

Literacy and numeracy qualification requirements for level 3 Early Years Educator Staff

National Children's Bureau response to Department for Education
consultation, 28 November 2016

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Introduction:

National Children's Bureau (NCB) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The National Children's Bureau is a leading children's charity working to build a better childhood for every child. We listen to children and young people and work with those supporting them to develop evidence on what needs to be done to enable children to enjoy their right to be safe, secure and supported so they can flourish and fulfil their potential.

In responding to this consultation, NCB's primary concern is ensuring that all children attending early years settings have access to the best possible education and care. Research shows that a well-qualified, confident and experienced workforce is central to the delivery of early education and care that improves young children's outcomes. Ensuring all early years practitioners have high levels of literacy and numeracy is one key element and indicator of the quality of that workforce. There is a weight of evidence that demonstrates the positive impact that practitioners with higher qualification levels can have on children's development.¹ Therefore, practitioners with better qualifications are needed to improve the long term outcomes for all children attending early years settings.

A 40 per cent pass-rate of 5 GCSEs (including English and Maths at grade A*-C) has been considered by government to be the basic floor standard for the secondary education system. All children attending early years settings should be welcomed on an equal footing with the highest aspirations for their long term success. Thus, with regards to literacy and numeracy requirements for level 3 early educator staff, NCB believes it is illogical that children attending these settings could be educated by level 3 early years practitioners who have not themselves met the Government's required floor standard for secondary education.

Observing the lowest performing local authorities in terms of GCSE pass rates, we see that it is these same authorities that are requiring significant investment to try to improve outcomes in the early years. In such areas, poorly educated practitioners are providing less high quality teaching to children who are then set up to fall behind their peers from the start.² NCB is concerned by this recurring cycle whereby children in the most deprived areas more regularly attend settings with high levels of staff who do not have even the most basic functional skills qualifications. Reducing academic standards below GCSE level grade C for level 3 early educator staff would be unhelpful and compound this issue further.

¹ EPPSE 'Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years' (2002) and DfE 'Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund' (2011).

² Sandra Mathers and Rebecca Smees, 'Quality and Inequality Do three and four year olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision', Nuffield Foundation (2014).

Options for level 2 literacy and numeracy requirements

As a child-centred organisation, NCB advocates for high aspirations for the early years sector. As such, maintaining the GCSE or equivalent benchmark is critical to ensure the quality of the early years workforce improves and to raise the status of the workforce by increasing professionalization and qualification requirements for all those who work with children. A level 3 practitioner's work involves keeping day-to-day records, being familiar with the statutory framework and other policy documents, daily written communication with parents, producing written progress reviews (EYFS Progress Check at Two/Integrated Review), being familiar with children's welfare and medical needs and taking part in meetings with other professionals as required. GCSE Maths and English (grade A* - C) provides a good foundation level of education for the requirements of the role, in addition to early years vocational qualifications.

In light of the evidence outlined above, NCB believes that all early years practitioners wishing to progress from level 2 to level 3 Early Years Educator level should have GCSE (grade A* - C) or an equivalent qualification in literacy and numeracy before they can be counted in level 3 ratios within early years settings.

NCB understands that the existing functional skills framework in its current form does not meet this level. Therefore, at present, NCB does not support the argument that a functional skills qualification in literacy and numeracy is an acceptable alternative to GCSE (grade A* - C) for the level 3 Early Years Educator qualification (under this proposal, staff could study for their GCSE or equivalent qualification alongside their Early Years Educator training as outline in par. 19b. However, functional skills in their current form would not be considered an 'acceptable alternative' to GCSEs as argued in par. 16-18 of the consultation document).

NCB understands that there are some challenges around requiring the traditional GCSE qualification for all Early Years Educator staff wishing to progress from level 2 to level 3, especially for mature applicants or those who have previously struggled in traditional educational settings. As an organisation, NCB is keen to widen access to these groups within the early years workforce and to foster inclusivity across all demographics. However, it is important we find a way to foster such inclusivity *without* lowering the required academic attainment standards for early years staff which would have a detrimental impact on children's learning and development. Consequently, NCB would welcome the expansion of the more accessible functional skills framework to bring this existing qualification up to GCSE equivalency. If the standards and status of the functional skills qualification were raised, NCB would see this as an acceptable alternative to requiring GCSE (grade A*- C) for the level 3 Early Years Educator qualification.

Whilst NCB recognises that the focus of this consultation is upon level 3 Early Years Educator staff, we would also like to take this opportunity to outline our position on required standards for level 2 Early Years Educator staff. To foster a culture of professionalism and high standards, and to ensure all children have access to the best possible teaching, NCB believes that all staff working in early years settings should have, at the very minimum, a functional skills qualification in literacy and numeracy. Obtaining the existing functional skills qualification should be a pre-entry requirement for all level 2 staff entering the workplace and should be obtained before a staff member can be counted as level 2 in early years staff ratios. To re-iterate,

staff then wishing to progress to level 3 should be required to obtain a higher GCSE or equivalent qualification before they are counted in level 3 staff ratios.

Bespoke early years training

Considering the option for a bespoke level 2 qualification focussed specifically on effective practice to engage young children in literacy and numeracy learning (as outlined in the consultation document par 19d), NCB supports the development of bespoke post-qualification training (rather than a formalised qualification) for all early years practitioners (level 2 and level 3) in order to improve early years teaching for all children. This training should focus on how young children develop literacy, numeracy and other skills, and the practitioners' role in leading that learning. The bespoke training should not be about the practitioner themselves gaining any additional academic skills in literacy or numeracy.

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