

# **The Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project (EYECEP)**

## **End-of-Phase 2, Report 1**

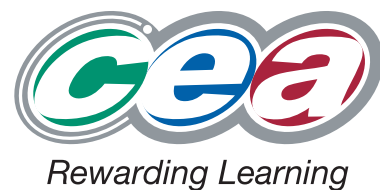
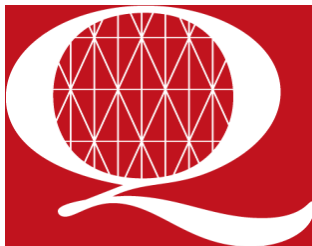
### **Overview: Evaluation Strategy and Curriculum Implementation**

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Team of Fieldworkers:	A group of 40 professionals, mostly retired teachers, who were trained to administer our psychometric tests and questionnaires in the schools. Most of them remained active in the project over several years and greatly facilitated the management of data collection across Northern Ireland.

<p>The views expressed are those of the research team and not necessarily those of the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment</p>
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## **Acknowledgements**

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The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment for funding the project.

## **Statement on Ethics**

The research was conducted following the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and each phase of the research was granted ethical approval by the Queen's University School of Psychology Ethics Committee.

## **1. Scope of the Report**

This is the first of four End-of-Phase 2 reports on the evaluation of the Enriched Curriculum (EC) in Northern Ireland schools.

The Enriched Curriculum began as a local initiative in the Belfast Education and Library Board. In September 2000, it was introduced by six primary schools in a disadvantaged area of Belfast. One of the purposes behind the pilot project was to ease the transition of 4-5 year old children from pre-schools, playgroups, or home — to statutory schooling. This was particularly important in Northern Ireland, which has the youngest statutory starting school age in Europe. Moreover, for the Belfast schools that initiated the project, the transition issue was acute, given that their school entry children tended to have poor oral language skills and were not always well prepared for school routines. By being responsive to the developmental stage of individual children, their aim was to remove the early experience of persistent failure and to promote children's sense of self-competence and self-esteem. The teaching methods included a greater emphasis on play and activity-based learning rather than desk-work, in order to stimulate children's curiosity, creativity, social development and engagement with learning. In literacy, the methods involved more emphasis on developing oral language skills and on emergent literacy (phonological awareness), and less on formal methods such as reading schemes. In mathematics, it involved laying foundations in number through sorting, matching, counting rather than formal number recording. There was a new emphasis on the importance of outdoor play and activities.

When information about the EC project in Belfast began to be disseminated, it provoked an enthusiastic response in other Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and from some individual schools, where many were already thinking along similar lines. Each ELB decided to introduce the project into a group of their own schools in September 2001, and additional schools joined in September 2002. Eventually, over 120 schools across Northern Ireland participated.

During 2000, a research team from the School of Psychology at Queen's University, and Stranmillis University College, was commissioned by the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to devise and conduct an evaluation of the impact of the curriculum and related issues. The evaluation was designed to be both formative, by providing feedback to the major stakeholders (CCEA, ELBs and schools) on emerging issues related to the development and implementation of the EC, and summative, especially with regard to the impact on children's learning.

The evaluation, which was initially funded for just one year, was extended for a further three years, and then for another four years. It was recognised that the impact of the EC could only be well evaluated in the longer term, hence the commitment to a longitudinal design. In the first phase of the evaluation, only 12 schools participated in the evaluation. Following an external review at the End-of-Phase 1 (2004), an additional 12 schools, and a second cohort of EC children in each school joined the evaluation, thus substantially increasing the sample size.

Thus, the evaluation was conducted over eight school years from 2000-01 to 2007-08 and was carried out in 24 EC schools. Three cohorts of children within each school were studied: the class of children who followed the curriculum that existed immediately before the introduction of the EC (called the control children), the class of children who followed the EC in the first year of its introduction (called EC1 children) and the class of children who followed the EC in the second year of its introduction (called EC2 children). As the numbers of schools and children participating in the EC increased, the evaluation strategy expanded to meet the complexities of the project. Because of the multiple perspectives of stakeholders that were studied, and the range of children's outcomes that were investigated over the eight years, the results of the evaluation will be reported in four separate reports.

This first report, End-of-Phase 2, Report 1, will provide an overview, which includes a brief review of key issues in early years education and research, some background on the EC as it was rolled out; the aims, scale and scope of the evaluation and key issues related to implementation.

The second report, End-of-Phase 2, Report 2, will report on changes in experiences and practices inside the EC classrooms and schools, examined through classroom observations, interviews with teachers, children and school principals.

The third report, End-of-Phase 2, Report 3, will report the views and perceptions of parents as they developed over the lifetime of the project.

