

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

16 WEST BANK DRIVE, BELFAST BT3 9LA TEL: 028 90782020 FAX: 028 m90782029
e-mail: mlanghammer@atl.org.uk web site: <http://www.atl.org.uk> VAT REG NO 539 0866 17
GENERAL SECRETARY Dr MARY BOUSTED B.A.(Hons) PhD



Consultation Response to the Draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

November 2010

Summary of ATL views

- This consultation will fail to inspire those professional teachers working in the early years settings upon whom quality provision will ultimately depend. The 'top down' managerialist approach of the draft Strategy at times reads more like a series of inter-departmental memos rather than a strategic vision and framework for the future.
- ATL recommends that this review study carefully the development and implementation of the Foundation Phase in Wales.
- Our submission notes that there is ample evidence that countries in which children do not start school until they are six or seven, and who are not formally taught to read and write until then, catch up with and overtake children in Northern Ireland who are taught formally from an earlier age.
- We argue that the 0-6 Early Years strategy should place more emphasis on pre-school education and its dependence on effective and appropriate teaching, assessment and learning (TAL) and that the aims of the Strategy will be best met by reliance of fully trained and qualified teaching professionals, a point made strongly in the Chief Inspector's Report 2008-10
- There should be better capacity in qualified Special Educational Needs and E.A.L. teachers within the 0-6 phases.
- ATL would express concern about the role of the private sectors in Early Years provision. It is difficult to see how the motivations of the private sector can be reconciled with the statutory and voluntary sector providers. This is particularly the case of the context of funding from the public purse, accountability and quality assurance.
- ATL has referred to the inherent dangers of "backward engineering" from the accountability systems within schools driving this policy. Our members tell us that the goals/milestones combined with the pressure of accountability regime in schools mean that the focus could very quickly become the goals for 'literacy' and 'numeracy'.
- ATL will call for greater flexibility in the ways in which children transfer from one provision to another throughout the 0-6 phase.
- ATL is concerned about advocacy of a single assessment instrument (UNOCINI) without a discussion of its merits, additional workload or alternatives.
- ATL would require that DE engage seriously with the recognized teachers unions on the DE Strategy.

Introduction

ATL, the education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, head-teachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC and ICTU, and works with government and employers by lobbying and through partnership.

ATL policy

ATL believes that professionals working within schools, children's centres and other services must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, both at the level of the individual and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Teachers have a particular role to play across all early years provision. Within light national parameters, development of the education system, in its widest sense, should take place at a local level, with increasing emphasis on collaboration and supporting well-being across a local area: the curriculum and assessment arrangements in relation to the appropriate levels of progression should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders;. Likewise, accountability mechanisms should support collaboration rather than competition.

ATL believe that the nomenclature associated with the Strategy is confusing. However, our understanding of the various 'phases' encapsulated within Early Years is as follows:

- Early Years (roughly 0-4 years)
- Nursery (normally for 3-4 year olds; occasionally including older 2 year olds)
- Foundation Stage: Primary 1 and 2 (4-6 year olds)
- Key Stage 1: Primary 3 and 4 (6-8 year olds)

In addition, ATL considers the document to be very wordy, poorly written and inaccessible. We would recommend that future policy documents are screened through the Plain English Society in advance of publication.

Early years

ATL believes that:

- ♦ Children are entitled to high quality provision where their needs and interests should take precedence, regardless of the setting in which they access their education and care.
- ♦ A well-qualified, highly skilled workforce with access to continuing professional development is central to the provision of high quality early education and childcare.
- ♦ Quality of provision must be consistent, regardless of the methods used to support providers or hold them accountable.

In our position statement, *Early Education and Childcare*¹, we state: *It is vital that policies for childcare and early education focus on the needs and interests of children, both in terms of their present needs and what they will need in order to live*

¹ ATL (2005) *Early Education and Childcare*

fulfilling lives in the future. Of course, services for young children must also take into account the needs and views of parents and carers, but where the needs of children and the changing patterns of employment conflict it is important that the needs of children take precedence.

We believe that high quality early education depends on four factors:

- ♦ well-qualified, knowledgeable and skilled staff who have access to continuing professional development
- ♦ well-resourced learning environments which are stimulating, exciting and safe, which promote children's imagination and curiosity and which acknowledge the importance of play
- ♦ routines and procedures which are centred around the child
- ♦ parents and carers who are valued as partners with a crucial role to play in their children's education and care.

ATL supports an Early Years Foundation Stage, in particular its commitment to play-based provision, based on the needs and interests of each child. We have particular concerns about the level of staffing ratios and qualifications. We also believe that the review should consider issues of transition and school starting age: the suggestion that Early Years is preparation for 'formal schooling' is unhelpful and should not drive this strategy. More attention should be given to making schools ready for children.

