

INSIDE THE FOUNDATION STAGE



Recreating the reception year

REPORT SUMMARY



Report commissioned and published by the
Association of Teachers and Lecturers

Written by
**Siân Adams, Elise Alexander,
Mary Jane Drummond and Janet Moyles**

This is a summary of a detailed and comprehensive 140 page report commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers.

For a copy of the full Report (free to members, £12.99 to non-members) please call the ATL publications despatch line on 0845 4500 009. Please quote product code PR18.

The report is also available online in sections at www.atl.org.uk.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers exists to promote the cause of education in the UK and elsewhere, to protect and improve the status of teachers, lecturers and non-teaching professionals directly involved in the delivery of education, and to further the legitimate professional interests of all members.

For a free copy of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers' publications catalogue, please call the ATL publications despatch line on 0845 4500 009.

©Association of Teachers and Lectures 2004. All rights reserved. Information in this publication may be reproduced or quoted with proper acknowledgment to the Association.

To receive the text of this book in large font, please contact ATL on 020 7930 6441 or write to ATL, 7 Northumberland Street, London WC2N 5RD.



CONTENTS

Introduction: background and research aims	2
Findings: introduction	4
Principal findings	5
The continuum of practice	8



BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH AIMS

What do teachers and others involved with reception classes think about the new Foundation Stage and its curriculum guidance?

What constructs do reception class teachers use in their thinking and planning for Year R children?

Has being part of the Foundation Stage impacted upon the reception class teacher's work?

Has being part of the Foundation Stage impacted upon children's learning experiences?

What role do the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) now have in reception class policies and practices?

Has the Foundation Stage enabled further examination of services for reception age children?

The announcement over two years ago of a new stage of education, the Foundation Stage, for children from the age of three to the end of the year in which they turn five, was swiftly followed by the publication of the document *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (DfES/QCA 2000). This document, as none before, outlined six elements of the early years curriculum; emphasised play both indoors and outdoors; laid out the principles of early childhood education and care, and emphasised the role of parents as partners in children's learning. It represents substantial changes to the structures of education and care for young children and raises many questions for professionals and academics, just some of which are identified above.

The ways in which children, the curriculum, the reception year and early years pedagogy are construed by policy makers, early years educators, parents and other stakeholders are major factors in the development of quality care and education services for young children in England. We have a long tradition of thoughtful, perceptive early years practice, stretching from the pioneering observations of Susan Isaacs to the ambitious *Quality in Diversity* (ECEP 1998), so we approached this enquiry with optimism and a desire to seek out and document best practice.

We set out to establish how early years practitioners and other professionals involved in the Foundation Stage have taken up the challenge of establishing this whole new phase of learning, distinct from Key Stage 1, and grounded in the principles of early childhood education.

The aims of the research were to:

- establish an overall picture of the implementation of the Foundation Stage in reception classes, and its impact on the quality of teaching, learning and the curriculum
- document the pedagogy of a small group of strong, articulate, reflective practitioners, working in reception classes
- identify the key constructs at the heart of these reception class teachers' work
- explore the practices that embody those constructs and the impact of their work on four to five year old children in reception classes.

The research was undertaken from February 2002 to August 2003. Initially, a questionnaire survey was sent out to reception class teachers, headteachers, teaching assistants, Foundation Stage governors, local authority and Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership personnel in 11 local education authorities across England. This was followed by interviews with representatives of all six groups, in seven authorities. Observations were also undertaken in nine reception classes in the same authorities. The triangulated outcomes of these three approaches have formed the basis of our findings and recommendations.

In producing this short executive summary, we have condensed the full report and present a necessarily brief outline of our findings (see inside cover for details of how to obtain the full research report). Our aim in this publication is to explain the significance of our findings in terms of our understanding of the aims and aspirations of the new structures of the Foundation Stage. We also offer some tentative suggestions to support self-evaluation and critical review by groups of Foundation Stage practitioners, in the conviction that, with appropriate support and some reappraisal of the impact of their role, these practitioners can adopt a more reflective approach to pedagogy, and focus much more closely on the quality of children's learning.



In the full report, selected issues in the field of early childhood education are reviewed. We argue that this will increase our understanding of contemporary reception class practices within the framework of the Foundation Stage and its Guidance document. In particular, we welcome the way in which the Foundation Stage offers the possibility of coherence and continuity for children's learning in the years before they reach the statutory age of schooling. The full report outlines our shared construction, as experienced researchers and early years educators, of young children as powerful learners, already deeply committed to the project of exploring and understanding the world. It argues that these young learners should be treated as active meaning-makers, co-constructing knowledge and understanding, as they act upon and investigate the social and material worlds of their early learning settings. We explain our optimism that the establishment of the Foundation Stage will help to eliminate the well-documented, inappropriately formal instruction that has characterised some reception classes for many years, replacing it with practices that are 'long established' in what is now the first year of the Foundation Stage and equally well-documented. We express our hope that the Foundation Stage will encourage and sustain the movement towards integrated and co-ordinated services for young children, exemplified in the multi-professional family/ early childhood centres, recently recognised as Early Excellence Centres. The concept of partnership as embodied in the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships is welcomed, as is the importance of the new role of reception class teachers (and their headteachers) as professional educators in partnership with the whole community of Foundation Stage practitioners, in a variety of maintained and non-maintained settings.