The fourth report, End-of-Phase 2, Report 4, will report outcomes for children, including attainment outcomes in literacy and numeracy, children's ratings of their own learning orientations and dispositions, and teachers' ratings of the children's behaviour in classrooms.

In addition, there will be a report written as guidance material for teachers related to developmentally appropriate practice.

This first report is divided into four sections — in addition to this introduction.

- Section 2 provides a brief overview of key issues in early years education research, policy and practice that have become more prominent since the EC began nearly 10 years ago.
- Section 3 will describe aims of the evaluation, the multi-method design of the evaluation, the different perspectives from which data were collected.
- Section 4 will describe the specific NI context in which the EC was introduced, how it was initially conceived and rolled out, and will evaluate key issues related to implementation.
- Section 5 will draw conclusions about implementation and how it bears on the interpretation of the research findings in subsequent reports.

The reader is reminded that the evaluation team have produced annual reports since 2001, supplementary reports, and an End-of-Phase 1 report (end of the Fourth Year) in March 2005 (Sproule et al., 2005). There will be some overlap in the data and commentary between these previous reports and the four End-of-Phase 2 reports which are now being submitted. In addition, members of the evaluation team collaborated with Dr Glenda Walsh, who produced specific reports on developing children's thinking skills in the early years (Walsh et al., 2006) and on managing transitions (Walsh et al., 2008). The Education and Training Inspectorate surveyed the EC classrooms and produced a report in November 2004. All these reports can be found at <http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/>.

## **2. Key Issues in Early Years Education: Policy, Practice and Research**

Since the introduction of the EC almost 10 years ago, there are new developments in early years policy and practice, especially in the UK. Research on what constitutes good practice with regard to early years education continues to evolve and will be a source of reference for future curriculum design and implementation. This section gives a brief overview of these developments and their relevance to the EC.

### **2.1 A shift in policy direction**

Both nationally and internationally, there is a general movement to recognise early years education as a distinctive phase in children's learning that should be characterised by a curriculum that focuses

on whole-child learning, and by teaching methods that are appropriate for young children (OECD, 2001). The term ‘early years’ is now used to cover children from birth to 8 years of age, and ‘early years education’ normally covers children from 3 to 8 years (depending on the country), thus spanning pre-school provision and the first years of statutory primary school education. Because of differences in the age at which schooling becomes statutory in different countries, the transition to primary school happens at different ages. This makes international comparisons quite confusing. Table 1 shows the statutory ages for primary school in Europe. Northern Ireland children begin compulsory school earlier than any other children in Europe.

**Table 1** Statutory school starting ages in Europe (c.f. Sharp, 2002)

Age	Country
<b>Four</b>	Northern Ireland
<b>Five</b>	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales
<b>Six</b>	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey
<b>Seven</b>	Bulgaria, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden

However, in most of these countries, many children start pre-school earlier, either by choice or by law. Even in the UK, the picture is complicated. For example, almost 100% of children in England enter reception classes in school settings from age 4y 4m upwards, thus effectively beginning school one year earlier than the statutory requirement. In the Republic of Ireland, although primary school is not compulsory until age six, most five-year-olds and about half the countries four-year-olds enter ‘infant classes’ in primary schools and follow a prescribed curriculum.

In most countries, tensions exist between the pedagogical traditions of pre-school, which tend to adopt play-based and informal approaches to learning and the more formal or subject-oriented curriculum framework of primary school. For the UK, Wood and Bennett (1999) characterised the formal approach as being predominantly teacher-led, with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, learning through repetition and practise to achieve mastery and competence. In contrast, an informal approach promotes play and story sessions as the primary media for learning, offers children choices and alternative activities to encourage children’s independence in learning, and advocates a balance between child-initiated activities and teacher/practitioner guidance.

In the UK, there has been a strong feeling that high-stakes testing has contributed to the downward pressure of an academic curriculum and a formal teaching approach into the early years. In response to this critique, and to international and national reviews and enquiries (POST, 2000; OECD



Starting Strong, 2001; BERA Early Years SIG, 2003; OECD Starting Strong II, 2006; Stephen, 2006) all nations in the UK have moved (or are currently planning to move) their policies in the direction of a more child-oriented approach to teaching and learning in the early school years. Each has adopted slightly different policies and practices to ease the transition between pre-school and statutory schooling<sup>1</sup> (e.g. The Foundation Stage in Wales, 3-7 year olds; the Early Years Foundation Stage in England, 0-5 year olds; The Foundation Stage in the Northern Ireland Curriculum, 4-6 year olds). There is a renewed emphasis on articulating and aligning the expectations for children in preschools and in early primary school classes. Most of these UK developments have happened since the introduction of the pilot EC curriculum in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the changes have taken place in the context of more extensive 4-14 curriculum reviews in all four nations in the UK, some of which are ongoing (e.g. Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, Rose Review of Primary Education in England).

