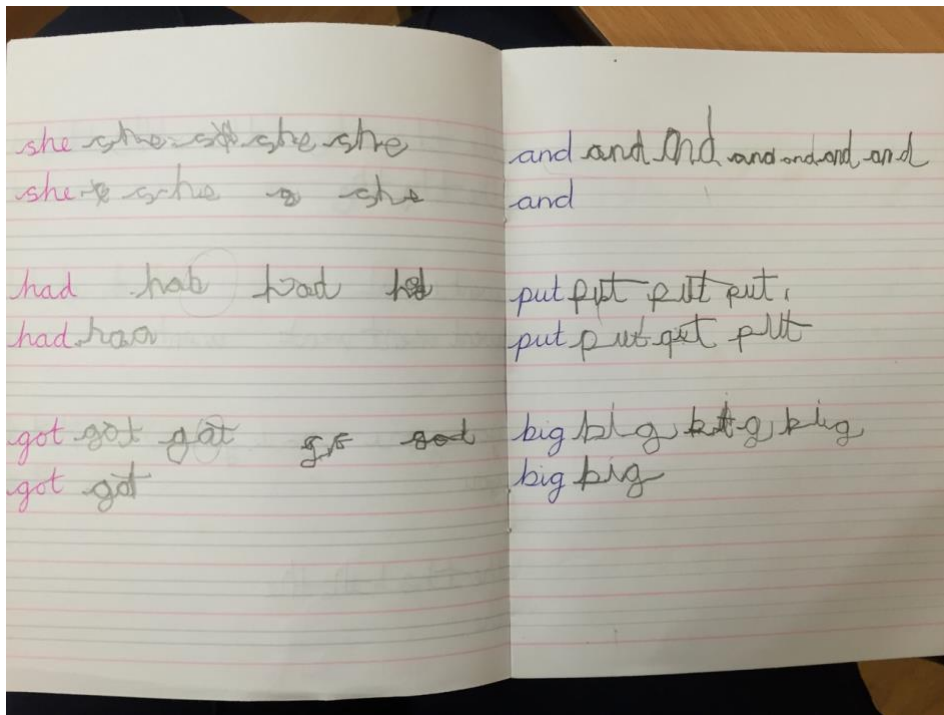
Image 3 - Example of cursive writing in the handwriting book (Child B)
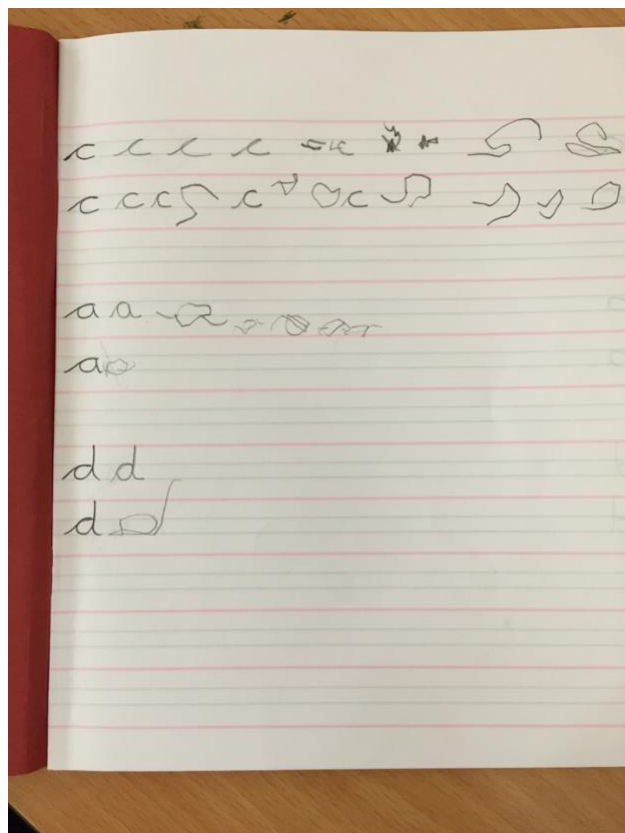
Image 4 - Example of cursive writing in the handwriting book (Child B)
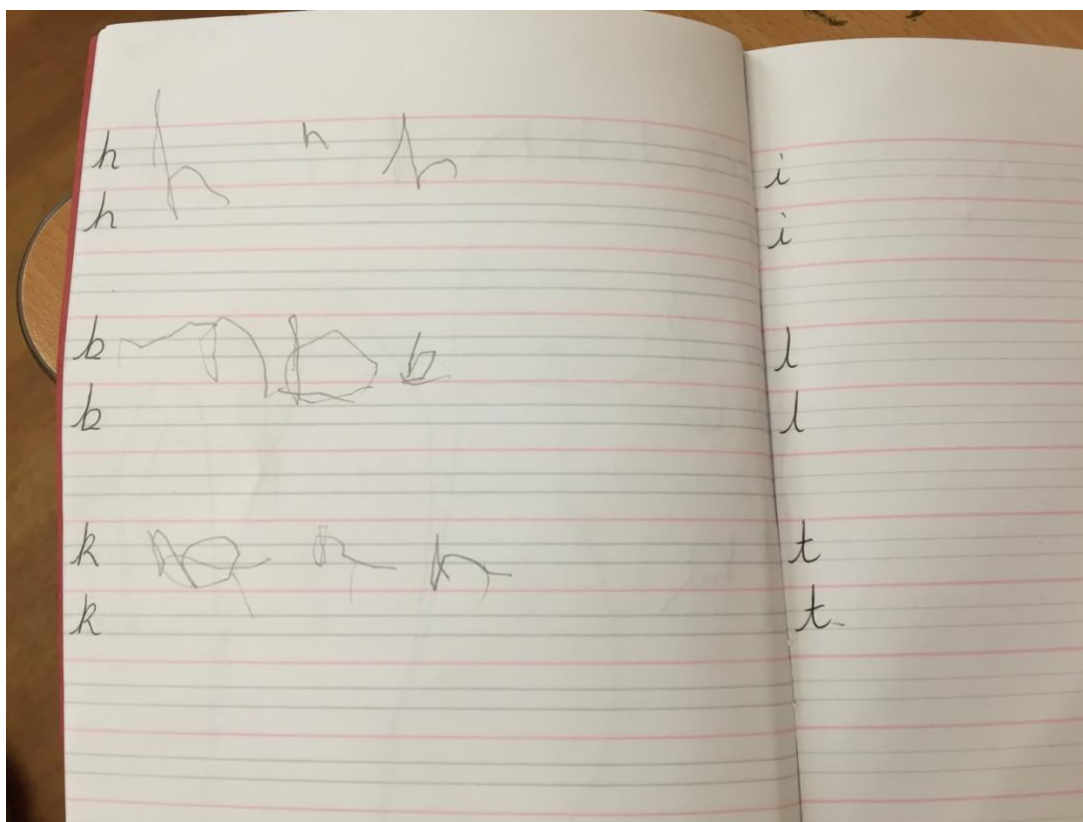
As can also be seen in the following photographs, the books the children are using have narrow lines, and are the type that they would have to use in Year One. During a conversation with Sarah, she told me how the Year One teacher had introduced these books to all the children when she was covering the Reception class, as a way of preparing the children for Year One. During the spring term, teaching staff had been moved around the school to accommodate the training needs of a student teacher, but this was also seen by the SMT as a way of Sarah moving into Nursery to prepare the children for Reception, and for the Year One teacher to prepare the children for transition into Year One. Another strategy introduced to Reception in preparation for Year One was the 'early edit'. Children were introduced to the idea of identifying what needs to be improved in their work, as a way of focusing on their writing. The teacher feeds back on the children's writing and boxes are used so children can correct errors in their writing, demonstrated in the following images:

Image 5 - Example of 'early edit' in the Reception writing books (Child C)
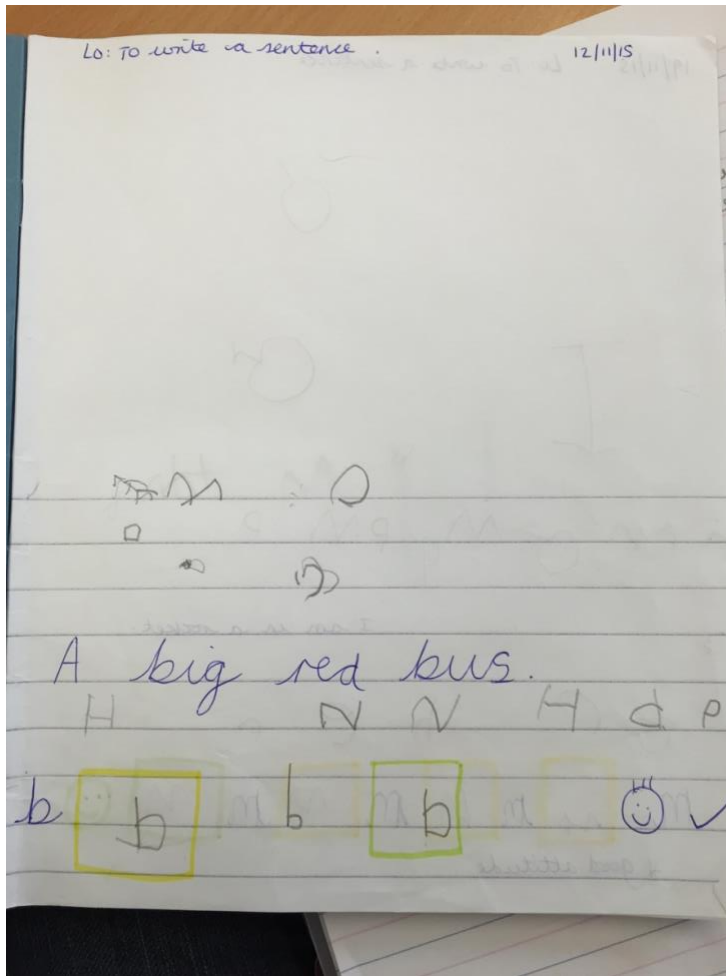
Image 6 - Example of 'early edit' in the Year One writing books (Child C)
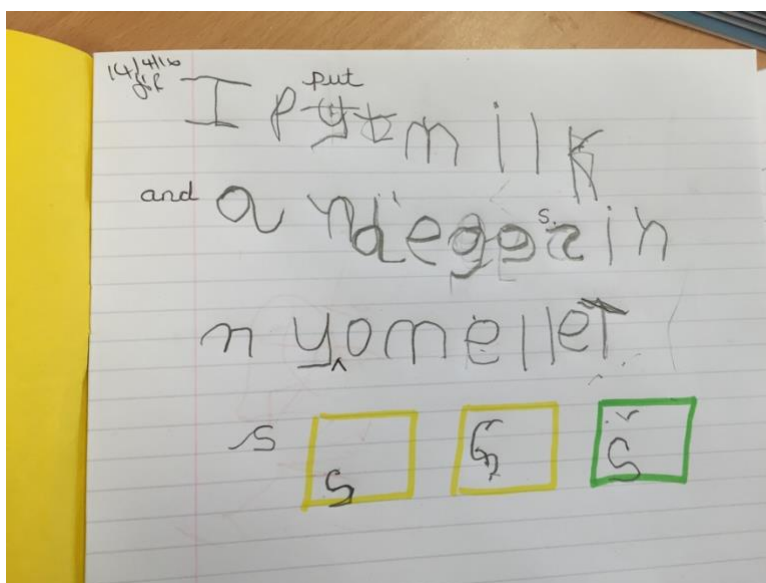
Image 7 - Example of 'early edit' in the Reception writing books (Child D)
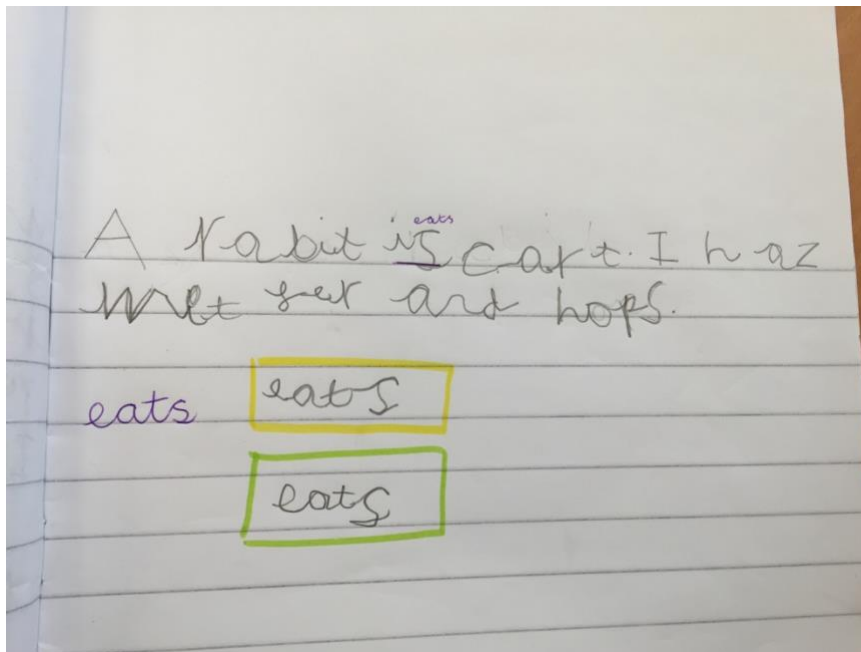
Image 8 - Example of 'early edit' in the Year One books (Child D)
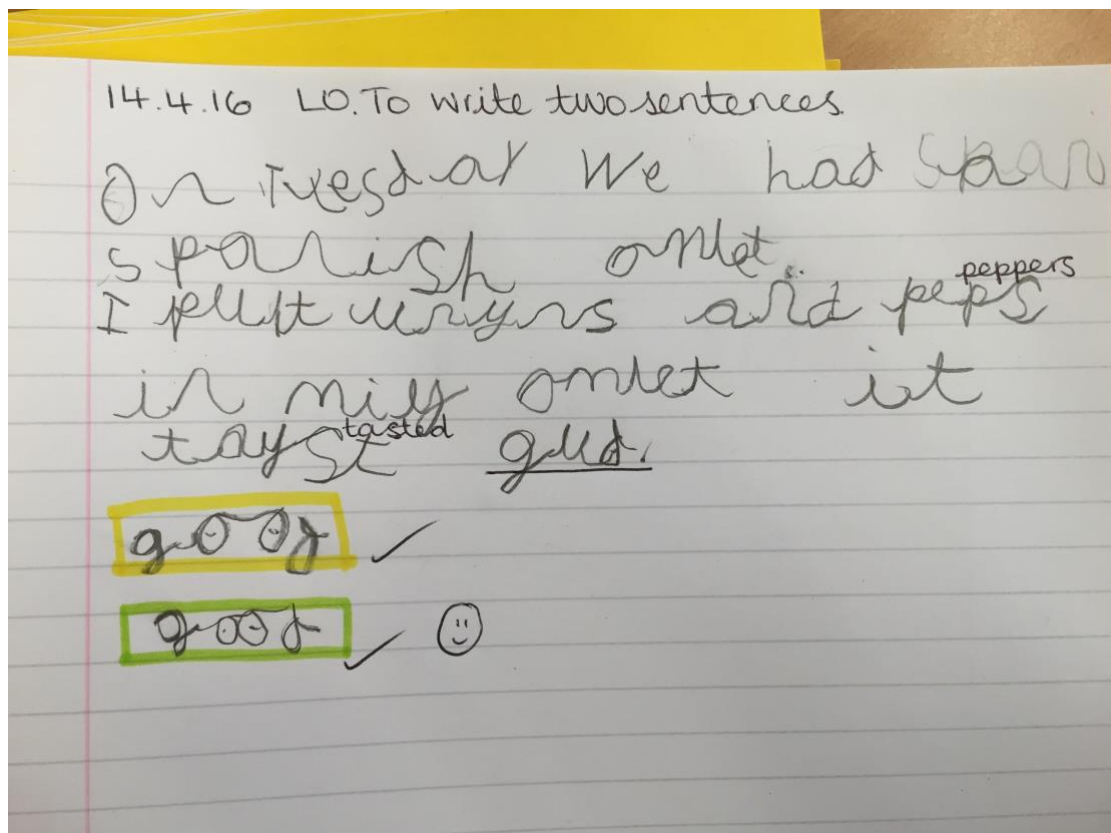
Regarding the teaching of Mathematics, Mary pointed out that this was done very practically, and reflected in the continuous provision in the classroom. Sarah re-iterated this stating:

> *... Maths is very much like a carousel kind of structured activities but some are open ended, some are with a teacher, some are independent it just depends on how many staff we have and what the children need do at that particular time. [Final interview - Sarah]*

The shift towards more formal teaching was also discussed in more depth in the interviews, where Sarah commented that there is more continuous provision in the Autumn term than the summer, and Mary describing the summer term as "more formalised".