In providing this response, ATL is fully cognizant and supportive of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the obligations that flow from it. Indeed, ATL wish to draw DE's attention to a recent publication by Professor Laura Lundy and Lesley McEvoy at QUB entitled '*Developing outcomes for educational services: a children's right-based approach*' [Effective Education, Vol (1) March 209 pages 43 – 60]. Moreover, ATL has previously endorsed OFMDFM's ten-year strategy for children and young people and its six high level outcomes which emphasise the extent to which children and young people are:

- healthy;
- enjoy, learning and achieving;
- living in safety and with stability;
- experiencing economic and environmental well-being;
- contributing positively to community and society; and
- living in a society that respects their rights.

The achievement of these outcomes will, in no small measure, depend upon the fundamental foundations provided by a high quality early years strategy and its concomitant delivery at local level. In this context, ATL acknowledges DE's vision for the strategy which is:

'to enable every child to develop to their full potential by giving each one the best start possible' (page 17).

ATL, however, would prefer to see a reference to education and learning in this vision to ensure that the policy sits more comfortably with general education policy with its renewed emphasis on quality teaching, assessment and learning (TAL) within a culture of self-improvement and self-evaluation and individual reflective practice.

ATL notes that there is ample evidence that countries in which children do not start school until they are six or seven, and who are not formally taught to read and write until then, catch up with and overtake children in Northern Ireland who are taught formally from an earlier age. We would argue that the principles and the pedagogy of the 0-6 phase should continue through the early years of school, at least to the end

of key stage 1, with thought given to the transition into KS2. We hope that this review will be studying carefully the development and implementation of the Foundation Phase in Wales.

The Government 0-6 Strategy & Consultation Questions

Vision and Aims

It is the purpose of the draft Strategy to define a framework for DE policy and to set out key objectives and actions for future development and improvement. Research and evidence gathered in the development of the Strategy identified the four main priorities indicated above. Based on the evidence and research considered the draft Strategy sets out as its vision:

- *To enable every child to develop to their full potential by giving each one the best start possible.*

Question 1 - *Is this the right vision? Is it an appropriate vision for an early years strategy?*

Yes

No

Comments:

ATL would argue that the 0-6 Early Years strategy should place more emphasis on pre-school education and its dependence on effective and appropriate teaching, assessment and learning (TAL) including the crucial area of learning readiness which should be a central focus of all pre-school education. ATL advocates a child-centred approach rather than a curriculum-centred approach to pre-school education. Indeed, there is much the present proposals can learn from the recent Cambridge Primary Review².

It is also the case that these aims will be best met by reliance of fully trained and qualified teaching professionals, a point made strongly in the Chief Inspector's Report 2008-10.³

ATL would express concern about the role of the private sectors in early years provision. It is difficult to see how the motivations of the private sector can be reconciled with the statutory and voluntary sector providers. This is particularly the case of the context of:

- funding from the public purse;
- accountability; and
- quality assurance.

DE, therefore, needs to unambiguously define the role of the private sector in early years provision.

ATL is also concerned at the over-reliance within the DE strategy on the Voluntary sector. Elsewhere, in an Interim submission on the specific issue of School Starting Age, we have made the point of stressing that the "*quid pro quo*" in enabling later and/or flexible school starting age would be the availability of high quality well funded pre-school provision. It is not self evident that such a system currently exists or is close to establishment

² Children, their world, their Education: Robin Alexander (Ed) 2009

³ Education and Training Inspectorate, the Chief Inspectors Report 2008-10, www.deni.gov.uk

ATL also recognises the reference made to the primary curriculum, especially its emphasis on children's readiness to learn and the flexibility provided to teachers to promote and build on learning readiness. However, ATL would seriously counsel against any '**backward engineering**' from the primary curriculum to pre-school education. This is particularly important in the area of assessment.

Comments on Pedagogy

ATL believe that the most important aspect of the DE 0-6 Strategy, which must not be lost in this consultation, is the focus on how children learn, and how adults support that learning. ATL's early years research⁴ sets out the importance of

- ◆ sustained, shared and purposeful talk
- ◆ sustained, complex imaginative play
- ◆ authentic, engaging, first-hand experiences.

Members also point out the importance of enabling children to 'wallow', to spend as much time as they need in exploring, playing, working things out for themselves.

Children need to learn through play, building on their own experiences and interests. In particular they need to play outdoors in all weathers, and it is vital that the regulations stipulate the need for all settings to have permanent access to outdoor areas. It is also the case that adequate funding to supply and build appropriate outdoor play facilities needs to be considered and factored into the DE Capital estimates.