## 2.2 An emerging consensus on early years curriculum and pedagogy

As part of an INCA (International Review of Curriculum and Assessment), Bertram and Pascal (2002) reviewed the early years curriculum, pedagogical and assessment approaches of 20 different countries across the world (Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Wales, and Hong Kong). Despite differences in the specific curriculum models (e.g., developmentally appropriate practice, Froebel, High Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Steiner, Te Whariki), there was a strong consensus about the *curriculum principles* for 3-6 year olds. These were

- a child-centred, flexible and individually responsive curriculum
- the importance of working in partnership with parents
- the need to offer broad and relevant learning experiences in an integrated manner
- the importance of play and active, exploratory learning
- an emphasis on social and emotional development
- the need to empower the child to be an autonomous, independent learner.

Bertram & Pascal (2002, Section 3.3, p. 21)

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<sup>1</sup> Websites for each part of the UK –

Northern Ireland: [http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/foundation\\_stage](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/foundation_stage),

England: <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/eyfs/>,

Wales: [http://wales.gov.uk/dcells/publications/curriculum\\_and\\_assessment/arevisedcurriculumforwales/foundationphase/foundation2008-e.pdf?lang=en](http://wales.gov.uk/dcells/publications/curriculum_and_assessment/arevisedcurriculumforwales/foundationphase/foundation2008-e.pdf?lang=en)

Scotland: <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/earlyyears/about/index.asp>

In terms of curriculum organisation, most countries used areas of learning, few used activities, and no country used disciplines or subjects. The areas of learning that were most commonly identified were: social and emotional; cultural, aesthetic and creative; physical; environmental; language and literacy; and numeracy. Many countries emphasised cultural traditions and aimed to enhance social cohesiveness through the curriculum. Only three countries emphasised early literacy and numeracy within the early years curriculum (Tasmania, USA, and England).

There was overwhelming consistency within the review countries as to the *recommended* pedagogical approach in the early years.

- This emphasised an *interactional pedagogy*, where the children and adults operated in reciprocity with one another.
- There was an encouragement of play-based, first hand, exploratory experiences which provided children with opportunities to talk and interact.
- The provision of opportunities for children to self-manage and self-direct their learning was also encouraged.
- Collaborative, peer group learning was the preferred model, with whole class teaching or circle time being used selectively to support this.
- The role of the adult was generally viewed as being to facilitate and support learning through skilful and guided interaction, adopting a flexible range of teaching and learning strategies according to the needs of the children.
- Some countries specifically discouraged the use of early disciplinary and prescriptive methods of instruction, for example, Italy, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and Sweden.

*Bertram & Pascal (2002, Section 3.6, p. 22)*

In the vast majority of countries included in the review, the early years curricula and pedagogical approaches refer to *pre-statutory* school settings which cater for children up to six years. In Northern Ireland, pre-school settings for 3-4 year olds follow the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education (CCEA, 2003 — replaced earlier Nursery Education Guidelines) which promote a child-centred, play-based and interactional pedagogy entirely consistent with Bertram and Pascal's review. The issue for Northern Ireland children arises because they make the transition into compulsory school at such a young age and are likely to experience more formal approaches to teaching than children living in other countries. Indeed, systematic observations of Year 1 classrooms in primary schools in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s, reported by Walsh et al. (2006),

and of reception groups<sup>2</sup> in primary classes (Guimaraes & McSherry, 2002), confirm that the teaching approach adopted in these classes was much more formal than the consensus identified in the INCA review. International comparisons of this kind, and general dissatisfactions with the formality of the early primary school curriculum in Northern Ireland, were the main drivers behind the introduction of the Enriched Curriculum.

### **2.3 New directions in research with implications for early years practice**

In the intervening years since the start of the Enriched Curriculum, important concepts related to early years practice have been considerably revised in the light of research findings. There has been a general shift in theoretical perspective about the nature of children's learning, from a developmental 'ages and stages' perspective (usually associated with Piaget) to an increased appreciation of the role of adults in scaffolding and co-constructing learning for children (usually associated with Vygotsky). In addition, there is a new focus on evidence-informed policy and practice and on evaluating educational interventions on the basis of outcomes for children. The EC evaluation is itself an example of this general trend towards seeking evidence and examining outcomes. The remainder of this section briefly highlights just **two** areas that have been the focus of recent research activity and which proved to be problematical for the EC as it was rolled out.

*Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP):* This concept underpins much of the early years practice in the US and in the UK, though it is more often espoused than practised, even in pre-school and nursery settings (Dunn & Kontos, 1997). The idea was first described and promoted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) which provided extensive guidance for practitioners (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1986). The DAP concept certainly underpinned much of the thinking behind the development of the EC and is consistent with the curriculum principles and pedagogical practices identified in the Bertram and Pascal review. However the concept has been expanded, revised (Bredenkamp, 1989, National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998) and critiqued several times over the past 20 years (e.g., Dickinson, 2002). In particular, it has been criticized for encouraging an overly 'maturationist' approach to children's development, thus encouraging teachers to adopt inappropriate practices with regard to waiting for development to 'naturally' occur rather than appropriately guiding and even teaching (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999)

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<sup>2</sup> In some NI schools, especially in rural areas, there was a practice of including small groups of 3-4 year old pre-schoolers in Primary 1 classrooms. This practice is currently being phased out, as alternative pre-school provision becomes more available.

A recent detailed research examination of the kind of pedagogy, practice and curriculum that enhances intellectual and social/behavioural development was carried out in the *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY)* project (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), as part of their longitudinal EPPE (Effective Provision for Pre-school Education) study in England, EPPNI in Northern Ireland). Although conducted in pre-school settings, their findings are relevant to the practices associated with the EC in the early primary school years, in that they challenge the maturationist approach even for children younger than four years. From their case studies, the REPEY team concluded that the most effective teachers/practitioners:

- engaged children in interactions that showed sustained shared thinking;
- showed a good understanding of the content of curriculum areas;
- encouraged children to engage with cognitive challenge;
- had a repertoire of pedagogical activity (including direct instruction) that they drew on as appropriate;
- differentiated the curriculum to match activities and level of challenge to the children's needs;
- showed an equal balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities; and
- had clear behaviour and discipline policies, supported by facilitating children to talk through conflicts which benefited social skills.

These findings represent a subtle shift from a 'responding and facilitating' model that was promoted in earlier developmentally appropriate approaches, toward a more 'proactive and intentional pedagogy' (Wood, 2007). For example, the findings show that the most effective practitioners displayed an *equal balance* between child- and adult-initiated activities and used *mixed pedagogies* to suit curriculum content and topics.

*Teaching Reading in the Early Years:* During the last ten years, several major research reviews into the development and teaching of reading have been conducted with the purpose of making the most recent research evidence available for teachers and practitioners, and of ending what have been referred to as the 'reading wars' (Adams, 1990). The focus of these reviews spanned the full range of reading processes, from emergent literacy in the early years, decoding skills, reading

comprehension strategies, motivation to read, independent reading and reading for pleasure. The National Reading Panel, commissioned by the US Congress, reviewed over 100,000 studies (National Reading Panel, 2000). Guidance for teachers that focus on reading instruction for 5-8 year olds was produced and covered — developing phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension (Armbruster & Osborn, 2003). In the UK, the Rose Report (2006) produced an independent review of the teaching of early reading for the Department for Education and Skills in London, and Torgerson, Brooks & Hall (2006) reviewed research on the use of phonics in the teaching of reading and spelling.

The overwhelming conclusion from the research literature points to the positive effects on learning to read of teaching phonics *systematically as part of a broader approach to teaching reading*. Rose (2006) specifically addressed the age at which phonics teaching should begin and the implications that that might have for pedagogical approaches in the Early Years Foundation Stage in England (Aspect 2 in the report). He argued that phonic work should begin by the age of five, **provided that the way has been prepared with pre-literacy activities like phonological awareness and immersion in a print environment**. He also pointed out that teachers must also be able to assess the children's readiness for systematic phonic work. He emphasised that formal planning for phonics instruction need not equal inappropriate formal practice. The report gives examples of multi-sensory approaches using visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities. Practitioners in early years settings and classrooms, who have participated in a pilot project, reported that it is possible to focus on children's phonic development without compromising the wider principles underpinning the Foundation Stage in English settings.

Although a systematic approach to teaching phonics was not part of the original conception of the EC, it was incorporated into later developments in some schools. Interviews with the 24 EC school principals in November 2008 confirmed that most schools had now adopted, or were planning to adopt, a more systematic approach to phonics teaching in Years 2 and 3 (and some in Year 1). This new emphasis on phonics represented a shift even from their previous practice before the introduction of the EC.

In an analysis of the sustainability of four large-scale educational reforms, Earl et al (2003) pointed out how important it is for curriculum innovations to incorporate improvements and respond to new data, yet remain consistent with underlying principles. It will be important for these new directions in research to be incorporated into subsequent curriculum guidance and training for the early years,

while remaining consistent with the general curriculum and pedagogical approaches that have emerged as distinctive for early years education.