Sarah spoke at length about the 'Band' system that was used in Key Stage One and Two as part of a whole school approach to assessment after levels were scrapped by the Government. She pointed out how what was previously considered to be Level 2 criteria had been shifted into Band 1, and how the gap between Reception and Year One had widened due to these changes. Sarah discussed how conversations with the Year One teacher had highlighted the need for children to be able to form their numbers correctly to prepare them for Year One, despite this not being a requirement for the ELG in Mathematics:

> *... they've always had to write numbers but the fact that they can't be reversed is quite a significant one and it's one that we're really struggling to hit because your top children in Maths still get 5 the wrong way around ... It's a common mistake ... but to me that's irrelevant [1st interview - Sarah]*

Mary highlighted how a lot of time was spent ensuring children were able to structure sentences in their writing, writing on lines, and using the correct punctuation. She also went on to add:

> *... the formation of the writing which does all need to come but which would have perhaps previously been more of a Year One skill ... now we are preparing them throughout Reception, particular this summer term so when they get into Year One and they can hit the ground running and they are straight into it with their writing ... [1st interview - Mary]*

Interventions

Both teachers talked of the close monitoring of children and regular tracking of children's levels and using timetabled interventions as a way of targeting children facing difficulties in specific areas of the curriculum.   Mary described how a group of EAL children had interventions based on developing their spoken language but also to work on their comprehension.   Intervention strategies were also used for children struggling with pencil control, letter formation and name writing, as well as Mathematical interventions that focused on recognising numbers and matching number to quantity:

> *... we've spent a long time this year for a lot of the children just actually getting them to recognise number and match the correct quantity to a number ... and for a long time it felt like a real uphill battle, but actually now we've moved away from that slightly and look at practical addition and subtraction and that does seem to have clicked into place quite quickly with them ... [1st interview - Mary]*

Read, Write, Inc. was also used as an intervention strategy for children who were "really struggling" as Sarah stated:

> *... the main one or the one that we've timetabled in the staffing timetable is the Read, Write, Inc. intervention because we've got quite a lot of children ... we've got group at the bottom that are really struggling ... they are SEN, they are EAL ... most of them aren't they ... but we try to just push it ... but it's not just those that we are targeting but they are the main ones that we are concerned about ... [Final interview - Sarah]*

Sarah also highlighted how the extra timetabled interventions that took place for the targeted children were "quite often at the expense" of the continuous provision on offer in the classroom.

Preparing Children for the Transition

During the final interview both teachers spent some time discussing how they prepared children mentally and emotionally for the transition into Year One.   The teachers describe how they have talked to the children about the similarities and differences between Reception and Year One and taking the children to visit the classroom when the current Year One class is doing PE:

... they were quite keen to look for those similarities ... so oh we've still got the phonics ... oh they have numbers in here just like we have ... so I said yes there are some things in here that you will see that are familiar and ... ooo ... a book corner and look at the books they have in their book corner ... you'll have some lovely new stories to read and you'll still have story time ... and just try and focus on the positives and all the things they can take that are the same [Final interview - Mary]

The teachers also talked about how they explained to the children that there is not much play and freedom in Year One, and showing children the seats that they would sit in to do their work with the teacher:

... when we did go and have a sit in the classroom and have a look around I made a point of saying to them ... look around you ... what sorts of things do you see ... do you see a sand tray ... do you see painting area ... no, we don't because we don't have those things on offer all the time ... [Final interview - Mary]

Sarah described how some of the children had expressed anxiety over going to work with a new teacher and had asked if Sarah could go with them to Year One.   Both Mary and Sarah talked about how they used circle times to talk through these anxieties and "put them to rest":

... you're going to have a really good time in Year One and now is your opportunity to ask any questions ... and if I don't know the answer I'll go and ask in Year One and if I do know the answer I'll tell you ... and it's OK to feel nervous but it is OK to feel a bit excited as well .... and after that they were OK. [Final interview - Sarah]

Both teachers said the children were excited to go into Year One, but there was "trepidation" *[Sarah]* and "lots of questions" *[Mary]* that they dealt with to prepare the children emotionally for the transition.

The final question of the final interview I asked Sarah and Mary what their own personal beliefs were regarding how 'school readiness' is constructed within the classroom.   Mary highlighted the importance of getting children used to routines and "school life", separating from their main carer, and having the opportunity to explore whilst getting used to doing a full day in school before moving onto more formal learning environment.   Sarah described how, for her, it was more "the emotional side" stating:

> *... it's the construction of the personality ... like pulling out their personality ... It's the stuff that you don't have to do that they need to be able to kind of survive ... pulling out their personality ... finding their emotions ... knowing how to deal with stuff ... [Final interview - Sarah]*

Mary agreed specifying that this was an important foundation for learning and if this resilience was not in place then children were not going to be able to learn the instrumental skills such as "recognising numbers" or "writing a story".

Sarah pointed out again the importance of communication, and how this would be a prerequisite to any ELG. She also pointed out how some aspects of personal and social development are not included in the EYFS pointing out "there's so much more to being in school than following the EYFS":

> *... you know the child ... you know the story and you know how much of an achievement it is for them but because it doesn't fit into that box it's not useless but it's useless for somebody else looking at it ... but it's actually very valid. [Final interview - Sarah]*

Mary expanded on this adding:

> *... but in order for the child to achieve the GLD they do have to have got that PSED side and that Communication and Language ... they're not just getting that GLD because they've got the Maths and Literacy ... they do have to have those other things ... so we do have to make sure that the children are well-rounded [Final interview - Mary]*

To summarise, it is clear from the findings that there is a focus on formal skills, particular writing, to prepare children for Year One, and interventions are used to help those children struggling to achieve the outcomes. However, there is also a concerted effort to prepare the children emotionally for the environmental transition into Year One, as well as the curricular transition. The next section will explore contradictions in the data as a way of identifying tensions between beliefs and practice regarding the 'school readiness' agenda.

What Contradictions are there Between Teacher Beliefs and Practice?

Manifestations of Contradictions as an Analytical Framework

Here I take inspiration from Engeström and Sannino's (2011) work on discursive manifestations of contradictions which moves away from the tendency to define contradictions as competing priorities that need to be rebalanced (p.369). They argue that contradictions do not 'speak for themselves' but rather emerge when participants 'articulate them in words and actions' (p.371). Contradictions are not 'observed directly', but are 'identified through their manifestations' (p.369). Therefore, the suggested framework begins with the analysis of 'rudimentary linguistic cues that potentially express discursive manifestation', followed with the identification and analysis of the actual manifestation from the data (p.370). As a way of analysing the interview data, Engeström and Sannino (2011) present four types of manifestations of contradiction that are identified using specific linguistic clues (p.375), summarised in *Table 22*.

Table 22 - Adapted from Engeström and Sannino's (2011) 'Types of discursive manifestations and contradictions'

Manifestation	Features	Linguistic cues
Dilemma	Characterise our everyday thinking and conduct - ideologically created and products of history	Commonly expressed through hedges and hesitations, such as, "on the one hand"/"on the other hand" and "but"
Double bind	Typically, a situation that cannot be resolved by the individual alone	Transition from the individual "I" to the collective "we have to", rhetorical questions, expressions of helplessness
Critical conflict	Situations where people face inner doubts, feel guilty, or are silenced	Personal, emotional and moral narrative accounts that may employ strong metaphors
Conflict	Resistance, disagreement, argument, and criticism	"No"/incidences of disagreement

As has already been discussed in the previous chapter, five interviews were carried out: two initial interviews with the Reception teachers, one interview with the Nursery teacher who was also a member of the SMT, a group interview with the Year One

teachers and a final group interview with the Reception teachers.   This was a useful exercise in order to gain a wider understanding of teacher beliefs about what 'school readiness' is.   However, for the purpose of this analysis I am going to focus on exploring the contradictions between beliefs and practices in the Reception classroom regarding the 'school readiness' agenda.

As a starting point for the analysis of discursive manifestations of contradictions, the quantitative distribution of the specified linguistic clues was examined, the results of which are displayed in *Table 23.*

Table 23 - Occurrences of linguistic clues

Interview	Length (min/sec)	Dilemmas	Double bind	Critical conflicts	Conflict
1st interview - Sarah (Reception)	87.13	144	15	22	9
1st interview - Mary (Reception)	44.03	78	4	7	1
Final group interview - Sarah and Mary (Reception)	49.38	101	11	3	3

The linguistic clues for the 'dilemmas' category was highlighted in the text using the 'find' function for occurrences of the word "but" in the word processing software.   In order to identify conflicts, double binds and critical conflicts the interview data was carefully examined in more detail, and each segment of text linked to the specified linguistic clues was highlighted using different colours as a way of thematically identifying relevant sections for later analysis.   It was during this stage that a critical approach was taken, and occurrences of the linguistic clues that did not correspond to the four categories of discursive manifestations of contradictions were disregarded.

Each interview was analysed in turn as a way of becoming very familiar with the data, and when all four categories had been applied, the data was interrogated again in order to identify common themes emerging, summarised in *Table 24*.

Table 24 - Emerging themes from interview data

Interview	Dilemma themes:	Double bind themes:	Critical conflict themes:	Conflict themes:
1st interview - Sarah	Children entering Reception at different levels Treating children as individuals Time Pressure The GLD Curriculum and outcomes Accountability Pedagogical issues Teacher attitude/ Pragmatism Top down pressure (cursive writing)	Children entering Reception at different levels Time Pressure Curriculum and outcomes The gap between Reception and Year One Top down pressure (cursive writing)	The GLD Impact on children Treating children as individuals Pressure Teacher attitude/ Altruism 'Victim of own success' Teacher feelings: Frustrations/anger/sadness	Top down pressure (cursive writing)
1st interview - Mary	Children entering Reception at different levels Curriculum and outcomes The GLD Summer born children Independence Pressure Pedagogical issues	The GLD Curriculum and outcomes	Teacher feelings: Frustration Children entering Reception at different levels Treating children as individuals	Treating children as individuals

Final group interview - Sarah and Mary	Curriculum and outcomes Pedagogical issues The GLD Transition into Year One	Curriculum and outcomes Treating children as individuals Pedagogical issues Pressure Children entering Reception at different levels	Teacher feelings: Frustration Transition into Year One	Curriculum and outcomes Pedagogical issues

The prevalent themes were then mapped (*Diagram 8*) and organised into main themes and sub-themes. The bolded text highlights the main themes, and the italicised text represents the sub-themes.

Diagram 8 - Visual display of main themes and sub-themes
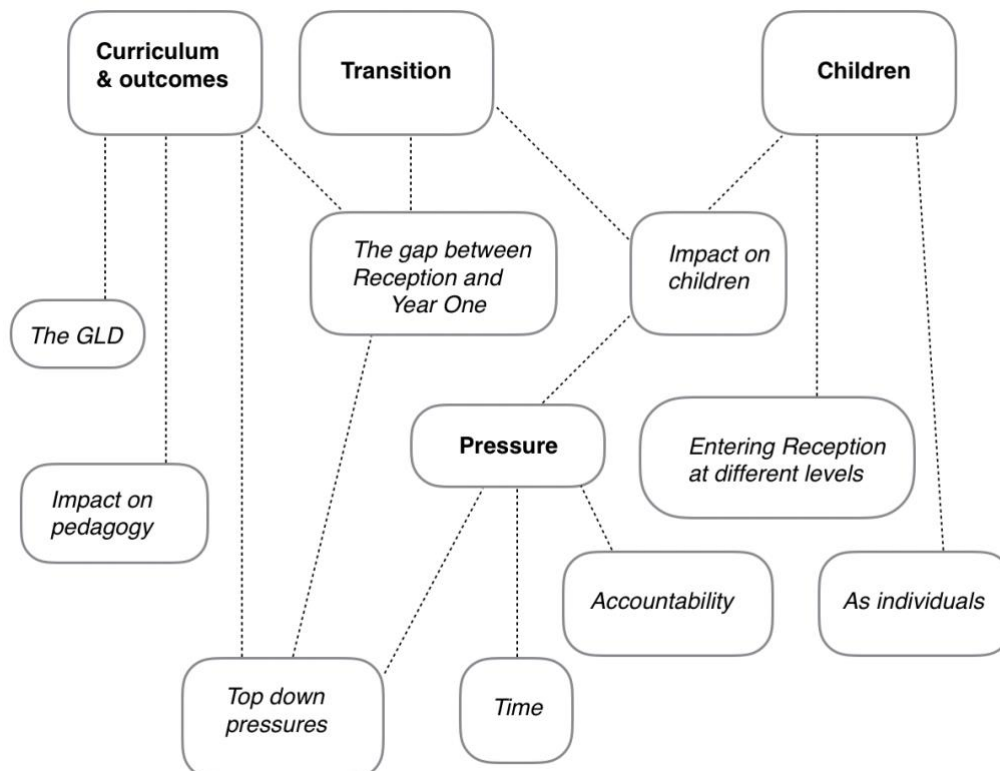
Using Engeström and Sannino's (2011) framework to highlight discursive manifestations of contradictions was a useful tool to identify the aspects of 'school

readiness' that create tensions for teachers in the classroom which will be explored in more depth in the next chapter. The following section will use the themes that emerged from this analysis to frame the findings discussion.

Curriculum and Outcomes

One of the main themes emerging from the data analysis across all three interviews were issues around the EYFS curriculum and the expected outcomes linked to the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness'. Alongside these outcomes, it was found that pressures being pushed down from above also had an impact on pedagogical considerations in the classroom, as well as efforts to try to 'bridge the gap' between Reception and Year One.

The Good Level of Development

Sarah discussed at length her frustration with the GLD and how the Mathematics and Literacy outcomes often meant children did not achieve this benchmark, despite achieving the ELGs for the prime areas of the curriculum. She talked about how she believed Reception should focus on the prime areas of the curriculum and made the point that children may achieve the outcomes for Literacy, for example, but the importance should be placed on the "basic skills". Mary gave an example of a child in her class who was very capable but due to her pencil control struggles to write and therefore will not meet the GLD:

> ... we've got some children who are very good with their PSE but ... good relationships within class ... well behaved ... good communication skills ... orally could give you lots and lots of answers but ... when it comes to then looking at perhaps the writing side of things ... really, really struggle ... I can think of one little girl in particular in my class who ... she ticks all the boxes for her gross motor skills ... her pencil has got real issues with ... that side of her development, you know is a bit of a concern at the moment ... but ticks all the boxes for other areas ... orally comes across very well ... very bright ... but on paper ... it wouldn't look that way because she's going to struggle to achieve a GLD for writing. [1st interview - Mary]

Sarah went on to describe how she had children with EAL and SEN who are not going to meet the GLD and how she upset she was having to inform parents that their children would not meet the expected level of development:

> *Well we've got EAL children in my class who are just not going to get there and I had to put this to parents last night and the devastation that this causes, I felt awful ... there were a few parents ... oh my goodness you're going to leave me in tears because I'm having to share this information with them ... so EAL children, SEN children, children with Speech and Language difficulties, children with social communication disorder .... you know the ones I'm talking about ... they're just not going to get it. [1ˢᵗ interview - Sarah]*

Mary highlighted how some children will have exceeded in some areas, and gave the example of children who were "very creative", yet who might not get "grouped in with the GLD" because it does not fall under the area of learning used to measure the GLD. Sarah also expressed her annoyance at the omission of Expressive Arts and Design and Understanding of the World, asking "do they not matter? ... Have we not got room for that?"   However, Mary stressed that even though this was not part of the GLD, it was still important as a way of considering "the whole child", and Sarah asserted how they "still always ensure the creative side of children's development takes place".   It was also pointed out how some areas of Personal, Social and Emotional development had been missed off the curriculum, and how some observations did not link to any of the statements, leading Sarah to declare "there's so much more to being in school than just following the EYFS".

Sarah also conveyed her irritation with the way assessment data is used by the Local Authority, and the questioning of any "anomalous results", stating:

> *... and I'm not about data I hate it ... I think a lot of teachers do ... but somebody flies in and starts picking your data apart but hang on a minute ... they've got ... You're telling me they can speak, they can do this that and the other, but they can't read ... yeah ... I am ... [1ˢᵗ interview - Sarah]*

She went on to discuss how she had "fought" to defend the data and her assessment of where children were up to regarding the GLD, and describes how "sometimes I've won, sometimes I haven't".   The number of children achieving the GLD nationally was also raised as a contentious issue:

> *... if I made that curriculum and only 54% of children were achieving that I'd be thinking that there's something wrong here ... [1st interview - Sarah]*

In the final interview, Sarah re-iterated this frustration with the data asserting that children were more than a number and the journey they have been on is not always reflected in the end result:

> *... because you know the child ... you know the child ... you know the story and you know how much of an achievement it is for them but because it doesn't fit into that box it's not useless but it's useless for somebody else looking at it ... but it's actually very valid [Final interview - Sarah]*

Top Down Pressures

Another theme that emerged throughout the data was the gap between Reception and the GLD and the curricular expectations of Year One.   Sarah pointed out how if a child achieves the GLD, the transition to Year One would be much easier, but due to the curricular expectations of Year One, there is still a gap:

> *I think it's probably more beneficial for the child if they do achieve the GLD and it's probably easier to access the curriculum in Year One but I don't think it's the be all and all ... there is still a bridge to go across to get to Year One whether you get a GLD or you don't ... so I think it does help if you do. [1st interview - Sarah]*

Sarah used the analogy of a bridge a number of times when describing the transition into Year One during the interview.   Later on, she described the difficulties faced by children who do not reach the GLD:

> *... there is a bridge to go across whether you achieve the ELG or not but if you don't the bridge is just so much bigger and you're constantly trying to play catch up, and because our Year One is so formalised I know that quickly they are going to drop behind ... [1st interview - Sarah]*

Sarah also explained how these children would be targeted for interventions during the two-week transition period in Year One at the expense of experiencing the continuous provision that was on offer in the classroom.   This was further exacerbated by the fact that the groups of children who do not achieve the GLD also do not cope well with changes to their environment and how that could "hinder their progress".

