

Shaping the future of Early Years teaching

Education Endowment Foundation response – September 2026

Summary

- **Early years teacher training should be underpinned by a shared, evidence-backed body of professional knowledge.** A common evidence base could help reduce variability in current early years qualifications, support a shared professional language, and improve the quality and consistency of practice across settings. When considering potential options for a framework, alongside the two options set out in the consultation, it may also be valuable for the DfE to explore the feasibility and implications of a 0–7 core content framework.
- **Implementation must explicitly address equity and the needs of PVI settings.** Reforms should include manageable routes for existing EYTS/EYPS holders to convert to QTS, high-quality induction and mentoring for early years teachers in PVIs, and practical solutions to operational barriers such as staffing, ratios, mentor capacity, and funding, particularly in disadvantaged communities.
- **Cross-setting experience and support could help bridge the divide between schools and other setting types.** Placements or training across contexts would strengthen trainees' understanding of different pedagogical and operational models, supporting mobility across the sector.

About the Education Endowment Foundation

1. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. Our mission is to support the education sector to transform outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged children and young people from age 2 to 19. We do so by enabling early years settings, schools and colleges to focus on delivering high-quality education, based on evidence and what works best in practice.
2. We hold a unique position in the English education system, with three key roles:
 - **We summarise evidence.** We synthesise the global evidence base to find out what is already known about improving teaching and learning.
 - **We build evidence.** We develop, evaluate, and scale up programmes and approaches that aim to boost outcomes for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

- **We put evidence to use.** We help policy makers, leaders and educators to use evidence to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. The EEF is committed to ensuring that teacher professional development in England is underpinned by the best available evidence. Since 2019, the EEF has worked closely with the Department for Education on its national teacher development programmes. Performing the role of an independent ‘evidence guardian’, the EEF has reviewed the content frameworks for Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Teaching (ITTECF); National Professional Qualifications (NPQs); and the Excellence in Reception Teaching (EiRT) short course, to ensure that they are underpinned by robust evidence. We also work with providers delivering these qualifications to support them to draw on evidence effectively in their programmes.

An evidence-based core body of professional early years knowledge

Corresponding questions:

Q1. To what extent do you agree that further developing a common understanding of what works well for teaching young children and babies would improve the quality of early years teaching?

Q2. To what extent do you agree that having a common understanding of what works well for teaching young children and babies would improve the quality of early years practice for all levels of EY qualifications?

Q3. To what extent do you favour or oppose the introduction of an evidence backed core body of early years professional knowledge that, in future, all early years training must follow?

4. To maximise the impact of initial teacher training in the early years (EY) sector, it is essential that both the content and the design/delivery of training is high-quality and grounded in evidence of what works in the sector. Research evidence helps us to differentiate between more or less impactful practices in education, ensuring Early Years Teachers (EYTs) prioritise approaches that are likely to have the greatest impact on children’s outcomes. High-quality interactions between adults and children are key to improving outcomes (Bonetti & Brown, 2018) and professional development has the potential to significantly improve educator effectiveness in this regard and to help close disadvantage gaps (EEF, 2021). Therefore, it is vital that all educators are taught a curriculum that is underpinned by the most robust evidence.

5. We would welcome the development of a common understanding of what works well for teaching young children and babies, disseminated through the introduction of an evidence backed core body of early years professional knowledge. A major benefit from the introduction of the ‘golden thread’ reforms in the school sector has been the provision of a common language around pedagogy and practice in schools (DfE, 2025a). The EY sector could similarly benefit particularly due to the variability in existing EY teaching courses (Campbell-Barr et al, 2020) [paragraph 11].

6. Developing a shared understanding of language, theories and effective practices in education can benefit all staff in a setting, not just those who receive training directly (Sims et al, 2021). This can be achieved through formal or informal knowledge sharing between colleagues. For example, in a school context, this could be through a shared understanding of what good scaffolding looks like to ensure that the teacher and TA are aligned and support one another in their engagement with pupils during the lesson. It would be reasonable to expect that similar dissemination of knowledge through EY settings could have a positive impact on the quality of EY practice overall.

EYITT leading to QTS

Corresponding questions:

Q4. Do you think that early years teachers should have the same teaching status as school teachers?