Early Learning Goals

ATL agrees that there should be a structure for practitioners to use in planning for children's learning. This is vital if there is to be consistency within the sector. However, the early learning goals should not be the structure – this is to place the focus on outcomes instead of on children. Instead, the areas of learning should be the structure within which practitioners plan and teach.

- ◆ Our members tell us that there are **too many goals**, and the goals combined with the pressure of accountability regime in schools mean that the focus is very quickly on the goals for 'literacy' and 'numeracy'. In particular, teaching becomes too focussed on the building blocks of language and numbers, and not enough engaged with children's understanding of the real world of language and numbers.
- ◆ Evidence from members suggests that an over-reliance on "targets" and "backward engineering" are developmentally inappropriate. The problem is that pressure to achieve them, combined with the implications within some goals of '*best practice*' (for example the use of phonic knowledge which leads to the privileging of phonics to the detriment of other strategies for learning to read and write), can lead to unhelpful teaching of formal skills too early.

It is absolutely right that there are aspirational outcomes for children and settings to work towards. However, the aspirational (or the average) becomes the expected level very quickly.

We are concerned too about school starting age. Following a resolution at our annual Conference, ATL is developing policy on appropriate provision for young children, including the age at which children should start school. In our earlier, interim, submission to this consultation (focussing solely on school starting age) we

⁴ Adams S, Alexander E, Drummond M J and Moyles J (2004) *Inside the Foundation Stage, Recreating the Reception Year* London: ATL

suggested that schools have many different ways of supporting children to start school, and it is likely that a single point of entry is too inflexible to support the majority of children. As such, it is likely that ATL will call for greater flexibility in the ways in which children transfer from one provision to another throughout the 0-6 phase.

Based on existing policy and practice, and on the research, the draft sets out its aims to:

- *value and respect the early years of a child's life, while also laying the foundations of and removing barriers to learning so that each child can develop as a successful learner; and*
- *achieve positive outcomes for children by supporting their development through high quality, child-centred and family-focused services, ensuring greater equality of access.*

In achieving these aims the Department will seek to engage stakeholders involved in early years provision.

Question 2 - *Do you agree that the aims are appropriate?*

Yes

No

Please add any comments you have:

The aims as set out are largely appropriate. It is essential that the early years strategy is not shaped by a 'backwash' mentality. The Strategy should seek to promote positive outcomes for children, but this must be achieved within a child-centred approach to early years provision rather than one that is curriculum and assessment driven.

The Northern Ireland curriculum has led to significant improvements in children's dispositions to learning and learning outcomes. However, much remains to be done. ATL wishes to emphasise that quality provision in early years under the leadership of specialist, qualified, early years teachers is the bedrock upon life-long learning is built and nothing should be done to compromise this. Rather, the focus of this strategy should be to enhance the quality and equality of provision under the pedagogical leadership of **qualified early years teachers**.

The draft strategy is very detailed, and although this detail is intended to be helpful, it suggests three unhelpful and untrue propositions:

- i) that young children learn in a straightforward, linear progression;
- ii) that all young children learn in this predictable fashion, with some merely needing additional support to move forward to the next step; and
- iii) that early years practitioners need step by step instruction in order to 'deliver' this education.

Properly qualified and well supported professionals do not need this level of detail.
We believe that government should trust professionals to interpret broader guidelines

within the general pedagogy.

ATL's policy on curriculum⁵ states that

“There should be a light national curriculum framework setting out the skills and attitudes which pupils need now and in the future for employment, caring roles and citizenship... the curriculum, as taught, should be designed locally. It should be based upon a needs analysis which is set in the context of a national entitlement and strategy but is rooted in local circumstances.”

We believe that this is as appropriate for the Draft DE 0-6 Strategy as it is throughout the later key stages.

ATL's curriculum publication⁶ highlights physical skills as an often overlooked but vitally important area of learning. Whatever the priorities of the day, it is impossible to develop these skills in a vacuum; the other areas of learning provide a context for this vital learning.

What is most important in setting out learning and development requirements is to be clear about the purposes of early education. In a recent ATL survey, members particularly identified the following:

- ◆ socialisation/the development of social and emotional skills
- ◆ learning through play in a safe environment
- ◆ learning skills, acquiring a love of learning/a curiosity to know more about the world
- ◆ communication/language skills

In addition, we believe that children need to develop their strengths so that they experience success and to help them to persevere with difficulties without being made to feel failures. Unfortunately, many of our members believe that *children are not enjoyed for who they are but are constantly reminded that they are not good enough.*

Objectives

In support of the aims and to ensure effective policy making and implementation four key objectives have been defined. For further information on the rationale behind the objectives please see Annex 2 of the draft early Years (0-6) Strategy.

The draft Strategy elaborates on the objectives in terms of what the Department of Education needs to address and what it needs to do under each objective.

