

**KENT COUNTY COUNCIL
EDUCATION AND LIBRARIES
POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE**

**EARLY YEARS:
A SPRINGBOARD TO SUCCESS**

**Report of the Select Committee Topic Review on
Early Years Education**

January 2003

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Early Years – a Springboard to Success

Report of the Kent County Council Select Committee
on Early Years Education
January 2003

Executive summary

Our children represent the future. It is vital that we work with their parents and others to give them the best possible start in their lives, educationally and socially, and to help everyone to achieve his or her potential. This Select Committee report identifies key issues which we believe need to be addressed in order to reach this objective. No young children in the County, whatever their circumstances, should be deprived of the opportunity to receive quality educational experiences. This means enhancing the quality of their surroundings, the quality of their activities and above all, the quality of their interactions.

With unprecedented expansion in Early Years services under way, there is a unique opportunity to effect a sea change in perceptions and practice. This Select Committee has sought to support and complement the excellent work that is being done already, and to provide a springboard for future development.

The Committee has collected written evidence and research reports, made visits to Early Years settings around the County, and spoken in person to academics, practitioners and other experts. What stands out from the evidence is the high degree of consensus on many of the issues that arose. The Committee hopes that others involved in the Early Years will recognise and concur with much of what is said.

The report's recommendations are wide-ranging. The profile of Early Years in schools and elsewhere must be raised, and our understanding of the aims of Early Years education developed. The County Council should take a lead in providing services that make sense to both children and parents, and that reflect individuals' needs; children make no distinction between care and education.

Key Stage 1 tests should not be the defining influence on children's early experiences of education. Excellent provision can impart skills and attitudes that are not measured by SATs, but that will stand children in good stead throughout their lives and educational careers. If the County Council is really concerned with raising attainment in the long term, the views of those who believe that Key Stage 1 tests do more harm than good must be considered.

Parents are the most important influence on their children. Where the County Council can help parents to become engaged in their young children's education, it should do so. The home environment may in some circumstances be the best one for learning, and where the County Council can assist and facilitate this, it should do so.

We will not truly demonstrate that we value our young children until we show that we value the people who care for and educate them; the County Council must do all in its power to support them. Excellent work is already being done, but there is a clear and urgent need to ensure that the future supply of practitioners is sufficient, and of a consistently high standard.

These changes cannot be effected overnight. But the transformative potential of the Early Years - in quality of life as well as strictly educational terms - is clear, and should not be disregarded. Research suggests that good provision can improve outcomes for society as well as the individual, reducing welfare dependency and involvement in crime later in life, as well as raising attainment and helping parents back into work. Our young children are important, the quality of their experiences crucial. The introduction of the Foundation Stage and various Government initiatives have gone some way to changing Early Years' image as the 'Cinderella' of education. The challenge is now for the County Council to work with others to complete the transformation in Kent.

Introduction

In September 2001 Kent County Council adopted a new Constitution. The new political structure means that a Leader and a single-party Cabinet now take most of the decisions previously taken by the all-party service committees. Elected Members outside the single-party Cabinet can contribute to the development of policy through the three all-party Policy Overview Committees (POCs): Strategic Planning, Social Health and Community Care, and Education and Libraries. These committees may advise the Council, Leader and Cabinet on policy development, review the Council's performance relative to its objectives and targets, and make reports and recommendations to the Council. Article 7.2 of the Constitution gives Policy Overview Committees the power to appoint Select Committees, with the legal status of Sub-Committees, to conduct reviews with the same powers as the main Committee.

On 16 September 2002 the Education and Libraries Policy Overview Committee appointed a Select Committee to conduct a topic review of Early Years Education. The Terms of Reference were:

- i. after research, to suggest a Kent "Best Practice" model for the Early Years Curriculum, (ages 3 to 5 years), whether delivered in Maintained, Private, or Voluntary Sector settings, or at home
- ii. to advise on how to link pre-school experience to the compulsory school curriculum as children transfer, to maximise progression

The Membership of the Select Committee was:

Mr M Dance (Chairman, Conservative)	Mr M Wheatcroft (Labour)
Mrs V Dagger (Conservative)	Ms J Cribbon (Labour)
Mrs J Newman (Conservative)	Mr M Vye (Liberal Democrat)
Mrs P Stockell (Conservative)	

The Review Programme: witnesses and visits

The Early Years Select Committee decided to gather evidence primarily through a number of hearings, at which expert witnesses and key stakeholders were invited to give evidence and answer questions from the Members. This information was supplemented by written evidence from a number of sources. Representatives of the Churches were given an opportunity to contribute to the deliberations of the Select Committee at a special session. Members would like to express their thanks and appreciation to all the witnesses who gave up their time to attend hearings. The programme of hearings was as follows:

Hearing 1:	Jayne Meyer , Programme Director, Sure Start Dover and Chair of Kent EYDCP
Hearing 2:	Professor Tricia David , Emeritus Professor of Education, Christ Church Canterbury University College
Hearing 3:	Margaret Edgington , Early Years trainer and consultant
Hearing 4:	Colleen Marin , School Development Advisor, Early Years, Kent LEA
Hearing 5:	<p>Roger Berwick, Kent EYDCP Private sector representative and manager of Palm Bay private Nursery</p> <p>Diane Daniels, Kent EYDCP Voluntary sector representative and manager of the Caterpillar Cabin Playgroup</p> <p>Sue Burt, National Childminding Association</p>
Hearing 6:	<p>Jenny Middleton, Senior Early Years Advisory Teacher, KCC</p> <p>Jenny Reeves, Deputy Headteacher, Sandgate Primary School</p>

In addition, Members undertook visits in pairs to six Early Years settings within the voluntary, private and maintained sectors. Members then reported back to colleagues on the Select Committee. The settings visited were:

- Queenborough Nursery School
- Warden Bay Playgroup
- Diocesan and Payne Smith School Canterbury, nursery class
- Palm Bay Nursery, Cliftonville
- Our Lady's Pre-School, Northfleet
- Northfleet Nursery School

The Committee would like to express its gratitude to the following staff who gave up their time to show Members around their settings and to talk about their work: Alan Jenner, Amanda Harling, Tina Cox, Hilary Quincey, Jenny Lacey, Alan Curtis, Liza Chitten, and Roger Berwick.

The Select Committee's approach

The evidence received has been wide-ranging and stimulating. Many important issues were touched upon that were felt to fall outside the Select

Committee's terms of reference, including Additional Educational Needs, funding streams, and the urgent need to consider and rationalise provision for the birth to three age group. Other than expressing a preference for service integration, the Committee has not considered the relative merits of different types of Early Years provision (that is, comparing provision in the voluntary, private and maintained sectors). The Committee's remit was cross-sector, and this is reflected in the organisation of the report. Although the Committee's initial aim was to produce a 'best practice model', it quickly became apparent that it would be more beneficial to concentrate as much on identifying the *barriers* to good practice – whether related to curriculum, staff development, facilities or other areas – and how those could be removed. The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* sets out the content of Early Years learning, and the work of producing 'good practice guides' to relate this guidance to practice is already in hand by the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. Transition has emerged as an issue very closely related to other policy strands, rather than an isolated aspect of children's Early Years experience.

The report is organised according to the broad themes that emerged from the Committee's programme of evidence-gathering, and represents the collective views of the whole Committee.

1. The current context of Early Years in the U.K.

The benefits of Early Years provision

1.1 Government policy in recent years has demonstrated an increasing commitment to Early Years provision. This chapter will briefly explore the rationale for this commitment, and provide an overview of the various initiatives and strands of current Early Years policy as a background to the rest of the report. The developments in policy and practice represent recognition of the huge potential benefits which accrue from provision for children, to them, their families and the community. A review of the evidence in the recent Inter-Departmental Childcare Review concludes that: 'not only do the benefits cascade throughout the educational system, but there are big gains in reducing crime, in improving health, and in reducing demand on social services.'¹

1.2 Assessment of the outcomes of early childhood care and education is not straightforward. The current crop of U.K. initiatives are mostly at too early a stage for longitudinal studies - the most telling where lasting outcomes are concerned - to be available. Few studies of the effects of childcare programmes have run for long enough to provide direct evidence of increased educational attainment beyond the age of 11. There is some research, however, suggesting that certain types of early years education and care can play an important role in raising cognitive and social/behavioural outcomes, thereby increasing children's ability to learn. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education study (EPPE), has found that certain types of pre-school provision for children between 3 and 5 years old - namely LEA nursery schools, nursery classes and 'combined centres' - result in higher attainment at the start of primary school. This can be a good predictor of attainment as a child progresses through school. The results applied to children irrespective of socio-economic background.

1.3 It has been argued that the behavioural and attitudinal effects of Early Years provision are more likely to endure than immediate boosts to 'educational' attainment. (It is, for example, rare for a programme to demonstrate long-term increases in I.Q.) These factors, however - including self-esteem, ability to concentrate on a task, resilience and aptitude for learning - can have direct beneficial effects on a child's later performance in school, and impact upon the length of time children stay in mainstream education.² As well as improving children's 'readiness to learn', Early Years services allow early identification of and support for special needs.

1.4 Evidence from the USA suggests that 'model' early intervention programmes can have positive long-term effects on children, but there is a large gap between those programmes and large-scale, publicly-funded interventions such as Head Start in the US. The evidence for long-term benefits is much less conclusive for public programmes than for model

¹ Inter-Departmental Childcare Review, Delivering for children and families (November 2002), p.60.

² IDCR, p.31.

programmes, which typically feature more intensive contact with children and their families, for example, or very highly-qualified practitioners.³ This emphasises that the quality of early educational experiences is by no means incidental to the potential gains.

1.5 However, the most startling piece of research into the outcomes of early education is one of these 'model' programmes, the Perry Pre-school Project, commonly known by the name 'High/Scope' (a research foundation and curriculum project). This study followed a randomly-selected group of African-American children who were born in poverty and at high risk of failing in school, and who received a high-quality, active learning pre-school programme at ages three and four, and compared them with a similar group who received no pre-school programme. At age 27, the former group were found to have higher earnings and property wealth, half as many criminal arrests and significantly less dependence on welfare assistance, as well as a better record of graduation from high school. Based on an evaluation of 'whole-life costs' - including savings on welfare, special education, the justice system, and additional tax revenues - the public was estimated to receive \$7.16 in return for every dollar originally invested. The calculation is hardly unproblematic, but compelling nonetheless.⁴

The Nursery Education Grant

1.6 Until recently, Early Years provision in this country has been something of a 'poor relation'. The Committee heard from many witnesses that, while there has always been some excellent provision, only now is the U.K. beginning to catch up with countries where quality childcare has traditionally been regarded as central to both children's education, and to helping parents back into work. A National Childcare Strategy was launched in 1998, with the aim of creating more affordable, quality services, backed by significant new investment.

1.7 There has been a massive expansion in Government-funded early education places in recent years. All four year-olds now have access to a free part-time place for the three terms before they come of compulsory school age. By March 2002, more than 66 per cent of three year-olds were also accessing a free early education place. The Government is aiming to make this universal; funding for all three year-olds will be available from April 2003, but local authorities will not have responsibility to ensure the provision of places until September 2004.

1.8 A grant-funded early education 'place' is defined as five two-and-a-half hour sessions for a minimum of 11 weeks each term. It can be in a setting run by the LEA, private, voluntary or independent organisations, or with an Accredited Childminder. All settings that receive nursery education grant

³ For example, the Early Training Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Project, the Perry Preschool Project and the Milwaukee Project, for all of which see Currie, J., Early Intervention Programs: what do we know?, Joint Center for Poverty Research Working Paper 69 (April 2000).

⁴ For the Perry Pre-School project see *ibid.* and [www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject]

funding are required to offer high-quality educational provision. They must deliver the Foundation Stage curriculum, be registered with their local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP), and must be inspected on a regular basis by OfSTED.

The Foundation Stage

1.9 In September 2000, the Foundation Stage was introduced as a distinct stage of education for children in England from the age of three to the end of the reception year. It was supported by the QCA's *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*, published in May 2000, and by *Planning for learning in the Foundation Stage* in 2001. The CGFS gives practitioners guidance on: children's learning; teaching, planning and assessment; aims for the Foundation Stage; and principles of early years education. The introduction of the Foundation Stage has not changed the point at which attendance at school is compulsory (that is, the beginning of the term after a child's fifth birthday).

1.10 The Foundation Stage is intended to prepare children for learning in Key Stage 1 and to 'underpin all future learning'. There are Early Learning Goals in six curriculum areas:

- personal, social and emotional development
- communication, language and literacy
- mathematical development
- knowledge and understanding of the world
- physical development
- creative development

The expectation is that by the end of the Foundation Stage, some children will have met or exceeded the Goals; others will be working towards some or all of them.

1.11 The Foundation Stage Profile, to be introduced in Spring 2003 and replacing Baseline Assessment, will assess children's attainment against the Early Learning Goals, their progress and future needs, at the end of the Foundation Stage. Profiles must be completed in any Government-funded setting in England in which children complete the Foundation Stage; for most children, this is at the end of the reception year. They are based on practitioners' on-going observations and assessments in all six areas of learning; there are no assessment activities, tasks or tests to be undertaken. Completed profiles must be shared with parents. The numerical results of the Profiles will be collated annually, initially by LEAs and then the DfES. The first publication of national results will take place in the Autumn 2003 term. Results will allow comparisons between settings, but the Government has stated that they are not intended for use as a 'value-added' measure until the Profile is well bedded down. From September 2002 there is no statutory requirement to carry out baseline (that is, on-entry) assessment. Schools and other settings are free to decide whether they want to continue to make on-entry assessments. QCA guidance suggests that this would be most useful where little or variable transfer information is available about a child.

EYDCPs

1.12 Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships have been established in all local authority areas to help plan the development and delivery of early education and care services. Along with LEAs, they are responsible for planning Early Years services in their area, through a 3-year strategic plan as laid down by the National Childcare Strategy. The Partnerships involve representatives from all Early Years and childcare sectors - statutory, voluntary and private - as well as other stakeholders. They can establish sub-groups to cover particular areas such as funding, recruitment and training, and publicity.