Tensions were also highlighted between the expectations of the GLD, and the gap between these and the curricular expectations of the banding system further up the school.   Sarah spoke at length about how these were sometimes being pushed down from Year One into Reception, particularly with aspects of writing, such as number formation.   Despite this not being an ELG, she was being asked to ensure children could write the numbers correctly in order to meet the curricular outcomes of Year One:

> ... I need to get them where ... a GLD ... where some people tell me I should have them ... but it's that added stuff now ... as well as trying to reach the GLD your having to then address some of the issues ... some of the things we're finding in the band system in Year One [1st interview - Sarah]

Frustrations over the needs for compliance within this context are clearly expressed by Sarah who attests:

> ... we're all wrapped up in this world where we've got to do it like this, or we've got to do it like that ... when actually in your heart of hearts you probably wouldn't do it like that if you had a choice ... [1st interview - Sarah]

Mary discussed how in the summer term, much more emphasis was placed on writing as a way of ensuring the children "hit the ground running" in preparation for Year One, but also raised the point that this would have "previously been more of a Year One skill".   Sarah re-enforced this argument and talked about how expectations changed over the year:

> ... so, your writing when you first come in ... you know you're expecting possibly initial sounds if you're lucky but you're happy with whatever they can do ... if there's a mark on the paper it's cause for celebration but by the time they get to the summer term I'm expecting punctuation and stories even ... I suppose the aim is to get them to that exceeding statement if we can do ... we kind of lessen the gap between Reception and Year One [Final interview - Sarah]

However, Mary does describe how, for some children, it is important to take a step back and "let them just enjoy holding a pencil" and being successful at simply making marks on the paper.   She asserts that children should be:

> ... praised for what they can do, no matter what sized line it's on ... because for some children it's just holding the pencil and getting something that looks like the letters on the page ... that is a real achievement ... [Final interview - Mary]

As has already been discussed, cursive writing is taught from Reception and Sarah spoke a lot about the challenges faced when implementing this strategy. She explained how it had been flagged that children's handwriting in lower Key Stage Two could not be read by the external examiners, and so a whole school approach to writing had been adopted. Sarah was reticent about this, declaring "I don't know the pros and cons of doing it early on … All I know is it is hard work", and how, if she had a choice, she would not do it in Reception as it is "just one added thing". However, there were clear tensions here as she pointed out she had seen it work for some children, and it did seem to improve writing further up the school. She also talked about how she was "a bit torn", as some of the children did manage to do the cursive writing, and this was seen by the rest of the school to be a validation that it was an effective strategy to use from Reception upwards:

> *I produce 27 books maybe 20 of which have got a pretty good attempt at cursive writing at the book scrutiny … well they're doing it in Reception … brilliant, they can do it in Reception so carry on … so I'm making a rod for my own back really by producing these books that are quite … that are pretty good and they are showing some understanding of cursive writing and I'm having to carry it on because I've shown that they can do it [1st interview - Sarah]*

Despite this being a "strict" requirement in Reception, Sarah did clarify that if children really could not manage to do the cursive script she did waiver but for those who were capable she could accept nothing else. She talked how this was "non-negotiable" and how she "did fight it but lost".

Impact on Pedagogy

Pressures from above, and the need to ensure children reach the GLD, both had an impact on pedagogy and practice in the classroom. Mary and Sarah spoke about the importance of play, and how children's interests were followed as a way of engaging children, with Mary asserting it was a way of "building key skills" such as "confidence and independence". However, Sarah described how the more instrumental skills, like "cursive writing and sentence building" were easier to achieve through a "more formalised way of teaching", and argued "it does change the way you do things because of the fact you are held to account". She also asserted how much knowledge children gained through play, and how this could be carried through to

Year One, but that it is "difficult to translate into a Year One environment".   She went onto express further frustrations about the drastic pedagogical shift faced by children as they transitioned into Year One:

> *It kind of takes away the individuality doesn't it in Year One ... but then if they have developed that through their play in Reception then you would hope they would take some it with them into Year One ... it would translate better if they learnt the same way in Year One ... if they could explore in Year One in a similar way it would be a lot more seamless wouldn't it ... if they continued to build on the skills that they'd already got in Reception ... it's almost like two steps forward and one step back isn't it? ... it's just that complete and utter change. [1st interview - Sarah]*

Mary also talked about how the continuous provision was still on offer throughout the year but in the summer term, the continuous provision is used as a way of targeting groups to complete specific activities linked to curricular outcomes:

> *... we would look at the overview of observations and see where the gaps are so we need to make sure that we've got a particular type of activity out and we need to make sure there's an adult on that activity to draw children into it rather than it be an activity that children would access as they wished. [Final interview - Mary]*

Sarah was also mindful of feeling the need to have to constantly be looking for the "next step, the next stage" stating:

> *It does get quite tiresome sometimes because sometimes I just want to sit in the classroom and just watch what they're doing and you feel a bit guilty doing that don't you, because you don't feel like you're doing anything but actually you're taking that raw view ... I just ... just sometimes I just think ... you know what I just want to get into your world and play with you but without having to think where we are going next [1st interview - Sarah]*

Pressure

Both teachers referred to "pressure" across all three interviews, from their own perspectives, but also the pressures that were placed on children to achieve the GLD and be prepared for Year One.   This was articulated by Sarah who, when asked what had influenced her beliefs about 'school readiness', replied that it was "what you've got to achieve in such a short space of time ... I think it's the pressure really".   She went on to explain the importance of ensuring children achieved the GLD, made more

difficult when children were coming into Reception from a number of different settings:

> *... you've got all this ground to make it up ... and all the time you're thinking GLD ... I've got to get these children to achieve a GLD for the school ... it also becomes part of your performance management ... you've got a certain percentage to fall in line with ... the authority are putting the pressure on ... there is a lot of pressure from a whole host of different places ... you've got to get these children ready for Year One ... it's bandied about all the time [1st interview - Sarah]*

It was highlighted how these pressures were compounded by the importance placed on the GLD by the SMT as an indicator of the school's performance. However, Sarah pointed out that pressure coming from SMT was unintentional, explaining:

> *... it's that GLD that always pops up ... what do you think? Do you think we're going to get there? ... it's a reflection that the school has done well .... and it's not that they don't care about the individual children it's just they are so hung up on statistics sometimes all you see is numbers ... [1st interview - Sarah]*

She went onto empathise with the culture of performativity that teachers and headteachers are working within, discussing how a poor set of results can trigger an OfSTED inspection, but also stressed that the approach taken by the SMT was "supportive" and "in celebration" of what the children can do rather than being "negative".

As has already been discussed, pressure also trickles down from Year One, but again, both teachers understood where this came from and articulated how Year One teachers also have their own pressures that they have to work with. Mary reflected on this stating:

> *... I can understand why pressures are being put on to get them ready for Year One because Year One then have the pressures to get ready for Year Two and so on and it follows all through school doesn't it ... those expectations ... [1st interview - Mary]*

However, it was also discussed how these pressures can also start to have an impact on the children. Sarah talked about how children were expected to be a "certain way" and described how she felt she was "railroading" them, and "pushing" them into the categories of the GLD. She summarised this tension, stating:

> *... It's very prescriptive and I think children aren't like that, are they? They need to be allowed to be ... whatever ... without being over clichéd ... be the person that they're going to be ... [1st interview - Sarah]*

Time was another pressure that was discussed throughout the interviews, clearly articulated by Sarah who explained:

> *... the biggest challenge is the sheer amount of stuff you've got to get through ... again I'm not trying to make excuses but because they come in so low you've got an awful lot of ground to cover ... time is a big restriction and ... just ... the sheer amount of stuff you've got to get in, in such a short space of time. [1st interview - Sarah]*

She went onto to describe how the lack of time restricted the "spontaneous kind of learning" that she believed was best placed in Reception, and voiced her sadness about being "being bound to these statistics" and the expectation of the GLD. She also raised concerns over children being aware of "the need and drive" behind the curricular outcomes, and talked about how some of them "will crumble" and get "upset and really stressed out about writing sometimes". Sarah was clear that she believed children felt the pressure of the preparations for Year One, highlighting an overt tension when she stated:

> *I do think they feel the pressure ... because they ... it's hard not to share it sometimes isn't it ... they know what they've got to do ... they know there's a high expectation which is good in a way because they will rise to it, but at the same time the expectation is coming from the pressure that is on me that they do feel sometimes ... [1st interview - Sarah]*

She re-iterated how children felt the pressure and the expectations, and the difficulty of achieving the GLD, particularly in Literacy and Mathematics, and how she would not place as much emphasis on these skills if they were "allowed more time".

Children as Individuals

Throughout the interviews, both participants spoke about children as being individuals rather than an homogenous group, and identified how practice was differentiated to meet the needs of the children. Problems arose when children came into Reception from a number of different settings, or perhaps having no prior experience of being separated from their main carer and being in a school

environment.   Sarah talked about having "a lot of ground to make up" when children were entering Reception without basics such as "counting skills" and "communication" in place already.   Mary referred to this as a "real uphill battle" and the work that was required to get them to a "level playing field", whilst Sarah referred to having "all this ground to make up".   It was clear the level children entered Reception at had a knock-on effect on the outcomes that were expected for the GLD. Sarah summarised this by stating:

> *... It would make it easier if they could ... you could start a lot further up then couldn't you ... with those basic skills ... so you could start where you need to start really ... moving them on. [1st interview - Sarah]*

> *... you've got to have a starting point haven't you ... I know you've got an end point but sometimes your starting point and your end point are a lot further apart than others aren't they ... [Final interview - Sarah]*

Sarah also discussed how some children come into Reception not being able to speak any English but were "still expected to reach the same end point as everybody else".

In spite of these issues, there appears to be a pragmatic approach that was adopted by both teachers when working with this diverse group of children.   Sarah talked about how some children were not yet accessing the Read, Write, Inc. phonics scheme and how at that particular point in time there was "no point even trying" as the children were not up to that level.   She went on to explain how, for these children, it was still very much about building on skills through play and accessing things on "whatever level they are working at" asserting "if they are not ready for sounds ... they are not ready ... It's as simple as that".   Mary talked a lot about the "whole child" and looking at the "whole picture" rather than focusing on what children could not do in terms of Literacy and Mathematics.   She talked about how teaching ultimately came down to "the individual child within the class" and how approaches need to be adapted "depending on the child", for those needing more support as well as those needing more challenge.   Sarah related this to the difficulties faced by some children to reach the Literacy outcomes declaring:

> *... obviously two sentences aren't going to cut it but if they leave me being able to write a sentence having not had any communication or anything ... you know we've had to build all those bridges at the beginning and they leave me writing*

a sentence then I'm happy ... but some of them go on a completely different journey and some of them might be writing the sound by the end of Reception in which case I'm quite happy ... I suppose it depends where they do arrive ... [1ˢᵗ interview - Sarah]

Regarding preparing children for Year One from a 'school readiness' perspective, Sarah talked altruistically about the challenges faced as a Reception teacher, stating:

I don't think any of us are going to give up soon but at the same time you don't want to let those children down because if you're not doing enough to get them ready or giving them the best chance to be ready it's not going to help them in the future, is it? [1ˢᵗ interview - Sarah]

Reflecting on my time at the setting, it was clear that focusing on the GLD was seen as a way of helping to set the children up to succeed.   Sarah was aware of what the children would face going into Year One and did not want it to take them by surprise. Ultimately, she was 'playing the game' for the sake of the children.

Concluding Comments

The findings provide an insight into the tensions faced by teachers when data such as the GLD is used to measure 'school readiness', particularly when children are coming into Reception with a wide range of differing experiences, yet are still required to meet the same endpoint.   Further pressures are faced when, in addition to the ELGs, Year One outcomes are pushed down into Reception as a way of 'bridging the gap' between the two curriculums.   Dangers of an ever-widening attainment gap are highlighted as children start Year One having not achieved the GLD, and are in a constant state of playing 'catch up' as they move up through the school.   Not surprisingly, the findings show that there is an impact on the way the classroom operates, particularly in the summer term when children are introduced to more formal teaching practices to prepare them for Year One.

The next chapter will use these findings as a foundation for the discussion, and will refer back to the CHAT framework as a way of building on Engeström's (2001) view that activity systems take shape over a period of time.   Furthermore, the history of the theoretical and, in the context of this research, the political ideas and tools that

have shaped the activity, will help to explain the 'historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems' (p.137).

The aim of this thesis was to explore teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and how 'school readiness' is constructed in the Reception classroom.   Building on these aims, the study then identified tensions and contradictions between beliefs about 'school readiness', policy frameworks and pedagogical practices.   As a way of addressing the social and collective dimensions of teaching practice, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory was used as a methodological framework that enabled the exploration of collective activity and the tensions and contradictions that may emerge as part of this process.   Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through the use of the Starting School questionnaire (Perry *et al.*, 1998), which was disseminated online, and interviews, observations and documentary evidence that took place in one school.   This chapter will discuss the findings that emerged from the data analysis, and address the final two research questions using the tensions that emerged from the activity system to frame the discussion.   The first research question has been addressed in Chapter Two as part of the policy analysis, and questions two and three have been discussed in Chapter Five, as part of the findings and analysis of the data.

> 1)   How is 'school readiness' defined in Government policy in England?
>
> 2)   What do teachers in the Early Years perceive 'school readiness' to be?
>
> 3)   How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom?
>
> 4)   What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and policy frameworks?
>
> 5)   What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practice?

Contradictions within the Activity System

Building on the discussion that took place in Chapter Three centring on CHAT as a research framework, using contradictions as a basis for analysis serves as a way of interpreting how teachers develop their practice as they continuously grapple with

policy framework accountabilities and classroom activity. Foot (2014) asserts 'Contradictions are not points of failure or deficits in the activity system in which they occur. They are not obstacles to be overcome in order to achieve goals. Rather than ending points, contradictions are starting places' (p.17). For the purpose of this research, secondary contradictions within the activity system will be the main focus of the discussion as highlighted in *Table 25*. Contradictions that have caused disturbances and tensions within the activity system are depicted on the diagrams by the red two-headed lightning-shaped arrows.

Table 25: Types of contradictions (Engeström, 1987, p.104)

Type of contradiction	Characteristic
Primary	Contradictions that occur within each component of the activity system
Secondary	Contradictions that occur between two corners of an activity system.
Tertiary	Arises when the object of a more developed activity is introduced into the central activity system.
Quaternary	Occurs between central activity and neighbouring activities.

In Chapter Two, I carried out a policy analysis that examined how 'school readiness' had come to be seen as a problem for the government, how this is governed through policy constructs, and the effects of this formation for teachers and children. The policy analysis highlighted some key discussion points that are summarised as follows:

1) The key drivers behind the 'school readiness' agenda are to break the cycle of poverty at the most 'cost-effective' point in time and to prepare children for the formal learning of Year One

2) This discourse positions 'school readiness' within a narrative of economy and is seen as being a predominant factor for the prosperity of society (Osgood, 2009)

3) A model of early intervention is a key policy lever in the 'school readiness' agenda and is seen as a way of narrowing the attainment gap and reducing the burden on social and educational services in the longer term (Brown, C., 2015)

4)   Within the narrative of economy children are positioned as human capital where a return on investments made to ensure a child's 'school readiness' are at the forefront of policy (Public Health England, 2015)

5)   Neoliberal ideology permeates ECE policy as England strives to compete on the global stage through comparative data collection processes such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS, and 'school readiness' is seen as way of getting a head start in the race to the top

6)   The Good Level of Development is used to measure 'school readiness' and is a key component of the accountability and performativity framework within which Early Years teachers are situated

This policy analysis provided the backdrop for the current educational context, and highlights how teachers and children are positioned within the 'school readiness' agenda.   However, it is argued that when 'school readiness' is framed within policy in a deterministic and instrumental way, children are reduced to a checklist of particular cognitive and behavioural outcomes which ignore the complexities of their lived experiences (Dahlberg *et al.,* 1999).   This discussion will highlight the tensions that emerge as the teachers navigate the demands of the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness', whilst working on a day to day basis with children with messy and complex lives.   To summarise the key findings of the data analysis the following tensions were identified and mapped against the supplementary research questions and the activity system (*Table 26*):

Table 26 - Mapping the research question to the Activity System

Activity Focus	*Supplementary research questions*	*Key themes from the data*
Subject-Tool-Object	What do teachers in the Early Years perceive 'school readiness' to be? How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom? What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practice?	The complexities of 'school readiness' as a transitional concept The Good Level of Development when used as a measure of 'school readiness' The impact the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness' has on pedagogy The impact the GLD has on children

Subject-Rules-Object	How is 'school readiness' defined in Government policy in England? What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and policy frameworks?	School readiness' as an accountability and performativity measure and the impact on teachers The curricular gap between Reception and Year One outcomes

Tensions Between the Teacher (Subject), their Beliefs (Tools) and the GLD (Object)

Diagram 9 – Tensions in the Activity System (Subject>Tool>Object)

Tools: Beliefs of the teacher

Outcome: The construct of 'school readiness'

Subject: Teacher

Object: The Good Level of Development

Rules: Policy frameworks

Community

Division of Labour

Key themes:

The complexities of 'school readiness' as a transitional concept

The Good Level of Development when used as a measure of 'school readiness'

The impact the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness' has on pedagogy

The impact the GLD has on children

Hasan and Kazlauskas (2014) declare that 'In Activity Theory, the relationship between *subject* (human doer) and *object* (the thing being done) forms the core of an activity' (p.9). Activities are specific, directed towards an *object* that is to be acted upon with a motive and a desired *outcome*, and any of these facets 'may be constructed or

perceived differently' by the *subject* (Foot, 2014, p.10).   This dialectical relationship can be both objective and subjective, and in the context of this research clear tensions and contradictions have emerged between the subjectivity of teachers and their beliefs, working towards the objective way 'school readiness' is measured using the GLD (*Diagram 9*).   This next section explores some of these tensions around what teachers believe 'school readiness' to be, and how this is managed when considering 'school readiness' as a transitional concept.

