



Ark

Finding out what children know and can do in Ark schools

Ark is an international charity, transforming lives through education. We exist to give every young person, regardless of their background, a great education and real choices in life.

In the UK, Ark is a network of 35 schools, educating more than 22,000 pupils. These schools are all non-selective and in areas where they can make the biggest difference.

The reception year in Ark schools provides the foundation for all future learning and aims to give children the broad range of knowledge and skills that lays the ground work for excellent future progress.

Ark's Head of Early Years, Lydia Cuddy-Gibbs, spoke to us about Ark's approach to the crucial task of finding out what children know and can do when they enter the reception year.

Ark schools clearly recognise that assessment plays a crucial role in helping teachers monitor children's progress, and as such they incorporate a range of assessment methods, including the on-entry baseline assessment, BASE.

'We have used the BASE assessment for two years now and it's a really robust way of assessing the children,' Lydia explains.

'We do the assessment over a two week period at the beginning of the year. In Week 1 we do the Literacy part of the assessment and pause, and then in Week 2 we do the Maths, and then the Language and Communication part.

'We do that for a very specific reason. We use the Read Write Inc. phonics programme throughout our schools, and we want to launch that as soon as we can, but we don't want to have taught that before we have assessed the literacy.

'So we use BASE to assess Literacy in week 1 and then we can launch our phonics programme. Meanwhile we assess Maths, and doing it this way makes it a far less intensive way of assessing and allows the teachers time to really get to know the children.

'The schools look carefully at the data, then they make plans for the curriculum and teaching accordingly.'

Objective baseline

Ongoing assessment in Ark schools plays an important part in understanding children's needs and recognising the progress they make from the baseline assessment on entry.

'The reason we like the Literacy and Maths aspects of the BASE assessment is because we feel we can get a very raw baseline - something that is objective, and something that is more than we can get with just a teacher assessment,' says Lydia.

'We also like doing it at the beginning of the reception year, especially for those children who are new to our receptions and haven't come from our nurseries. We can then spend the rest of the autumn half-term assessing them, getting to know them and their families, and getting a parent voice and child voice to contribute to the teacher assessment.

'We recognise that the BASE assessment and teacher assessment are different and give us different data. There will be some children who score very differently on those assessments, and those differences should be thoroughly considered. Assessing this way brings really useful questions to the discussion and allows for really strong moderation.'

Teacher assessment

Children make more progress in the first year of school than at any other stage. From the on-entry baseline assessment in Ark schools, all staff contribute to the ongoing observations and an individual child profile is built up over that crucial first year.

'I think that taking time for that teacher assessment is key,' Lydia explains. 'We know that it takes time for children to settle and to show all areas of what they know and can do.

'Once they have done the BASE assessment with the children, teachers look at the data, as well as looking at the information from families and parents, and from close observation of children over a period of four to six weeks, and only then do they make their teacher assessment baseline judgment. Doing the BASE assessment can relax practitioners because it means they have a raw baseline already.

'For example, if Ofsted is on the horizon, and schools want to show what assessment information they have, they are not being forced to make a teacher judgement too soon before they have really had a chance to get to know the children properly.

'They already have that baseline data and they can say "we are now collecting our teacher assessment in a really thorough way". They can look at their BASE data, compare it to teacher observations, and get a really clear picture.'

Working together in a network

Ark schools send their on entry and termly summative assessment data to be analysed by Lydia at the Ark central office.

'In terms of analysing the data for a whole network, we love the BASE assessment because it is really useful to compare the teacher assessment with this objective assessment,' Lydia explains. 'It gives us a combined picture as well as individual pictures that are interesting.

'We have termly meetings with Early Years' Leads and look at all the data, but with the BASE data we talk about it all the time, in every meeting.

'As a network over the last few years, we have developed a culture of talking about data in a comparative way. It is about seeing which schools are doing well, how we can learn from them and asking how we can improve our practices. This can then be shared across the network.

'Obviously the reception policy is in flux and data is not needed to meet government requirements, so it can be difficult to justify spending on the assessment.

'We know that schools are stretched at the moment with budget cuts and fewer members of staff in school to cover everything, but we also recognise that combining teacher assessment and BASE is the best way of assessment'

Find out how schools use BASE to help children make progress: cem.org/case-studies-testimonials

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