1.13 Partnerships' targets are based on the 29 Early Years targets of the DfES. Targets especially relevant to education and curriculum issues include:

- to ensure that all practitioners delivering the Foundation Stage education have access to an average of 4 days relevant training and development per year by 2004
- to ensure that, by 2004, all settings that deliver a Foundation Stage curriculum have access to the input and advice from a QTS teacher
- to ensure that, by 2004, all qualified teachers involved in delivering the Foundation Stage have undertaken appropriate training and development to improve their specialist knowledge of early education

These targets are underpinned by the Government's five strategic goals for early education and childcare:

- to create new childcare places for 1.6 million children by March 2004
- to have by March 2004 a childcare place in the most disadvantaged areas for every lone parents entering employment
- to close the childcare gap between disadvantaged areas and others
- to put in place universal nursery education for 3 year-olds by September 2004
- to ensure that 94 per cent of early education settings, are making satisfactory or better progress in delivering the Early Learning Goals by September 2004.

Sure Start, Early Excellence Centres, and Neighbourhood Nurseries

1.14 Sure Start is an initiative 'to work with parents-to-be, parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children - particularly those who are disadvantaged - so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school'. Sure Start programmes are intended to co-ordinate, support and add value to existing services as well as to provide new ones, and they are as much about care and health as education. Programme targets can include, for example, a reduction in the number of mothers who smoke during pregnancy, or of under-fours living in households where no-one is working. The approach is very much multi-agency, and local needs-led. The intention is to have 500 programmes in operation by 2004, concentrated in areas of deprivation around the country.

1.15 The work of the programmes nationwide has been widely praised, and may provide important models for how best to shape services in the future. Dr Gillian Pugh of the Coram Family told the Parliamentary Select Committee on Early Years in 2000:

‘Sure Start is fantastic... However, Sure Start will only be effective if it becomes a mainstream strategy and not a short term initiative which disappears in four years time. In addition it needs to change the way we run services across the country, not just in the 250 areas in which it is based.’⁵

Sure Starts already running or planned in Kent are located in Dover, Thanet (x2), Sheerness, Folkestone, Dartford, Gravesham and Ashford.

1.16 Early Excellence Centres are ‘one-stop’ multi-agency centres offering integrated care and education for under-fives and support services for their families. They can provide services day-long and year-round. The Government is aiming to have 100 EECs nationwide by 2004, and intends them to develop, demonstrate and disseminate models of excellence in provision. Hythe Community School will be the site for the first designated EEC in Kent, opening in Spring 2003.

1.17 The Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative was launched in January 2001, with the aim of establishing 900 Neighbourhood Nurseries in the 20 per cent most deprived wards in the country by 2004. The nurseries will cater for children birth to age five. In Kent the scheme will lead to a minimum of 540 new high-quality childcare places in areas of disadvantage by 2004.

The changing role of OfSTED

1.18 Under the provisions of the School Inspections Act 1996, OfSTED arranges inspections of the quality of nursery education provision in maintained schools. Since 1998, OfSTED also arranges inspection of all nursery settings in the private, voluntary and independent sectors which receive the nursery education grant for three and four year-olds. In addition, the Care Standards Act 2000 transferred the responsibility for registering and inspecting childminders and day care providers for children under the age of 8 from local authorities to OfSTED. These inspections will be against the National Standards for childcare, which cover aspects of provision including the physical environment, equipment and safety, health, behaviour and child protection. The regulation of childcare and early education has therefore now been brought together under the one agency. New ‘combined’ Early Years inspections that cover both the childcare standards and the Foundation Stage curriculum began in April 2002. Combined inspections will occur at least once in every four year period.

⁵ House of Commons Education and Employment Committee, First Report, Session 2000-2001: ‘Early Years’, available online at: [\[www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmeduemp/33/3302.htm\]](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmeduemp/33/3302.htm)

2. The current context of Early Years in Kent

Achievement at Key Stage 1

2.1 The standards reached by Kent's 6 and 7 year-olds in English and maths at the end of Key Stage 1 have improved over the last three years. However, the results of Key Stage 1 tests in Kent are below average, and progress in the County lags behind progress both nationally, and in statistically similar Local Education Authorities.⁶ There are also considerable differences in attainment across Kent's twelve districts. Among the Council's targets in the *Next Four Years* is a commitment to ensuring that Key Stage 1 results exceed the national rate of progress year on year.⁷

2.2 The relationship of Key Stage 1 performance to quality pre-school provision is suggestive. Kent's provision of maintained nursery places for 3 to 5 year-olds falls well below the average for similar authorities. For example, in January 2000 there were 1,990 Kent children aged 3 and 4 in maintained nursery schools and classes; this is just over half the number in Kent's closest statistical neighbour, Essex.⁸ In Gravesham, better Key Stage 1 performance coincides with a higher percentage of children accessing LEA nursery provision. When matching Key Stage 1 results to deprivation indices, Thanet performs comparatively well in reading and writing. A key factor may be the Sure Start programme which has been in place for five years.⁹

Range of provision in Kent

2.3 The *Survey of Achievement* recommended that 'it would be among the most educationally significant decisions the County could make' to expand maintained nursery provision in all areas. The *Next Four Years* includes a commitment to double the number of KCC-maintained nursery units from 35 to 70. Progress towards this target has already begun, and the first raft of sites for new maintained nurseries have been identified. Currently Kent maintains one nursery school and 35 nursery units attached to infant or primary schools, catering for about 2000 pupils aged 3 and 4 on a part-time basis (there are in total approximately 33,500 3 and 4 year-olds in Kent).

2.4 In line with progress nationally, from April 2002 there has been in Kent grant funding for 3 terms of pre-school education for all 4 year-olds, and two terms for all 3 year-olds (3 year-olds with SEN or disabilities benefit from an additional term). The range of settings in which children can receive their grant-funded education sessions is summarised below.¹⁰

⁶ A Survey of Achievement in Kent Primary Schools: foundation stage and Key Stage 1, Kent County Council, Education and Libraries (2002).

⁷ Kent – the Next Four Years, Kent County Council (2002).

⁸ Essex Education Statistics 2000, Essex County Council (2000).

⁹ Survey of Achievement in Kent Primary Schools

¹⁰ Numbers as of August 2001.

Maintained nursery schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A whole school for 3-5 year-olds • 1 KCC (in Northfleet) • statutory requirement is for one qualified teacher and one qualified assistant to 26 children • open during term time; usually offer five half-day sessions per week
Nursery classes in maintained primary and infant schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35 KCC, to double by 2006 (<i>Next Four Years</i> target) • one qualified teacher and one qualified assistant to 26 children¹¹ • open during term time; usually offer five half-day sessions per week
Reception classes in maintained primary schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take children at age four or five • class sizes limited by law to 30 • staff are qualified teachers but may not always be trained specifically for children under five; some classes have assistants
Playgroups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • very varied hours; usually non-profitmaking, run by volunteers including parents • at least one adult per 8 children; half the adults must have a qualification • approx. 11,000 places in Kent
Day nurseries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take children under five for the whole working day • may be run by LAs, voluntary organisations, private companies, individuals, employers • at least one adult per 8 children; half the staff must have a qualification • approx. 9,750 places in Kent, plus 760 crèche places
Childminders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • look after under-fives as well as school-age children after hours and in holidays • usually work in childminder's own home • childminders can register as part of a network to provide early education – nine networks currently in Kent • nearly 6,000 places with childminders in Kent
Integrated services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • settings providing both childcare and early education • may also offer family support services, eg. adult education, health visitors

2.5 Sue Burt explained to the Committee the current developments in the organisation of childminding in Kent. All childminders in England must be registered with OfSTED. In order to be eligible for the nursery education

¹¹ This is the statutory requirement; Kent LEA funds schools for one qualified teacher and two qualified assistants.

grant, however, childminders need to be accredited by the DfES through 'Children come first' childminding networks run by the National Childminding Association (these networks are nationally-recognised quality assurance mechanisms, and are not the same as informal support groups run by childminders themselves). In Kent there are nine childminding networks, managed by the NCMA and each run by a part-time co-ordinator. This is a large number compared to most local authority areas. The capacity of each network is twenty childminders, and the target is to have 25 *accredited* childminders *in total* by March 2003, giving a possible total of 75 early education places. This represents a very small proportion of the nearly 2000 childminders (providing places for nearly 6000 children) active in Kent. With the exception of the two West Kent networks which are funded by Social Services, the funding for the networks finished in 2004. Although the NCMA would like to increase the proportion of childminders who can offer nursery education grant places, they are not prepared to set up more networks unless the future funding is secure.

2.6 Further to all this provision, informal care – given by relatives or friends – plays a major role in the childcare system and is expected to continue to do so. Some 72 per cent of parents used informal childcare at least once in 2000 (36 per cent within the week prior to survey), while 50 per cent used formal childcare. 37 per cent used both.¹² Sue Burt of the National Childminding Association, Kent's Early Years Unit and Sure Start Dover are exploring ways of measuring the level of unregistered childminding in the Dover area.

Quality Assurance

2.7 The *Next Four Years* pledges that: 'We will apply a kitemark scheme to ensure excellent quality standards in all of our KCC maintained and private nurseries, in line with best national practice'. In the 2002 Autumn term a pilot of the curriculum-based Kent Quality Assurance Scheme began with an initial cohort of 100 providers; the full launch is scheduled for early 2003. The Kent Kitemark, franchised from the original Sheffield version, is curriculum-based and is intended to function as a higher level accreditation than the OfSTED baseline. By 2003 the current 2 per cent of providers accredited with a Quality Assurance scheme is to rise to 12 per cent, working towards a central Government target of 40 per cent of non-maintained providers accredited by 2004. The LEA's Leading Early Years Teachers will be working on adapting the Kitemark to maintained settings. The EYDCP and Next Four Years Quality Assurance targets are exceptionally resource-hungry, and concerns have been expressed about whether it is possible to meet them within the currently-available resources. A review managed by the Early Years and Childcare Unit is now in progress to examine the EYDCP's structures, management and resources, and its ability to meet the targets. The review will be completed mid- to late March, and its recommendations will inform the future development of the Kitemarking issue.

¹² Woodland, S., et al, *Repeat survey of parents' demands for childcare*, DfES Research Report 348 (May 2002), p.35.

2.8 The Committee heard differing views on the Kitemark. Palm Bay Nursery was one of the pilot providers, and its manager Roger Berwick commended it as the single best initiative that has been introduced. He emphasised how the accreditation process forced a provider to reflect constructively on their practice and analyse all aspects of their provision from different angles. Diane Daniels, however, said that because of cost, it is unlikely that her own playgroup will be able to consider working through the Kitemark. She considered that if a provider is delivering the Foundation Stage and passing OfSTED inspections then they are already engaging in the sort of reflective practice that the Kitemark is supposed to encourage. The Pre-School Learning Alliance have had an affordable accreditation scheme for many years, which has been accepted by some EYDCPs as their Kitemark. Members expressed some concerns that providers who were priced out of any accreditation scheme may find themselves suffering if parents perceive there to be a two-tier system.

Best Practice Guides

2.9 The Kent EYDCP, in co-operation with Christ Church Canterbury University College, is planning to produce a best practice guide with sections covering the following groups of practitioners: birth to age 3, ages 3 to 5, out of school care (ages 5 to 14), and childminders. The guide is intended to be cross-sector, including the maintained sector, but provisionally childminders are covered in a separate section. It is envisaged that work on the 3 to 5 section will commence in March 2003. This section will essentially be the successor to KCC's well-regarded document *Starting Together*. Much of the content of that document remains valid, but needs to be updated to take account of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*. The guide will attempt to bridge the gap between the *Curriculum Guidance* and practice, with real-life examples and case studies drawn from the experience of Kent practitioners. It will be structured so as to be useful to practitioners working towards the Kitemark, as well as a stand-alone document that could be used nationwide.

The Kent Foundation Stage Record of Transfer

2.10 The Thanet Early Years and Childcare Forum has developed a 'record of transfer' to facilitate the sharing of information about individual children between their pre-school provider and their school when they transfer. This form has been successfully piloted and will now be rolled out on a County-wide basis. The form can be completed by a practitioner in any Foundation Stage setting. It comprises two sides of A4 with sections for each of the Foundation Stage curriculum areas, with space for practitioners to comment in a fairly free way on a child's progress and indicate what they believe to be the next steps for their learning. The form will also contain basic information about a child's attendance at pre-school, the input of other agencies if any, and a contribution from the parent or carer. The manageable format was praised by witnesses, and raises the hope that teachers will find the information easy to use when they receive it. If used widely, the form has

great potential to regularise at least some aspects of the transfer from pre-school to school for children, and enable teachers to build on a child's progress rather than starting from scratch with them.

Recommendations

- 1. The Committee welcomes the introduction of the Kitemark Quality Assurance Scheme, and recommends that all necessary steps be taken to ensure that the Kitemark is accessible to all providers, and that its relationship to other schemes of Quality Assurance, particularly that offered by the Pre-School Learning Alliance, is made clear.**

Chapter 3: The Foundation Stage

3.1 The Committee heard from many witnesses that the introduction of the Foundation Stage has been broadly welcomed by experts and practitioners in the Early Years sector. It has given a new, more coherent and visible identity to Early Years, alerting public and practitioners to the fact that education for three to five year-olds cannot be regarded as simply a watered-down prelude to compulsory schooling. There should now be no room for confusion about the place of a play-based curriculum that runs until the end of reception year.

Practitioners and the Foundation Stage

3.2 Colleen Marin told the Committee that practitioners had been waiting for something just like the Foundation Stage; the Curriculum Guidance 'talks about children in a way teachers recognise and understand'. Most practitioners say that it confirms and reinforces what they already knew, giving them a mandate to put that into practice. Voluntary and private playschools in particular have historically had a play-based approach that had, said Jenny Middleton, been getting lost a little, but they now feel relieved that it is being officially endorsed. Roger Berwick talked of the introduction of the Foundation Stage as almost a 'liberating experience', and an opportunity to get rid of many of the worksheet-type activities which had come to the fore.