The Complexities of 'School Readiness' as a Transitional Concept

The phrase 'school readiness', in itself, raises some interesting points for discussion. OfSTED (2014) and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015) have both drawn attention to the lack of clarity regarding the definition of what the phrase means, and to which transition it is linked.   Over the course of this research it has been questioned numerous times by participants as to whether 'school readiness' refers to the transition into Reception, or the transition from Reception into Year One. The findings from both the Internet survey and the interviews highlight the confusion over what 'school readiness' means and to which transition it applies.   It is therefore apparent that, despite Kagan (1990) writing about this nearly thirty years ago, the issue has not been addressed, and the phrase is still 'mired in confusion with practitioners and policymakers advancing widely differing positions regarding it and related issues' (p.272).

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.   This is supported by Bingham and Whitebread (2012) who argue that 'the disagreement about terminology and definition encapsulates a fundamental difference in conception of the purpose of early years education' as there is no clear agreement as to what children are being prepared for (p.4).   Supported by findings from this research, a failure to define 'school readiness' results in different interpretations and confusion as to what skills are required for children both on entry into Reception as the first year of school, and the transition from Reception into Year One.

Within the context of this research, the year the study took place was the first year the school had had Nursery provision.   Prior to this, children had come from different PVI settings, or straight into school from a home context, which had created problems for the teachers who were then working with a range of assessment data whilst trying to make their own judgements about each child's attainment.   The lack of consistency in the children's abilities on entry into Reception had placed the emphasis of 'school readiness' on ensuring children were ready to come through the school door. Interpreting 'school readiness' as encompassing the skills needed on entry into Reception is a logical conclusion for teachers to draw due to the fact that this is seen as the first year of 'school', and this aligns with Kagan's (1990) construct of 'readiness for school' which Scott-Little *et al.* (2006) assert encompasses the physical, intellectual and social skills needed to cope with the school environment (p.273).   However, when used in policy discourse in England, 'school readiness' refers to the skills required to prepare children for the more 'formal learning' of Year One and Reception becomes a place to 'ready' children for school (DfE/DH, 2011; STA, 2016; DfE, 2017a).   This construct corresponds with a 'readiness for learning' which Kagan (1990) argues can be affected by multiple factors including 'motivation, physical development' intellectual ability, emotional maturity, and health (p.273).

As part of this discussion it is important to explore why the confusion over the term 'school readiness', and the type of transition it refers to, is of concern.   Both the Internet survey and the interviews highlighted how the teachers believed that desirable skills for the transition into Reception are centred on social adjustment and disposition.   This echoes findings from previous research carried out exploring teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' in the USA which found very few teachers naming academic skills, such as counting to twenty and knowing the alphabet, shapes and colours as being essential for transition into school.   Rather, the importance of social and emotional development, language and communication skills, a confident and attentive disposition and independence in the classroom were seen to be important attributes for success in school (Lin *et al.*, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

If we then consider how 'school readiness' is located in English policy as the transition from Reception into Year One, and the use of the learning outcomes that make up the

GLD as a measure of 'school readiness', the skills required become much more instrumental than the personal and social skills required on entry into Reception. The teachers in my research believed that there was a clear shift towards teaching more formal skills such as phonics, Writing, and Mathematical concepts to ready children for the transition into Year One. This supports Wickett's (2016) argument in that there are two distinct transitions, the first being the 'institutional transition' from home/pre-school settings into the classroom, and the second as the 'curricular transition' from Reception into Year One. In this context, the 'school readiness' lens becomes blurred, which creates a significant problem space as we consider and compare the different skills that would be required for the two transitions. *Diagram 10* is presented as a way of visualising the complexities linked to the way 'school readiness' is viewed and presented through policy discourse and educational parlance.

Diagram 10 - Visualising the transitional complexities of 'school readiness'
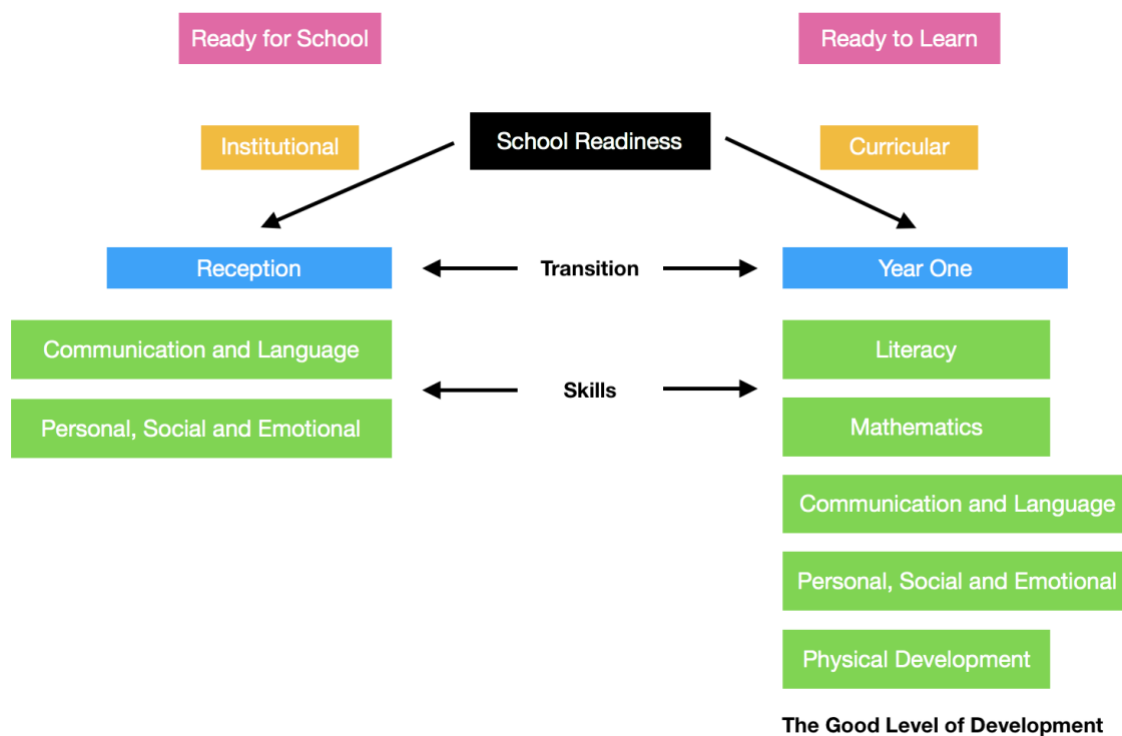
These complexities can be further problematised when we consider what 'ready to learn' means. Neuro-scientific research offers proof that babies begin to learn before they are even born (James, 2010), and therefore the natural correlation is that all children are 'ready to learn' as they make the transition into school. However, within

the context of the curricular and assessment frameworks of the EYFS, and the emphasis placed on Literacy and Mathematical outcomes, I argue that being 'ready to learn' is ascribed to mean the formal and instrumental skills of Mathematics and Literacy that are required to meet the GLD. This is highlighted in a press release by the DfE (2015c) entitled *More children than ever starting school ready to learn* where it was asserted:

> *As a result of this government's commitment to higher standards in every setting, today's figures show that an extra 38,600 number of 5-year-olds are reaching the expected level of development in maths and literacy, as well as in prime areas of personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language.*

Referring back to the findings of this study, one of the participants voiced frustrations about children not having the necessary personal and social skills to cope with the school environment, and how time was wasted working on these when they could have been "pushing on with the learning". This illuminates a key shift in the purpose of Reception as the 'transition' year that Tickell (2011) refers to, instead becoming the year to ready children for school (or rather the formalities of KS1), and to work towards the achievement of the GLD.

The Good Level of Development as a Measure of 'School Readiness'

The GLD is a summative assessment based on the achievement of the ELGs of five areas of learning in the EYFS curriculum: Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development, Communication and Language, Mathematics and Literacy. The overall assessment is made up of collated pieces of formative assessment that have been collected over the course of the Reception year. The GLD is then used by the government as a way of measuring a child's 'school readiness' before they make the transition into Year One.

Drawing on the research findings, numerous tensions were identified which highlight the possible conflicts teachers face between their own beliefs about what 'school readiness' is, and the way in which the GLD is used as a 'school readiness' measure. It was expressed by the teachers in the study that children coming into Reception had a wide range of differing needs, including some children who were unable to speak

any English, or had limited communication skills. It is continuously reported that the most significant concern is that children are entering school with limited communication and language skills (NAHT/Family and Childcare Trust, 2017, p.6), yet the participants were consistent in their belief that this was a fundamental skill required in order to be 'ready for school'. This supports research carried out for the DfE by Snowling *et al.* (2011) which found considerable evidence to show that language, communication and Literacy were the 'best predictors of educational success' (p.42). Communication and Language skills were seen as a precursor to more formal learning such as phonics and Writing, and without these skills in place teachers were having to spend time filling the gaps before children were 'ready to learn' the more advanced Literacy outcomes. In the context of this school, these included skills such as cursive writing, lined workbooks and 'early editing' which, the teacher pointed out, would previously have been considered Year One skills.

As discussed in the policy analysis in Chapter Two, outcomes such as writing simple sentences are now an expected outcome whereas previously, when compared with the National Curriculum Year One level descriptors (QCDA, 2010), these were Level 1 outcomes and point 9 on the Foundation Stage Profile (QCA, 2008). Rather than make critical considerations about the reasons behind the number of children failing to achieve the GLD, the Government continues to push the 'top down' and 'earlier is better' agenda into the Early Years (Whitebread *et al.*, 2012, p.3). Within the context of the GLD the notion of 'school readiness' becomes the ability to handle the more formal Literacy and Mathematical outcomes. This reflects findings from research carried out in the USA by Bassock *et al.* (2016) who observed 'a corresponding increase in Literacy and Math content instruction in kindergarten classrooms, with particularly large increases in time spent on "challenging" topics previously considered outside the scope of kindergarten' (p.14). This caused some tensions for the teachers who, throughout the research process, talked about the importance of the 'whole child' and voiced frustrations over the omission of the creative aspects of the EYFS as part of the GLD. Further frustrations were caused by the fact that some children would be exceeding in areas such as Personal, Social and Emotional Development and Expressive

Arts and Design, yet had not achieved the more complex formal outcomes of Literacy and Mathematics and therefore would not reach the GLD.

It is this tension between the traditional holistic philosophy of ECE and the current focus on Mathematics and Literacy outcomes that has led to the assertion by Roberts-Holmes (2015b) that the Early Years is being 'schoolified' in order to meet these outcomes.   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).

Table 27 - EYFSP Attainment by each early learning goal included in the GLD (DfE, 2016)

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

Table 27 displays the percentage of children nationally reaching the expected level of development in the Prime and Specific areas of learning that make up the GLD.

Across the Prime areas of learning there are, on the whole, small increases in the percentage of children achieving these outcomes over the three years. The areas of learning that see a considerably larger hike in attainment are Literacy and Mathematics, with Writing seeing over a 10% increase. 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. This was reflected in the findings of this study where the teachers talked of how they were placed under pressure to get children to the GLD, and how much more emphasis was placed on Mathematical and Literacy outcomes as these were what children found most difficult. 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. This finding also supports recent findings from *The Hundred Review* (Pascal *et al.,* 2017) which found that teachers are being pressured to improve children's outcomes and that pedagogy in Reception is 'becoming more instructional, teacher directed and narrowly focused on Literacy and Mathematics learning, with a loss of play and more individualised, creative approaches' (p.27).

The increase in children achieving the more complex Literacy and Mathematical outcomes year on year further troubles the traditional approach to ECE. One of the teachers described how, despite not agreeing with teaching cursive writing in Reception, many of the children were able to do it, which went some way in validating this as being the correct thing to do, particularly in the eyes of the Senior Management Team. This creates a clear tension for teachers who are having to teach more formal skills in order to reach the GLD, but which sees children ultimately achieving the specified outcomes. Questions arise as to whether the focus on Literacy and Mathematical outcomes are at the expense of more holistic approaches to teaching, and this was reiterated in the interview data. 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, aligning with the findings of Moyles and Worthington (2011) who argued that the 'prescribed curriculum' was driving classroom practice

(p.3). When it is considered that curricular and assessment frameworks were positioned within the activity system as the *rules* governing the activity, the findings also support van Oers (2014) assertion that the frameworks that exist in the Early Years are creating 'conflicting motives' for teachers (p.20).

The findings from this research are consistent with existing studies that have examined the 'datafication' of ECE, the emphasis on Mathematical and Literacy outcomes, and the impact this has on pedagogical practices (Brown *et al.*, 2015; Flewitt & Roberts-Holmes, 2015; Roberts-Holmes, 2015a; Roberts-Holmes, 2015b). Building on this work, I argue that the use of CHAT as a theoretical and methodological framework, and the identification of the 'manifestation of contradictions' (Engeström & Sannino, 2011) within the data, has highlighted some of the tensions and dilemmas teachers face on a daily basis in their pedagogical practice. Using the GLD as a measure for 'school readiness', and the accountability linked to this data, has clear implications for both teachers and children, explored in more depth in the next section.

The Impact on the Teacher and Pedagogical Practice

It was reported by the teachers that the SMT took an active interest in the projected number of children who were likely to achieve the GLD and, although this was always done in a positive way, throughout the interview both teachers talked at length about the pressures they were placed under. Here I consider Vygotsky's theory of internalisation and externalisation (Douglas, 2010) as the teachers made sense of the messages being given by the SMT and the LEA about the importance of the GLD, and the subsequent impact this may have on teacher identity. From a Vygotskian perspective, what follows is a discussion that considers how the teachers were shaped by the requirements embedded within the GLD as a performativity measure, and how in turn these understandings were acted upon through pedagogical approaches and classroom practice.

Whilst children were able to access continuous provision both inside and outside at numerous points during the school day, the teachers were aware of the importance of the GLD as an accountability measure and it was explicitly stated that this had an impact on pedagogy in the classroom. Play was seen to be an important part of

Reception by both teachers, and frustrations were expressed over the lack of play available in Year One.   The concept of 'purposeful play' (OfSTED, 2015b) also emerged as it was explained that the continuous provision was used as a way of ensuring children met certain curricular outcomes and observations became a way of assessing whether those outcomes were being met, rather than valuing the play for what it was.   This is reminiscent of Bernstein's (2000) 'performance model' whereby the teacher regulates what is taught and measures the resulting outputs of the child through a 'visible pedagogy'.

This 'visible pedagogy' is highlighted by the use of handwriting and Literacy workbooks which provide tangible evidence for the Literacy ELGs, but also reflect a more instrumental approach to the writing outcomes.   Here we see how teachers have had to align their pedagogy with 'discourses of effectiveness and performativity measures' (Wood, 2014, p.153) in order to ready children for formal schooling.   However, this caused tensions for the teachers who argued that some of the outcomes being taught and the expectations linked to writing would have been previously considered a Year One skill.   This further evidences the view that outcomes are being pushed down into Reception and re-enforces the belief by policymakers that 'earlier is better' despite research showing that this approach may not be effective, and could in fact be potentially damaging to children (Sharp, 2002; Walsh *et al.,* 2006).   Not surprisingly, the teachers did "fight" against the introduction of cursive writing but were told this was "non-negotiable".

Conversely, as has already been discussed, the teachers were keen to establish that they saw children as individuals with different needs, and worked hard to ensure children developed holistically, aligning with Bernstein's (2000) 'competence model'. Children's interests were followed as part of the weekly planning and it was asserted by the teachers that this gave children the opportunity to build their confidence and independence.   Mathematics was delivered through practical and playful activities, and this was then reflected in the continuous provision.

Throughout the data collection period, the GLD was a dominant driving force for the teachers, a 'totalising discourse' that Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue forces

everybody into the same way of thinking and acting (p.142).   The teachers expressed criticisms of the use of the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness' stating that if only 54% of children were achieving it then there must be "something wrong", and that children were more than a number on the spreadsheet.   However, the data highlights how the intensity of the GLD as a performative measure 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.   Persistent tensions were present throughout the data and, based on the findings of this research, I argue that the GLD subjugates teachers and forces them to focus on the outcomes required for what Roberts-Holmes (2015a) describes as the 'good data' that are often in conflict with their beliefs, knowledge and personal experiences.   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.

The Subjugation of Children

The impact that the 'school readiness' agenda had on children became significant as I considered whether the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness' is positioned as a data collection tool in order to measure a school's performance, or if the driver behind this was to benefit the children.   In Chapter Two, I identified that a dominant discourse of ECE policy is the aim of ensuring children have 'the best start in life' (Allen, 2011; DfE, 2011; DfE/DH, 2011; Field, 2011; DfE, 2017b), but it was also questioned whether this discourse was inclusive of all children, particularly those living in situations of socio-economic disadvantage.