Quality of Provision

Objective One: To improve the quality of early years provision thereby promoting better learning outcomes for children by the end of the Foundation Stage, especially in language and number; and in the children's personal and social development, emotional well-being and readiness to learn.

The draft Strategy identifies the following matters which DE needs to address:

- an increased focus upon outcomes by the end of the Foundation Stage especially to raise standards in language and number;

⁵ ATL Subject to Change: New thinking on the Curriculum, 2006: www.atl.org.uk

⁶ Johnson M et al (2007) *Subject to Change: New Thinking on the Curriculum* London: ATL (p80)

- closure of the gap between those children who are least school ready and those who are most ready;
- provision for those working with children of a common framework for child development across the years 0-6 (taking account of relevant guidance) accompanied by appropriate milestones, the implications for learning and standards and quality indicators against which the provision can be quality assured;
- promotion of the early identification of developmental delays, especially in relation to language and other barriers to learning;
- greater focus on identified special or additional needs and disadvantage to ensure that relevant provision is targeted to provide help to those children who need it most; and
- strengthening the links, on an area basis, between early years providers (from birth to six years of age) at points of transition (currently Sure Start (0-4), pre-school (3-4) and Foundation Stage (4-6), to ensure progression in learning and development and the exchange of relevant information.

Question 3 - Are these the key issues for DE to address?

Yes

No

Question 4 - Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to improve quality of provision?

Comments:

ATL has earlier referred to the inherent dangers of “backward engineering” driving this policy. Bullet point one page 7 of the response booklet suggests evidence for this mindset. It states:
‘an increased focus upon outcomes by the end of the Foundation Stage especially to raise standards in language and number’.
 ATL takes the view that a wide consensus needs to be built around what constitutes effective pre-school education, teaching and learning and that an ‘outcomes approach’ needs to be considered more in terms of the quality of provision rather than as a mechanism for measurement and accountability.
 The risk of too great a focus on outcomes is that children’s educational experience will be tailored to meet only these outcomes, missing out on other valid and associated learning experiences - “Teaching to the Test”

Moreover, the references to a common framework for child development accompanied by appropriate milestones, the implications for learning and standards and quality indicators etc suggest a departure from current trends toward flexibility and teacher judgement. There is a danger that the out-workings of this policy will be overly restrictive and have the consequence of narrowing pre-school provision towards instrumental development outcomes.

Nonetheless, ATL does see it as important to develop early intervention where developmental delays are significant or profound. There is a need here for agreed improved training on assessment and diagnosis

Nonetheless, we welcome the proposals to promote collaboration across early years and advocate that early years specialist teachers can have a key role to contribute to and lead on this. We also support strengthened links with Health professionals (Health visitors, Speech Therapists, Occupational and Physio-therapists) to produce greater cross sectoral collaboration.

Whilst it is the case that the socially disadvantaged need additional support and help, it is also the case that Special Needs issue traverse the social class divide.

The draft Strategy proposes that DE will undertake the following actions:

- (i)** DE will take steps to improve outcomes at the end of Foundation Stage by the following actions:-

 - a. DE will commission ETI to work with the HSCTs, ESA, and others to set out the milestones to be expected in a child's development up to the end of the Foundation Stage and to identify best practice to achieve them. These will focus particularly on physical, personal, social and emotional development, intellectual and language and numeracy development and will promote more effective progression for children;
 - b. DE and DHSSPS will commission ETI, Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and HSCT to develop a Quality Framework for the registration and evaluation of early years provision. The Framework will comprise a broad outline of child development and the key milestones, the implications of these for quality learning provision along with the DHSSPS Minimum Standards and the ETI quality indicators to guide self-evaluation and regulation and inspection;
 - c. In light of the work set out especially at b. above, DE will require ESA to review the pre-school curriculum and advise DE on how it should be updated to ensure a coherent and complementary approach across the early years;
 - d. DE in collaboration with DHSSPS and HSCTs, will address issues of underperformance or inadequate provision in pre-school settings and in the Foundation stage, identified through inspection, to ensure that the highest standards are achieved and maintained; and
 - e. DE will seek to identify an appropriate mechanism to capture progression in child development and learning linked to the milestones developed by ETI.
- (ii)** DE will develop a co-ordinated approach to early years provision to ensure smooth transitions with appropriate exchanges of information at the different stages through the following actions:-

 - a. DE will commission research and evaluation from ETI and other sources to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of provision and

of the transitions into pre-school and primary school; it will focus in particular, on the assessment of the children's development and progression in learning, provision for SEN, the transfer of information and the continuity of the curriculum;

- b. DE will commission ESA to address, on an area basis, the issues relating to two year olds in nursery provision and to reception classes in primary schools to ensure that provision is age appropriate;
- c. DE will work with DHSSPS to develop a mechanism (drawing on existing data sources where appropriate) by which key information can be shared more effectively so that relevant agencies can access the most up-to-date information on the child with a view to addressing any identified areas of difficulty; and
- d. DE will work with DHSSPS to promote the use of the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) assessment tool across children's services as a comprehensive single means of assessing recording and communicating across agencies to improve the early identification of difficulties and appropriate interventions.