3.3 Witnesses emphasised, however, that only the most confident and expert practitioners had been able to incorporate the *Curriculum Guidance* into their practice immediately. Roger Berwick said that it is a large document and it takes time to get used to it, and practitioners particularly need additional skills to adapt it to the needs of individual children. However, once they are more familiar with it, practitioners are able to apply it better rather than following it slavishly. Margaret Edgington similarly said that the more confident practitioners have been able to take the guidance on board, using it constructively and creatively straight away.

School management and the Foundation Stage

3.4 In order to have maximum benefit, witnesses emphasised the changes that schools need to make to adapt to the Foundation Stage. Margaret Edgington said that every school should have a Foundation Stage co-ordinator among the staff, and a Foundation Stage governor, who can act as an effective champion for Early Years within the school. She was critical of the lack of Foundation Stage training specifically for headteachers nationwide, and pointed out that headteachers in fact often sent another member of staff in their stead to the training that is offered. This point is also made in a 2001 OfSTED survey, which reported that 'Few headteachers had attended foundation stage training or were otherwise well informed about this stage... Headteachers were not generally in a good position to advise their

reception class teachers about planning and teaching.¹³ Jenny Reeves expressed the view that colleagues elsewhere in the school should also be educated about the Foundation Stage; in her experience, when other teachers observe and understand good Early Years practice their respect for and interest in it rapidly grows.

3.5 Colleen Marin, however, offered a positive assessment of the current profile of the Foundation Stage in Kent's primary schools. Two major Foundation Stage conferences have been attended by around 300 headteachers, there were speakers on Early Years at last year's primary heads' conference, there have been Early Years breakfast briefings, twilight sessions, and an ongoing County programme of governor training is also very well attended. Governors in many schools have made a huge commitment to taking on additional adults, for example LSAs, to improve the staff ratio in reception classes, and Foundation Stage co-ordinators within schools are now often members of the senior management team.

Recommendations:

The Committee is pleased that the Foundation Stage and its Curriculum Guidance have been welcomed by Early Years practitioners, and welcome the steps that have already been taken in many schools in Kent to recognise the importance of this stage of education. Therefore:

2. The Committee recommends that the LEA actively encourage all primary schools in Kent to have a champion for Early Years, and where appropriate a Foundation Stage co-ordinator, as a member of the school's Senior Management Team, and a governor with a special responsibility for the Foundation Stage.

3. The Committee endorses the LEA's initiatives to inform all primary headteachers about the philosophy and methods of the Foundation Stage, and expresses the wish that this become universal if not compulsory.

¹³ OfSTED, Teaching literacy and mathematics in reception classes: a survey by HMI, HMI 330 (2001), paragraph 65.

Chapter 4: Integration and continuity in Early Years services

Education and care

4.1 Early Years education cannot be seen in isolation from the wider range of services and interventions that can improve outcomes - educational and otherwise - for children. 'Education' in a narrowly academic sense must be set in the context of settings traditionally regarded as providers of 'care', which are now delivering the Foundation Stage alongside school settings. Dr Tony Munton of the Institute of Education summarised the debate about competition between care and education, and how it has shifted in recent years, in a 1999 article:

'Since the middle of the last century, it has been accepted that the state has a duty to provide all children with an adequate standard of education. Providing care, on the other hand, has remained the private responsibility of families... On this basis, education has been defined in terms of children's intellectual needs, and care in terms of their physical and emotional needs. The job of providing care and education has, until very recently, been split between different government departments... Public funding for education has far outstripped funding for day care; training - and hence the professional status - of care workers has fallen well short of that enjoyed by teachers... The Government's National Childcare Strategy... aims to address these issues... Popular opinion has shifted towards accepting that the state has a greater responsibility for providing childcare. In this sense, the education versus care debate is all but dead.'¹⁴

4.2 Government thinking on the changing character of the Early Years sector was set out in the 2001 education Green Paper, *Building on Success*:

'Traditionally early years services have been delivered separately by a range of professionals working in distinct education, care and health services. However, very young children do not distinguish between care and education, and families' needs in the modern world are best met by providing joined-up services. Our approach to early years education and care is to develop seamless services for children and families. We want to retain the best which each profession offers, but provide more integrated services which are built around children's needs rather than professional structures. All the evidence shows that joined-up services deliver both better outcomes for children and better value for the public purse.'¹⁵

4.3 In her evidence to the Committee, Jayne Meyer, director of Sure Start Dover, emphasised that in her view no sensible demarcation could be made

¹⁴ Munton, T., 'Beyond learning versus play', *Times Educational Supplement* (27 August 1999).

¹⁵ Green Paper, *Building on Success*, Chapter 2: Early Years (February 2001).

between 'care' and 'education' for young children. The Sure Start ethos is to work in multi-disciplinary teams to tackle the problems of children and families in deprived areas, and no one sector, she felt, whether health, social care or education, should 'own' the Early Years profession. The needs of children were not always met by 'teaching' them in any academic sense; many children need basic social skills and emotional development well before they can be started on reading or writing, and some simply need a stable emotional environment to counteract chaotic home lives. If these needs are not addressed at the earlier stages then the children will not be 'school-ready', as Sure Start aims to make them.

4.4 The EYDCP, too, should be a united front for all sectors, believes Jayne Meyer. The twenty-nine targets originally handed down from the Department for Education and Skills to the Partnerships nationwide were, she feels, much too narrowly focused on education. The creation of a new amalgamated central Government unit of Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare following the July 2002 Spending Review should, however, lead ultimately to a revised set of targets reflecting the input of health, social care and the employment perspective, contributing to a more 'holistic' approach. Professor Helen Penn in a memorandum to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Employment in 2001 bemoaned 'the predominance of the school agenda and its undue influence on early years provision', and 'competition between various unsatisfactory forms of care and education, rather than more coherent integrated settings'.¹⁶ However, the SPEEL project researchers raised the question, 'Is care dominating in some settings at the expense of education?'¹⁷ The researchers noted that 'care is very embedded in practices, especially in day care settings', and attributed to this some practitioners' difficulty in identifying themselves as 'teachers' or embracing the language of 'teaching'.¹⁸ The study implies that as a result some children may not be exposed to sufficiently educational experiences. Evidently there is a balance to be struck.

Combined centres

4.5 At the forefront of Government Early Years policy, aiming to strike this balance, are 'combined centres', that is, nursery schools which also offer childcare. Early Excellence Centres are one-stop multi-agency centres providing childcare, education, health and family services for under-fives, day-long and year-round. The EECs are also intended to disseminate excellent practice in integrated services among other providers in their area. Signs for these centres are encouraging: early findings from the EPPE research project on effective pre-school education indicated that nursery schools and combined centres scored highest on all scales.¹⁹ An OECD review states that 'It has become clear from international government and NGO studies that

¹⁶ Penn, H., Memorandum to the Select Committee on Education and Employment, Minutes of Evidence, EYF 09 (April 2001).

¹⁷ Moyles, J., et al, SPEEL: Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning, DfES Research Report 363 (June 2002), paragraph 7.58 (hereafter 'SPEEL').

¹⁸ SPEEL, paragraphs 7.31, 7.4.

¹⁹ 'The enemy within early years', Times Educational Supplement (21 June 2002).

policies which aim to integrate and co-ordinate educational, social and health initiatives are likely to be more effective and more wide-ranging in their impact'.²⁰ Among the services that can be provided through one site are health visitors, clinical psychologists, speech therapists and social workers. Parents can also access training. The expected outcomes include reductions in social exclusion, child poverty and unemployment as well as educational underachievement. The Government initially aimed to have 100 EECs nationwide by 2004.²¹ Hythe Community School is the site of the first designated EEC in Kent, which will begin to operate in Spring 2003. As set out in the Inter-Departmental Childcare Review in November 2002, the Government is now aiming in the long term to establish a 'children's centre' in every one of the country's 20 per cent most deprived wards: 'All children's centres will provide a core offering that includes good quality childcare, early years education, health services, family support, parental outreach and a base for childminders. By March 2006, at least 650,000 children will be covered by children's centre services.'²²

Wraparound care

4.6 Parents may choose different settings at different stages of their children's development according to what they see as appropriate at any particular stage. However, the choices parents make are often dictated by practical considerations, above all the need for 'wraparound' (that is, all day) care which enables them to go to work. As the nursery education grant funds only five half-day sessions per week, and many settings in the voluntary and maintained settings are not accessible on a full-time basis, parents must use a 'patchwork' of provision. Roger Berwick pointed out to the Committee that expansion of standard maintained provision will not help the large number of parents who find it a problem to collect their children at 11.30am or to take them to school in the afternoon. For new maintained provision to be attractive to these parents, wraparound care needs to be attached.

4.7 Some responses to this situation develop in an ad hoc way; for example, Roger Berwick told the Committee that the staff of the Palm Bay Nursery are willing to pick children up from morning sessions at a maintained nursery unit and take them back to the Palm Bay Nursery where they stay until the end of the working day. Sue Burt said that childminders were in a very good position to provide the sort of continuity that children need, being flexible enough to care for children before or after provision elsewhere, and to do so throughout their early years and beyond. She said that the National Childminding Association is exploring the possibility of pioneering formal arrangements linking pre-schools to childminding networks in their area, so that parents who need their child to be cared for after a morning session finishes can be put in touch with the network co-ordinator. Local network childminders can therefore provide wraparound care.

²⁰ Bertram, T., and Pascal, C., OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care: U.K. background report, OECD (2000).

²¹ Green Paper, Building on Success, Chapter 2: Early Years (February 2001).

²² Inter-Departmental Childcare Review, Delivering for children and families (November 2002), p.6.

4.8 Tricia David pointed out to the Committee that according to research, from the child's perspective, two and a half hours of provision daily is quite sufficient; nursery-age children do not necessarily benefit more from a longer day.²³ It is important to preserve a variety of provision in order to meet the particular needs of parents, however, and all sectors have their place. However, as children may find attending several different settings confusing, perhaps embedding maintained nursery education in full-time provision - as with the majority of Early Excellence Centres - is one answer, or using a maintained setting as a hub to which other types of providers are connected. 75 per cent of Early Excellence Centres are based in, or built around, schools; 57 per cent have grown from nursery schools.²⁴ The Inter-Departmental Childcare Review recognises that the increase in the numbers of 3 and 4 year-olds in nursery education places offers opportunities to develop school-based 'wraparound' care and education, although physical capacity may prove an obstacle.²⁵

4.9 Another approach was proposed by Jenny Middleton, who suggested that practitioners with qualified teacher status could be employed by KCC in non-maintained settings to deliver Foundation Stage-based education. This would exploit the teaching expertise that remains a major draw of maintained settings, while allowing the children to remain in their full-time care setting.

Continuity for children

4.10 A major concern was raised by Tricia David about the continuity of children's pre-school experiences. Between birth and entering compulsory schooling, children may attend several different types of Early Years setting - sometimes even within the course of a week. This concern has been echoed by other experts. Professor Helen Penn in a memorandum to a Parliamentary Select Committee in 2001 lamented the 'rapid turnover of children between settings - a child may attend four or five or even more settings before statutory school age, a turnover which would be unacceptable at any other stage of education'.²⁶ Among the consequences of this is 'difficulty for parents in maintaining involvement in any early years setting, because the time-span of attendance is usually so short'. The effects on children's learning are highlighted by the SPEEL study: 'Where children attend various settings in a single week, continuity and progression are not well supported, because in each setting the child receives experiences pertinent to that setting but not related to the child's weekly experiences as a whole'.²⁷

²³ Where 'benefits' are measured in terms of, for example, language ability and social interaction. Hutt, S.J., Tyler, S., Hutt, C. and Christopherson, H., (1989) Play, exploration and learning (1989).

²⁴ Inter-Departmental Childcare Review, pp.43-44.

²⁵ Inter-Departmental Childcare Review, p.43.

²⁶ Penn, H., Memorandum to the Select Committee on Education and Employment, Minutes of Evidence, EYF 09 (April 2001).

²⁷ SPEEL, p.132.

4.11 The Foundation Stage is surely the single biggest instrument in seeking to make children's experience of the Early Years more coherent, as it sets out common educational goals and a common ethos for all Early Years settings. Two other elements are crucial: firstly that provision of all types be of a uniformly high quality, and secondly that there are effective links between the practitioners in different settings so that all are aware what a child has been doing elsewhere. A child's attendance at different providers has implications for assessment and planning procedures, because only by involving all the practitioners concerned - as well as parents - can a full picture be gained of what a child has achieved, learned and experienced to date, and what areas need to be built on. It is debatable whether such communication between providers is best effected through informal channels, or whether any workable formal solution could be implemented. The administrative burden of the latter could prove prohibitive. The potential for parents to provide continuity and communication should not be overlooked (see paragraph 8.4), although as several witnesses pointed out, it is often difficult to engage parents to the degree that providers might wish. There are also implications for the workings of the Kent Foundation Stage Transfer Record (see paragraphs 2.10 and 6.31), and a need to consider how best to involve all those who provide care and education for a child.

Recommendations

Early Years education cannot be seen in isolation from the wider range of services and interventions that can improve outcomes - educational and otherwise - for children. Children's experience of Early Years services is too often fragmented, and parents too often cannot make use of education sessions which occupy their children for only part of the working day.

4. The Committee is pleased that Kent has its first designated Early Excellence Centre, and hopes that it will be an effective beacon for excellence in service integration in the County.

5. The Committee recommends that the County seeks to find flexible and workable solutions to the problem of providing high-quality care and education that working parents will be able to use. This could include both extending maintained provision into wraparound care, and qualified teachers practising in non-maintained settings.

6. The Committee recommends that ways of making individual children's experience of Early Years care and education more coherent be explored, including ways of tracking children's progress across settings.

7. The Committee advises of the need for further research to establish how services for the birth to 3 age group in the County can best be developed.