It has been established that children enter Reception with a range of different skills and experiences and further issues arose as the Reception teachers identified the problem faced by the need to get all children to the same point by the end of Reception regardless of their starting points.   In particular, EAL and SEN children were identified by one of the teachers as children who they were concerned would not meet the expected level of development, and this supports evidence published by the DfE

where only 23% of children with special needs achieved the GLD in 2016.   As a way of managing this, numerous interventions were in place to support the children, but they were still finding phonics and reading difficult, and it was reported that these interventions often took the children away from the continuous provision on offer in the classroom.   Referring back to the discussion on the importance of Communication and Language as a precursor to more instrumental Literacy skills, it would appear that there is an expectation regardless of a child's attainment, to continue to prepare for the transition into Year One, which aligns with the deterministic nature of the GLD.   This was further problematised by the fact that some children did not even speak English on entry into Reception yet were still expected to meet the GLD.   This highlights a fundamental flaw in the use of the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness' and Hammond *et al.* (2015) argue that these 'normative assessment arrangements' serve to 'contribute to inequity'.   The dominant discourse of 'readiness' as the achievement of the GLD only serves to place these children in a deficit position before they even enter Year One and brings to mind Osgood's (2016) assertion that using selected outcomes such as the GLD to measure children privileges some groups of children over others, and further marginalises groups of children who are already marginalised.   Furthermore, the failure to achieve these outcomes becomes the fault of the child, rather than any deficiencies in the expectations of the policy frameworks.

A somewhat worrying finding that emerged from the data was the belief that children were being placed under pressure 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.   Drawing on previous studies focusing on the early introduction of formal learning (Sharp, 2002; Walsh *et al.,* 2006), the use of this language is concerning when findings highlighted how children were being placed

'under pressure' and how this impacted negatively on self-esteem and motivation to learn.

One of the teachers talked about how children were expected to behave in a "certain way" which is reminiscent of Sonu and Benson's (2016) notion of the 'ideal learner' (p.236). Dahlberg *et al*. (1999) remind us of the 'richness of children's lived lives' and yet using the GLD as a way of measuring 'school readiness' and classifying children as 'ready' or 'unready' ignores what children can do, and their social and cultural experiences beyond school. Rather, the child is reduced to the practices of instrumentalism which, when viewed through this lens, reflects the ideological influence of neoliberalism whereby only what is measurable is seen to be of value (Biesta, 2010; Evans, 2013). Arguably, this supports the belief that the focus on 'high stakes accountability' with an emphasis on Mathematics and Literacy, ensures children become 'neoliberal subjects' as the complexities of the children's lives are ignored (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015; Morris, 2016). This caused a clear tension for the teacher who interestingly re-iterated the arguments presented by Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) and criticised the "very prescriptive" nature of the GLD, articulating her beliefs that "children aren't like that" and how they should be allowed to be themselves, rather than what was expected of them in the context of the GLD.

Child-initiated activities were observed throughout the data collection period and independent writing and mark-making were undertaken by children during their free choice time *(Image 9 and 10).* In *Image 9* it can be seen how children are experimenting with letter formation and story narratives through their own child-initiated learning.

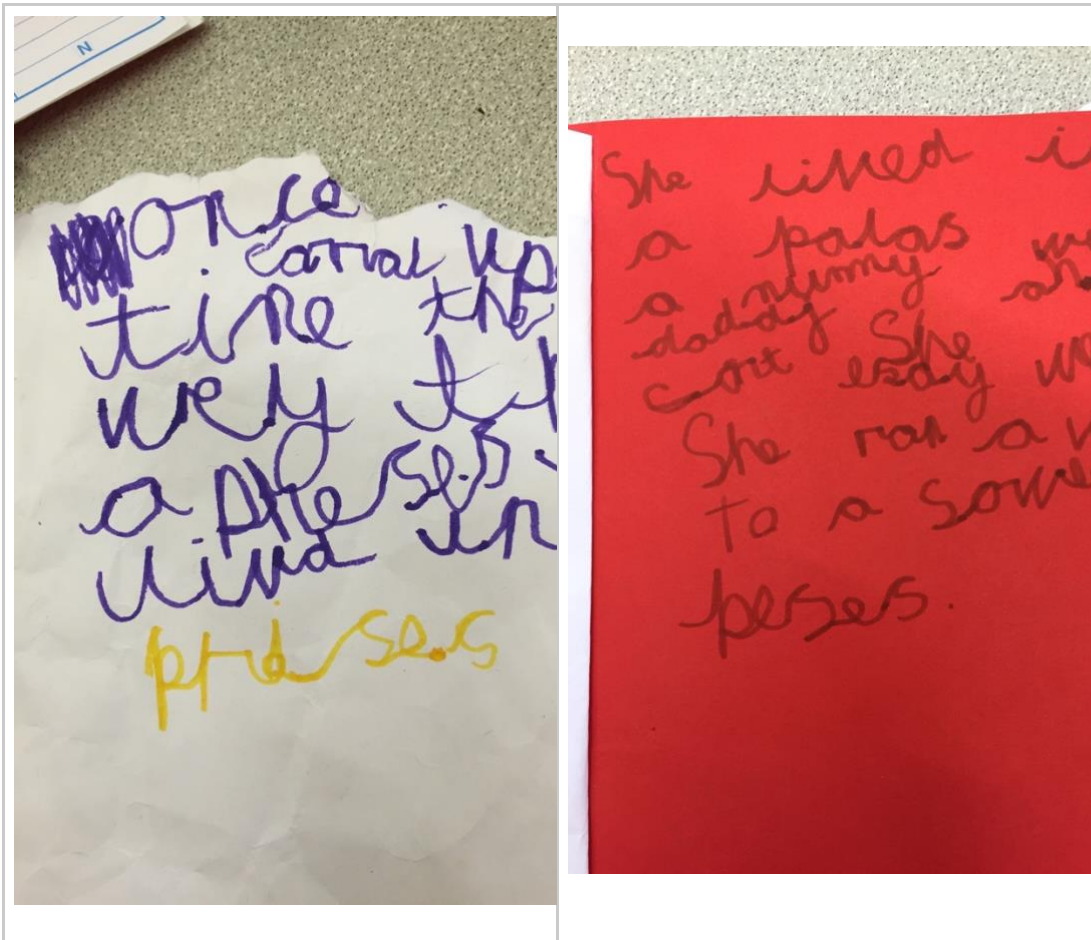*Image 9 - "Once upon a time there was some superheroes and some baddies, the end."*
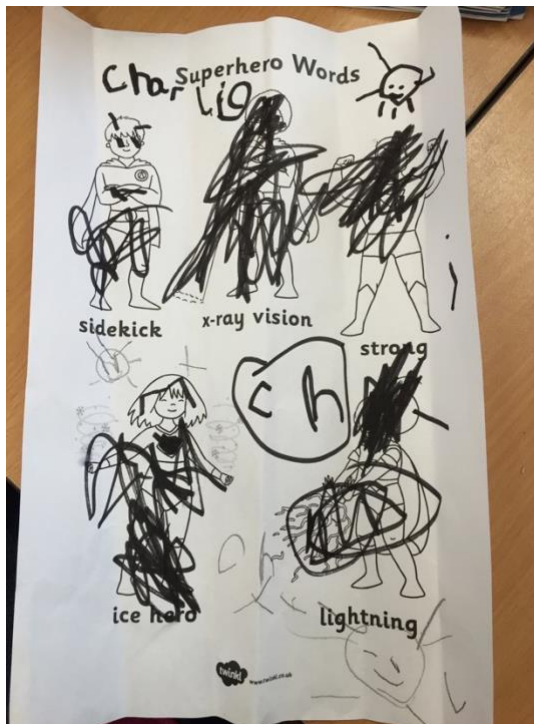
Image 10 - Evidence of independent writing done at home and at school

In *Image 10,* the child had started to write a story at home, which she had then brought into school to finish.   She was able to read the story back to me and had made plausible attempts to spell complex words such as 'princess' and 'palace'.   This demonstrates what Neaum (2016) refers to as the 'fluidity and responsiveness to the selection, sequence, timing and pace of each individual child's learning' that she argues requires a 'significant level of professional autonomy' (p.248).   The two examples highlight the differences in each child's development, but both pieces of work are valid and valuable with regards to each child's personal learning journey. On this basis, I am left wondering whether the challenge is to give children what Graue *et al.* (2002) refers to as the 'gift of time', and to embrace the understanding that 'children carry readiness in their bodies' (p.351).   However, within the English policy context, the idea of placing more trust in children reaching the point of 'readiness', one not defined by the GLD but rather a child's personal capacity for leading their own learning and subsequent development based on context and environment, is readily ignored.

There was an acknowledgement by the teachers that, for some children, writing a letter sound may still demonstrate huge progress for that particular child and they were critical that the numerical data did not always reflect what the children had achieved over their time in Reception.   This re-enforces the argument that 'learning involves processes and content that are important for children' that are not always bound by the linear trajectory of the developmental EYFS framework (Wood & Hedge, 2016, p.401).   Children who do not meet the specific outcomes of the ELG's are categorised as 'emerging' and, within this framework, progress made by these individual children is not included in the data.   This lack of detail about a child's achievement at the end of Reception was a clear source of frustration for the teachers and demonstrates how the complexities of children's learning and development are reduced through what Roberts-Holmes (2015b) refers to as the 'short-term test-driven regime' of the GLD.

Building on this argument, the 'emerging' construct illuminates the ontological reductionism of the GLD, whereby children are identified as being 'unready' for school, based on the failure to achieve the required prescriptive outcomes.   Furthermore,

the report *Are You Ready: Good practice in school readiness* (OfSTED, 2014) aligns the construct of 'emerging' to a delay in development, where 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'.   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.   One of the teachers highlighted the tension this created, in that only what is measured for the GLD is considered important, arguing that while it may be "useless" (in the context of the GLD), it was "very valid" when acknowledging a child's achievement.   Ball (2008) describes this as the 'first-order' and 'second-order' effects of performativity, whereby the 'pedagogical and scholarly activities' that lead to measurable outcomes inevitably cause the outcomes that are not measured to be discarded (p.54).   Children's achievements are compartmentalised into what is valuable in order to achieve the GLD, and those that are not are ignored within the data driven system of Early Years assessment measures.

Evans (2017) argues that a more optimistic approach is to view 'emerging' as the fluidity of each individual child's development, that it is an 'active and unpredictable process'.   Viewed through this lens, for children who are assessed as 'emerging', 'readiness' is part of the dynamic process of 'becoming', rather than a 'teleological goal' in a child's development (p.215).   This reflects a more 'hopeful' discourse than the one presented by OfSTED which defines children as being in a fixed state, and one that is deficit to normative expectations.

Tensions Between the Teacher (Subject), Policy Frameworks (Rules) and the GLD as a Measure of 'School Readiness' (Object)

Diagram 11 – Tensions in the Activity System (Subject>Rules>Object)
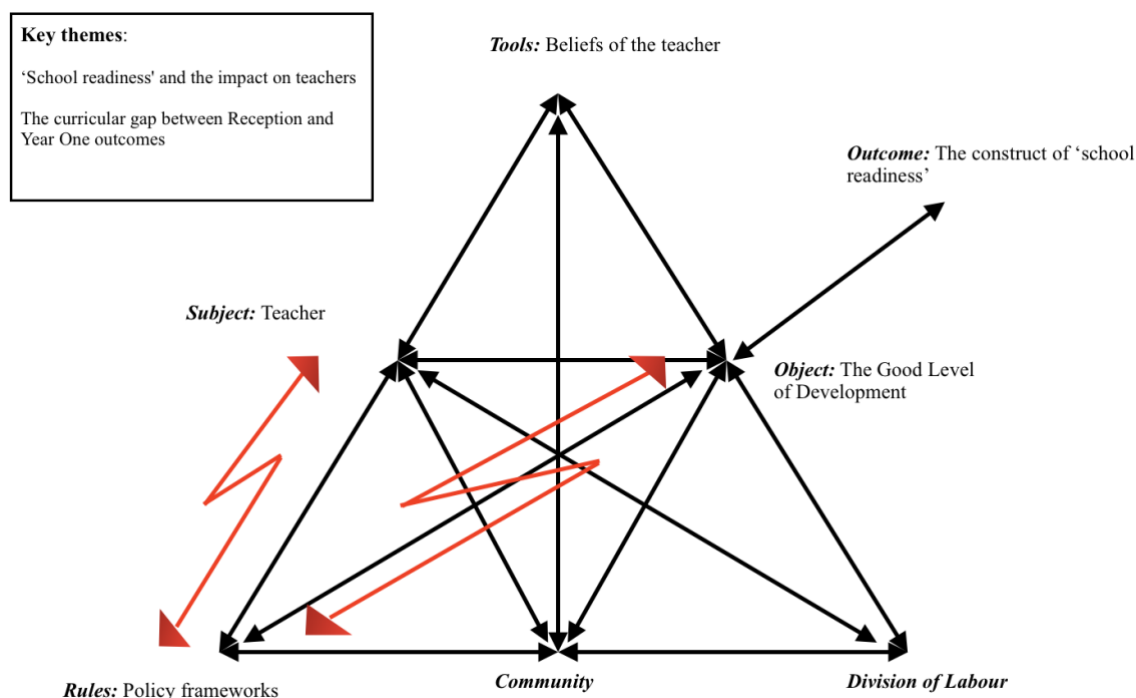
Here *rules* are positioned as the policy frameworks that teachers are expected to work within, and part of this discussion will explore whether these *rules* constrain the *subject* (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p.23).   I will also consider issues around the curricular gap between the EYFS and the National Curriculum expectations of Year One, and the impact that this has on provision.

The Perils of Performativity and Accountability

In Chapter Three I explored how 'Quality and Effectiveness' form a 'particular form of logic' (Evans, 2016, p.65) whereby quality is defined by how it is measured.   It is useful here to draw on Ball's (2003) position on the 'measure of productivity or output' encapsulating 'quality' but also that central to this is who 'controls the field of judgement' (p.216).   The findings from the data highlight how neoliberal ideology and the culture of performativity and accountability are played out within the context of the GLD as the participants described how ensuring children achieved the GLD was

a "reflection that the school had done well". This is significant when we expand further on Ball's (2003) assertions that this current educational climate leaves teachers open to sacrificing their beliefs and values, and possibly steering teaching in particular ways as professional judgement is overruled by performativity measures.

In Chapter Four, notions of praxis and transformative agency were examined to help conceptualise the teacher as the *subject* of the activity system. The discussion drew on the Vygostkian principle of 'double stimulation' whereby teachers interpret a situation and make decisions based on that interpretation, and this activity is transformative in the way it alters the environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 1997). At this point it was questioned whether teachers are able to make decisions according to their own beliefs, whilst still maintaining compliance with policy demands. The 'consequential change actions' of transformative agency were framed as follows:

1) *Resisting* the proposed change, or suggestions or initiatives associated with it.

2) *Criticizing* the current activity and organization.

3) *Explicating* new possibilities or potentials in the activity, often relating to past positive experiences.

4) *Envisioning* new patterns or models for the activity.

5) *Committing* to taking concrete actions to change the activity, often formulated as commissive speech acts tied to specific time and place.

6) Taking consequential actions or reporting having taken consequential actions to change the activity (Engeström *et al*., 2014, p.125)

Both teachers talked at length about the pressures they were under to ensure children met the GLD, and the limitations of time they were faced with as children entered Reception with gaps in their learning that need to be addressed before they could start working on the more instrumental Mathematical and Literacy skills. 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. This concurs with Osgood's (2006a) reference to the demands of performativity as being a 'form of ventriloquism' as the teachers navigated the expectations placed on the children, and their own performance. However, both teachers were critical of many aspects of the GLD including, as already discussed, the outcomes, the importance placed on the data by

the LEA and SMT, and the reality that year on year many children will fail to meet the expected benchmark.

Whilst the GLD caused considerable tensions for the teachers, both teachers understood and accepted that this measurement of performance came from the data-driven system they were working within. This brings to mind Roberts-Holmes' (2015a) argument that the data becomes part of the 'teacher's pedagogical focus' (p.307) despite attempts to stay true to traditional ECE philosophy. This tension also reflects the hegemony of educational policy (Ball, 1990; Scott, 1990; MacDonald, 2003), whereby the expectations placed on teachers and children are so embedded within this culture, that they are unable to resist the policy frameworks within which they are situated. As a consequence, and supported by findings from this research, teachers become complicit in the delivery of these outcomes, regardless of whether they align or not with their own beliefs. As we move further down the road of 'technicist assessment practices' (Wood, 2014, p.153) with the continuing pushing down of outcomes into the Early Years, questions arise as to how this will continue to shape teacher identity as new teachers qualify into this system of performativity and accountability. Indeed, findings from recent research carried out by Basford (2016) highlight how early career teachers are 'playing the assessment game' and that this has resulted in 'distorted assessment practices' stemming from the 'performative culture that dominates assessment policy' (p.1).

Overall, the data did not reveal many aspects of 'transformative agency' as defined by Engeström *et al.* (2014), and the above discussion demonstrates how powerful the performativity demands of the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness' are within the Reception classroom. However, referring back to Freire's (2000) definition of praxis as being the 'reflection and action upon the world to transform it' (p.51), the findings show that reflections were made about how children were reacting to the impending transition and that this resulted in the teachers putting strategies, or 'consequential actions' (Engeström *et al.* 2014*)*, in place to ensure the needs and anxieties of the children were addressed. 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.

Interestingly, an alternative discourse emerged from the study as the teachers explained how they did not use the term 'school readiness' in their day-to-day practice.   As children moved through Reception, the emphasis shifted towards what they consistently referred to as a 'preparation' for Year One which focused on more formal skills and ensuring children had the emotional maturity and intellectual ability that Kagan (1990) argues encompass the 'readiness for learning' construct.   This included the formal skills that were required to meet the ELGs, but there were also clear endeavours to ensure children were prepared emotionally for the transition, and had the resilience to cope with the changes.