Q5. To what extent do you favour or oppose early years initial teacher training leading to QTS?

7. Providing equal recognition and status between EY teachers and other teachers supports the government’s commitments in the Best Start in Life (BSiL) strategy to champion EY teachers and introduce reforms to move towards greater parity with other teachers (DfE, 2025b). As such, we support EY teachers having the same teaching status as school teachers, and reformed early years initial teacher training (EYITT) leading to qualified teacher status (QTS), where training is based on a core body of professional early years knowledge.

8. However, the government should be cognisant that, to achieve the BSiL ambition of an EY teacher in every setting (DfE, 2025b), qualifications reform and parity must be considered alongside associated pay and conditions and statutory requirements. Courses leading to Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) or QTS are not currently prevalent qualifications in non-school based settings (DfE and IFF, 2025), with current statistics showing that 41% of EY staff in school-based settings hold a level 6 qualification or

higher, compared to only 11% in group-based settings and 11% of childminders (DfE, 2025c).

9. Reform options that result in EYITT leading to QTS alone are unlikely to improve take-up of the qualification in private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) settings and among childminders, and carry a risk of qualified EY teachers leaving these settings for schools in search of better career progression, pay, and working conditions. Any option pursued would have to consider policy solutions to this challenge to have a tangible impact on qualification levels in non-school based settings. This is particularly pertinent given that, excluding children attending reception in state-funded schools, around 2 in every 3 children (64%) registered for government funded childcare entitlements are registered at PVI settings (GOV.UK, 2026a).

10. The government must also especially prioritise encouraging EY teachers to work in areas of higher deprivation. The current pilot of an additional £4,500 bonus for graduate EY teachers working in deprived nurseries (GOV.UK, 2026b) is an encouraging step in the right direction, but may not equate to the salary increase EY teachers working in PVIs could get from working in a school instead. Any policy change in the future of early years teaching must support the BSiL strategy's commitment to attract and keep early years teachers in settings serving the most disadvantaged communities, as children from low-income families set to benefit the most from high-quality early education (DfE, 2025b).

Views on consultation options 1 and 2 for future early years teacher training

Corresponding questions:

Q7. To what extent do you agree that an early years core content framework should include early years evidence-based practice only?

Q10. To what extent do you favour or oppose more early years teaching content in the ITTECF?

Q11. Are there any particular equality implications associated with these proposals?

11. Research has found that early years degrees in England are highly fragmented, with variability across a range of areas including age focus and course content (Campbell-Barr et al, 2020). Ensuring that EYITT is built on a core body of professional knowledge would help to address this existing variability and provide a consistent, evidence-based foundation.

12. We recognise the benefits set out in the consultation to option 1 and 2. In the interest of conciseness, below we have drawn out what we think are the biggest considerations for these options.

Option 1: Develop a separate EY core content framework (EYCCF)

13. **The early years specific evidence base is still developing and is not yet as well-developed as the evidence base for schools.** There are some specific, well-evidenced areas of EY practice which a separate EYCCF should include. However, due to limitations in the evidence base more broadly, it is unlikely that any EY specific framework could be equivalent to the strength and specificity of statements in the ITTECF whilst maintaining the same evidence standards. This could impact both perceptions of the course's status and its appropriateness as a pathway to QTS.

14. **Two routes to becoming an EY teacher with QTS (EYCCF and ITTECF) could continue to perpetuate a two-tiered system.** EYCCF being perceived as lacking equivalence in prestige could have tangible implications such as schools potentially preferring not to employ EY teachers who have followed the EYCCF training route, which could reduce the cross-sector mobility of the qualification in practice.

Option 2: A combined regime: incorporate early years, primary and secondary school in the ITTECF

15. **The rigour and strength of ITTECF statements risks being diluted by expanding to broader pupil age ranges.** Many of the causal statements in the ITTECF are underpinned by research evidence most applicable to school teachers, measured by the 'ecological validity' of the evidence to school settings. Significant research synthesis would be needed to identify suitable evidence to bolster / adapt existing statements to make them relevant for EY participants. Evidence gaps in EY mean that it may not be possible to extend some of these causal claims, i.e. there may only have been robust studies which look at school teachers delivering a pedagogical approach to school pupils and not EY teachers delivering it to young children, and therefore we cannot be certain about its effectiveness in that context. Our expectation is that robust causal research evidence will be more readily available for the 3-6 age range, and more limited for children age 0-2 (EEF, 2023). As such, variation in the evidence base from birth through statutory education may lead to statements across the ITTECF being tempered overall to extend their applicability to the full EY phase.