Question 5 - *Do you agree with the actions proposed?*

Yes

No

Question 6 - *What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?*

Comments:

ATL is concerned that DE is to commission the ETI to work with the HSCT's and ESA and others to set out the milestones to be expected in a child's development up to the Foundation Stage and to identify best practice to achieve them (consultation booklet (1) (a) page 8). This suggests that a top down inspectorial agenda is driving the current policy proposals. There is a danger that the milestones as developed will become implicit or more even explicit targets to be imposed on the foundation stage or on early years pre-school provision.

Of course, there is merit on having early years pedagogy guided by current child development understanding. However, the move towards milestones must be made with caution bearing in mind the likely unintended consequences of such an approach. Good quality training should be 'de riguer' in order to embed the milestones. There is a risk of limiting educational experience and providing more opportunity for "failure" at 0-6.

The focus of the registration and evaluation of the provision should focus on the quality of the provision rather than on the child development milestones

In short, the actions outlined from (1) (A) to (e) indicate an overly managerialist approach to the Foundation Stage and pre-school provision. ATL recognises that appropriate accountability systems need to be put in place along with mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation. However, this sudden lurch to the extremes of

managerialism will not bring about the improvements to quality and equality that the policy proposals advocate.

Roles: There is a clear need for DE, DHSSPS, ESA and ETI to clarify their respective roles in the development and implementation of this strategy. ATL welcomes the advocacy of greater collaboration among stakeholders in order to ensure the success of this policy. However, there is a central need to ensure that professionals working in pre-school settings (nursery schools, units attached to primary schools) are also encouraged and motivated by the current proposals. Unfortunately, this may not be the case as the strategy at times is too top-down in its presentation and managerialist in outlook.

ATL is concerned with the level of detail in some areas of the policy proposals. This can be illustrated at paragraph (d) page 10 of the consultation Booklet. It states that: *'DE will work with DHSSPS to promote the use of the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) assessment tool across children's services'*. This advocacy of a single assessment instrument without a discussion of its merits and alternatives suggests that significant policy decisions have already been taken irrespective of the outcomes of this current process. The use of UNOCINI will help to standardise a common tool across all agencies. However, the implementation of this new framework will increase the training requirement as well as increasing workload and administration. At the very least, this proposal should be considered by the Teachers Negotiating Committee in order to "workload proof" the proposal.

As was the case with the DE consultation on 'Every School a Good School' and the more recent consultation on the future of special educational needs provision, ATL takes the view that a significant change in tone is required and a greater effort needs to be made to engage with Early Years and Key Stage 1 teachers and principals. There is now a growing consensus that the engagement of those at the front line of service provision and a respect for their professional judgement and input to policy development needs to be taken seriously if children are to reach their full potential.

As such, ATL would require that DE engage seriously with the recognized teachers unions

The Role of Parents and Carers

Objective Two: To recognise and respect the role of parents and carers of young children and to raise the level of engagement by DE (and its partners) with families and communities.

The draft Strategy identifies the following matters which DE needs to address:

- . the quality of communication with parents;
- . the engagement with parents in support of their child's learning and development so that they can fulfil their key role as the first educators of their children and to strengthen the partnership between parents and early years staff;
- . the need to work with parents of children in funded provision to address any barriers to learning their children face, including SEN;

- . the impact of the health, care and learning services provided to parents in disadvantaged areas through Sure Start Programmes; and
- . the incorporation of play-based learning, including access to outdoor play, in early years provision, recognising that play is a vital part of the informal learning in early childhood.

Question 7 - Are these the key issues for DE to address?

Yes

No

Question 8 - Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to recognise and respect the role of parents and to raise the level of engagement?

Comments:

Given their level of professional competence, teachers in the various statutory early years settings should be regarded as a strategic resource to assist DE in the realization of objective two. Again, as with earlier criticisms of the present proposals, the policy reads as a top down strategy and fails to set out a creative and imaginative way forward in which all partners are engaged with the strategic objectives and vision of the policy.