It was with these explicit beliefs and aspirations that we set about the process of analysing our wealth of data.

In carrying out this analysis many sources and research studies were examined, which, taken together, contribute a comprehensive and authoritative account of effective pedagogy, high quality provision and best practice. We drew, for example, on DES 1990; Ball 1994; Ministry of Education 1996; ECEF 1998; Edwards *et al.* 1998; Drummond 1999; Moyles *et al.* 2001, and Alexander 2003, as well as some of the great pioneers of the past.

It is then with disappointment and concern that we report that our optimism and enthusiasm seem, in some respects, to have been ill-founded, and that our understanding of what constitutes quality in early childhood provision is not consistently realised in practice.



Principal findings

More detailed findings appear in the full report, which illustrate and amplify those given below, and which draw specifically on each of the strands of our enquiry (questionnaire, interview and observation). This summary outlines our five principal findings to which we have added comments and recommendations for exemplification.

Finding 1

There were significant discrepancies between the questionnaire data, the interview data and the observation data. The questionnaire data showed that both the Foundation Stage and the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* were welcomed by practitioners, and had presented few difficulties or challenges to practice in schools. The interview data showed that the implementation of the Foundation Stage had not been quite as straightforward as the questionnaire data suggested, and there was evidence of some confusion. Then the classroom observations provided evidence that everyday practice in classrooms does not appear to reflect adequately the principles of early childhood education, even as set out in the Guidance document. There appears to be a fundamental lack of understanding of the place of the reception year in the education of young children, and what its priorities and principles should be.

Comment

This finding suggests an urgent need for coherence, clarity and co-ordination in the work of all those involved in 'recreating the reception year'.

We recommend a variety of strategies (training courses, conferences, seminar opportunities) to foster a clear and coherent approach to the care and education of all children between three and five years of age, an approach which emphasises the wholeness of the new community of Foundation Stage children and their educators.

Finding 2

The possibility of extending to four and five year olds in primary/ infant schools the best practice in the education of three and four year olds has not been realised in practice. Our observation and interview data show that what we know about high quality in what is now the *first year* of the Foundation Stage from a number of other studies (e.g. Whalley 1994; Bertram *et al.* 2002), is not matched in the *second year* of the Foundation Stage in the schools in our sample.

Comment

This finding suggests that the reception year is not yet seen in its proper relation to the first year of the Foundation Stage, as an extension and continuation of the best of early childhood care and education.

We recommend that the best practices in the years prior to the reception year should characterise the whole of the Foundation Stage. This should not give way to practice in the reception year that is typically characteristic of Key Stage 1 classrooms, with a daily rhythm of lessons, learning objectives and plenary sessions.

Finding 3

There was evidence that reception class practitioners experienced pressure from their Key Stage 1 colleagues to prioritise particular kinds of achievements (for example, literacy, numeracy and familiarity with particular school routines, such as lining up in the playground).

Comment

This finding suggests that Foundation Stage practitioners are not yet sufficiently confident or articulate to resist inappropriate pressures from their KS1 colleagues.

We recommend that Foundation Stage practitioners should be supported by documentation and training opportunities which, rather than prescribing what they should do, would offer them a well-argued rationale for the principles of early childhood curriculum and effective pedagogy in the early years. Reception year practitioners should be trusted to build, with this support, their own confident and principled understanding of the necessary characteristics of early education.

Finding 4

There was evidence that the function of the reception year was seen exclusively in terms of the whole school context and the start of statutory education; there was a relatively low level of awareness of the relationship of the reception year to the education of all Foundation Stage children, within the structures of the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. Indeed, the working model of partnership evidenced in this enquiry across all respondents is weak, underdeveloped and largely unrealised in practice.

Comment

This finding suggests that a shared working definition of partnership is urgently needed to underpin the collaborative tasks of all those involved in the Foundation Stage.

We recommend that training opportunities for all those involved in the Foundation Stage should recognise and explicitly affirm the relationship between individual reception classes and the Foundation Stage community as a whole. This relationship is as yet under-developed, but has enormous potential for building coherence and continuity.

Finding 5

There was extensive evidence in both questionnaire and interview data of a perceived need for a variety of different training opportunities. Frequently mentioned themes included outdoor play, literacy learning through play and teaching through play. Surprisingly, there was little or no recognition of the need for training to work with other professionals or for working in partnership with parents.