Chapter 5: Early Years as a cross-sector profession: status, pay, training and support

5.1 The Committee has heard from many witnesses that, although the status and profile of Early Years have risen greatly over the past few years, there is still an unspoken, unofficial hierarchy in education which popularly puts Early Years at the bottom of the ladder. This is a misguided and damaging conception. The Committee is fully convinced of the vital importance of Early Years as a stage which can lay down social, emotional, behavioural and educational foundations for the rest of a child's life. It is therefore of the utmost importance that Early Years is not seen as the poor relation of compulsory schooling, and its practitioners must be accorded appropriate status. Colleen Marin told the Committee, 'Valuing the people we have in the County who are working with our youngest children is one of the biggest ways that we can make a difference'. Jenny Reeves said that 'Your best, most talented and most organised teacher has to be in the Foundation Stage' - an attitude sharply contrasting to the popular opinion that a move into Early Years is a 'demotion' for a teacher.

Pay and conditions across sectors

5.2 Practitioners in all sectors – maintained schools, private daycare, voluntary playgroups, childminders, etc. - make invaluable contributions to children's education and development, yet there are great disparities between their training, pay and conditions, and perceptions of the jobs they do. The Committee heard that there is a huge gulf between qualified teachers and other practitioners. The joint training which was run to introduce the Foundation Stage has done a great deal to boost the esteem of non-maintained practitioners and break down the barriers between sectors. This is one way of combating a problem raised by Jayne Meyer, which is that practitioners in the voluntary and private sectors do not always recognise their own status as professionals. This 'inferiority complex' can be manifested in low expectations of their own access to training and continuing professional development.

5.3 Pay inevitably impinges on the public and self- perceptions of Early Years practitioners. Jenny Middleton told the Committee that the Early Years Unit's last workforce survey (now two years old) showed that there were approximately 10,000 people working in non-maintained pre-schools and nurseries in Kent - and that the vast majority of them were on the minimum wage. She said that 'while you have a sector that pays the majority of its personnel minimum wage, you are clearly saying to them that you do not value what they do'. Although college training in Early Years is often fully subscribed, there is a constant shortage of active practitioners. Jenny Middleton attributed this to the fact that if you can get paid more for stacking supermarket shelves (which also does not require sacrificing free time to curriculum planning or training), then this inevitably creates problems of recruitment and retention. A study published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation points to low pay and poor job status as among the major factors for an 'unsustainable' fall in the numbers of registered childminders

nationally.²⁸ Staff in the voluntary sector are not usually paid an annual salary, as the settings can rarely afford it. Rather, they are paid only for the sessions that they work, meaning that they cannot be paid out of term time if the setting is not open, or for sessions missed for training. Pay and conditions can also affect the support that is available to practitioners. Difficulties in recruiting to the County's team of Early Years Advisory Teachers may be attributable at least in part to the fact that suitable candidates (qualified and experienced teachers who can demonstrate the very best practice) may face a pay cut to take up the post, because teachers' pay and conditions have moved on in recent years.

Opportunities for sharing practice

5.4 Diane Daniels considered that it would be very useful if there were more arenas in which practitioners from the voluntary sector could meet and share practice with colleagues from other sectors:

'There is not enough opportunity to compare practices with pre-schools or jointly with teachers in reception classes. Some areas hold supervisors' lunches, the Pre-school Learning Alliance have Branch committees and an executive committee where experiences and information can be shared out, but nothing like the consortium of cluster schools that schools operate... Meeting up regularly would be very helpful in my estimation... [Practitioners from each sector] have their own strengths and qualities. Teachers are qualified for school but pre-school practitioners are qualified in early years and both can learn from each other.'

5.5 The strengths of various types of Early Years education have come through strongly in the evidence to the Committee; speaking generally, voluntary groups are often particularly good at engaging parents, private nurseries may excel at integrating 'education' into wraparound care, maintained classes are traditionally strong pedagogically, and childminders can offer a domestic setting and plenty of individual attention. In other words, settings can all learn from each other, and facilitating the exchange of ideas and experiences should be beneficial for all practitioners, and ultimately the children in their care. It could also have a positive effect on children's transition into maintained classes, said Diane Daniels: 'The acceptance by schools that we are all working towards the same goals, on the same curriculum with appropriately qualified staff would improve the links that are possible.' Ms Daniels described how her pre-school's close relationship with a primary school has been beneficial:

'I attend the school staff meeting each week (which is a privilege) and it enables me to keep up with the work done in school, their new ideas and strategies. A pre-school's liaison with their local

²⁸ 'Study highlights unsustainable fall in the number of childminders', Joseph Rowntree Foundation press release (May 2001).

school has a lot of benefits but this is a voluntary arrangement by the school and I give my time.'

5.6 Margaret Edgington suggested to the Committee that one of the most constructive things a local authority can do for Early Years is to these provide networking opportunities for practitioners, such as cluster groups, or chances to visit other settings. In some areas providers have taken the initiative in starting this themselves; Roger Berwick mentioned the Thanet Early Years Forum (which first raised the need for a uniform transfer record), a consortium of private providers in his area, and a termly meeting between local schools and other providers to exchange ideas.

Access to training

5.7 Opportunities for sharing practice and particularly for receiving training mean little, however, unless practitioners can access them. Too much of the training that is available, said Jenny Reeves, carries a cost, and when faced with a wide choice of training options, teachers will often privilege those that relate to the content of a particular area of the curriculum, which is not necessarily the greatest need. The accessibility of training is a particular problem for practitioners in non-maintained settings, as not much of the training that is available offers financial assistance for supply cover (initial Foundation Stage training offered by the Early Years Unit being an exception). Furthermore, it is also extremely difficult for providers to arrange supply cover, as there is no bank or agency of qualified supply practitioners for non-maintained settings to draw upon. Diane Daniels explained that while her setting benefited in this respect from the help of the adjacent school, this is not an option for most voluntary settings; and if a village hall playgroup, for example, was short of staff they would simply have to close. Releasing staff for training with no prospect of supply cover was therefore simply not an option.

5.8 Roger Berwick said of private wraparound care that it is almost impossible to find time for staff to be trained - or even for regular, substantive staff meetings - when the setting is open from 8am to 6pm. He was also critical of one method often used to surmount the problems of training large numbers of people with limited time and budget; in his opinion, cascading is an extremely ineffective way of delivering training. It asks people who are not qualified to train others to do just that, and does not take into account the fact that each person will take different things away from training sessions according to their personal needs and priorities.

Recruitment

5.9 The availability of staff is also a cause for concern. Roger Berwick told the Committee that it is very difficult to get adequately trained staff. The standard of recruits is very variable, and it can be difficult to judge the worth of the plethora of qualifications available. (See table in Appendix A). Aspiring practitioners do not always access the most suitable training; he gave the example of school-leavers getting onto a course that is meant instead to help

those already working in the sector to build on their experience. Jenny Middleton drew attention to potential future recruitment problems that loom with ambitious Early Years expansion targets. National Government targets are to set up 450 additional childminder networks, and a minimum of 70,000 new non-maintained childcare places in areas of disadvantage by 2004. In Kent, expansion in the non-maintained sectors will be accompanied by the doubling of maintained nursery units. The implications for the workforce are immense, and much greater numbers will need to be attracted into the profession. A detailed picture of what personnel will be needed and how they can be recruited and trained in sufficient numbers is therefore an urgent requirement.

Advice and support

5.10 Several agencies provide support to Early Years practitioners through teams of advisory staff. Kent LEA has 1.5 full-time advisers working with maintained schools and nurseries and has recently appointed a team of Leading Early Years Teachers: teachers whose practice is identified as excellent and who can be observed in action by other teachers. In addition there are 3 Advanced Skills Teachers with Early Years expertise in Kent who each work 9 days per term to support schools in the Foundation Stage. The County's Early Years Unit employs Early Years Advisory Teachers, qualified teachers who visit and offer support to practitioners in non-maintained settings around the County. The work of the EYATs drew praise from Roger Berwick and Diane Daniels, but both commented that there are not enough of them to go round. Diane Daniels also explained that voluntary settings could draw on the Pre-school Learning Alliance's Development Workers for support and advice. In her experience, the PLA offers a consistent, personal and responsive service: 'we have got used to having home numbers and almost same-day responses to support in our pre-schools from Pre-school Development Workers or the PLA County Office'. However, these development workers cannot advise on curriculum issues. Furthermore, Ms Daniels expressed the belief that many voluntary-sector providers are badly informed about what kind of support is available to them, and from what sources.

5.11 The changes to the inspection system have disrupted some of the support mechanisms that many voluntary-sector providers had come to rely upon. 'We have also lost access to what was our Social Services Under 8's Officer who would have given us instant advice on the phone or as soon as possible visit,' explained Diane Daniels. This officer was a named individual with whom a setting could build a working relationship. OfSTED have taken over the registration and inspection functions, but 'we cannot get advice from OfSTED from a consistent officer (if we get a reply at all)'. Tina Cox at the Warden Bay playgroup also expressed concern at the loss of a dedicated Under-8s officer, because the playgroup had known exactly who to turn to for every problem related to care standards or regulations, and it was somebody based in Kent who would be familiar with the setting.

Administrative burdens

5.12 Jayne Meyer told the Committee that in her experience of working with providers through Sure Start in Dover, it was not always a lack of educational support that was getting in the way of improving educational standards. Many providers simply needed more backroom assistance, help with administration or accounting, for example, which would free up the practitioners' time to work with the children. The Pre-school Learning Alliance does offer some training in the business and administration side of running a setting, but this does not alleviate the problem of manpower. Diane Daniels described to the Committee how the administrative burden of playgroups had changed over the past few years: taking on the Foundation Stage, SEN responsibilities, Individual Education Plans, training from several sources, more formal record-keeping and planning, and the administration of the Nursery Education Grant. In a voluntary setting like the Caterpillar Cabin there is no equivalent to the school secretary, and so most of the administration has to be done voluntarily, by staff or parents. As children rarely stay at the setting for more than a year, the turnover among parent volunteers is high and in some years their committee is much more active than in others.

Recommendations

The Committee is of the opinion that valuing the practitioners who work with children in Early Years is one of the most important factors in raising standards. If we expect practitioners to perform to a professional standard which will help to raise children's attainment in the long term, the County must be committed to treating them as professionals. Therefore,

8. The Committee recommends that the County make a commitment to removing barriers to accessing training and professional development across Early Years sectors, and investigate all the steps that are necessary to realise this.

9. The Committee advises that 'cascading' is not an appropriate or adequate means of delivering training to practitioners; if resources will not allow any other model of delivering training, steps must be taken to support the practitioners responsible for the 'cascading'.

10. The Committee recommends that the Partnership and the LEA continue to investigate ways of facilitating the sharing of practice between practitioners of all sectors.

11. The Committee recommends that a statistical picture be built up of the numbers and qualifications of staff that will be needed to sustain expansion in the Early Years sector in Kent in coming years.

12. The Committee recommends that the support available to non-maintained providers in non-curriculum matters be reviewed, to ascertain whether it is possible to restore the benefits of a dedicated officer.

13. The Committee asks that the County review the pay and conditions of the team of Early Years Advisory Teachers, with the aim in mind of securing the best possible curriculum support for non-maintained providers.

Chapter 6a: The Early Years Curriculum

6.1 These chapters summarise the Committee's findings on three major themes: what young children should learn, how they should learn, and when they should learn. The starting point is comparative international research into the ages at which children begin compulsory schooling, and the implications of these findings for the curriculum and school organisation are then explored. In general the play-based approach of the Foundation Stage is endorsed, but with concerns that in practice sometimes it is delivered too narrowly or in too formal a manner. The Committee acknowledges that not only do practitioners need certain skills to deliver the curriculum in a developmentally-appropriate way - they also need policy-makers, parents and colleagues to support the Foundation Stage approach.

Research into school starting age

6.2 In most of Europe, children begin compulsory schooling at age six.²⁹ Malta is the only European country outside the UK to start school at age five. Northern Ireland and the Netherlands start at age four, and several eastern European and Scandinavian countries start at age seven.³⁰ However, many countries have extensive pre-school systems, and several allow individual children to enter school earlier or later than the standard starting age, in accordance with parents' wishes, teachers' views and/or the results of pre-school assessments. The UK's starting age is also low by world standards, and in practice can be regarded as lower still; most English and Welsh children start school when they are four, being admitted to reception classes at the beginning of the year in which they turn five.³¹ Figures from the DfES show that in January 2002, 99 per cent of English four year-olds were attending some sort of educational provision, the majority in reception classes. The UK's low starting age dates to the 1870 Education Act, and was a decision based on compromise rather than any developmental or educational rationale.

6.3 There are two principal arguments for a relatively low school starting age like that in the UK:³² firstly, that young children are capable of learning the more formal skills inherent in the school curriculum and so starting school early enables children to get a head start in learning; and secondly, that an early start provides an opportunity for children from less advantaged backgrounds to make up any deficit in their academic skills (the Netherlands has of August 2002 lowered its compulsory school age to four as an interventionist strategy for disadvantaged children).³³ The County obviously does not have the power to alter the compulsory school age for Kent children, but the Committee is concerned – having considered the academic strength

²⁹For this paragraph, see Sharp, C., School Starting Age: European policy and recent research, National Foundation for Educational Research (November 2002), pp.2-3.

³⁰Bulgaria, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Sweden are the countries starting at age seven.

³¹Bertram, T., and Pascal, C., Early Years Education: an international perspective, QCA and NFER (July 2002), p.8.

³²Sharp, p.3.

³³Bertram and Pascal, p.9.

of some countries with a significantly later school age - that the U.K.'s relatively low starting age may in certain respects be damaging to children's progress. The evidence has implications for two related areas: curriculum and admissions.

The curriculum in the Early Years: how and what should young children be learning?