Parents/carers are children’s first educators. ATL fully recognises the crucial role that parents play in the early socialisation and education of their children. Moreover, the engagement of parents with the formal educative process whether pre-school, primary or post-primary provision is crucial for children’s success and well-being. In developing the professional teacher competences⁷ the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland prioritised this aspect of teacher professionalism when it stated in competence 12:

Competence 12 *‘Teachers will have developed a knowledge and understanding of the inter-relationship between schools and the communities they serve, and the potential for mutual development and well-being’.*

It is vital that parents and practitioners work together to support children’s learning and development in its broadest sense. This is about much more than *‘working with parents to help improve children’s learning and development at home’* but unfortunately this is how much government rhetoric appears to operate, and how many parents see the relationship between school and home.

Real partnership with parents means time and space for teachers to talk to parents about their ‘unique child’, their interests and backgrounds, as well as their needs. It means flexibility within the days and weeks to focus on that ‘unique child’ and to plan play activities which make sense to the child in the context of their unique family backgrounds. It may mean multi-agency support.

It also means talking to parents about what happens at school and how they might support their children to cope with the school environment. This might include helping parents to understand the behaviour policy of the school, so that they can reinforce

⁷ Teaching, the Reflective Profession, www.gtcni.org.uk

similar 'good' behaviours. It may include explaining to parents about play-based learning, so that they are not concerned that their children are 'just playing' and do not push for overformal teaching. DE and ETI should be more pro-active in ensuring that all Early Years policies are devised in conjuncture with parents. It might include encouraging parents to read with their children, to draw out learning from real activities like cooking, shopping, socialising with friends.

The draft Strategy proposes that DE will undertake the following actions:

- (i) DE will promote close and collaborative working between parents and early years providers to assist their vital role in supporting their children's learning by the following actions:-
 - a. DE through ESA will put in place a family programme in funded pre-school provision to increase awareness amongst parents of the child development milestones and to assist them with the early identification of additional or SEN. In this way it is intended that parents will themselves become involved in the removal of barriers to learning. This programme will take full account of existing good practice;
 - b. DE will ensure the effective provision of information and advice to parents on the availability of early years services and will collaborate with DHSSPS in the Families Matter Strategy; and
 - c. DE will consult with parents in order to ensure that their views are incorporated into policy formulation. ESA and other appropriate bodies (including Sure Start) will consult with parents on the development of early childhood services.
- (ii) DE will build support for parents in areas of disadvantage by working with partners to support the capacity of parents to assist with their children's learning by the following actions:-
 - a. DE will seek to expand the reach of Sure Start and the Programme for Two Year Olds to improve support for children and families living in areas of highest disadvantage;
 - b. DE will work with OFMDFM in the development of the Play and Leisure policy. ESA will provide families with information on their role in encouraging the value of play, including outdoor play, in the development of early learning; and
 - c. DE will promote the importance of regular attendance in early years settings.

Question 9 - *Do you agree with the actions proposed?*
Yes No



Question 10 - *What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?*

Comments on the actions proposed:

ATL is fully cognizant and supportive of the UNCRC. The informed participation of parents in decision making about their children’s education is recognised as good practice. This is particularly important in the early years as pupil voice may not, at this stage, be articulate enough to express considered opinions. It is also essential that the various stakeholders collaborate to bring a synergy of professional expertise to bear on policy formulation and delivery. However, this is easier said than done as there remains many structural impediments to collaboration across the education sector in N Ireland. In this context, ATL would refer DE to a recent Queens University research paper⁸ which examines some of these issues and from which lessons can be learned.

Equity and Access

Objective Three: To improve equity and access to early years provision.

The draft Strategy identifies the following matters which DE needs to address:

- a. the funding issues between providers in relation to pre-school provision raised in the Chief Inspector’s Report 2006-08 and the need to ensure that resources are used as effectively as possible to improve services;
- b. qualification levels, professional development and access to specialist support for the early years workforce in the interest of greater equity between the statutory and non-statutory providers and of raising standards;
- c. the provision of appropriate Irish-medium education as appropriate for those who wish to avail of it;
- d. the developmental Programme for Two Year Olds and their parents in areas of disadvantage, particularly linked to Sure Start;
- e. the delivery of early years provision that is appropriate to age and stage of development and aligns with best practice; and
- f. the identification and dissemination of good practice across early years provision for children with additional or special needs.