The Curricular Gap Between the EYFS and KS1

Further tensions in the research data bring attention to the curricular gap between the end of Reception and Year One.   In 2004, the OfSTED report *Transition from the Reception Year to Year 1* drew attention to the 'insufficient consideration' given to the relationship between the Early Years and Primary curricula, and how the pressures of the end of Key Stage One tests had impacted on an 'abrupt' transition to more formal learning (p.2).   In the school where the study took place, the children experience the environmental and pedagogical transition where the play-based approach of the EYFS is replaced with the more formal, subject-oriented approach of the National Curriculum.   The children also have to make the shift from the seven areas of learning to the eleven statutory subjects of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a).

As part of the policy analysis in Chapter Two, I argued that the key policy drivers behind the 'school readiness' agenda are to ensure that the cycle of poverty is broken at the

most 'cost-effective' point in time, and to prepare children for the formal learning of Year One so that England is strongly positioned to compete in the global race of education. 'School readiness' is seen as a key solution to 'long-standing social problems' and disadvantaged families' (Allen, 2011; Field, 2010; Simpson *et al*. 2015), and policymakers argue that an earlier start for children from disadvantaged families will help to 'make up the deficit in their academic skills' (Sharp, 2002, p.1). In line with recommendations from the EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017), the summer term in the Reception classroom became more formalised and writing became much more of a focus so children were ready for the approach adopted in Year One. Punctuation and well-structured writing was specified by one of the teachers as being an expectation by the end of Reception, despite previously being Year One skills. The teacher also talked of getting children to reach the Exceeding statement in Writing which states 'Children can spell phonically regular words of more than 1 syllable as well as many irregular but high frequency words. They use key features of narrative in their own writing' (STA, 2016, p.44). She argued that this would help to "lessen the gap" between Reception and Year One which raises some serious questions regarding the curricular bridge between Reception and Year One, and it is of concern that outcomes that are already difficult for young children to achieve still do not correlate with the expectations of Year One. This highlights a clear issue for those children who do not achieve the ELGs for Literacy and Mathematics, who then enter Year One already behind and in a perpetual state of catch up.

At the time of writing, the Government response to the primary assessment consultation (DfE, 2017b) was published stating, 'We will ensure that the ELGs are appropriately aligned with the year 1 curriculum, particularly the ELGs for Literacy and mathematics' (p.6). Whilst there is a clear requirement to ensure the two curriculums align to provide a smooth curricular transition, the recent trend of pushing outcomes down into earlier years raises some concerns as to which direction this may go. It was reported by the teachers that there are already pressures placed upon them to introduce Year One outcomes, such as writing numbers correctly, despite this not being an ELG. Whilst the teacher was resistant to this additional burden, it highlights the pressures that each year group is under and how outcomes are being

pushed down in order to 'ready' children, resulting in children being in a constant state of preparation for the next stage of their learning.

Concluding Comments

This discussion has brought to light how CHAT has enabled the identification of tensions and dilemmas for teachers working within a framework where the GLD as a measure of 'school readiness' is a powerful performativity and accountability tool. The confusion over 'school readiness' as a transitional concept has been explored in more depth, and how this blurs the lens with regards to the different outcomes required for the environmental and curricular transitions. It has been argued that the GLD as a normative assessment measure is flawed and reductionist in nature, and disregards outcomes that are not considered relevant. The discussion also draws attention to the impact that current assessment and curricular policy frameworks have on teachers and children and transformative agency is diminished as teachers work within a culture of datafication and accountability.

Returning to Foot's (2014) assertion that contradictions are 'starting places' rather than 'ending points', the final chapter will consider the implications of this research, the contribution to existing knowledge, and the potential for future research that builds on these findings.

The aims of this research were to explore teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness', to examine how 'school readiness' is constructed within the classroom, and to identify the tensions between the beliefs of the teachers, policy frameworks and pedagogical practices.   As a way of framing this study the following supplementary questions were addressed:

1)   How is 'school readiness' defined in Government policy in England?
2)   What do teachers in the Early Years perceive 'school readiness' to be?
3)   How is 'school readiness' constructed within the Reception classroom?
4)   What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and pedagogical practice?
5)   What tensions and contradictions are there between teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' and policy frameworks?

Reflections of the Thesis

Using CHAT as a Research Framework

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory has been a useful tool in this research, both as a methodological and conceptual framework, but also as a way of framing the analysis and searching for contradictions within the data.   Positioning teachers as the *subject* of the activity system worked well from the onset of the study, however, I found that as the research progressed I grappled with the different aspects of the framework, in particular, the *tools* and the *object*.   *Diagram 12* and *Diagram 13* demonstrate how the activity system evolved over the course of the research.

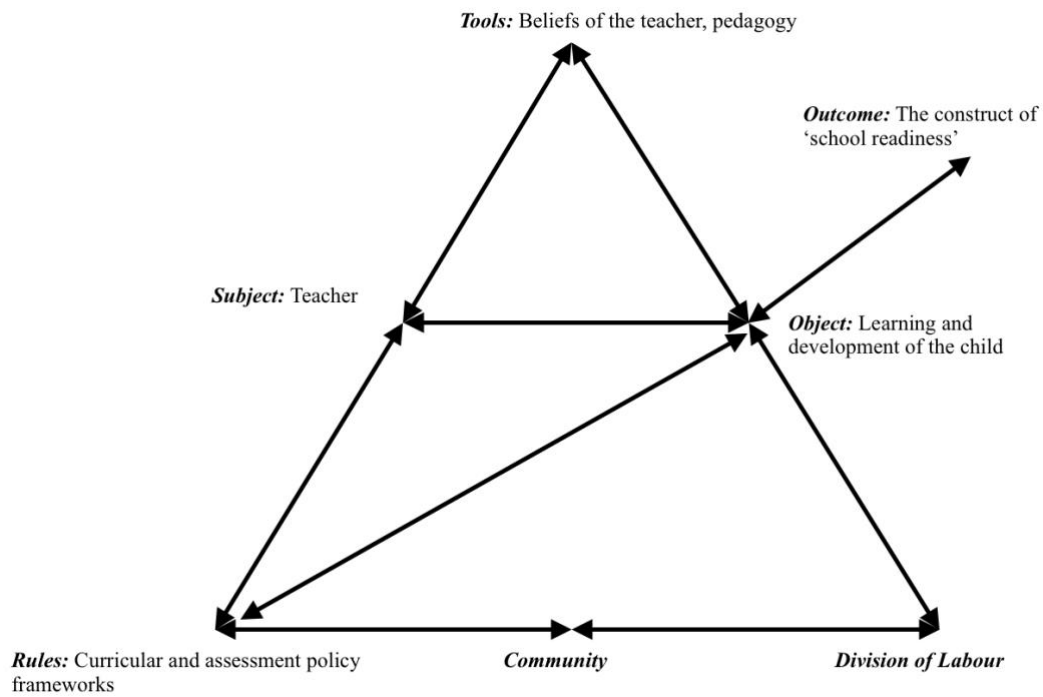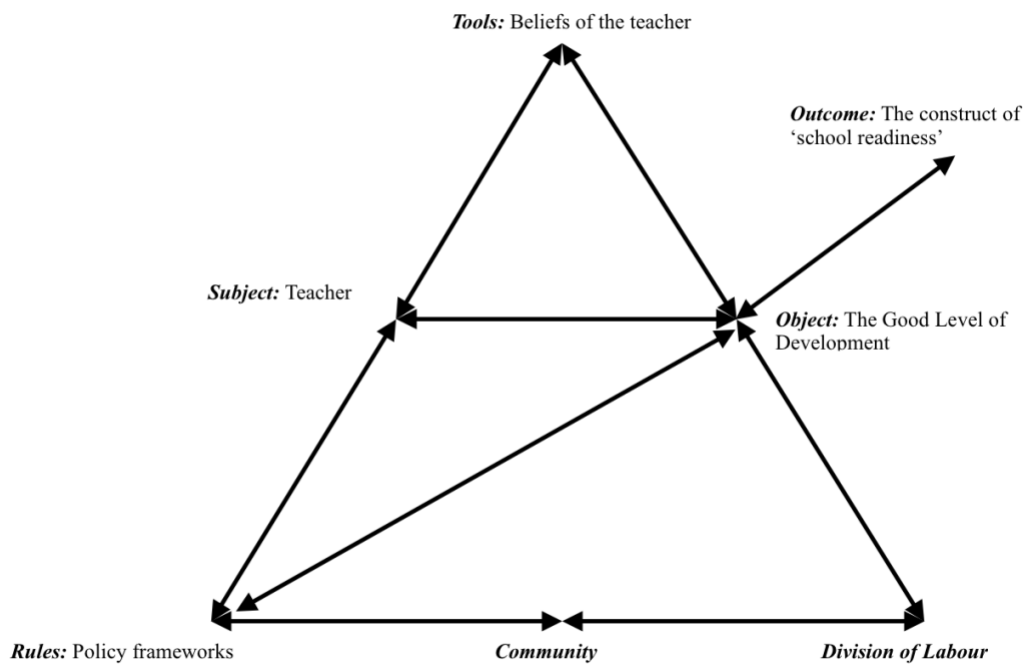*Diagram 12 - The original version of the 'classroom' activity system*

Tools: Beliefs of the teacher, pedagogy

Outcome: The construct of 'school readiness'

Subject: Teacher

Object: Learning and development of the child

Rules: Curricular and assessment policy frameworks

Community

Division of Labour

Diagram 13 - The final version of the 'pedagogical' activity system

Tools: Beliefs of the teacher

Outcome: The construct of 'school readiness'

Subject: Teacher

Object: The Good Level of Development

Rules: Policy frameworks

Community

Division of Labour

Whilst it would have been easy to position the child as the *object* of the activity system, it was important that a humanistic perspective was used and children were positioned

in the research as people, not objects.   With this in mind, I considered the oriented activity would be focused on the *object* of learning and development, rather than the embodied child.   However, as I worked through the data and the discussion, the GLD was such a powerful dynamic within the classroom I contemplated how the achievement of this assessment benchmark was the key objective of the activity system in the Reception classroom.

The other aspect of the activity system that I contended was the use of *tools* as a mediating artefact within the system which were initially pedagogy and teachers' beliefs.   Teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' were a key focus of the research, and CHAT enabled me to explore in more depth the different factors that influence those beliefs, such as personal experiences, knowledge and the political climate, and how teachers drew on these beliefs as part of their classroom practice.   However, when it came to explore the tensions between the different parts of the activity system, I reconsidered pedagogy as being much more than a *tool*, but rather the activity driving the system in the first place.   I had initially defined the activity system as the 'classroom' but concluded that it is *what happens* in the classroom, rather than the *physical space*, that is important.   Based on this reasoning the final version of the activity system was then used to explore the tensions between the different aspects of the activity system which enabled me to frame my discussion.

For the purpose of this research using CHAT has been an effective way of unpicking the complexities of teachers' pedagogical practices when carried out against a deterministic political backdrop of accountability and performativity.   It also helped to draw out the neoliberal constructs that are at play within the English educational system and explore other influences that impact on contemporary teaching practice. With this in mind, I argue that CHAT can be used in future research as a way exploring further the convoluted nature of ECE, and the different forces at play within this context.

Limitations of the Study

The study does have limitations, one of which was the small sample size used which meant there was a limited breadth of data.   In total, five teachers were interviewed,

but only the interviews of the two Reception teachers were used due to the amount of data generated.   As such, generalisations cannot be drawn from the research, but the study does provide a rich and focused insight into the beliefs of two teachers working within the current educational climate where there is a strong emphasis on data as an accountability measure.

A further limitation was the lack of research that has been carried out on 'school readiness' within an English or European context, as most of the existing research on this topic has come from the USA and Australia.   However, this also brings attention to the timeliness and relevance of this research as a contribution to the current debate about 'school readiness' as the agenda continues to grow as a key government focus. This also highlights the need for future research to explore in more depth some of the issues raised by this thesis, and to include more voices such as those of the parents and the children.

The survey questionnaire was a useful exercise in order to establish an overarching view of what 'school readiness' was, but again confusions around which transition it referred to may have impacted on the participants' responses.   In this case, in order to build on the questionnaire data, future research could involve revisiting the answers given by the respondents and using them as discussion points for online focus groups using social media such as Twitter or Facebook.   This would help to gain a broader understanding of the beliefs of teachers with regards to 'school readiness'.

As part of this research, the Nursery teacher and Year One teachers were also interviewed about their beliefs about 'school readiness' and their expectations of what children should be able to do on transition into school, and from Reception into Year One.   Due to the word limitations of the thesis, this data was only used to establish what beliefs the teachers held about 'school readiness', and could therefore be used as part of a further study into the beliefs of the wider teaching community.

Looking to the Future

Contribution to Knowledge

The focus of the study did not change as I worked through the research process, but some unexpected themes emerged as I explored the literature in more depth. It became clear that neoliberalism is a major structural force driving the 'school readiness' agenda and this became a key focus of my discussion. This is further strengthened by the recent announcement by the OECD (2017) about a major new project that will be 'an international assessment of children's early learning' to be known as the International Early Learning Study (IELS) (Moss *et al.*, 2016, p.344). Moss *et al.* (2016) refer to the IELS as a 'pre-school PISA' (p.4), arguing that the technical approach adopted for the study values 'objectivity, universality, predictability and what can be measured' (p.6). This process of testing, building on the measure and compare strategies of PISA, TIMSS and PIRLs, and the construction of league tables of winners and losers, fits in easily with the neoliberal concept of global competition and test-based accountability (Morris, 2016, p.8). The IELS further re-enforces the framework for 'standardised assessment' whilst continuing to exclude 'contextually appropriate improvement of educational practices and equitable outcomes for all children' (Urban & Swadener, 2017, p.6). To date, only England and the USA have agreed to participate in the study. It is therefore argued that this thesis contributes to the continuing debate on the impact of neoliberalism on ECE, and also highlights opportunities for further research into the IELS as an entity that has the potential to strengthen the 'school readiness' agenda in England.

Much of the existing research carried out exploring teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' has come from the USA and Australia, and therefore this thesis has provided new insights into the pressures faced by two Reception teachers working within a 'school readiness' agenda in England. The pressures faced by the teachers in this research are similar to those that Graue (1993) found kindergarten teachers were facing two decades earlier. Kindergarten classrooms in the USA have become increasingly similar in structure to typical first grade classrooms of the late nineties, and first grade classrooms have an increased emphasis on assessment. These

findings are supported by research carried out by Brown and Lan (2015) whose analysis demonstrates how teachers' conversations around 'school readiness' have shifted, with more emphasis being placed on preparing children for success in school. My thesis elucidates, therefore, that the top down push of formal and instrumental skills into the Early Years has followed the same trajectory as that of the USA, and how the academic expectations to reach outcomes, particularly those linked to Literacy and Mathematics, has intensified.

A fundamental aim of this research was to identify tensions between beliefs, policy frameworks, and pedagogical practices, and I have explored in depth how these tensions impact on teachers and children. Here I refer back to the assertion by Roberts-Holmes (2015a) that accountability and performativity frameworks are intensifying the pressures placed on teachers to ensure children are 'school ready' (p.304). I argue that this research contributes to the debate by highlighting what pressures are being faced by teachers, and by illustrating some of the key issues encountered by Reception teachers working in a context where the GLD is such a powerful driving force.

Using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory to underpin this study has helped to illuminate the influences, interactions and practices that occur as part of Reception pedagogy. Whilst CHAT has been used across the educational research landscape, the use of this theory in ECE is somewhat limited, and therefore this study highlights the further possibilities of using this framework in research. It can also be argued that this study provides an example of the practical application of CHAT, and that this can continue to be developed as a relevant and useful research tool.

Implications of the Research

Over the course of this study it has become increasingly obvious that 'school readiness' is a subjective term that is dealt with in an ideological way by policymakers, with the use of the GLD as the true measure of whether a child is ready for school. The findings of this research clearly highlight the need for a definitive understanding of what 'school readiness' is, and the transition to which it refers. As has been discussed at length, the teachers' beliefs about 'school readiness' did not align with the way

'school readiness' is positioned within government policy. Based on the logic of the teachers, the implications of 'school readiness' were when children first enter school, and the skills that are needed for this transition are very different to the skills needed for transition into Year One, as measured by the GLD. Therefore, a key recommendation would be to push policymakers towards establishing a clear definition of what 'school readiness' is and to which transition it refers.

Further findings demonstrate how the term 'school readiness' is not used within the day to day classroom or school discourse. From the teachers' perspectives, their role was to 'prepare' the children rather than 'ready' them, which is much more in keeping with traditional ECE principles. I argue that the two terms have different connotations. To 'ready' children throws up the question 'ready for what?', and implies that children are prepared specifically for an action or purpose. Conversely, to 'prepare' children suggests they are being supported to be able to deal with a specific event, in this instance the transition into Year One. As discussed, this was a prevalent part of both the teachers' practice, an altruistic outlook that helped to set the children up to succeed in Year One, rather than face the shock of a more formal learning environment. I therefore recommend that the focus shifts towards a way of preparing children holistically for the transition, rather than the requirement to fulfil a checklist of outcomes.

A key recommendation from the findings of this research would be to further the debate regarding the Literacy and Mathematical outcomes that leave so many children behind before they enter Year One. As has been discussed, these outcomes have become a key focus in the Reception classroom, and have possibly impacted on pedagogical approaches as a way of achieving these outcomes. This calls into question the appropriateness of these practices, but also the fact that this results in children beginning their time in Year One in a deficit position from which they may never catch up. This is particularly pertinent when we consider the Government's promise to align the ELGs with the National Curriculum (DfE, 2017b, p.6) and the danger that even more difficult outcomes may be pushed down into Reception.

