As the Government presses ahead with plans to introduce a new baseline test in Reception classes, early years assessment is under the spotlight. The Early Learning Goals, which feed into the EYFS Profile, have also been revised and are currently being piloted in schools: practitioners will need to get up to speed on the new goals before they are adopted.

The progress check at age two, and the profile to be completed at the end of the EYFS, are already statutory requirements. Good looking

How should practitioners best be observing children, assessing progress and letting this knowledge inform their planning, asks Charlotte Goddard

Practitioners must also carry out ongoing assessment to understand children’s level of achievement, interests and learning styles and to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations.

The observation, assessment and planning cycle is crucial to children’s progress in the EYFS, but some practitioners are confused about what is required. Some are spending too much time on paperwork, whether because of the systems they are using or pressure from above to deliver data. This is despite the fact the EYFS framework states, ‘Assessment should not entail prolonged breaks from interaction with children, nor require excessive paperwork.’

‘There is still a misunderstanding about the assessment part of the everyday process of pedagogy,’ says Jan Dubiel, head of national and international development at Early Excellence. ‘You are responsible for assessing children’s learning, not generating huge piles of documents.’ Ofsted’s new draft inspection framework is putting less emphasis on data, something that training now needs to highlight.

An influx of new digital systems for tracking and assessing children has led to some practitioners becoming de-skilled.

The EYFS calls for a progress check at age two, the EYFS Profile in Reception, and ongoing observation-led assessment to feed into planning.

- Over-reliance on digital systems, an inability to monitor progress, and difficulties in interpreting the data are common.
- Some practitioners spend too much time recording data.
- Training should cover both how to carry out observations and assessments, and the theory behind the process.

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Staff can spend more time with the children about the children at home. We have moved partnerships, the things we have learned now start with next steps, taking into on what we had learned, ‘ says Ms Bell. ‘We steps which had been put in place.

‘At first there was a formal presentation session with three or four of her team. ‘It was more like an informal surgery, looking at what we do and how can we structure it better and add the bits we were missing.’ This was followed by a Quality Improvement Visit to look at the steps which had been put in place.

‘We changed our planning system based on what we had learned,’ says Ms Bell. ‘We now start with next steps, taking into account children’s interests, and parent partnerships, the things we have learned about the children at home. We have moved from a paper-based to an electronic system. Staff can spend more time with the children now so we can see the benefits straight away.

We are also more able to home in on a child’s interests, based on our knowledge and what the parents tell us about them. We have found children’s progress is now quicker than we would have seen before.’

EXPERT VIEW
Kathy Brodie, early years consultant, says:

‘Good training should cover both the theory behind the process and what looks like in a quality setting. We need to understand the why as well as the how. Even if a course is just focusing on observation, the training should talk about what the observation is being used for, rather than just doing it and putting it in a folder.

‘When I started out, observations were written on Post-It notes, but now there are all kinds of packages available. Whatever system you use, training on it should be offered by the provider, as all the systems are so different. A general training course should focus more on child development than on a specific system.

‘Now we are more familiar with the EYFS I think practitioners are less anxious about ticking all the boxes when it comes to observations, making sure they have the same number of observations for Maths and Physical Development, for example. Training needs to cover the importance of personalisation, and how to make observations relate to the unique child. Don’t just put down that a child knows the colour red – why is that important for this particular child? Is it a significant thing for that child – [maybe] they have never recognised a colour before?

‘When I go into a setting I can tell immediately if training is ongoing, rather than a reaction to Ofsted coming in. Trained practitioners tend to be holding back more, observing, standing back and reflecting on their own practice. “What is it I could have done better? I’m going to change something because children are not coming to this table.” When practitioners are well-trained you can see the difference in the children because they are more engaged and have a deeper level of learning.

‘There should be more training around Anna Ephgrave’s concept of In the Moment Planning – practitioners need to understand what “in the moment” actually is.

‘Assessment has got a bad reputation at the moment, people associate it with testing. Current training needs to make it clear that it is different. A lot of early years services don’t actually have anything to do with the EYFS Profile or baseline testing because the children they work with are too young, but it is important for practitioners to understand what children will be stepping into when they leave their setting, and why they are getting that top-down pressure from schools. That is why training on observation, assessment and planning should cover birth to six.’