The draft Strategy proposes that DE will undertake the following actions:

⁸ ‘Competition or Collaboration’: A critique of multi agency working in Northern Ireland to meet the needs of young people at risk of exclusion from mainstream schooling’ (Carlisle, K. Gallagher, T. Kilpatrick, R and Daniels, H 2008, BAICE Conference Queen’s University, Belfast)

- (i) DE will increase the skills of the workforce in DE funded early years settings by promoting a higher level of qualifications and wider access to professional development through the following actions:-
- a. DE, with DEL, ESA, and other relevant bodies, will work towards raising the minimum level of qualifications for those working in all DE funded early years settings, including Sure Start, to an NVQ level 3; the minimum level of qualification for the leader-in-charge will be raised to NVQ level 4 or above;
 - b. ESA will secure or procure an “early years leadership programme” and provide access to it for those currently in leadership in funded pre-school provision;
 - c. ESA, working in conjunction with ETI, will identify and disseminate ‘best practice’ drawing from both statutory and voluntary/private funded early years provision to promote quality across the entire early years workforce; and
 - d. DE will seek to support the non-statutory sector through capacity building to ensure they can benefit fully from the opportunities offered by the SEN policy.
- (ii) DE will take steps to address issues of access to early years provision by the following actions:-
- a. DE will consider changes to the funding mechanisms to address the equality issues in pre-school education taking account of resource constraints;
 - b. ESA and the HSCTs will devise a mechanism through the existing partnership structures, to manage the allocation of pre-school places on an area basis and to ensure that provision is age-appropriate;
 - c. Given that early years provision is offered through small units and that some pre-school children still take up reception places in primary school. ESA will introduce an area-based approach to the planning, delivery and support of early years provision to ensure that knowledge, expertise, good practice and resources are shared more widely across the providers and that provision is age appropriate;
 - d. All voluntary and private pre-school providers who are funded through the Pre-School Expansion Programme will be required to work within the revised SEN framework;
 - e. ESA will provide access to development and to informed advice and expertise from the full range of pupil support services for staff in funded pre-school settings. This support will be managed through the ‘area-based’ area approach referred to above;
 - f. DE will develop proposals to improve access to Irish-medium pre-school provision;

- g. DE will maintain part-time provision with the statutory pre-school sector; any changes to such provision will be based on criteria linked to access and to disadvantage; and
- h. DE will seek to expand provision for two year olds.

Question 11 Are these the key issues for DE to address

Question 12. Do you consider there are other areas that should be addressed to improve equity and access to early years provision? If so what are they?

Question 13. Do you agree with the actions proposed?

Question 14. What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?

Comments:

ATL endorses the objective to improve equity and access to early years provision. However, it is also essential that no policy decisions are taken that could undermine the quality of provision. In other words, policy makers must ensure that they are levelling up rather than levelling down. This will be crucial in any changes to funding mechanisms. This response has placed emphasis on the importance of quality provision provided by professional teachers working in pre-school settings and in no area is this more crucial than early intervention relating to special needs. Indeed, the policy proposals emanating from this consultation must be congruent with those that emerge from the current consultation on the future of special needs. The issue of quality in this area is crucial and the Chief Inspector has commented in his 2006-2008 Report:

'There is some variation in the overall effectiveness across the types of pre-school provision. The highest and most consistent quality is in the nursery schools, where over one half- of provision is judged to be outstanding. In nursery units just under one-half of the provision ranges in quality from very good to outstanding; in the voluntary/private sectors it is just over one-third!

The significant difference in performance, identified by the Chief Inspector, is clearly explained by the fact that pre-school provision in the statutory sector is led by professional teachers. Moreover, the Chief Inspector's findings echo those of the EPPE project which found that children who don't receive pre-school provision suffer in their development. Children who attend high-quality centres showed less anti-social and worrying behaviour and more independence when they started school. However, and very significantly, the Effective Pre-School Provision in Ireland, 1998-2004 research⁹ demonstrated that the biggest impact comes from having qualified teachers working with young children.

There is a concern that by raising the NVQ requirement (in respect of largely voluntary sector or private sector provision) that this represents an acceptance of movement away from the need for teaching qualifications in the Early Years. At a time of significant teacher unemployment in Northern Ireland, this is not a proposal that ATL could tolerate.

It is also the case that the increase in requirement for Teachers of EAL (English as an additional Language) will require adequately trained teaching professionals. In regard to the support of 'disadvantaged children', ATL believes that well qualified and well supported early years professionals will use their judgement to decide what support, encouragement and enrichment each unique child needs. This needs a

⁹ Chief Inspector's Report: Effective Pre-School Provision in Ireland, 1998-2004: www.deni.gov.uk

strong and continually updated understanding of child development, and knowledge of subject content and the ways in which children come to understand concepts. We believe that **smaller class sizes**, increased opportunities for evidence-based training and development, and better adult:child ratios are what makes it possible to meet the needs of each child, and close the gaps in children's achievement, attitudes and understanding which are already apparent when children start school.