16. **Expanding the ITTECF would require a careful balance between EY, primary and secondary content.** As set out in the consultation, for some ITT courses, content on childhood development and early years pedagogy would replace parts of curriculum

that may be more relevant for those teaching different phases. This would risk potential disengagement of participants during training when having to cover content which may not be directly applicable to teaching their intended age range. This expansion of the framework could also risk the reduced efficacy and impact of ITTECF for school teachers if some school content is removed to make space for EY content, or if the expectation that ITT providers cover all framework content is relaxed.

A 0-7 framework

Corresponding questions:

Q8. To what extent do you agree that an early years core content framework should include early years and key stage one evidence-based practice?

Q10. Do you think the core body of early years professional knowledge would be more beneficial as:

- a) Option 1: a stand alone early years core content framework and a separate EY system
- b) Option 2: a part of the ITTECF with a combined teacher development landscape
- c) An alternative option, please explain

Q11. Are there any particular equality implications associated with these proposals?

17. **Alongside the two options presented in the consultation, there may be value in DfE exploring the feasibility of a CCF which covers ages 0-7** as a potential bridge between the two options set out in the consultation. A 0-7 framework could potentially be an alternative approach to meeting the needs of EY teachers, while also supporting early primary teachers' professional practice, specifically in the transition to reception and early identification of need. This would also align with the current precedent of cross-phase teacher training courses in the UK, and some international practice. There are some potential risks to this option, which would need to be carefully considered as part of further policy development.

18. **A 0-7 framework could potentially support more effective transitions and inclusion** through building cross-phase understanding of childhood development and appropriate pedagogy. This could support more consistent pedagogical approaches across different EY settings, which may ease transitions into reception. A framework covering this age range may also mitigate existing challenges for school-based nurseries in delivering high-quality age-appropriate provision to younger children (Sutton Trust, 2026), pertinent to government's expansion of school-based nurseries

and funded entitlements for two-year-olds (GOV.UK, 2025). In addition, the transition from Early Years Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1 (KS1) could be better scaffolded by supporting educators' understanding of an adult's role in, and effective delivery of, child-led learning in Year 1. Finally, children's developmental progression is not always linear, and a more holistic understanding of development from birth to age 7 could help educators implement inclusive practice to meet the needs of all children and could improve early and accurate identification of special educational needs.

19. This approach also presents some significant challenges and potential trade-offs, which the DfE would need to carefully consider when appraising this option. For example, it would be important to carefully consider the balance between baby, toddler, pre-school and KS1 practice. The framework would need to provide sufficient detail on areas of child development and appropriate pedagogy to adequately support the creation of course content aimed at educators working with children age 0-7. There are significant differences in practice between an EY educator working with an infant and a KS1 class, so it would be important to carefully test whether a course could be designed that appropriately covered this breadth of practice in sufficient depth. For KS1, some of the content from the ITTECF would still need to be covered. This would therefore require a reasonable balance of statements around child-led and adult-led pedagogy in the framework.

20. Additionally, consideration would be needed on the issue of multiple routes to becoming an EY teacher and a KS1 teacher. With the risks of perpetuating a two-tiered system in mind, as well as the potential for additional fragmentation, overlap and complexity within the system, further deliberation would be needed on potential policy solutions to these challenges. It would also be important to consider the potential for an imbalance in knowledge and understanding across phases, as well as duplication in the system.

Additional considerations

Corresponding questions:

Q11. Do you think those who currently hold EYTS/EYPS require further support to effectively teach different key stages in schools?

21. We agree that, given newly trained EY teachers in a reformed system would gain QTS, current educators with EYTS / EYPS will also need a route to gaining QTS. This is necessary to avoid inequity between staff with Level 6 teaching qualifications in settings, and to facilitate the opportunity for those who have trained prior to these reforms to move between age groups if they so wish. Determining what further support

to facilitate conversion to QTS would be required is challenging given the variation in the existing training [paragraph 11].