### **3. Aims and Design of the Evaluation**

#### **3.1 Specific aims of the evaluation**

The evaluation was conducted in two phases. The end of the first phase (Sproule et al., 2005) reported on the first four years (2000-2004), when the first groups of children who began the EC (EC1) in the six inner city schools had completed Key Stage 1, and the second group of children in six schools outside Belfast had completed three years of primary school. These End-of-Phase 2 reports now extend to cover the past three years (2005-2008), when an additional 12 new schools and a second cohort of children in each school (EC2) joined the evaluation. All children were longitudinally followed as they progressed through Key Stage 2. Thus the evaluation had different aims for Phase 1 and Phase 2; these are outlined below.

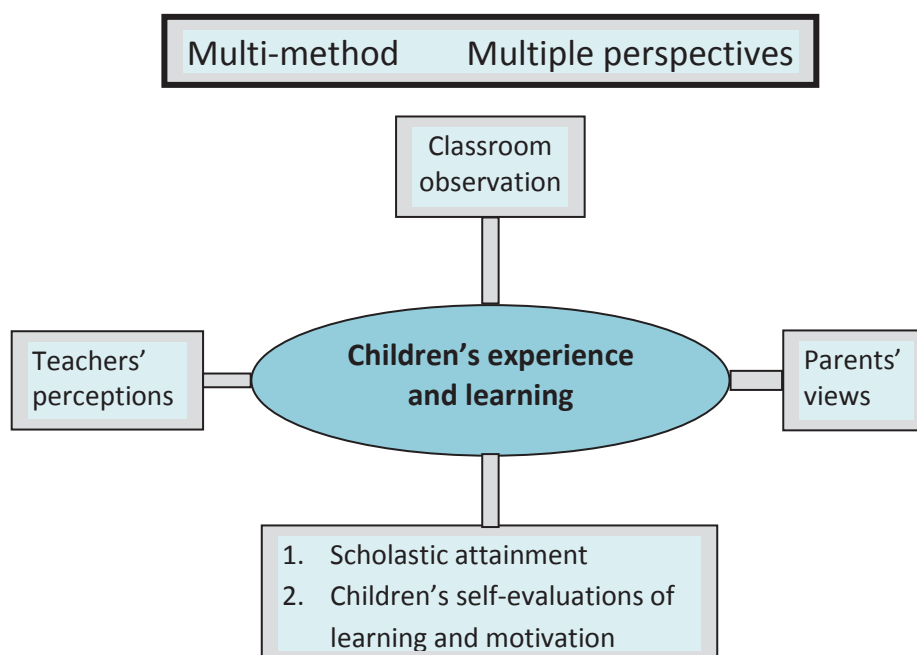
- To assess the short- and longer-term impact of the EC on children's learning orientations and attitudes, and on their progress in literacy and numeracy, in three samples of schools; the initial high deprivation schools in inner city Belfast, and two groups of schools outside Belfast that were representative of primary schools in Northern Ireland. For Phase 2, the longer term impact of the EC for children was assessed during, and at the end of, Key Stage 2. Two cohorts of children were studied, allowing stability or change in EC outcomes to be evaluated.
- To investigate the perceptions of teachers about the appropriateness of the EC for children as they progressed through the early primary school years and beyond. For Phase 1, this involved interviews and surveys with the specific teachers who were teaching the new EC (Y1 and Y2) together with teachers who received the EC children into their classes for the remainder of Key Stage 1 (Y3 and Y4). For Phase 2, it involved the perceptions of KS2 teachers and school principals who gave a more general response to the impact of the EC in their schools.
- To study the views of parents about the appropriateness of the EC for their children as they progressed through the early primary school years and beyond. In Phase 1, parents were responding as their children were being taught the EC and immediately afterwards (Y3 and Y4). For Phase 2, parents provided perceptions of their children as they progressed into Key Stage 2 and were coming to the end of their primary schooling.

- To collect information on some of the factors that impacted on the effectiveness of the curriculum implementation, for example, teacher training, external support and resourcing. This was the main focus for Phase 1 and was collected primarily through teacher interviews. In Phase 2, the information was supplemented by interviews with school principals.
- To examine the *classroom processes* of how the EC was implemented in classes, and to collect information on programme integrity through structured classroom observations. This was confined to Phase 1, with some additional video case study materials collected in Phase 2, for the purpose of providing teacher guidance.

### 3.2 The four major strands of the evaluation and related research questions

To meet the aims of the evaluation, a multi-method strategy was adopted to provide information about the impact of the curriculum from different perspectives, see Figure 1 for an outline.