Evidence¹⁰ suggests that approximately 85% of the variation in pupil achievement is due to factors external to the school, and the brightest children in Britain's poorest homes are outperformed by the less able children from wealthy homes by the age of seven. The low attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, therefore, is driven more by a combination of factors related to poverty and deprivation than ability.¹¹

Teachers, schools and the curriculum cannot be expected to compensate for the effects of disadvantage on education which is outside their scope of expertise. The 0-6 Strategy should be seen as a whole and holistic framework which includes multi-agency support for children and parents. What is vital is that funding is made available to ensure access to quality Early Years provision for all children, and in particular that funding *formulae* do not lead to the closure of high quality provision such as nursery schools.

In conclusion, ATL fully supports the policy drive to improve equity and access but this needs to be reconciled with what research clearly identifies as quality provision and the role of qualified teachers.

Collaboration and Integration

Objective Four: To encourage greater collaboration among key partners to promote greater integration in service delivery.

The draft Strategy identifies the following matters which DE needs to address:

- . the primary focus of interventions must remain, at all levels, on the child and their needs;
- . better involvement among the key partners particularly education, health and social care, to ensure a more joined-up and integrated approach, especially in relation to early intervention strategies; and
- . the contribution of early years provision to the wider Executive consideration of childcare policy.

The draft Strategy proposes that DE will undertake the following actions:

- (i) DE will seek to develop and promote collaborative partnerships both within and outside government to ensure that a coherent view is taken of the needs of the child by the following actions:-
 - a. DE will contribute to the Executive's actions for children in relation to the early years and will work with other departments to embed these in the next Programme for Government, including the development of relevant Public Service Agreement targets;

¹⁰ See for example Cassen R. & Kingdon G. (2007) *Tackling Low Achievement*, York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

¹¹ ATL, *Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas*, position statement (2008).

- b. DE will require ESA and the Public Health Agency to develop more integrated provision in the delivery of its early years services;
 - c. ESA and the Health and Social Care Board/Public Health Agency will work together on evaluation and sharing of data; and
 - d. DE and DHSSPS will explore the optimum use of existing accommodation to promote greater integration of services.
- (ii) DE and DHSSPS will work through ESA and the Health and Social Care Board/Public Health Agency to develop the most effective structures for the collaborative regional planning of services and how best to develop more integrated services in early years provision by the following actions:-
- a. DE will commission ETI to inspect and report on the quality of the learning provision in all early years settings; DE will consult with DHSSPS, on how the HSCT regulatory function should align with the quality improvement role of ETI to ensure the highest possible standards of provision set out in the proposed quality framework;
 - b. DE will collaborate with DHSSPS to improve health and social and educational outcomes for children and their families. DE intends to address issues around speech and language provision and health and social well-being; and
 - c. in order to promote issues of healthy eating and nutrition, DE will expand the remit of its current nutrition associates who currently work with ETI in primary schools, to work in pre-school settings.

Question 15. *Are there the key issues for DE to address?*

Question 16. *Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to encourage greater collaboration among key partners to promote greater integration in service delivery? If so, what are they?*

Question 17. *Do you agree with the actions proposed?*

Question 18. *What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?*

Comments:

The drive towards greater collaboration and integration of service provision is welcomed by ATL, notwithstanding the issues previously identified in the research by Carlisle, K etc al (2008). Moreover, the general thrust of this policy consultation is “top down” with a series of ‘to do’ lists for various partners. Collaboration and integration will be challenging in the current unsettled policy climate. Nevertheless, policy proposals which seek to find a synergy between health and social service and education is to be welcomed and the professional team around the child advocated for example in the SEN Review is laudable way forward.

Additional Comments

If you have any additional comments you wish to make about the draft Strategy please use the box below.

Additional Comments:

ATL recognises that strategic importance of an effective Early Year (0-6) Strategy for the overall education, social health and well-being of our children and young people. Any sensible cost-benefit analysis will clearly show that investments in quality early years provision pay enormous benefits in later years in terms of overall levels of attainment and reducing educational inequality.

Unfortunately, this consultation will fail to inspire those professional teachers working in the early years settings upon whom quality provision will ultimately depend.

The 'top down' managerialist approach of the current consultation at times read more like a series of inter-departmental memos rather than a strategic vision and framework for the future.

ATL asks the Department to ensure that any policy proposals which emerge from this consultation are fully informed by professional practitioners and are subject to discussion and negotiation with the recognized trade unions.

It is important that equity and quality of provision are reconciled in any future policy direction. This approach will not only ensure the success of the policy but benefit the young children and their families which should be the focus of all our deliberations.

ATL recommends that:

Support must be made available to ensure high quality provision across all classes – this should include a review of class sizes, better adult:child ratios (closer to 1:8), and better resources for the youngest children. In order to develop effective early years practice, including sensitive intervention in children's play, useful observational assessment and opportunities for sustained talk, we need to review the adult:child ratios.

Time and space must be available for teachers, other early years professionals, schools and settings to share and reflect on their own practices, across local schools and more widely.