6.4 International comparisons of school starting ages are useful but cannot be conclusive, because they involve different cultures, education systems and even concepts of childhood. However, it is possible to say with some confidence that a later standard starting age does not appear to retard children's progress. Research consistently shows that children introduced to formal learning of literacy and numeracy skills earlier in their lives (that is, around age four or five) do not generally display any *lasting* academic advantage; according to one US study, later readers catch up by around age eight - others say age nine.³⁴ The important contribution of experiences in the home and in pre-school must be borne in mind when evaluating later starting ages, but in most European countries children are not taught formal literacy or numeracy skills in kindergarten.³⁵

6.5 Moreover, certain studies have suggested that earlier exposure to academic skills can be associated with higher anxiety, lower self-esteem and less motivation towards learning.³⁶ The available research suggests that early reading, writing and maths experiences can be valuable, as long as they are embedded in children's preferred experiences and interests and are not too formal, abstract or disconnected from other activities. There is some evidence that pressurising young children to learn about letters or numbers in too formal a manner might be counter-productive; children under the age of four or five may not have fully developed the social and cognitive skills that facilitate learning from formal instruction.³⁷ The definition of 'pressurising' is open to interpretation, however. Tricia David recalled a research trip to Denmark where Early Years colleagues thought that children were being put under too much pressure even by the practice of integrating the written word naturally into children's play experiences in pre-school. (Professor David noted also that the incidence of illiteracy among Danes at age 11 is around a quarter of that in the UK. While the English language is relatively complex to learn, however, this does not mean that children need to start earlier to learn it successfully).

6.6 The Committee heard from several witnesses that literacy and numeracy skills are often given too much emphasis in the Foundation Stage, and are often taught in an inappropriately 'formal' way (meaning that they are treated as discrete, practitioner-directed activities). Tricia David told the Committee that literacy and numeracy can dominate the curriculum to the

³⁴ Sharp, pp.20, 12; Early Years Learning, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology Report 140 (June 2000), pp.9-10 (henceforth 'POST').

³⁵ POST, p.9.

³⁶ Sharp, p.16.

³⁷ POST, p.12.

detriment of the great breadth of learning that young children should be exposed to, and the other areas covered by the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*. Much depends on the approach practitioners take to integrating 'communication, language and literacy' and 'mathematical development' into children's learning. Professor David told the Committee that the elements of literacy and numeracy should, as with all the learning children do at this age, be embedded in their play and experiences. She explained that it is possible and desirable for a practitioner to *think* about the children's learning and activities in a formal way, but for the children to experience those activities as 'play'. 'Teaching' can take place without a formal structure; the crucial thing is for practitioners to be able to identify the learning opportunities in everyday and play experiences. This approach is backed by neurophysiological research which shows that children learn through experiences, meaning that if a child appears to be struggling with reading, writing or counting, it is actually counter-productive to use the limited time you have with that child on just those discrete skills. Embedding children's learning effectively calls for advanced pedagogical skills, which Professor David indicated may not always be developed to the same degree in the non-maintained sectors, due to a relative lack of training and consequently of confidence about pedagogy.

6.7 Reading and writing are not the only skills that are necessary for the eventual acquisition of fluent literacy. Evidence from a Sheffield University study has indicated that too much emphasis on reading and writing for the under-fives may be hampering the development of their spoken language skills. The researchers emphasise that oral skills underlie reading and writing, and that too little exposure to spoken language in the Early Years will damage later ability to understand text.³⁸ Tricia David was critical of Key Stage One SATs for not including any assessment of children's oral ability, which is a key indicator of effectiveness in the Early Years.

6.8 Furthermore, one of the most important things that a child learns in pre-school is not linked to any specific skill or area of knowledge, but is about attitude to learning itself, and learning how to learn. The elements of this include processes of attention, perseverance, task performance and work organisation. The Carnegie Foundation made a survey of US kindergarten teachers in 1991, which found that the teachers deemed only 65 per cent of entering students 'ready to learn'. Many people assumed that the teachers meant the children were lacking in cognitive skills. However, when asked to name the most important factors contributing to school readiness, the attributes cited most often were, in order: being physically healthy, rested and well-nourished; being able to communicate needs, wants and thoughts verbally; enthusiasm and curiosity in approaching new activities; taking turns; and knowing how to sit still and pay attention.³⁹

³⁸ 'Early-years reading and writing hampers speech', *Times Educational Supplement* (11 January 2002).

³⁹ Currie, J., *Early Childhood Intervention Programs: what do we know?*, Joint Center for Poverty Research, Working paper 169 (April 2000).

The National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies and the Foundation Stage

6.9 An inappropriate emphasis on literacy and numeracy may stem from tensions between the Foundation Stage on one hand and the Key Stage One tests and the National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies on the other. Some believe the demands of the latter to be at odds with the priorities of the former; these tensions are felt to act especially upon reception classes. Margaret Edgington told the Committee: 'As long as you value a couple of parts of the curriculum over others, and those are the bits you test and set targets for, you are inevitably going to take away from a broad, balanced curriculum.' Mrs Edgington is the author of a petition to the Government on the subject, the full text of which is reproduced in Appendix B. The petition was signed by more than 2,500 people. In response, the then Education Secretary Estelle Morris said that the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were fully consistent with the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*. This was disputed by Mrs Edgington, who believes that reception teachers' experience is of working with two 'incompatible' initiatives, with the Strategies being much more prescriptive than the Foundation Stage guidance.⁴⁰ The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* gives the following advice on linking to the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy:

'The early learning goals are in line with the objectives in the frameworks for teaching literacy and mathematics, which should be taught throughout the reception year... Reception teachers may choose to cover the elements of the literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson across the day rather than in a single unit of time. In order to ensure a smooth transition to the literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson in year 1, both should be in place by the end of the reception year.'⁴¹

6.10 The petition's cause has been taken up by the National Union of Teachers. A guidance document issued by the NUT claims that:

'The current national focus on targets for older children in reading, writing and maths inevitably has an effect on Early Years teachers. Such downward pressure risks undermining children's motivation and disposition to learn, thus lowering rather than raising levels of achievement in the longer term... Of particular concern are the experiences of reception and Year 1 children in mixed age classes. With the downward pressure of the Key Stage 1 statutory tests, an overcrowded primary National Curriculum as well as the requirements of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, reception classes can receive either the same or a diluted version of the Year 1 curriculum. In the face of such pressure, it can be very difficult for teachers to

⁴⁰ www.early-education.org.uk/1petition.htm

⁴¹ Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (2000), p.27 (henceforth 'CGFS').

make decisions about what best meets individual pupils' literacy needs. It is vital for teachers to make their own professional judgements, supported by evidence, about what is an appropriate curriculum for the children they work with.⁴²

The document argues that the Literacy Hour is inappropriate for young children because it forces them to 'sit for too long and learn and decontextualised and often meaningless ways'. Instead it recommends that 'teachers need to know it is acceptable to be formal in their heads but not practice, relating elements of the literacy hour to the whole curriculum to make it more meaningful'.

6.11 A DfES survey of reception class teachers and headteachers, published in June 2002, found that the majority of reception class teachers implemented both the NLS and the NNS flexibly in the first two terms, but used the Literacy Hour and a daily mathematics lesson in term three.⁴³ This approach was endorsed by an OfSTED survey of the teaching of literacy and numeracy in reception classes in 2001, which emphasised that pupils should have 'sufficient experience of full literacy hours and daily mathematics lessons before they enter Year 1'. However, Tricia David told the Committee that while it may be possible to make a class of four-year-olds all sit down together and quietly listen to the teacher, this does not mean that it is good for the children to do so. Margaret Edgington also expressed this view, saying that summer-born boys in particular may not react well to being asked to sit still and listen for an extended period of time. When behavioural problems ensue, the blame is too often put on the children rather than on the teaching. There is some concern that practitioners fear that OfSTED expect to see quite 'formal' teaching in the settings they inspect. However, in most cases this appears to be only a fear rather than a reality, as OfSTED adapt to the demands of inspecting the delivery of the Foundation Stage.

6.12 One of the problems of implementing the Foundation Stage in schools is that it was introduced after the National Curriculum and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. These other initiatives, which were generally 'pushed' more by the Government nationally said Mrs Edgington, are therefore sometimes felt to take precedence. Training for the Foundation Stage has not been as prominent and has been 'cascaded', and many practitioners still do not even own a copy of the guidance. Colleen Marin pointed out that materials on Early Years are not always sent directly to schools, unlike the NNS, NLS and National Curriculum documents. Heads and governors were not asked to go to Foundation Stage training initially in the same way as they were for the Strategies. She also agreed that the huge amount of NNS and NLS training has sometimes been allowed to skew priorities for the Foundation Stage.

⁴² National Union of Teachers, The Foundation Stage and the National Literacy Strategy - Guidance for Members in England (August 2002).

⁴³ Taylor Nelson Sofres, Aubrey, C., Implementing the Foundation Stage in reception classes, DfES Research Report 350 (June 2002).

6.13 The argument that Foundation Stage practice is being distorted by contrary priorities received support from several witnesses to the Committee (for example, Tricia David and Sue Burt as well as Margaret Edgington). Mrs Edgington said that she believed that much the same pressures - from the requirements of SATs, and the ethos of the rest of the school - may act upon nursery classes based in schools as well as on reception classes. Practitioners therefore need not only need the skills to deliver the curriculum; they need reassurance that the Foundation Stage approach is the right one, and guidance in reconciling the pressures and mixed messages acting upon them. Colleen Marin told the Committee that the LEA schools advisors have tried hard to achieve this by giving practical advice about how the Numeracy and Literacy Strategies can be linked to the Foundation Stage (for example, by producing a document about learning literacy through role-play), letting teachers know that it is both legitimate and effective for the Strategies to be delivered in a play-based way. They have taken every opportunity to underline the DfES' message that the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* is the core document for ages 3 to 5, to which the strategies are supplementary, and that schools should not get side-tracked into thinking that formal skills-based teaching is the way to produce lasting improvements in attainment. Elsewhere in this report the Committee has addressed the importance of educating both parents and other teachers (including headteachers) about the Foundation Stage, which would also help to ease the pressures.

The importance of child development knowledge

6.14 Additionally, there are areas of training which could help to both improve practitioners' professional judgement and their confidence to exercise that judgement. Tricia David identified child development as a topic that needs to be included in training to a much greater extent than at present. Margaret Edgington endorsed the view that incorporating more child development - including the ways in which children learn and the stages of development - in practitioners' training would enable them to better understand how children learn. The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* supports this, saying that the quality of teaching

'is informed by the practitioners' knowledge and understanding of what is to be taught and how young children learn... The different ways to teach may be selected at the planning stage or may be a perceptive response to what children do or say... Young children do not come into a setting in a neat package of social, emotional, physical and intellectual development... The strategies used in learning and teaching should vary and should be adapted to suit the needs of the child.'⁴⁴

6.15 The skill of differentiating between the needs of children at various stages of development calls for sound knowledge of this area; Jenny Reeves drew attention to the need to know how to extend bright children in an

⁴⁴ CGFS, p.22.

appropriate way, for example. The urgent need for more child development knowledge among practitioners is reinforced by the SPEEL study of pedagogical effectiveness in early learning. The study recognises the potential of degrees in Early Childhood Studies and the new foundation degrees for Senior Practitioners, but emphasises that 'Child development knowledge should be included in all training both initial and in-service... to give practitioners the depth of knowledge which all involved in early years acknowledge is vital to effective pedagogy'. This knowledge must then be linked to the CGFS to allow differentiated teaching and learning.⁴⁵

Key Stage 1 tests

6.16 A poll of over 1000 teachers conducted by the Times Educational Supplement earlier this year revealed an overwhelming majority in favour of scrapping Standard Assessment Tests for seven-year-olds, at the end of Key Stage 1.⁴⁶ The National Union of Teachers has called for the abolition of the SATs at age seven, because of the 'downward pressure' of the tests on teaching in the Early Years.⁴⁷ Jenny Reeves told the Committee that in her opinion, 'Key Stage 1 should not be tested... You've got to get rid of the SATs - they do so much damage... A lot of children with misguided parents are put under a lot of pressure, and the parents also pressurise the teachers.' Professor David explained that many teachers believe assessments simply duplicate what they themselves can tell you about a child. She advised, 'Weighing the pig more times doesn't make the pig any heavier'. As for Key Stage 1 in particular, Professor David ventured that the end of Year 2 might be too early a stage to expect to gain a full picture of children's performance - children who are not able to read and write by that age are not condemned by any means to be academic failures. Margaret Edgington concurred, expressing the view that results at age 11 are more important and a truer indicator of achievement. She said that for as long as we have the Key Stage 1 tests, they will continue to exert detrimental 'top-down' pressure.

6.17 The Welsh Assembly is in the process of scrapping Key Stage 1 SATs and extending the Foundation Stage to age seven in Welsh primary schools. Margaret Edgington endorsed these steps and recommended the same approach for England. Invited to comment on the Welsh innovations, Tricia David remarked that she had heard that so far there has been little effect on practice. However, this was mostly because local authorities were still eager to collect data on a similar basis to the SATs, and so the pressures on teaching method and content had not been removed.

Recommendations

The Committee endorses the play-based approach of the Foundation Stage, subject to an adequate understanding of this approach. Practitioners must be aware that play is an alternative structure for learning, rather than a

⁴⁵ SPEEL, p.135.

⁴⁶ 'Scrap all primary tests, teachers say', *Times Educational Supplement* (19 April 2002).

⁴⁷ National Union of Teachers, *The Foundation Stage and the National Literacy Strategy - Guidance for Members in England* (August 2002).

replacement for it or an activity separate from it. Literacy and numeracy should be incorporated into Foundation Stage learning only in a developmentally-appropriate, 'embedded' way. Adequate knowledge of child development is also fundamental to effective teaching and learning. Therefore:

14. The Committee recommends that training currently offered for practitioners in all sectors should be evaluated, bearing in mind the need to develop the skills necessary to 'embed' learning and to use 'play' as a constructive tool for learning.

15. The Committee welcomes and supports the ongoing work of the Kent Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership to produce 'good practice guides' for use in all Early Years settings alongside the Foundation Stage guidance.

16. The Committee recommends that the County's Literacy and Numeracy consultants should be involved in the planning and delivery of Foundation Stage training and materials for practitioners in all sectors, in order to resolve any impression of inconsistency between the Foundation Stage and the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, and to improve practitioners' understanding of how literacy and numeracy should be incorporated into the Early Years.

17. The Committee endorses the LEA's efforts to emphasise that the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* is the core curriculum document for all Early Years settings, including primary schools.

18. The Committee recommends that the child development content of Early Years training available in Kent be reviewed and, where necessary, additional training developed.

19. The Committee recommends that further ways to support the development of oral language skills in all Early Years settings be explored.