Figure 1 Evaluation Strategy



- Classroom observations: Changes in the classroom practices of teachers in the first two years (Years 1 and 2) were observed using a newly designed observation instrument, the Quality Learning Instrument (Walsh and Gardner, 2005; Walsh et al., 2006) to assess the extent to which teachers adjusted their practices in developmentally appropriate ways. Over 140 classrooms were observed.
- A major focus was on the quantification of children's learning outcomes using psychometric measures. Literacy and numeracy attainments, as well as orientations and self-evaluations

of learning were collected in a quasi-experimental<sup>3</sup> longitudinal design. Children in classes one year ahead in the same school, who had experienced the pre-existing more formal curriculum, acted as controls. Two cohorts of children who experienced the EC curriculum were studied, allowing the stability or change in EC practices and outcomes over time to be evaluated. The quasi-experimental longitudinal design allows a range of questions about the impact of the curriculum on the outcomes for children, and allows for complex statistical modelling to partial out the effects of different variables. Over 3000 children participated in the evaluation at some stage over the nine years of data collection.

- Teachers' perceptions of the curriculum, of their training, and of children's progress, were also collected, through interviews and surveys, over eight years, as the children progressed through the primary school. Over 270 teachers were consulted.
- School principals were interviewed regularly throughout the 8 years on an opportunistic basis. At the end of the project, all 24 principals were interviewed in order to gauge the impact of the EC on their schools and the lessons they had learned.
- The views of parents were an important component of the Enriched Curriculum evaluation and they were contacted each year to find out how they thought it was affecting the progress of their children. Over 1500 parents provided responses.

In the End-of-Phase 2 reports, we deal with a complex set of data — quantitative psychometric measures on children's learning outcomes, as well as interview and survey data from teachers, school principals and parents. In addition, we describe classroom observations that have been quantified. These sources may be viewed with different levels of confidence. There may be a tendency to put greater weight on the quantitative psychometric measures than the reports from teachers, school principals and parents. The research team would like to point out that different kinds of data have their strengths and weaknesses. Objective tests can have different levels of reliability and validity and be more or less sensitive to the learning outcomes being investigated. Even at best, they assess only the children's performance at a particular point in time. In contrast, teachers and parents have the advantage that they are observing the children over the long term and in a wider range of contexts than a single test. Interview and survey data have limitations but

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<sup>3</sup> When conducting an evaluation of the effects of any intervention, it is crucial that the children in the intervention and control groups are similar, so that the effects of the intervention can be adequately evaluated. The ideal method is to randomly assign children/classes/schools to either the control or intervention groups. A **quasi-experimental** research design is one in which the comparison groups are formed by some method other than random assignment. Alternative strategies are then adopted to ensure that the two groups are as similar as possible. In the EC evaluation, the similarity of the comparison groups was ensured by using the year-ahead class in the same school as the control group.



they reflect the perceived reality and context in which the EC was implemented and in which the children's learning took place. As such, they have powerful effects in their own right.

### **3.3 Details of the sample by school groups and cohorts of children**

There were 24 schools in the evaluation in three school groups, the Belfast high deprivation group (6 schools), Contrasting Area 1 group (CA1 group, 6 schools) and Contrasting Area 2 group (CA2, 12 schools). These groupings reflect the time at which the schools joined the evaluation. The latter two groups of schools were divided between the Western (N=2), North Eastern (N=7), Southern (N=5) and South Eastern (N=4) Education and Library Boards. This breakdown is a reasonably good reflection of the relative population distributions of the Education and Library Boards. The schools volunteered to participate in the evaluation, and thus were not randomly selected. However, a balance between school types in terms of locality was sought as detailed in Table 2. Although the sample was not randomly selected, it is representative of the population of schools in Northern Ireland, in terms of geographical distribution, urban/town/rural, and social advantage/disadvantage as indicated by percentage of free school meals (FSM). In addition, a balance was sought between integrated (N=4), controlled (N=13) and maintained (N=7) primary schools<sup>4</sup>. Demographic statistics clearly distinguish the high deprivation group in Belfast from the rest in terms of FSM and intake ability characteristics. There were 3414 children who contributed to the evaluation at some point but for reasons of cost and the rolling nature of the evaluation, not every child took part in every aspect of the evaluation. There were three successive cohorts of children in each school; Control, EC1 and EC2. Actual sample sizes for the main measure of attainment, Performance Indicators for Primary Schools, PIPS<sup>5</sup>, in each year group are given in Table 3. For other measures, sample sizes were of the same order as those given for PIPS and these will be detailed in subsequent reports.

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<sup>4</sup> Controlled schools are government controlled and admit mainly Protestant and non-affiliated children, maintained schools are controlled by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and Integrated have specific quotas for children from the different Northern Ireland communities.

<sup>5</sup> A full description of PIPS can be found in Report 4, where the outcomes for children are described.