This leads me to consider an alternative discursive landscape that can be seen in Nordic and Central European countries which follow a social pedagogy where the kindergarten years are seen as a 'broad preparation for life and the foundation stage of lifelong learning' (OECD, 2006, p.57). Policy documents and curriculum guidelines acknowledge 'a central expectation that preschools and schools will exemplify democratic principles and that children will be active participants in these democratic environments' (Wagner, 2006, p. 292). The 'Nordic tradition' within ECE applies a 'social learning approach' where play, relationships and the outdoors are central to pedagogy, and learning taking place through children's participation in social interaction (Ringsmose & Kragh-Müller, 2017, p.ix). Introducing learning outcomes too early is seen to restrict a child's free development, and a 'school readiness' driven agenda is considered unnecessary and 'almost harmful' (Jensen, 2009, p.11).

Bingham and Whitebread (2012) argue that the social pedagogy model appears to support children's development as 'learners' and 'emotionally well-adjusted citizens' in contrast to the 'earlier is better' approach adopted by England (p.5). Mathematics and Literacy are not excluded from this tradition but rather an open and holistic curriculum is maintained, contrasting with countries where 'readiness' is privileged alongside a more academic approach to curriculum (OECD, 2012, p.83). The emphasis is placed on social skills rather than preparing children 'explicitly for school' or focusing on academic skills (Oberhuemer, 2004, p.18), and as a consequence, 'school readiness' is a less used concept in Nordic countries (Ringsmose & Kragh-Müller, 2017, p.88).

It is pertinent, therefore, to denote that 'school readiness' is not seen to be a 'problem' in countries using a social pedagogical model. Children in countries using the social pedagogy model start formal schooling two or three years later than children in England and, prior to this, the emphasis is placed on developing social skills rather than academic skills. The continued efforts of the government in England to force instrumental skills into the Early Years ignores the alternatives practiced elsewhere, and fails to consider the problematic aspects of a "too much, too soon" approach to ECE. This study has revealed how the focus on Mathematics and Literacy has had an impact on classroom practice, and illuminates how curricular and

assessment pressures have pushed down formal and instrumental skills into the Early Years.   Therefore, the recommendation to policymakers would be the consideration of alternative approaches to ECE that foster holistic development, and acknowledge the socio-cultural contexts that children exist within, rather than the dominant focus on 'readying children for school'.

Data from The World Bank regarding the *Official entrance age to primary education (years)* (2014) shows that the United Kingdom is part of the 10% where children start school aged five, with the majority of the world's countries stipulating six or seven as the compulsory school age.   The Cambridge Primary Review describes the introduction of a formal, subject-based curriculum at age five as being 'against the grain of evidence, expert opinion and international practice', 'highly contentious' and a source of anxiety for teachers and parents (Hofkins & Northen, 2009, p.16). Furthermore, Sykes *et al.* (2009) argue that 'children around the age of 4 may not be ready for the environment they encounter in the Reception class, which will include having to deal not only with a curriculum that may not be tailored to their needs but also with a number of social and emotional adjustments' (p.32).   Findings from this research have highlighted the pressures that are faced by the children as they are judged against difficult Literacy and Mathematical outcomes, and how this can leave them in a deficit position as they make the transition into Year One.   I argue that these findings contribute to the debate around the compulsory school age, and many of the pressures highlighted in this research would be alleviated if teachers had more time to ensure secure foundations are in place before children move into more formal learning environments.   Therefore, I recommend that a case be made for a later compulsory school age, and the extension of the EYFS until children are at least six years old.

Finally, I recommend that the focus of 'readiness' shifts to the school being 'ready' for the child, rather than the responsibility lie at the feet of the child.   Research into transition into school carried out by Peters (2000) in New Zealand found that while children adapted to the school routine relatively easily, what was important was 'the nature of the support they received and the connections between family, teachers and peers' (p.23).   This increased understanding that children exist within these

social contexts has highlighted a need to focus on the school's readiness for the child and the role that teacher's play in transitions (Shallwani, 2009, p.5).   Rather than see 'readiness' as a 'unitary construct' that the child needs to demonstrate before entering Year One, the use of a bi-directional model such as an interactionist framework sees both child and school as partners in the readiness equation (Carlton & Winsler, 1999, p.346).   A 'ready' school is defined as providing a safe and secure environment where all children are able to learn, where teachers and staff are welcoming, and effective learning opportunities are offered (Arnold *et al.*, 2007, p.17).   Meisels (1998) argues that this perspective 'addresses both the child's contributions to schooling and the school's contribution to the child' reflecting Kagan's (1990) construct of a 'readiness for learning' rather than a 'readiness for school' (p.11).   Schools who respond to a child's individual needs rather than enforcing children to conform to a particular standard, are then better placed to establish 'appropriate learning pathways' (Peters & Roberts, 2015, p.6), which will help to address some of the issues highlighted in this research.

Implications for future research

This study focused on the beliefs of Reception teachers about 'school readiness', how 'school readiness' is constructed within the classroom, and what tensions arise for teachers working within this agenda of accountability.   As already discussed, using CHAT has been a useful way of framing the research but this could be built on further by exploring the concept of expansive learning within the activity system.   Engeström (2001) proposes that as contradictions within the activity system are aggravated, there is potential for the individual to begin to 'question and deviate' from the established norms, which can lead to 'collaborative envisioning and a deliberate collective change effort' (p.137).

Explored in the previous chapter, the findings of this research highlight how opportunities for teacher agency are diminished by the pervasive force of the GLD as a performance management tool.   In order to explore the notion of teacher agency within the activity system in more depth, the gaze could be shifted to look more closely for 'consequential change actions': resistance, criticising, explicating new possibilities,

envisioning new patterns, committing to change, and taking consequential actions (Engeström *et al.,* 2014, p.125).   This concept of expansive learning offers 'progressive possibilities by enabling movement from current practices deemed problematic' towards a 'facilitation of transformative change' (Avis, 2009, p.152). Avis (2009) argues that this type of analysis offers the 'development of emancipatory practices' yet also feeds into the improvement of the 'effectiveness and efficiency of institutional practices' (p.152).

Continuing to develop CHAT as a methodological framework, a key aim is to build on the findings of this research and begin to probe the two aspects of the activity system that were not utilised in this research, the *wider community* and the *division of labour*, in more depth.   Findings from this research support the view that the skills that children need in place as they make the institutional transition into school are centred around Personal and Social Development, and Communication and Language. Working with parents and the wider community more closely could provide an insight into how the development of these skills could be supported, and issues regarding transition into school from a parents' perspective could be further identified. Further potentials for future research also include the exploration of perspectives of 'school readiness' from the point of view of Nursery and Year One teachers, and potentially those of the SMT.

At the point of finishing the thesis, OfSTED (2017) published the *Bold Beginnings* report with the aim of identifying 'the extent to which a school's curriculum for four - and five-year-olds prepares them for the rest of their education and beyond' (p.2). Key recommendations included a greater importance be placed on teaching numbers, that reading be the 'core purpose of the Reception year', and children are taught to write using a correct pencil grip whilst sitting at a table.   TACTYC's (2017) response to the report criticised the 'underlying agenda of downward pressure from KS1 to narrow the early years curriculum' (p.6), and the failure to recognise the 'nature and value of play and playfulness in learning' (p.3).   Indeed, the *Bold Beginnings* publication appeared to contradict the earlier OfSTED (2015a) report *Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?* which described how teaching in the Early Years sits on a 'continuum', dependent on the needs of the child at a given point in

time (p.5).   The subsequent debate highlighted tensions around the false dichotomy of play and learning, and the requirement to 'teach' knowledge and skills to ensure 'school readiness'.   I argue that, as Mathematics and Literacy are pushed to the forefront of ECE as part of the 'school readiness' agenda, a critical stance is taken to explore in more depth the clarifications of cultural and political assumptions around play and learning in the Early Years.   As Wood and Hedge (2016) assert, without clarity of 'the links between play, learning, and pedagogy', the ECE curriculum will continue to be 'subject to critique, and open to the levels of control that are embedded in many contemporary policy frameworks' (p.391).   In the current context of the 'school readiness' agenda and the issues raised in the thesis, this is worthy of further exploration.

As has been discussed in depth as part of this thesis, a key problem space is the children who do not manage to reach the GLD, and a pertinent and relevant line of enquiry would be to examine how these children cope with the transition into Year One, and how this impacts on the work of the Year One teachers.   The GLD is a political construct that should continue to be interrogated, and the impact that this assessment measure has on children, teachers, and the wider school community.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Executive Summary of the Research

How do teachers in the Early Years perceive school readiness and the impact it has on their classroom practice?

The aim of this research is to understand school readiness in the context of the pedagogical approaches, curriculum planning and assessment practice of two teachers working in Reception classrooms in a two-form entry in a school in northwest England. It is proposed that this research will explore the teachers' beliefs about school readiness, and how these beliefs have an impact on their classroom practice.

Teaching is a busy and demanding role and it is acknowledged that the research will be second priority to the teacher's work commitments. One of the key aims of the research is to establish a collaborative partnership and that the teachers will act as co-researchers as part of this process. Reflective conversations and discussions will take place with the teachers throughout the data collection process, with the purpose of constructing a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Contradictions between belief and practice will be examined in order to identify any tensions present in the classroom as we scrutinize issues around school readiness. As part of this study, current policy frameworks will be analysed and through the use of narrative methods the beliefs of teachers will be explored through interviews, non-participant observation and the document analysis of classroom documents including activity and lesson plans, and assessment data. Data will be returned to the teachers as an ongoing process to allow for further comments and clarifications, and it is hoped that this process will prompt deeper thinking within the partnership over the course of the data collection period.

The data collection period will run from January 2016 to July 2016, with the aim of completing the thesis by the end of 2017. A copy will be made available for the school on completion of the study.

Appendix B - Participant Information Sheet

Date: 31st October 2015

Research Project Title: *How do teachers in the Early Years perceive school readiness and the impact it has on their classroom practice?*

You are being invited to take part in a research project that will be submitted as a doctoral thesis for the University of Sheffield Doctorate of Education (EdD) programme.   Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.   Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.   Please do not hesitate to ask if there is anything that is not clear or you would like more information.   Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

What is the purpose of the project?

The primary aim for this research is to explore the construct of school readiness and how this impacts on the pedagogical approaches, curriculum planning and assessment practices of two teachers working in Reception classrooms in northwest England.   The study will explore teacher beliefs about school readiness, and the factors that have influenced these beliefs. School readiness is at the forefront of current Early Years educational policy and is seen politically as a way of narrowing the attainment gap and improving the social mobility of disadvantaged children.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you work in a Reception classroom in a two-form entry school in Oldham.   For the purpose of this research, two participants will be required.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary.   If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form.   You may discontinue your involvement at any time during the research process and you do not have to give a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

The data collection process will take place from January 2016 to July 2016 (*Appendix 1*).   An initial interview will take place at a convenient location.   The purpose of this interview will be to find out what your beliefs about school readiness are and what has influenced these beliefs.   These interviews will be recorded using audio equipment and the data will be stored securely and will remain confidential.

Observations will be carried out in the classroom every Friday morning, the focus of which will be determined by the analysis of the interview data.   I will observe teacher led activities, whole class teaching, and other interactions made between teacher and child throughout the course of the morning, focusing on your role in the classroom.   Over the data collection

period there will be four observation sessions during which time informal conversations about the research focus will also take place. Data collected throughout the process will be returned to you so you are able to add further comments or clarifications.

Planning documents and assessment practices will be analysed as a way of framing the observation schedule and interviews. It will be necessary to have a copy of the medium term planning for the spring and summer term, and short term planning for each week of the data collection phase (either printed or an electronic copy).

At the end of the process there will be a final interview which will explore how you think your own beliefs about school readiness have impacted on your pedagogical approach, curriculum planning and assessment practices. In order to establish a relationship of collaboration throughout the data collection process, emerging themes within the data will be discussed with you as an ongoing practice and will be explored in depth in the final interview.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep. In addition to this the parents of the children in the class will also be given an information sheet to explain what I will be doing in the classroom over the course of the data collection process.

What do I have to do?

You will be required to participate in two interviews at the beginning and the end of the data collection phase, be observed over the course of the data collection phase, and be available for informal discussions throughout the observation period on the mornings that the data will be collected. Data will be returned to your for verification and clarification. You will also be asked to provide weekly copies of the short term planning over the course of the data collection period.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those participating in the research, it is hoped that the project will represent the voice of teachers working in this current educational climate where school readiness is at the forefront of contemporary debate in government policy and the Early Years. You are considered to be the expert of your own pedagogical approach and your narrative will present a first hand insight into this issue. It is also hoped that by taking part in this project, your reflections and contributions to the debate will support your own continuing professional development.

What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

If this happens, the reasons will be explained to the participant.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to raise a complaint about treatment you have received during the research process you should contact the Research Supervisor, Professor Elizabeth Wood (e.a.wood@sheffield.ac.uk). If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the School of Education ethics review panel (edu-ethics@sheffield.ac.uk).

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential.   You will not be identified in any reports or publications.   Any written or verbal communication between researcher and participant will be treated as confidential, and data will be stored on a secure laptop and backed up to password protected online storage facilities. You have the right to access personal information that relates to you and will be provided with a copy of information on request.   This could include data such as the interview transcripts and observation records.   You also have the right, following completion of your involvement in the research and discussions with the researcher, to withdraw your consent and require that your own data be destroyed, if practicable.

Data will be collected, stored and handled in anonymous form, using a pseudonym.   Also, the school and area in which the research takes place will also be anonymised.   The data will be stored on a password-protected laptop and will be securely uploaded to iCloud and Dropbox as a backup.   Data will remain confidential at all times.   If the data is needed for future articles and conferences, permission will be requested from the participants beforehand.

Confidentiality will only be breached if a safeguarding issue arises during the research process and this will be done via the school's designated Child Protection Officer in adherence with the school's safeguarding policy.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio recordings of the interviews made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures.   No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside of the project will be allowed to access the original recordings.

What type of information will be sought from me, and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

Teachers hold implicit beliefs about the practice of teaching.   For the purpose of this research, your educational viewpoints about school readiness will be examined in an attempt to understand the impact that your beliefs have on the process and culture of teaching.   I will explore the multiple factors that influence your beliefs, and how your values and experiences shape the activities that take place within the classroom.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the School of Education department's ethics review procedure at the University of Sheffield.

Contact for further information

Louise Kay (Lead researcher)

Ljkay1@sheffield.ac.uk   07762 787752

Professor Elizabeth Wood

e.a.wood@sheffield.ac.uk   (0114) 222 8172

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your time and consideration in taking part in this research project.

e.a.wood@sheffield.ac.uk   (0114) 222 8172

Appendix C - Biographical Questionnaire

PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF:

1.   What training route did you take into teaching?

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………………………………………………………………………………………………...........

2.   How many years have you been teaching?

………………………………………………………………………………………………...........

3. How long have you been working at this school?

………………………………………………………………………………………………...........

4. How many years have you taught in Reception?

………………………………………………………………………………………………...........

5. What other teaching experiences have you had either as a student or a teacher?

………………………………………………………………………………………………...........

………………………………………………………………………………………………...........

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PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT THE CHILDREN IN THE CLASS:

6. How many children are in your class? _____ boys _____ girls _____ total

7. Do you have any children with Special Education Needs in the class?   YES / NO

8. What Special Educational Needs have been identified?

……

……

……

9. What interventions do you use to support children with Special Educational Needs?

……

……

……

……

……

……

10.   How many children are in receipt of Free School Meals? _____ boys _____ girls _____total

11.   How many children have birthdays in the summer months (after April)? _____ boys _____

girls _____total

Appendix D - Interview/ Observation schedule (Jan to July 2016)

January

Wk	M	T	W	Th	F	S	S	
53					1	2	3	
1	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
2	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
3	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
4	25	26	27	28	29			Introduction session Classroom 1

February

Wk	M	T	W	Th	F	S	S	
5	1	2	3	4	5			Introduction session Classroom 2
6	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
7	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
8	22	23	24	25	26			Observation Classroom 1/ Initial interview
9	29							

March

Wk	M	T	W	Th	F	S	S	
9		1	2	3	4			Observation Classroom 2/ Initial interview
10	7	8	9	10	11			Observation Classroom 1
11	14	15	16	17	18			Observation Classroom 2

Wk	M	T	W	Th	F	S	S
12	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
13	28	29	30	31			

April

Wk	M	T	W	Th	F	S	S
13					1	2	3
14	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
15	11	12	13	14	15	Observation Classroom 1	
16	18	19	20	21	22	Observation Classroom 2	
17	25	26	27	28	29	30	

May

Wk	M	T	W	Th	F	S	S
17							1
18	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
19	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
20	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
21	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
22	30	31					

June

Wk	M	T	W	Th	F	S	S
22			1	2	3	4	5
23	6	7	8	9	10	Final Observation Classroom 1/ Final interview	

24	13	14	15	16	17	Final Observation Classroom 2/ Final interview
25	20	21	22	23	24	Exit Session Classroom 1
26	27	28	29	30		

July

Wk	M	T	W	Th	F	S	S	
26					1			Exit Session Classroom 2
27	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

Appendix E – Permission to use Survey

Perry, Robert 📎   20 December 2015 at 23:17

Questionnaires on Starting School   Details   RP

To: ljkay1@sheffield.ac.uk,   Cc: Dockett, Sue

🗑 ↩ ↞ → | 📎 3 ⌄

Dear Louise,

Please find attached the two forms of the Teachers survey that Sue Dockett and I used in our earlier work. There are two forms because the original was just too long. I hope these will be helpful for your research. We would love to hear of your progress through your studies and of any results which the questionnaires help you to obtain. All the best for Christmas and 2016. Bob

Bob Perry
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Career Research Medal

Leader, Educational Transitions: Continuity and Change Research Group Program
Link to publications: http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R?func=search-advanced-go&file_format_code=WEX%20&local_base=GEN01-CSU01&mode=1&find_code1=WID&request1=11372554

Charles Sturt University

| ALBURY-WODONGA | BATHURST | CANBERRA | DUBBO | GOULBURN | MELBOURNE | ORANGE | PORT MACQUARIE | SYDNEY | WAGGA WAGGA |

Appendix F - Survey

Teacher Beliefs about School Readiness

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The focus of my research is centred around teacher's beliefs about school readiness, and your contribution is important in reflecting current thinking in contemporary Early Years practice. This survey forms part of a larger study being undertaken for a Doctorate of Education at the University of Sheffield. My main focus is to explore teacher beliefs about school readiness, and how these beliefs impact on practice and pedagogy in the Reception classroom. The survey is a way of getting a wider view about current beliefs around school readiness before I go into a school and work with two reception teachers in more depth. The project has been ethically approved via the School of Education department's ethics review procedure at the University of Sheffield. All the data that I collect during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and participants will remain anonymous. If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me at ljkay1@sheffield.ac.uk. Many thanks.