20. The Committee recommends that, alongside the Early Learning Goals, the County develop a definition of 'school-readiness' that is based on behaviours and attitudes rather than acquisition of formal skills. This could be used to focus the aims of Early Years provision.

21. The Committee does not wish Foundation Stage learning in any setting in Kent to be adversely affected by pressure to achieve results in certain skills in Key Stage 1 Standard Assessment Tests.

Chapter 6b: Transition to school

Primary school admissions

6.18 In addition to a comparatively low school starting age, the UK has an above-average correspondence between age-group and school year group. It is much more common in other countries to hold children back from starting school for a while, or, later, to promote them a year. A comparative study of schools in Zurich and Barking and Dagenham suggests that a narrow range of academic ability in a class enables the whole class to progress at a faster and more uniform rate. Such homogeneity might be achieved by increasing the flexibility of school starting age, allowing children to stay an extra year in pre-school if considered beneficial.⁴⁸ However, others are unconvinced that holding children back is advantageous, because while a narrower range of ability allows a teacher to adopt whole-class teaching methods more effectively, a wide range of ages within a class can bring its own problems, mostly social and behavioural.⁴⁹ While children who progress to compulsory schooling before they are ready may be misdiagnosed with special needs when they are simply a little immature, research from the USA suggests that the reverse may also be true; some children may be held back because of perceived immaturity, whereas they actually have special needs that need to be addressed by direct intervention rather than by delayed entry to school.⁵⁰

6.19 Several witnesses, however, commented to the Committee on the perceived negative effects of current systems of admissions to primary school. Jenny Middleton was critical of a situation in which admissions policies are sometimes dictated more by the need to secure the funding that attaches to each child, than by an assessment of individual children's needs. Jenny Reeves explained that at Sandgate School they would like to be able to have younger children starting on a part-time basis after Christmas, but all the surrounding schools begin on 1 September. Single-term entry means that children who have barely turned four are entering school reception classes. Jenny Reeves said, 'I really don't think that four year-olds should be in the reception class. It is not fair... There's your little girl who was four on 31 August, and your little boy who was five on 7 September, in the same class - they're a year apart.' Many respondents to the REPEY survey were also highly critical of the common practice of schools of admitting all children at the start of the year instead of in stages throughout the year. Children in Kent can be admitted in either September or January and they can be part-time until Spring half-term, but there is concern about how readily this scope for discretion is utilised.⁵¹

6.20 It is not just that schools are under pressure to fill places; Sue Burt drew attention to the dilemma of parents who are afraid of losing a place at their preferred school if they defer entry, or do not send their child to the

⁴⁸ POST, pp.9-10.

⁴⁹ Sharp, p.6.

⁵⁰ Sharp, p.8.

⁵¹ Siraj-Blatchford, I., et al, Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years, DfES Research Report 356 (June 2002), p.79 (henceforth 'REPEY').

school's reception class. This can override an honest assessment of the suitability of a reception class environment for a particular child. Margaret Edgington told the Committee that among the signatories of her Foundation Stage petition,⁵² parents of summer-born boys were among the most anxious about too formal an educational environment too early. There is some evidence to substantiate their anxiety; research shows that young, summer-born children tend to do better on later tests of academic achievement if their entry to school is delayed.⁵³ Jenny Reeves called for fluidity between pre-school and school, with children ideally able to join in some activities in the school and then go back to pre-school for others; she believed this would particularly benefit gifted or talented infants. The opportunity for children to experience both school and pre-school environments according to their needs at different times is a principle that could perhaps be usefully incorporated into a flexible admissions policy.

6.21 The 2001 OfSTED survey of literacy and numeracy teaching in reception classes, however, pointed out some of the problems that could be created by more flexible admissions arrangements:

'The children who enter school in January and, in particular, after Easter, have had less time in school than other children. They join their classes at points in the year when the rest of the children have already settled to established routines and ways of working... teachers resolve the difficulties as best they can by planning separate activities and teaching groups.'⁵⁴

Other observed strategies for combating the problems included 'stronger links with other pre-school settings, including playgroups, in order to develop a more consistent teaching programme throughout the foundation stage', such as joint training, developing common assessment and recording procedures, and maintained settings sharing their expertise in curriculum planning.⁵⁵ From the evidence received by the Committee however, it is clear that these activities, far from being only tactics for coping with the 'problem' of non-standard admissions, are themselves desirable elements of a coherent Foundation Stage strategy which could include greater flexibility in children's entry to school.

6.22 It is also questionable how many parents would be willing to make use of an option to defer their child's entry, to reception classes at least. A 2000 national survey of parents whose children had moved from playgroups to reception classes found that of the parents who had the option to deferring their child's entry to reception, only a very small number had actually done so. 64 per cent of those parents who had not had the option said that they would not have wished to exercise it. However, a substantial minority of parents - 37 per cent - did express the view that their child had been too young to start

⁵² See Appendix B.

⁵³ POST, pp.9-10.

⁵⁴ OfSTED, *Teaching literacy and mathematics in reception classes: a survey by HMI*, HMI 330 (2001), paragraph 69.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, paragraph 70.

reception class when he/she did. 3 per cent of parents felt their child had been too old.⁵⁶

Extending the Foundation Stage

6.23 Aside from the abolition of SATs at age seven, the other element to the innovations in Wales is the extension of the Foundation Stage through the first two years of compulsory schooling. Tricia David expressed the view that there is a definite need for elements of the Foundation Stage approach to be carried through into later schooling, especially for younger children in Year 1, and other witnesses supported this view. Colleen Marin believed that headteachers would begin to introduce elements of Foundation Stage good practice into Years 1 and 2, because they have seen how children flourish on the Foundation Stage, developing as independent learners with good problem-solving skills and high levels of self-esteem. She feels that some of our visionary headteachers could pioneer this way of working in Kent and share their best practice with others. Margaret Edgington similarly said that since the introduction of the Foundation Stage there has been increased interest among Year 1 and 2 teachers, and headteachers, in the use of play (recognising, for example, the value of role-play in improving children's language ability). She told the Committee that in schools which have extended the Foundation Stage, the major difference is that the children are more motivated and eager to learn.

6.24 Jenny Reeves also supported the idea of extending the Foundation Stage, but subject to a better understanding of what it means to learn through play, and greater rigour in supporting and tracking children's progression. The need for a better practical understanding of the concept is echoed by the SPEEL report which found that: 'Effective pedagogues believe in the value of play, yet have difficulty in either defining what they mean or in teaching through play. Research which identifies, through practitioners, what is play in the context of early education and care, and how children's natural propensity to play can be developed by practitioners, is clearly vital.'⁵⁷ The Early Years Curriculum Group recently published a booklet, *Onwards and Upwards - Building on the Foundation Stage*, calling for Foundation Stage principles and practice to be extended and used throughout Key Stage 1. It says, 'Where the Foundation Stage has been introduced successfully it has become increasingly apparent that the active, flexible, interactive approach to learning that epitomises the phase from three to five years is equally appropriate for children of six and seven.' One way of promoting greater correspondence between the Foundation Stage and compulsory schooling is for a school to establish an 'Early Years Unit', which covers Year 1 and perhaps Year 2 as well as reception and nursery classes.

6.25 Extending the Foundation Stage approach would also help to resolve the tensions created by two quite different curricula in schools where reception and Year 1 classes are combined. A DfES survey of reception

⁵⁶ Blake, M., and Finch, S., Survey of the movement of children from playgroups to reception classes, National Centre for Social Research and DfEE (2000).

⁵⁷ SPEEL, paragraph 7.56

class teachers found that 27 per cent were also teaching older children in the same class: 60 per cent of these reported some difficulties in teaching from both the CGFS and the Key Stage 1 Programmes of Study in the same classroom.⁵⁸ The same survey reported that 8 per cent of primary heads and 8 per cent of reception class teachers were concerned that the Foundation Stage disrupts children by being so distinct from Key Stage 1, and not preparing them sufficiently for the type of learning they will encounter in Years 1 and 2. This problem would also be lessened if Key Stage 1 learning were adapted to embody more of the Foundation Stage approach.

Easing the transition into compulsory schooling

6.26 Promoting a closer relationship in curriculum terms between the Early Years and compulsory schooling may be one way of tackling the problem of facilitating children's transition from pre-school to school. The introduction of the Foundation Stage has highlighted the problems children can experience when moving into Year 1, characterised by some as 'culture shock'. Some practitioners see the problem as the transition from pre-school to reception classes, others at the point of transition from reception to Year 1. Diane Daniels told the Committee, 'In my experience I think pre-schools offer much more freedom to choose activities and move around and use their imagination, experiment and risk take than reception classes.' In the past, there has been a significantly lower ratio of practitioners to children in reception classes, although in many schools this is now being addressed as governors recognise the need to recruit more Early Years staff to support qualified teachers. The physical environment of reception classes also traditionally is more akin to that of the schools which house them, with classrooms and especially outdoor areas that are not specifically tailored for the Foundation Stage. In two of the schools which were visited by Members of the Committee, the nursery class is physically separated from the rest of the school, while reception classes are housed in the main school building. This can inhibit communication between Foundation Stage staff, and can restrict reception children's access to suitable facilities.

6.27 The introduction of the Foundation Stage has led to a clearer and more helpful general perception of the proper place of the reception class, however. Practitioners are quoted in the REPEY report explaining how things have changed:

'I think it's good. I think, for reception, particularly, because they've been in no man's land. They're not quite nursery, and not quite adhering to the National Curriculum, so they haven't actually fit in or had a phase of education that is theirs in their own right, and it depends very much on your school as whether you are seen as part of a national curriculum or as part of amusements. At least they know now where they belong.'⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Taylor Nelson Sofres, Aubrey, C., Implementing the Foundation Stage in reception classes, DfES Research Report 350 (June 2002).

⁵⁹ REPEY, p.79.

'My grave concern... a few years ago was what was happening in reception classes. Reception teachers didn't necessarily have early years training and were being put under really incredible pressure to do the Literacy Hour and the Numeracy hour and I thought it was becoming far too structured... I used to be very anxious about some children, particularly those entering reception class nearer to four than to five missing out on a whole wad of nursery experience... Now I think the Guidance Notes are going to enable those reception teachers who knew that that wasn't the practice they wanted to adopt to argue in school if they need to that that's what they should be doing. I also think it points out to people coming into reception class. Sometimes you can get junior teachers who've been teaching year six I've seen that in schools - suddenly put in the reception class. So I think with the Foundation Guidance that kind of teacher will have far more of an idea of what's expected of them.'⁶⁰

6.28 By no means all the problems of transition into maintained Foundation Stage settings have disappeared; practitioners expressed concern about children's independence not being valued in a classroom setting, and 'there was also evidence that the old ideological divisions between pre-school and school (informal versus formal provision) remained in some settings and this seemed to be inhibiting progress in transition'.⁶¹ The REPEY authors suggest, however, that with the introduction of the Foundation Stage the greatest problems of transition have shifted from entering reception to entering Year 1: 'We found evidence that the reception teachers in our sample shared many of the pre-school centres' concerns about transition at this stage.'⁶² Margaret Edgington told the Committee that children in nursery classes can be very independent, choosing resources and activities for themselves, and Year 1 tends to be much more teacher-directed. Meanwhile,

'Year 1 classes have become very boring places to be, quite often - there are too many tables and chairs, and I think the children just feel quite alienated... What worries me is the number of children I hear who say school is boring, at the age of four or five... It is awful to think that children are already feeling this is not something they want to be engaging with, at that very early age.'

The Head of a North London junior school was quoted in the Guardian newspaper as saying: 'We go from this wonderful recognition that children learn in different ways, to something very structured... We're told to differentiate between the children at the nursery stage... but then, suddenly, at the end of year one, they're all supposed to be moving on at the same rate.'⁶³

⁶⁰ REPEY, p.82.

⁶¹ REPEY, pp.78-80.

⁶² REPEY, p.80.

⁶³ 'We want more play', The Guardian (16 July 2002).

6.29 Witnesses suggested that the introduction of the new Foundation Stage Profile will help Year 1 teachers to understand the Foundation Stage better. The Profile will provide a huge incentive for Year 1 teachers to familiarise themselves with the Foundation Stage, as the Profile will form the basis for planning in Year 1, and children entering the class will be at different stages in relation to the Early Learning Goals. (see paragraph 1.X for more information about the Profile).

6.30 Pre-school providers adopt various strategies to make the transition to reception or Year 1 classes easier for children, getting them used to the environment, routines and staff of the school. Children may visit the school, and reception teachers may visit the pre-school. At the Caterpillar Cabin, the children who will be moving into the adjacent school visit it one afternoon per week for the last half of the summer term, and the children regularly join in the school assembly. However, such contact is not always possible. When a large school has children coming from many different providers, it is hard to build up a special relationship with them; their teachers, for example, cannot visit the nursery every year. Similarly, the children in a pre-school setting might be moving on to several different schools. Diane Daniels said that the Caterpillar Cabin was very lucky in the relationship it has with the primary school, and that transition would probably be much more problematic for children whose settings do not benefit from such close ties. Much of what happens is done on an informal basis; Sue Burt said that this is how most contact between childminders and teachers occurs.

Transfer records

6.31 The transfer of records and knowledge about particular children to reception or Year 1 teachers currently mostly takes place on an ad hoc basis. Settings develop their own record-keeping procedures and make their own decisions about what sort of information they pass on with the children when they progress. Members were able to see some of these, very varied, methods of record-keeping when visiting settings. In the nursery class of Diocesan Payne Smith School in Canterbury, a variety of different records and examples of work are collated for each child and passed on with them to whatever reception classes they will attend. However, staff at Payne Smith did not know how much attention was paid to these packs, and rarely received any feedback from the reception classes.

6.32 However, this situation may be regularised by the introduction in 2003 of the Kent Foundation Stage Record of Transfer. (see paragraph 2.10 for more information about the Record of Transfer). Roger Berwick's Palm Bay Nursery was one of the pilot providers for the new Record. He told the Committee that it was a very good form, and it was important that practitioners from different sectors had been involved in devising it. The form is of a very manageable size, which makes it more likely that teachers will be able to absorb the information. Mr Berwick believes, however, that providers may have difficulty adapting the form to use with their own current record-keeping methods, especially when they have invested in a commercial

scheme. While the Record of Transfer has great potential, therefore, to regularise the flow of information about children moving to schools, it will only gain general acceptance if providers are convinced that it will be used by schools. There is a space on the form to indicate if a child has been attending more than one setting, in which case each provider (including also accredited network childminders) would complete a separate form. These would be passed on to the receiving provider before the child moves to allow preparation time.