Comment

This finding is welcome in that it suggests that the majority of our sample recognise the need for growth and development in their practice.

We recommend that high quality, funded opportunities for continuing professional development should be provided for all those involved with reception classes, right across the partnership. These opportunities should be multi-disciplinary and collaborative, and should foster shared debate, discussion and a growing mutual understanding between educators from a variety of settings.

These five principal findings, taken together, suggest the need for sustained and well-supported development work, both across local partnerships, and within individual primary/ infant schools. Only through such work will there be any possibility of achieving a desirable consensus about the priorities, purposes and underpinning philosophy of the reception year in the newly defined context of the Foundation Stage. In the remainder of this summary report we outline some approaches that we consider would be useful in supporting the development work we have identified as essential if the Foundation Stage is to fulfil its promise of ensuring appropriate high quality provision for all three, four and five year old children.



The continuum of practice

One of the important key findings from the observation strand of this enquiry is that many aspects of 'quality' are highly variable from classroom to classroom. Using our observation data, we have constructed a framework that shows the multiple dimensions on which schools and classrooms differ. It is presented in four sections, with the descriptions of appropriate practices and priorities on the right-hand side. The brief descriptors at each end of the continuum are all based on our observation data.

We recommend that the continuum of practice is used as a self-evaluation tool by reception class practitioners, supported by their headteachers and advisory support staff. With this tool, small groups of practitioners can begin to establish a regular cycle of enquiry, observation and critical review. The extremes of the continuum, for any of the 22 aspects of quality they represent, can be used as the starting point for focused observations, as practitioners ask deceptively simple questions about themselves and the children, looking for evidence of good practice. The framework is not intended as a way of labelling and perpetuating weakness or inadequacy, but as an incentive to development work, in which small/ whole staff groups can observe and document their slow, steady progress towards quality. Movement across the continuum is the desirable outcome of the use of the framework.

Children's activities and behaviours

Limited teacher-imposed writing task (e.g. compose and copy two sentences)	↔	Emergent writing for a purpose, spontaneous mark-making
Use of play/ toy materials to demonstrate specific learning objectives (e.g. parts of speech)	↔	Spontaneous complex imaginative play (e.g. with big blocks and miniature world materials)
Obey the school/ classroom rules	↔	Care for, comfort and love one another
Supply brief/ single word responses when nominated by the teacher	↔	Use complex spoken language spontaneously for a wide variety of purposes
Record conclusions/ observations dictated or modelled by the teacher	↔	Arrive at and express personal meanings through discussion in small groups
Thematic work and imaginative play supported by pictures, ICT, plastic replicas	↔	Children handle and use authentic objects and living materials from the real world

The educators' priorities, key constructs, activities

An emphasis on achieving the Early Learning Goals	↔	A whole-hearted commitment to play and active learning
Complete detailed short, medium and long-term plans based on the six areas of learning	↔	Plan from daily observations of children's spontaneous activity
Daily timetable dominated by adult-led activities	↔	Set aside long periods for child-initiated activities
Inform parents e.g. about literacy practices (key words, phonic rules)	↔	Aspire to full partnership with parents, recognising their role as prime educators
Assume that children only learn what the adult teaches	↔	Assume that children come into the classroom as confident and accomplished learners in their own right
Fragile belief in self, dependence, anxiety about role	↔	Strong, confident advocate for children and their learning

The learning environment and working conditions

Security issues are paramount	↔	Open doors, open relationships – everybody is made welcome
Traditional concrete playground	↔	An outdoor learning environment that reflects the richness and breadth of the classroom provision
Minimal bilingual staffing, little attention to mother tongue and EAL learners	↔	Rich provision of bilingual staff; their expertise used with confidence
Low professional status of the early years team	↔	High status of the early years team, membership of SMT
Under-staffed, numbers of children rising, severe budget constraints	↔	Well-staffed, experienced NNEBs, early years trained teachers/ headteacher

The conceptual structures of schooling

The Early Learning Goals and the KS1 SATs represent the most significant aspects of learning	↔	A holistic view of learning: all the children's learning is valued, however divergent
The setting seen as a place to lay the foundations for good SATs results at KS1 (and beyond)	↔	The setting seen as a place in which children can ' <i>have a good childhood</i> '
Literacy learning constrained by the priorities of NLS	↔	An emphasis on living, real-world literacy and the '100 languages' of representation
The overriding importance of particular aspects of early numeracy: number labels and number bonds	↔	Mathematical learning seen as a way of understanding and operating in the world
A divided view of learning, discontinuous practices, attitudes and values	↔	A view of learning that is continuous and coherent right through the school