Corresponding questions:

Q13. To what extent do you agree that early years teachers working in PVIs should follow a similar induction programme to those in schools?

Q14. Which elements of ECTE school induction do you think would be the most beneficial to supporting EY teachers practice in PVIs?

Q15. We invite respondents to share their views and experiences of the specific barriers or constraints that may affect the provision of high-quality induction in PVIs, as well as any considerations that should inform future policy or support.

Q16. We invite respondents to share their views and experiences of the specific barriers or constraints that may affect the provision of high-quality mentoring in PVIs, as well as any considerations that should inform future policy or support.

Q17. We welcome views on the value and the challenges of mandating cross-setting training and how it might best be implemented to strengthen practice and collaboration across the early years system.

22. We agree that early years teachers working in PVIs should follow a similar induction programme to those in schools. Evidence highlights the importance of continued professional development and opportunities to reflect on practice (EEF, 2021). Participants and induction tutors for early career teacher entitlement (ECTE) school inductions consider the programme to have a positive impact on self-confidence, knowledge, and teacher performance, as well as potentially early career teacher (ECT) retention (DfE, 2025a). Ensuring that qualified EY teachers in PVIs receive a similar structured induction as they would receive working in schools could support parity of esteem and encourage EY teachers to work in PVIs and other setting types, supporting the government's stated aim of having at least one qualified teacher in every EY setting (DfE, 2025b).

23. Mentoring, including training support for new mentors, could be beneficial for supporting EY teachers to improve their practice in PVIs. Mentoring plays a central role in the ECTE school induction, and evaluations show that ECTs tend to regard mentoring as the most useful element of their induction (DfE, 2025a). Specific benefits of mentoring highlighted include tailored support that meets the individual's

needs, the experience and expertise of the mentors, and the opportunity for trusting, open conversations. This success was in part attributed to the training and support available to mentors (Ibid). Although more evidence is needed on how mentoring could improve practice in EY contexts, the reported success for the ECF induction shows the value in considering how mentoring could be embedded as a core part of an EY teacher induction in all setting types, not just schools.

24. Current practice suggests some potential barriers to implementation that would need to be addressed. The ECF evaluation highlighted challenges recruiting new mentors, as well as concerns about mentor time and workload, that would also need to be considered in the EY context (DfE, 2025a). Mentoring and coaching practice is variable across EY setting types and as part of the current EY ITT, with Ofsted’s published inspections of 9 current EY ITT providers finding weaknesses around mentoring and placement provision for 6/9 providers (Ofsted, n.d). Funded time out of ratio for both ECTs and mentors is likely to be an important factor in ensuring that mentoring takes place and is effective, though this can be logistically challenging, particularly in smaller or standalone EY settings. There is funding available with the EY ITT to support this, though some settings report it insufficient for replacing experienced staff, and cite challenges finding cover staff of similar experience (DfE and IFF, 2025).

25. Existing practice could be used as a helpful basis for innovative approaches to mentoring that could mitigate these challenges. We understand some large PVI groups such as London Early Years Foundation use coaches to provide coaching, mentoring, and guidance for staff at all levels, including supporting educators undertaking their Level 3 EY educator qualification (LEYF, n.d). Coaches and ‘quality advisers’ often work across multiple settings or are employed across the chain, an approach which could help mitigate the challenges of recruiting experienced mentors in EY settings. Any policy approach would need to consider how to support standalone settings, which might be less able to draw on cross-organisational expertise to develop mentoring and induction structures. There may be options to use itinerant mentors or to structure further opportunities for collaboration between settings to support mentoring.

26. Cross-setting training and placements should be an important feature of any reformed EY teacher training. We would welcome EY teacher trainees gaining experience in all setting types, including PVIs and childminder settings, to support them to develop a well-rounded, expert understanding of the different pedagogical approaches, operational structures, and child development practices that characterise each context. Cross-setting placements may also support with cross-sector mobility for EY teachers as they would be able to demonstrate experience in a variety of contexts. A consideration for cross-setting placements is the potential to have a

consistent mentor for trainees to ensure capacity and benefit from continuity. This may also help mitigate some of the challenges around sufficient mentors for PVI EY teachers / trainees, as mentors could then be recruited from all setting types.

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