Recommendations

The Committee is concerned that many children, particularly summer-born children, are entering a school environment at too young an age because of inflexible primary school admissions policies. The Committee also believes that the Foundation Stage approach has much to offer children who have already reached compulsory school age. Rather than seeking to ease children's transition into school by altering the Early Years experience to accustom them to the trappings of 'formal' education, perhaps it is the case that certain principles of Early Years provision should be incorporated into the first years of school instead. Therefore:

22. The Committee recommends that the County undertake an assessment of the effects of single-term entry policies, and investigate the practical implications and potential benefits or pitfalls of greater flexibility in admissions.

23. The Committee recommends that the County explore the possibility of allowing schools who wish to extend a less formal, experiential learning approach into Key Stage 1, and who can demonstrate that they have the necessary expertise, facilities and parental support, to do so on a trial basis.

24. The Committee welcomes the introduction of the Kent Foundation Stage Record of Transfer, and emphasises the importance of accurate and considered information about every child being passed on and utilised by schools, and the desirability of face-to-face contact between the practitioners concerned.

Chapter 7: The Use of Outdoor Areas in Early Years Settings

7.1 The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* states that 'Well-planned play, both indoors and outdoors, is a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge.'⁶⁴ The Committee has received much evidence for the importance of the outdoors as a key learning space for young children. 'Outdoor classrooms' should be used to deliver all areas of the curriculum, not just for physical development or for children to let off steam. Ideally the children will have access to outdoor areas throughout their time in the setting, not just in summery weather or in discrete blocks of 'playtime', and will be able to move between indoor and outdoor spaces, accessing learning opportunities and activities as they choose.

7.2 The importance of outdoor areas at Early Years settings is reinforced by the fact that settings may be providing many children's principal regular experience of the outdoors. Parental fears about security, and growing preferences for sedentary, passive and solitary pursuits, are negatively affecting both children's health and their learning opportunities. Outdoor play enables children to be much freer than is possible indoors, allowing them to explore boundaries and take risks. It contributes to their health and physical well-being, strength and co-ordination. It offers the chance to explore and observe the natural world, encourages creativity, and to use materials, interact with others and develop skills - including literacy and numeracy - in ways not always possible indoors.

7.3 Margaret Edgington, a witness to the Select Committee, has written in a booklet entitled *The Great Outdoors*.⁶⁵

'In considering the benefits of outdoor experience, it becomes obvious that some things can only be learnt out of doors, such as learning about nature, the seasons or weather conditions. Everything else has the potential to be learnt out of doors just as effectively as indoors. In fact some children are more likely to learn out of doors, particularly those with a more active kinaesthetic learning style. These are more likely to be boys.'⁶⁶

In this way, outdoor activities can support the differentiation of learning and adaptation to a variety of learning styles. Members of the Select Committee saw some excellent practice recognising these principles on their visits to Early Years settings: the imaginative use of outdoor areas for all areas of the curriculum; large, secure spaces sometimes incorporating different surfaces; and practitioners who ensured that reception classes without their own outdoor areas nevertheless had regular access to nursery class areas.

7.4 The Committee, however, acknowledges the sometimes very severe constraints practitioners face when seeking to provide and exploit an ideal

⁶⁴ CGFS, p.25.

⁶⁵ Edgington, M., *The Great Outdoors: developing children's learning through outdoor provision*, British Association for Early Childhood Education (2002), p.9.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.8.

outdoors learning environment. Many Early Years settings are not purpose-built, and even nursery and reception classes in schools often have facilities not specifically adapted for children aged three to five, or for the delivery of the Foundation Stage. Some of the difficulties observed by Members on Committee visits, or mentioned by witnesses in oral evidence to the Committee, were:

- no inside/outside flow, whether because of lack of staff or the unsuitable design of the buildings
- settings with inadequate security, restricting their willingness to invest in expensive outdoor equipment
- inadequate storage space for outdoor equipment
- unsuitable surfaces or surfaces in a bad state of repair
- reception classes in particular sharing outside areas (usually traditional playgrounds) with older classes
- use of outdoor areas restricted by proximity to other classes because of the disruption felt to be caused

7.5 A November 2001 survey of 550 Early Years practitioners working in schools by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers identified the use of outdoor areas as a major problem in implementing the Foundation Stage, highlighted as a top priority for review by 61 per cent of respondents.⁶⁷ A DfES survey of heads and reception class teachers recorded that 43 per cent of primary headteachers interviewed felt that outdoor learning facilities for reception-aged children in their school were 'inadequate'.⁶⁸ Colleen Marin confirmed to the Committee that outdoor areas have been a major problem for Foundation Stage settings within schools; she offered a very rough estimate of perhaps half of all maintained Early Years settings in Kent not having an appropriate outdoor area. Many schools will have an outdoor area which is nonetheless inadequate, or will not have enough staff to supervise it properly, and therefore they cannot deliver all six areas of the curriculum both indoors and outdoors. The quality of outdoor provision, Mrs Marin emphasised, impacts on standards and therefore on later attainment. In recognition of this, Kent LEA has recently issued guidance on outside areas, setting out the minimum criteria for adequacy, for example provision of at least 9m² per child.

7.6 The Kent EYDCP has recently undertaken a survey of the outdoor areas in non-maintained settings in the County. The survey attracted a response rate of around 60 per cent, with around 80 per cent of respondents saying they had some sort of outdoor opportunity. However these opportunities were not always used to the full - some only as a run-around space in good weather, and some not at all. In her evidence to the Select Committee, Jenny Middleton offered a rough estimate of perhaps only 40 per cent of non-maintained settings having access to ideal outdoor opportunities.

⁶⁷ Ellis, N., Firm Foundations? A survey of ATL members working in the foundation stage, Association of Teachers and Lecturers (2000).

⁶⁸ Taylor Nelson Sofres, Aubrey, C., Implementing the Foundation Stage in reception classes, DfES Research Report 350 (June 2002).

7.7 The Kent EYDCP is planning to address these issues via several avenues. A free conference for Early Years providers on the theme of outdoor provision is being held in February 2003, with a booklet of advice and good practice to follow. The Partnership is also working with the charity Learning Through Landscapes to develop a series of exemplars: Early Years settings of various types and in various locations around Kent that will offer a practical demonstration of good outdoor areas from which other providers can draw ideas. The exemplars will be deliberately chosen to reflect both purpose-built and adapted provision, and small and large spaces, as well as showing how results can be achieved on a tight budget.

Recommendations:

Effective outdoors provision for the Foundation Stage depends on several factors: the suitability of the premises, the expertise of the practitioners (which can include imaginative use of facilities external to the setting), and the ratio of staff to children (to allow indoor-outdoor flow, and active involvement in children's outdoor learning rather than just 'supervision'). The Committee attaches great importance to the quality of the spaces both indoors and outdoors in Early Years settings, and practitioners' knowledge of how to use these to maximum effect. Therefore:

25. The Committee endorses enthusiastically the forthcoming work of the Kent EYDCP in drawing attention to best practice regarding the set-up and use of outdoor areas.

26. The Committee expresses a desire to see use of outdoor areas addressed in the Partnership's forthcoming good practice guides.

27. The Committee recommends that an audit be undertaken of the existing facilities in maintained settings in Kent to assess the current quality of provision.

28. The Committee recommends that curriculum-appropriate facilities of the highest possible quality be incorporated as a matter of course in the design of new maintained nursery units in Kent.

Chapter 8: Parental involvement in Early Years Education

8.1 The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* describes parents' role as 'children's first and most enduring educators', and characterises the ideal parent-practitioner relationship as 'an effective partnership... a two-way flow of information, knowledge and expertise'.⁶⁹ Parental involvement is often understood as helping out as a volunteer, on day-trips or in fundraising. However, without wishing to devalue such contributions, the Committee proposes a broader understanding of the potential roles of parents, covering both their contributions towards children's learning in the home and their inclusion in settings' educational programmes.

How parental involvement benefits children

8.2 Research shows that young children's attainment can benefit from the involvement of parents.⁷⁰ It has been claimed that any quantifiable advantage children gain in intellectual skills from early education dissipates within a couple of years of starting school alongside children who have not had pre-school education. However, infants who attend schemes which involve parents register higher levels of social and educational attainment throughout their lives, because the home environment reinforces those early gains.

8.3 Jenny Middleton expressed the view that the optimum form of provision for children up to the age of four in ideal circumstances was to remain in the home with the parents. The REPEY report cites some evidence as to why this may be so in educational terms: conversational exchanges in the home tend to be richer and encourage children's active participation to a greater extent than exchanges between adults and children in a nursery school, where practitioners often pose a series of questions rather than fostering conversations. In the home, children more often initiate interactions, ask questions and seek information, responding to happenings within the situation.⁷¹ Parents are also better able than other adults to respond to their child's previous experiences and understanding; 'The more knowledge the adult has of the child the better matched their support and the more effective the subsequent learning... parents clearly have a distinct advantage in this respect.'⁷²

8.4 Tricia David pointed out to the Committee the consequent vital importance of involving parents in children's assessments. A child might behave in a certain way or achieve certain things in the familiar home environment that might not necessarily emerge in the setting, and the different nature of the interactions can lead to practitioners underestimating

⁶⁹ CGFS, p.9. Throughout this document the word 'parent' is understood to refer also to 'carer' when appropriate.

⁷⁰ Penlington, G., *The Parental Stake in Pre-School Education*, Social Market Foundation (September 2001), ch.1 (hereafter 'Penlington').

⁷¹ Tizard, B., and Hughes, M., *Young Children Learning: talking and thinking at home and school* (1984), cited in REPEY, p.98.

⁷² REPEY, p.99.

children's abilities. Several witnesses drew to the Committee's attention the lack of continuity of Early Years experience for many children, who attend several different settings sometimes even within the course of a week. In these circumstances parents may be able to provide the necessary continuity and stability for children, as the only people able to take an overview of the education and care their child is receiving. Parents could be exploited as a conduit of information between the practitioners involved. For these reasons, settings should be regarding parents as a valuable source of information and expertise about their children.

8.5 Parents who get involved at the Early Years stage are also more likely to remain involved in their children's education throughout school. Diane Daniels explained why it can be easier to get parents involved at this stage than later on, particularly in reference to voluntary settings: 'One of our strengths is that we offer "education" to children and adults in the setting in a very informal way - leading to family learning. Many parents have had bad experiences of school and formal learning and we are able to break down these barriers.'

8.6 Moreover, there can be benefits to the parents themselves. British and American studies show that parents who volunteer at pre-school centres experience increased confidence in their parenting skills, greater participation in education and training, higher levels of employment, better mental health and a more active role in the community.⁷³ The Pre-School Learning Alliance advocates the formation of parent boards for all Early Years settings, and drop-in and advice centres and family learning opportunities at childcare settings. At St Stephen's Primary School in Maidstone, where the Caterpillar Cabin pre-school is based, there is an adult literacy programme which helps parents to gain more confidence in their own skills while helping out in the reception class.

Informing parents about the Foundation Stage

8.7 Parents should be informed by the settings they use about the Foundation Stage and its approach to children's learning. Several benefits could be expected to accrue from this. Firstly, parents who understand what the practitioners are working towards will be more supportive of a setting's aims and methods. Many non-maintained providers in particular come under pressure from parents to send the children home with tangible evidence of what they have learnt, for example, a completed worksheet. Parental expectations can therefore restrict providers' willingness to deliver the curriculum in the most appropriate way. Part of the problem is a general lack of public awareness of (or interest in) child development, and misunderstanding of how children learn.

8.8 A DfEE survey of parents whose children were moving from playgroups to reception classes, published in 2000, revealed that parents often have different expectations of the services offered by playgroups and

⁷³ Penlington, ch.2.

reception classes; the main benefit of playgroups was perceived to be working and playing with other children (mentioned by 87 per cent of the survey's respondents), while the main benefit of reception classes was perceived to be learning to read and write (mentioned by 58 per cent).⁷⁴ This survey took place before the implementation of the Foundation Stage, and it is to be hoped that the introduction of one curriculum for all Early Years settings has lessened the discrepancy in perceptions - and the play/learning dichotomy - to some degree. However, it is likely that, unless parents have been well informed about the Foundation Stage by the settings they use or by their local EYDCP or LEA, these different expectations persist.

8.9 The idea of a 'play-based curriculum' is one that may need to be carefully explained to parents, and if necessary an alternative way of expressing the same ideas found. Jenny Reeves pointed out that the word 'play' can be very misleading for parents in an educational, particularly a school, context, as it seems to imply that the child is not really learning anything; she personally prefers the word 'investigation'. In contrast, Diane Daniels told the Committee that the word 'curriculum' in relation to the Foundation Stage is also problematic, as parents may confuse it with the National Curriculum and expect a more formal approach. Jenny Middleton told the Committee that the County's Early Years Advisory Teachers are often asked to speak to parents as a group, to present some of the research and explain the thinking behind what their children are doing from day to day. The result is usually that any adverse parental pressure on the providers is lifted, and a more constructive relationship can result.

8.10 A second benefit of informing parents about the Foundation Stage approach could be enabling parents to engage in complementary educational activities in the home. The REPEY report states, 'Where there is some consensus and consistency in the home and school's approach to children's learning and the curriculum then more effective learning outcomes could be achieved'.⁷⁵ It is not parental involvement *per se* that contributes to higher achievement, but parental support in the context of 'shared educational goals'.⁷⁶ If parents understand what the practitioners are working towards and are engaged in the process, they will be more able to consolidate their role as children's primary educators by extending learning in their own homes. Professor Lesley Abbott told the Parliamentary Select Committee on Early Years Education that 'parents are educated by seeing a different model of working with their children... a different way of responding to their child's needs'.⁷⁷

Strategies for involving parents

⁷⁴ Blake, M., and Finch, S., Survey of the movement of children from playgroups to reception classes, National Centre for Social Research and DfEE (2000).