Suggestions for development in reception classes

In the full version of this report we discuss the significance of the elaborate and detailed planning (short, medium and long term) we were shown in our sample schools. We also note that we saw much less evidence of work on the critical evaluation of children's experiences and the quality of their learning. As a result we have recommended that this expenditure of energy and effort should be redistributed, so that the processes of self-evaluation and critical review become a greater priority for the whole team of professionals involved in working with reception class children. In this section of the summary report, we suggest some practical ways in which practitioners might move away from their present emphasis on making detailed plans for the provision of activities in the six areas of the Guidance document and adopt a more reflective stance, focusing more closely on the quality of children's learning, while giving a lower priority to the 'coverage' of the Stepping Stones. The practical measures we present below were all used in the process of this enquiry and so we recommend them to practitioners with considerable confidence; these approaches have already told us much about what is happening 'inside the Foundation Stage'.

Observing children: the target child method (Sylva *et al.* 1980)

This is a tried and tested observation technique, in which the observer records everything the target child is doing and saying at two-minute intervals over a period of one hour. It is a powerful way of exploring what actually happens in the lives of

individual children. It is *not* concerned with the educator's plans, or good intentions; it *is* concerned with how the educator's good intentions and carefully planned provision actually affect the target child. It records all his or her activity of whatever kind, and any periods of inactivity; it captures his or her social interactions and many spoken exchanges; it documents the experiences provided in any particular setting, through the eyes of those for whom the provision was made. The method is a reliable instrument for evaluating the quality of what happens in classrooms, from the standpoint of those on the receiving end of our well-intentioned practices.

Children's spontaneous activity (Isaacs 1932)

As one element of our analysis of the target child observation data, we used a framework taken from the work of the educator Susan Isaacs. She outlines three categories of spontaneous activity that characterise children's lives:

- the love of movement and perfecting bodily skills
- the interest in actual things and events and the discovery of the world without
- the delight in make-believe and the expression of the world within.

We found this an illuminating framework with which to examine the observation notes we had made of individual children: we were able to evaluate the extent to which the particular classroom provided time and space for each of these spontaneous kinds of expression and exploration. It shows how far each team of practitioners has gone in bringing their children close to engaging and challenging aspects of the world outside the school, as well as how much encouragement they offer for children's make-believe and imaginative play, the world within. We suggest that using this framework would be an informative and revealing exercise for practitioners to undertake together.

Strategies for literacy learning (Whitehead 1999)

We make a similar claim for the framework we used to analyse the observation data that reflected children's literacy learning. Marian Whitehead, an authority on early literacy, suggests there are four essential strategies for literacy learning in the early years classroom:

- talk, play and representation
- rhyme, rhythm and language patterns
- stories and narrative
- environmental print and messages.

These categories could profitably be used to reflect on the range and frequency of different kinds of provision in any particular classroom. The framework shows up the extent to which one aspect of literacy is over-privileged or under-prioritised at the expense of others. It demonstrates the relative richness (or poverty) of each of these aspects of literacy learning.

Starting with quality: a framework for evaluation

The third framework we recommend is taken, originally, from the neglected DES report *Starting with quality* (1990), which advocated an approach to learning which includes providing:

- first-hand experiences
- sustained purposeful talk
- sustained complex play.

This short list of necessary opportunities for children's learning is reiterated in the opening pages of the current QCA guidance, though not quite in such a succinct and memorable form. We found it invaluable in forming a picture of how much time children actually spend in these three intrinsically motivating and meaningful pursuits. We suggest that staff groups could use this framework to review the balance of time allocated to these crucial aspects of children's lives, indoors and outdoors, across a day, a week, or even a term in the reception class. Only such a review will satisfy practitioners that these real 'basics' of the early childhood curriculum are properly represented in the day to day routines of their classroom.

References

Bertram, T., Pascal, C., Bokhari, S., Gasper, M. and Holtermann, S. (2002) *Early Excellence Centre Pilot Programme Second Evaluation Report 2000-2001*. DfES Research Report No. 361.

DES (1990) *Starting with Quality: The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Quality of the Educational Experience Offered to 3 and 4 year olds. (The Rumbold Report)* London: HMSO.

DfEE/QCA (2000) *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*. London: DfEE/QCA.

Early Childhood Education Forum (ECEf) (1998) *Quality in Diversity*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Isaacs, S. (1932) *The Children We Teach*. London: University of London Press.

Sylva K., Roy C. and Painter M. (1980) *Childwatching at Playgroup and Nursery School*. London: Grant McIntyre

Whalley, M. (1994) *Learning to be Strong*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Whitehead, M. (1999) *Supporting Language and Literacy Development in the Early Years*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Association of Teachers and Lecturers 2004

ATL Members	Free
Non-members	£8.99
ATL product code	PR18a
ISBN	1-902466-34-9