**Table 2** Characteristics of the school groups in the Enriched Curriculum evaluation

Group: Cohort	Ability profile <sup>6</sup> <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Range of % of FSM* in school group	Year schools started EC	Type of locality of schools
6 Belfast high deprivation schools:				
Control cohort	45.5 (6.4)	50 - 76	All in 2000	6 city centre
EC first cohort	44.8 (5.2)			
EC second cohort	45.6 (6.4)			
Joined the <i>evaluation</i> in 2000				
6 CA1 schools outside Belfast:				1 city centre
Control cohort		2 - 27	All in 2001	3 city or suburban
EC first cohort	52.6 (7.4)			1 medium or large town
EC second cohort	51.8 (7.1)			1 rural or small town
Joined the <i>evaluation</i> in 2001	51.1 (6.6)			
12 CA2 schools outside Belfast:				1 city or suburban
Control cohort		0 - 30	2001 (2) 2002 (10)	4 medium or large town
EC first cohort	50.5 (7.0)			7 rural or small town
EC second cohort	51.5 (7.0)			
Joined the <i>evaluation</i> in 2004	50.7 (6.8)			

\*FSM – free school meals

**Table 3** Sample sizes by year group for PIPS literacy and numeracy testing<sup>7</sup>

PIPS test	N (EC)	N (Controls)	N (Total)
Baseline	314	278	592
End Year 1	177	188	365
End Year 2	447	156	603
End Year 3	732	307	1039
End Year 4*	738	422	1160
End Year 5	778	287	1065
End Year 6	635	369	1004
Mid Year 7**	340	364	705

\* End of KS1 in Northern Ireland

\*\* There are relatively fewer Y7 children compared with Y6 because EC2 children in CA2 schools had not reached Y7 when the project finished.

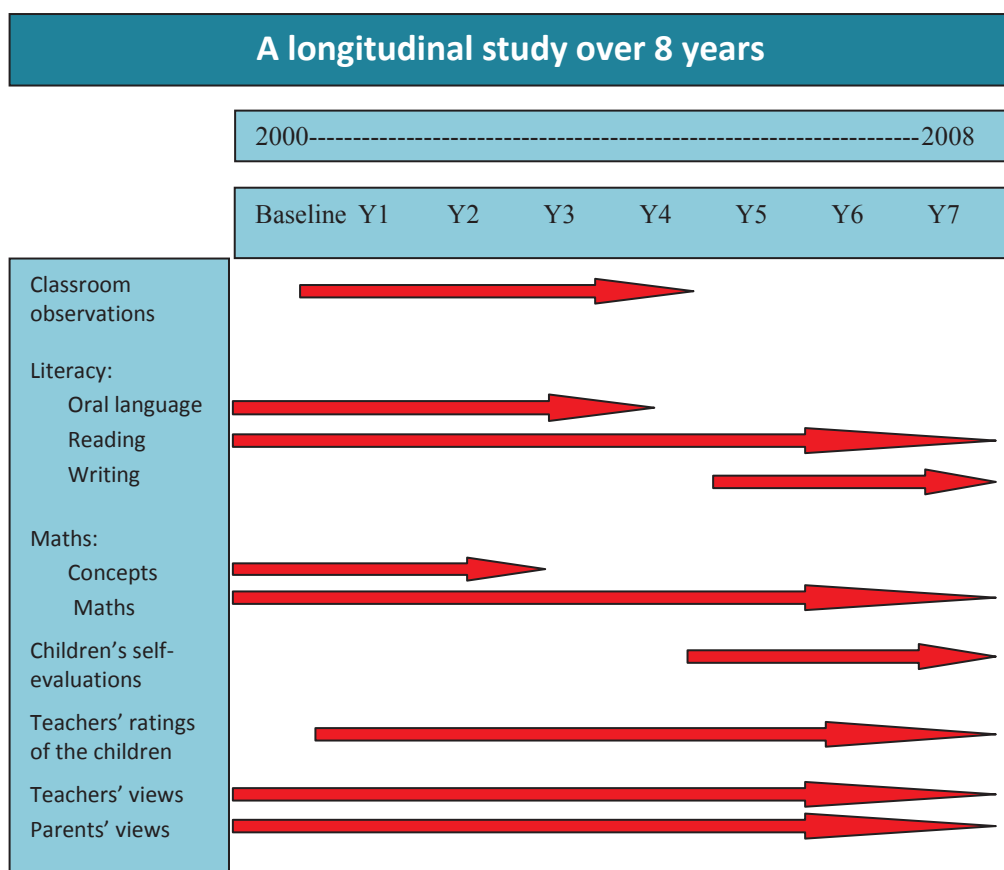
<sup>6</sup> Taken from the PIPS test and explained in Section 3.1 of Report 4. The population mean is 50, SD is 10.

<sup>7</sup> Sample sizes for other tests were of the same order or greater. Exact numbers will be reported in subsequent reports.

It is clear that the addition of the 12 schools and the second cohort of children in each school (EC2) for Phase 2 has considerably increased the sample size and will allow for robust statistical conclusions.