⁷⁵ REPEY, p.98.

⁷⁶ REPEY, p.101.

⁷⁷ House of Commons Education and Employment Select Committee First Report, Session 2000-1: Early Years (January 2000), paragraph 15.

8.11 It is the quality and not just the quantity of interactions between a setting and the parents that matters.⁷⁸ Many settings already do excellent work in involving parents, according to their own circumstances, sometimes in a formal structure but often on a more ad hoc basis. Indeed flexibility is a key principle in engaging parents, as has been demonstrated by Sure Start programmes nationwide: 'One of the strengths of Sure Start is that it is extremely responsive to local needs... there is no standard 'Sure Start' way of approaching parents'.⁷⁹ Jayne Meyer described to the Committee the approach that is adopted with great success by Sure Start Dover, the key elements of which are persistence, an informal, unthreatening attitude, and working on a *quid pro quo* basis. Other witnesses to the Committee described the different methods employed within their settings. Jenny Reeves said that at Sandgate School some of the strategies included asking parents to join the working day, encouraging them to stay with the children if they want to, and getting to know the parents in order to utilise their skills and address their particular circumstances. Diane Daniels said that the most effective communication in her voluntary sector setting was done on a one-to-one basis.

8.12 Involving parents in their children's education is by no means unproblematic, however. A National Literacy Trust study identifies some of the potential pitfalls; achieving a balance between the responsibilities of schools and carers, the danger of placing counter-productive pressures or unrealistic expectations on both adults and children. School-initiated programmes around literacy may exclude parents and carers who have reading difficulties of their own or who have had poor experiences at school.⁸⁰ The study calls for 'thoughtful approaches that reflect the exigencies of family life, the realities of poverty and low literacy levels, and the complexities and uncertainties of parenthood for many adults'.⁸¹ The difficulties vary with each setting. Parents are not always as interested in their children's education as practitioners might wish, or they may feel that they lack the knowledge or skills to get involved in a positive way and prefer to think of education as solely providers' responsibility. Practitioners in day nurseries may find it hard to communicate with parents who are frequently hurrying to work in the mornings and eager to get home in the evenings.

Recommendations:

The Committee has received convincing evidence for the need to involve and engage parents in their children's early education and care, and to support the role of parents as children's principal educators. Therefore:

29. The Committee recommends that consideration be given to producing for providers in all sectors in Kent a 'toolbox' of suggested

⁷⁸ REPEY, p.99.

⁷⁹ Penlington, ch.4.

⁸⁰ National Literacy Trust, Parental Involvement and Literacy Achievement: the research evidence and the way forward, Consultation Paper (May 2001), p.27.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.9.

strategies for engaging parents, perhaps as an element of the Partnership's forthcoming good practice guides.

30. The Committee recommends that consideration be given to a County-wide initiative, or the production of suitable materials in accessible formats, to inform parents of young children about the Foundation Stage and enable them to participate in their children's learning in the home.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

2. The current context of Early Years in Kent

1. The Committee welcomes the introduction of the Kitemark Quality Assurance Scheme, and recommends that all necessary steps be taken to ensure that the Kitemark is accessible to all providers, and that its relationship to other schemes of Quality Assurance, particularly that offered by the Pre-School Learning Alliance, is made clear.

3. The Foundation Stage

The Committee is pleased that the Foundation Stage and its Curriculum Guidance have been welcomed by Early Years practitioners, and welcome the steps that have already been taken in many schools in Kent to recognise the importance of this stage of education. Therefore:

2. The Committee recommends that the LEA actively encourage all primary schools in Kent to have a champion for Early Years, and where appropriate a Foundation Stage co-ordinator, as a member of the school's Senior Management Team, and a governor with a special responsibility for the Foundation Stage.

3. The Committee endorses the LEA's initiatives to inform all primary headteachers about the philosophy and methods of the Foundation Stage, and expresses the wish that this become universal if not compulsory.

4. Integration and continuity

Early Years education cannot be seen in isolation from the wider range of services and interventions that can improve outcomes - educational and otherwise - for children. Children's experience of Early Years services is too often fragmented, and parents too often cannot make use of education sessions which occupy their children for only part of the working day.

4. The Committee is pleased that Kent has its first designated Early Excellence Centre, and hopes that it will be an effective beacon for excellence in service integration in the County.

5. The Committee recommends that the County seeks to find flexible and workable solutions to the problem of providing high-quality care and education that working parents will be able to use. This could include both extending maintained provision into wraparound care, and qualified teachers practising in non-maintained settings.

6. The Committee recommends that ways of making individual children's experience of Early Years care and education more coherent

be explored, including ways of tracking children's progress across settings.

7. The Committee advises of the need for further research to establish how services for the birth to 3 age group in the County can best be developed.

5. Early Years as a profession

The Committee is of the opinion that valuing the practitioners who work with children in Early Years is one of the most important factors in raising standards. If we expect practitioners to perform to a professional standard which will help to raise children's attainment in the long term, the County must be committed to treating them as professionals. Therefore,

8. The Committee recommends that the County make a commitment to removing barriers to accessing training and professional development across Early Years sectors, and investigate all the steps that are necessary to realise this.

9. The Committee advises that 'cascading' is not an appropriate or adequate means of delivering training to practitioners; if resources will not allow any other model of delivering training, steps must be taken to support the practitioners responsible for the 'cascading'.

10. The Committee recommends that the Partnership and the LEA continue to investigate ways of facilitating the sharing of practice between practitioners of all sectors.

11. The Committee recommends that a statistical picture be built up of the numbers and qualifications of staff that will be needed to sustain expansion in the Early Years sector in Kent in coming years.

12. The Committee recommends that the support available to non-maintained providers in non-curriculum matters be reviewed, to ascertain whether it is possible to restore the benefits of a dedicated officer.

13. The Committee asks that the County review the pay and conditions of the team of Early Years Advisory Teachers, with the aim in mind of securing the best possible curriculum support for non-maintained providers.

6a. The Early Years curriculum

The Committee endorses the play-based approach of the Foundation Stage, subject to an adequate understanding of this approach. Practitioners must be aware that play is an alternative structure for learning, rather than a replacement for it or an activity separate from it. Literacy and numeracy

should be incorporated into Foundation Stage learning only in a developmentally-appropriate, 'embedded' way. Adequate knowledge of child development is also fundamental to effective teaching and learning. Therefore:

14. The Committee recommends that training currently offered for practitioners in all sectors should be evaluated, bearing in mind the need to develop the skills necessary to 'embed' learning and to use 'play' as a constructive tool for learning.

15. The Committee welcomes and supports the ongoing work of the Kent Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership to produce 'good practice guides' for use in all Early Years settings alongside the Foundation Stage guidance.

16. The Committee recommends that the County's Literacy and Numeracy consultants should be involved in the planning and delivery of Foundation Stage training and materials for practitioners in all sectors, in order to resolve any impression of inconsistency between the Foundation Stage and the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, and to improve practitioners' understanding of how literacy and numeracy should be incorporated into the Early Years.

17. The Committee endorses the LEA's efforts to emphasise that the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* is the core curriculum document for all Early Years settings, including primary schools.

18. The Committee recommends that the child development content of Early Years training available in Kent be reviewed and, where necessary, additional training developed.

19. The Committee recommends that further ways to support the development of oral language skills in all Early Years settings be explored.

20. The Committee recommends that, alongside the Early Learning Goals, the County develop a definition of 'school-readiness' that is based on behaviours and attitudes rather than acquisition of formal skills. This could be used to focus the aims of Early Years provision.

21. The Committee does not wish Foundation Stage learning in any setting in Kent to be adversely affected by pressure to achieve results in certain skills in Key Stage 1 Standard Assessment Tests.

6b. Transition

The Committee is concerned that many children, particularly summer-born children, are entering a school environment at too young an age because of inflexible primary school admissions policies. The Committee also believes

that the Foundation Stage approach has much to offer children who have already reached compulsory school age. Rather than seeking to ease children's transition into school by altering the Early Years experience to accustom them to the trappings of 'formal' education, perhaps it is the case that certain principles of Early Years provision should be incorporated into the first years of school instead. Therefore:

22. The Committee recommends that the County undertake an assessment of the effects of single-term entry policies, and investigate the practical implications and potential benefits or pitfalls of greater flexibility in admissions.

23. The Committee recommends that the County explore the possibility of allowing schools who wish to extend a less formal, experiential learning approach into Key Stage 1, and who can demonstrate that they have the necessary expertise, facilities and parental support, to do so on a trial basis.

24. The Committee welcomes the introduction of the Kent Foundation Stage Record of Transfer, and emphasises the importance of accurate and considered information about every child being passed on and utilised by schools, and the desirability of face-to-face contact between the practitioners concerned.

7. Outdoor areas

Effective outdoors provision for the Foundation Stage depends on several factors: the suitability of the premises, the expertise of the practitioners (which can include imaginative use of facilities external to the setting), and the ratio of staff to children (to allow indoor-outdoor flow, and active involvement in children's outdoor learning rather than just 'supervision'). The Committee attaches great importance to the quality of the spaces both indoors and outdoors in Early Years settings, and practitioners' knowledge of how to use these to maximum effect. Therefore:

25. The Committee endorses enthusiastically the forthcoming work of the Kent EYDCP in drawing attention to best practice regarding the set-up and use of outdoor areas.

26. The Committee expresses a desire to see use of outdoor areas addressed in the Partnership's forthcoming good practice guides.

27. The Committee recommends that an audit be undertaken of the existing facilities in maintained settings in Kent to assess the current quality of provision.

28. The Committee recommends that curriculum-appropriate facilities of the highest possible quality be incorporated as a matter of course in the design of new maintained nursery units in Kent.

8. Parental involvement

The Committee has received convincing evidence for the need to involve and engage parents in their children's early education and care, and to support the role of parents as children's principal educators. Therefore:

29. The Committee recommends that consideration be given to producing for providers in all sectors in Kent a 'toolbox' of suggested strategies for engaging parents, perhaps as an element of the Partnership's forthcoming good practice guides.

30. The Committee recommends that consideration be given to a County-wide initiative, or the production of suitable materials in accessible formats, to inform parents of young children about the Foundation Stage and enable them to participate in their children's learning in the home.

Appendix A

Below is a table summarising the main qualifications available to practitioners in Early Years education and care, excluding teacher training. A selection of these qualifications is offered by all the colleges of further education in Kent. For the purposes of calculating staff:children ratios, 'qualified' staff are staff with a qualification at Level 2 or above.

Occupation	Qualifications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nursery assistant • Pre-school assistant • Crèche assistant • Parent/toddler group assistant • Playgroup assistant • Toy library worker • Baby sitter/au pair • Playworker 	NVQ Level 2 in Early Years Care and Education [‡] Foundation Award in Caring for Children* Level 2 Certificate in Childcare and Education* Level 2 Progression Award in Early Years Care and Education [°] Level 2 Certificate in Pre-school Practice* NVQ Level 2 in Playwork [‡] Intermediate Certificate in Developing Skills Working with Children and Young People ^a
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nursery supervisor • Pre-school leader • Crèche leader • Playgroup leader • Toy library leader • SEN supporter • Nursery nurse • Childminder 	NVQ Level 3 in Early Years Care and Education [‡] Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education (formerly the Diploma in Nursery Nursing)* Level 3 Certificate in Childminding Practice* Level 3 Certificate of Professional Development in Work with Children and Young People* Level 3 Diploma in Pre-school Practice* NVQ Level 3 in Playwork [‡] Level 3 BTEC National Certificate in Early Years [†] Level 3 BTEC National Diploma in Early Years [†]
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager • Development Officer • Advanced Practitioner 	NVQ Level 4 in Early Years Care and Education [‡]

* Awarded by CACHE (Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education)

° Awarded by City and Guilds

‡ Awarded by City and Guilds, CACHE and Edexcel

^a Awarded by NCFE

[†] Awarded by Edexcel

1. All new **childminders** have to complete a pre-registration training course and first aid training either before registration is completed or within 6 months of registration. The most usual qualification taken by childminders is the Level 3 Certificate in Childminding Practice, which encompasses the pre-registration training, run by CACHE in association with the National Childminding Association.

2. The DfES is developing a new career pathway for Early Years specialists, based upon a **foundation degree**. Foundation degrees are new employment-related, higher education qualifications. Flexible study methods make them available to people already in work, unemployed people, or those wanting to embark on a career change. Canterbury Christ Church University College is offering a foundation degree in Children and Young People Learning. This career pathway is intended to lead to Senior Practitioner level and potential Initial Teacher Training towards Qualified Teacher Status.

Appendix B

The Foundation Stage petition:

'We, the undersigned, congratulate the Government on the introduction of the Foundation Stage and on the quality of the accompanying Curriculum Guidance. We are, however, concerned that some practitioners, particularly those working in reception classes, are being hindered in their attempts to implement the principles of the Foundation Stage by top-down pressure from Primary Headteachers, colleagues in Key Stage 1 and by Literacy Consultants, who are giving advice, or making demands, which conflict the Guidance. We are also concerned about the lack of continuity (of approach and expectations) from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1. The expectations for children's achievements in Years 1 and 2 are incompatible with the Early Learning Goals for children at the end of the Foundation Stage, and unrealistic for children, who may be just 5 on entry to Year 1 and need further experience of the approach promoted by the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA/DfEE 2000).

In order to ensure the Foundation Stage is implemented successfully, by appropriately qualified practitioners, we urge the Government to:

- insist that all Primary Headteachers, Advisers and Consultants have specialist training on the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*
- release the Foundation Stage from any requirement to implement the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, allowing practitioners to concentrate on planning from the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*
- promote the approach to learning and teaching advocated for the Foundation Stage into Key Stage 1 (particularly into Year 1 where many children are only just 5 on entry)
- recognise that the Foundation Stage, if fully implemented, will have positive effects on children's levels of achievement, but that, research shows, this effect is more likely to be seen during Key stage 2
- remove the pressure on schools to achieve limited academic targets at the end of Key Stage 1.'

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