Do you teach *

 Nursery?

 Reception?

 Year 1?

 Year 2?

Are you (please select)? *

 Male

 Female

Which country do you teach in? *

How many children are in your class currently?

How many years have you been teaching? *

How many years have you been teaching your current year group? *

List the first 3 things that come into your mind when you think about school readiness: *

a
)
    *

b
)
    *

c
)
    *

How important is each of the following statements with regards to a child being 'school ready'?
(Please tick the box that most closely matches your opinion.) *

	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
The child is physically big enough to cope with older children	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child knows how to speak to teachers	☒	☒	☒	☒

	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
The child can dress him/ herself	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child is happy to go to school	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child participates appropriately in large groups of children	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can read her/ his name	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can eat lunch without assistance	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child is confident when interacting with other children	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child knows his/ her address	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child knows how to react appropriately to changes in routine	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child understands the need for personal hygiene	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child likes to have books read to him/ her	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child talks positively about school	☒	☒	☒	☒

	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
The child knows the rules which apply in the classroom	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child is confident when interacting with adults	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child feels good about him/ herself	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child is able to play co-operatively with others	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can recognise letters	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can say the days of the week in order	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child does not disrupt other children's work or play	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child responds appropriately to being corrected	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can wash their hands without supervision	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can follow directions from adults other than the parent/ carer	☒	☒	☒	☒

	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
The child can write his/ her name	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child wants to learn	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child knows the rules that apply in the playground	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child takes responsibility for personal belongings	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child is able to compromise with others during play	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child separates well from parent/ carer	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can operate simple computer software	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child knows the rules about sharing and taking turns	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can count to 10	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child gets plenty of rest	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can identify basic colours	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child is able to form good relationships with peers	☒	☒	☒	☒

227

	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
The child is eager to participate in most school activities	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can hold a pencil correctly	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can go to the toilet by him/herself	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child can throw and catch a ball	☒	☒	☒	☒
The child demonstrates empathy towards other children	☒	☒	☒	☒

Are there other issues which you feel are important with regards to a child being 'school ready'?

How often do your children have opportunities to take part in the following activities? *

	Never	1 - 2 times a week	3 - 4 times a week	Daily
Running, climbing, jumping and other gross motor activities	☒	☒	☒	☒
Free play	☒	☒	☒	☒

228

	Never	1 - 2 times a week	3 - 4 times a week	Daily
Choosing from a set of pre-planned options (i.e. building blocks, small world play, fine motor activities, etc.)	☒	☒	☒	☒
Using worksheets for mathematics	☒	☒	☒	☒
Using worksheets for literacy	☒	☒	☒	☒
Listening to stories being read aloud by an adult	☒	☒	☒	☒
Creative activities	☒	☒	☒	☒
Singing or listening to music	☒	☒	☒	☒
Playing outside	☒	☒	☒	☒
Doing phonics activities	☒	☒	☒	☒
Rote counting	☒	☒	☒	☒
Messy play (i.e. play dough, cornflour, etc.)	☒	☒	☒	☒
Sitting for longer than 15 minutes	☒	☒	☒	☒
Large group teacher led instruction	☒	☒	☒	☒
Initiating their own activities	☒	☒	☒	☒

	Never	1 - 2 times a week	3 - 4 times a week	Daily
Taking part in teacher-led writing activities	☒	☒	☒	☒
Taking part in teacher-led mathematical activities	☒	☒	☒	☒

Comments:

On average, how much time each day do children in your class spend in formal group instruction led by the teacher with a focus on reading, numbers or phonics? *

hours

*

minutes

Comments:

On average, how much time each day do children in your class spend in individual or small group activities planned by the teacher? *

hours

[ ]

*

minu
tes

[ ]

Comments:

[ ]

On average, how much time each day do children in your class spend participating in child-initiated activities? *

hours

[ ]

*

minu
tes

[ ]

Comments:

[ ]

On average, how much time each day do children in your class spend accessing the outdoor area? *

hours

[ ]

*

minu
tes

Please rank from 1 to 6 (1 = most important, 6 = least important) the following categories of issues in order of how important you see them with regards to school readiness: *

Skills (For example: can toilet themselves, can dress independently)

Rules (For example: Knows and can conform with classroom and school expectations)

Knowledge (For example: can count, can recognise letters)

Physical (For example: eats well and is well rested and healthy)

Adjustment (For example: separates confidently from main carer, is confident with large groups of children)

Disposition (For example: is happy about school, is interested in learning)

Here are some statements about school readiness. Please indicate if you strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree with them. (Please tick the box that most closely matches your opinion.) *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Children can be ready to learn but not ready for school	☒	☒	☒	☒
Children become ready for school by going to school	☒	☒	☒	☒
Children who are struggling with the work in Reception should be able to repeat the Reception year	☒	☒	☒	☒

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Children who start school too early do not learn	☒	☒	☒	☒
Age is not a good predictor of school readiness	☒	☒	☒	☒
Children can be ready for school but not ready to learn	☒	☒	☒	☒
Children should only start school when they are ready	☒	☒	☒	☒
Teachers should try to meet the expectations about school held by parents/ carers	☒	☒	☒	☒
Children who start school older learn better than younger children	☒	☒	☒	☒
Real school does not begin until Year one	☒	☒	☒	☒
Year one classes should be more like Reception	☒	☒	☒	☒

Is there anything else which you would like to say regarding school readiness?

Appendix G - Interview Schedule – First Interview Reception Teachers

Thank you _____ for agreeing to be interviewed.   As discussed, I would like to talk to you to explore what your beliefs are around school readiness and what you think has influenced these beliefs.   For the purpose of this project I will ask you questions on this topic to find out what your perspectives are on the expectations placed on children to be 'ready for school' by the time they enter Year One.   If you need clarification on any of the questions, please do not hesitate to ask me.   You do not have to answer any question(s) that you may be uncomfortable with and you are free to end the interview at any time.   I would be grateful if you could also complete the short biographical questionnaire at the end of this schedule prior to the interview.

Icebreaker question

Can you tell me what made you want to become a teacher?

Beliefs about school readiness

Can you tell me where you have come across the term 'school readiness'?

- *Have there been discussions within school regarding 'school readiness'?*
- *Have you had any information or input from the Local Authority or the DfE regarding 'school readiness'?*

What do you personally believe 'school readiness' is?

What do you think has influenced your beliefs about 'school readiness'?

As a Reception teacher what would you want children to be able to do on entry into Reception?

What do you think are the most important things a child needs to be able to do before they move up into Year One?

A recent policy specified that 'school readiness' equated to achieving a Good Level of Development in the three prime areas of the EYFS and the specific areas of literacy and maths.   What do you think about this definition?

Do you think that this definition could be problematic for certain groups of children?

As a Reception teacher, what is your perspective on the expectations placed on

children to be 'school ready' if we consider it in this context of achieving a GLD in those areas?

What would you do if you felt a child wasn't ready to access the more formal aspects of the curriculum, for instance, literacy and maths?

Working with the wider community

How do you work with parents to help support their children to be 'school ready'?

- *Do parents ever voice any concerns or anxieties about aspects of 'school readiness'?*
- *Do you think parents have certain expectations about 'school readiness'?*

Do you feel there are expectations from higher up the school, or from senior management, to get children 'school ready' in the more formal aspects of the curriculum?

- *What do you think about these expectations?*
- *How do you manage the expectations?*

Challenges and conflict

Do you think that there is any conflict between your own beliefs and the expectations placed on children to be 'school ready'?

- *What are the conflicts you face?*
- *How do you manage these conflicts?*

What do you see as being the biggest challenges with regards to ensuring children are 'school ready'?

- *As a professional, how do you deal with these challenges?*

Appendix H - Interview Schedule – Year One teachers

Thank you, _____, for agreeing to be interviewed.   As discussed, I would like to talk to you to explore what your beliefs are around school readiness and what you think has influenced these beliefs.   For the purpose of this project I will ask you questions on this topic to find out what your perspectives are on the expectations placed on children to be 'ready for school' by the time they enter Year One.   If you need clarification on any of the questions, please do not hesitate to ask me.   You do not have to answer any question(s) that you may be uncomfortable with and you are free to end the interview at any time.   I would be grateful if you could also complete the short biographical questionnaire at the end of this schedule prior to the interview.

Icebreaker question

Can you both tell me what made you want to become a teacher?

Beliefs about school readiness

Where you have come across the term 'school readiness'?

- *Have there been discussions within school regarding 'school readiness'?*
- *Have you had any information or input from the Local Authority or the DfE regarding 'school readiness'?*

What do you personally believe 'school readiness' is?

What do you think has influenced your beliefs about 'school readiness'?

Do you think   'school readiness' applies to transition into reception, or from reception into Year One?

What do you want children to be able to do on entry into Year 1?

A recent policy specified that 'school readiness' equated to achieving a Good Level of Development in the three prime areas of the EYFS and the specific areas of literacy and maths.   What do you think about this definition?

Do you think this definition is helpful or problematic for some groups of children?

What is your perspective on the expectations placed on children to be ready for school if we consider it in this context of achieving a GLD in those areas?

What would you do if you considered a child wasn't ready to access the more formal aspects of the curriculum, for instance, literacy and maths?

Do you think play-based activities can prepare children for Year One?

Working with the wider community

How do you work with the Reception staff to help support the children make the transition into Year One?

- *Do you find that there are any tensions or conflicts around transition from Reception into Year One from a 'school readiness' perspective?*

If children are struggling to access the more formal aspects of the curriculum, would you involve parents?

Challenges and conflict

Do you think that there is any conflict between your own beliefs and the expectations placed on children to be ready for Year One?

- *What are the conflicts you face?*
- *How do you manage these conflicts?*

What do you see as being the biggest challenges with regards to ensuring children are ready for Year One?

- *As a professional, how do you deal with these challenges?*

Appendix I - Interview Schedule – Nursery Teacher/SMT

Thank you, _____, for agreeing to be interviewed.   As discussed, I would like to talk to you to explore what your beliefs are around school readiness and what you think has influenced these beliefs.   For the purpose of this project I will ask you questions on this topic to find out what your perspectives are on the expectations placed on children to be 'ready for school' by the time they enter Year One.   If you need clarification on any of the questions, please do not hesitate to ask me.   You do not have to answer any question(s) that you may be uncomfortable with and you are free to end the interview at any time.   I would be grateful if you could also complete the short biographical questionnaire at the end of this schedule prior to the interview.

Beliefs about school readiness

Can you tell me where you have come across the term 'school readiness'?

What do you personally believe 'school readiness' is?

What do you think has influenced your beliefs about 'school readiness'?

As a Nursery teacher what do you want children to be able to do on entry into Nursery?

Do you think children are coming into nursery with the skills they need for a school environment?

-        *Are there particular groups of children that find it more difficult on entry into nursery?*

What would you want children to be able to do making the transition into Reception?

Working with the wider community

As a member of the SMT, have there been discussions within school regarding 'school readiness'?   Have you had any information or input from the Local Authority or the DfE regarding 'school readiness'?

Can you tell me more about the 'Achieving Early' programme?

Challenges and conflict

Do you think that there is any conflict between your own beliefs and the expectations placed on children to be 'ready for school'?

- *What are the conflicts you face?*

- *How do you manage these conflicts?*

What do you see as being the biggest challenges with regards to ensuring children are 'school ready'?

- *As a professional, how do you deal with these challenges?*

Appendix J - Final Interview Schedule – Reception teachers

How is school readiness constructed in practice?

Can you describe to me the types of activities that you would do during a typical week in reception?

How does classroom practice change over the course of the year, from the autumn to the summer term?

How do you plan for the support staff in your classroom?

Do you think that you have adapted/changed aspects of your teaching practice to accommodate expectations of 'school readiness'?

Do you plan specific activities to help children make the transition into Year One?

Do you think play-based activities can prepare children for Year One?   Or are adult-led activities more effective?

How do you think the new KS1 curriculum has impacted on Reception?

Are there aspects of the curriculum that you feel some children are not ready to undertake whilst still in Reception?

Do you think that a focus on maths and literacy to ensure a smooth transition into year one results in other aspects of the EYFS being sidelined or sacrificed?

Do you use any interventions to support children make the transition from Reception into Year One?

Appendix K - Parents Information Sheet

Date: 31st October 2015

Research Project Title: *How do teachers in the Early Years perceive school readiness and the impact it has on their classroom practice?*

I am currently working in your child's classroom in order to carry out a research project that will be submitted as a doctoral thesis for the University of Sheffield Doctorate of Education (EdD) programme.   Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.   Do not hesitate to ask if there is anything that is not clear or you would like more information.   Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

What is the purpose of the project?

The primary aim for this research is to explore the construct of school readiness and how this impacts on the pedagogical approaches, curriculum planning and assessment practices of two teachers working in Reception classrooms in northwest England.   The study will explore teacher beliefs about school readiness, and the factors that have influenced these beliefs. The school and teacher are in full support of this research project and have given their own consent to participate.   The outcomes of this research project will be made available to the school and parents in the form of the doctoral thesis.

What does my child have to do?

Between January and July of this year I will spend some time observing the classroom teacher and the interactions that take place within the classroom.   Your child will have to do nothing different to what they would usually do.   No photographs will be taken during the observation sessions.   If you want your child to opt out of the observation process then please sign the form below and return to the classroom teacher or myself.   I will be available to speak to parents on the mornings that I am in school to answer any questions you may have about the research.   I will be in school as specified on the observation schedule, which is presented at the end of this information sheet.

Will the data in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential.   The teacher or school will not be identified in any reports or publications. Any written or verbal communication between researcher and the teacher will be treated as confidential, and data will be stored on a secure laptop and backed up to password protected online storage facilities.

Data will be collected, stored and handled in anonymous form, using a pseudonym.   Also, the school and area in which the research takes place will also be anonymised.

Confidentiality will only be breached if a safeguarding issue arises during the research process in line with the school's safeguarding policy.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the School of Education department's ethics review procedure at the University of Sheffield.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to raise a complaint about treatment you or your child has received during the research process you should contact the Research Supervisor, Professor Elizabeth Wood (e.a.wood@sheffield.ac.uk).   If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the School of Education ethics review panel (edu-ethics@sheffield.ac.uk).

Contact for further information

Louise Kay (Lead researcher)

Ljkay1@sheffield.ac.uk   07762 787752

Professor Elizabeth Wood (Research Supervisor)

e.a.wood@sheffield.ac.uk   (0114) 222 8172

_____

Name: _____

Child's Name: _____

I do not want my child to participate in the research project as specified above.

Signed: _____

Date:_____

Observation schedule (Jan to July 2016)

Friday 29th January - Introduction session Classroom 1

Friday 5th February - Introduction session Classroom 2

Friday 26th February - Observation Classroom 1

Friday 4th March - Observation Classroom 2

Friday 11th March - Observation Classroom 1

Friday 18th March - Observation Classroom 2

Friday 15th April - Observation Classroom 1

Friday 22nd April - Observation Classroom 2

Friday 10th June – Final Observation Classroom 1

Friday 17th June – Final Observation Classroom 2

Friday 24th June – Exit session Classroom 1

Friday 1st July - Exit session Classroom 2

Appendix L – Ethical Approval Letter

Louise Kay
Registration number: 130226024
School of Education
Programme: Doctor of Education

Dear Louise

PROJECT TITLE: How do teachers in the Early Years perceive school readiness and the impact it has on their classroom practice?
APPLICATION: Reference Number 006576

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 22/01/2016 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 006576 (dated 19/01/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1013116 version 3 (19/01/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1013114 version 4 (19/01/2016).
- Participant consent form 1013115 version 2 (06/11/2015).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

Professor Daniel Goodley
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Appendix M – Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: How do teachers in the Early Years perceive school readiness and the impact it has on their classroom practice?

Name of Researcher: Louise Kay

Researcher Contact Details: ljkay1@sheffield.ac.uk   Tel: 07762 787752

Participant Identification Number for this project: Please
initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated
    31st October, 2105 explaining the above research project and I have had

    the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw
    at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative
    consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular
    question or questions, I am free to decline.

3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.
    I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my
    anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with
    the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the
    report or reports that result from the research.

    4.   I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research

5. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

(*or legal representative*)

_____   _____   _____

Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature

(if different from lead researcher)

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

_____   _____   _____

  Lead Researcher   Date   Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.