Figure 2 shows that not all measures were collected each year. For example, classroom observations were confined mostly to Years 1 and 2. The most complete longitudinal pupil outcome dataset was for measures of reading and mathematics attainment (PIPS). Other measures were age appropriate; for example, spelling and writing measures were collected only in Key Stage 2, and reliable self-ratings by the children were also collected only at Key Stage 2. However, teacher and parent data extend over all 8 years. The time line in Figure 2 applies to the basic longitudinal design for the first EC cohort, with the plan for other EC cohorts being similar but starting in subsequent years up to 2003-2004.

**Figure 2** Outline of the evaluation elements over the lifetime of the study



## 4. Training for the EC and Curriculum Implementation

### 4.1 The Enriched Curriculum as originally conceived

The Enriched Curriculum grew out of the earlier Greater Shankill Project (Sheehy et al., 2000), which had highlighted to principals and teachers the fact that the pre-existing curriculum was not meeting the needs of the children in this very deprived area. Subsequent classroom observation research by the evaluation team which compared 38 Year 1 classes who were following the pre-existing curriculum with 32 EC classes in Year 1 confirmed the formality of previous Northern Ireland early years practice (Sproule et al., 2001, p30; Walsh et al., 2006). For example, up to 70% of the child's day in the more traditional classes was spent on desk-based and writing activities and over 80% of activities were adult-initiated.

In the original group of high deprivation schools, the primary goal of the new curriculum was to remove the experience of *persistent* early failure for all children. This goal implies a more child-centred curriculum — process rather than content driven — in which the teacher adapts content and pedagogy for each individual, so that the child can experience successful learning and thus develops motivation to learn. In turn, this method implies ongoing and accurate assessment by the teacher if they are to effectively support the child's learning.

In this high deprivation group of schools, most children came to school with poor to very poor language skills and teachers believed that this problem was getting worse<sup>8</sup>. The focus of the EC in these schools was on developing aural and oral language skills in order to prepare the children for more structured reading and mathematics learning. Thus, learning through play and through several story sessions dominated the framework for the day, but there was a more structured approach during a short task time, typically about 20 minutes long. Many of these children also had poorly developed social and emotional skills at entry in school. For example, self regulation, sharing and conversational skills were very poor. Their teachers had recognised that early school life must therefore seek to develop these skills to a point where children become equipped to benefit fully from later learning and to promote the child's welfare in the broader context. Hence there was an emphasis on social and emotional development.

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<sup>8</sup> This was confirmed by the evaluation team on baseline testing (Sproule et al., 2001). *On average*, the children were markedly below age norms. Some children had speech more characteristic of toddlers.

*Activities and qualities characteristic of the Enriched Curriculum in the first year of the project*

- *Shared reading*<sup>9</sup>, circle time and *structured play*<sup>10</sup> were all used to develop oral language skills.
- There was a special emphasis on emergent literacy activities<sup>11</sup>. Using reading schemes was postponed until it was judged that the children had developed the requisite pre-reading skills.
- In mathematics, the emphasis was on laying the foundations for a strong sense of number and early mathematical concepts through sorting, matching, counting and other basic activities. Understanding of mathematical language was promoted by getting children to explain what they had done during task time and by including mathematical language in a meaningful context as part of other activities. Only when these skills had been established was formal recorded arithmetic introduced.
- Good motor development was fostered at gross and fine levels through appropriate indoor and outdoor activities: for example, drawing letters in sand trays, playing with blocks, using outdoor equipment for physical development.
- Creativity was encouraged and developed through activities such as art and role-play.
- Social and emotional development was encouraged during such activities as circle time, structured play and discussion of stories. Teachers also promoted positive discipline regimes sensitive to the stage of the children's development.
- There was an emphasis on encouraging the children to take responsibility for their own learning. This was achieved by teaching them to ask questions, to learn where in the classroom they might find help or needed equipment and encouraging them to work unassisted whenever possible.
- Parents were encouraged to support their children with shared reading and practical homework activities.
- More structured work such as story times took place in relatively short sessions, initially fifteen minutes at most.

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<sup>9</sup> **Shared reading** can be an individual, small-group or whole-class activity in which the child takes an active part. Lessons have specific learning intentions or goals and children are encouraged to join in refrains, practice decoding strategies and discuss the content.

<sup>10</sup> **Structured play** may be distinguished from free play in that it is designed to enhance children's knowledge of topics addressed in other parts of the curriculum and to enable them to put into practise what they have learned within a meaningful context. For example, when a class was studying stories about cold countries, the house corner was transformed into 'Iceland'. During role play, children discussed what they might need to take for a visit to Iceland and 'wrote' a list of equipment.

<sup>11</sup> **Emergent literacy** activities comprise work on phonological awareness, activities to promote general listening and concentration skills, oral sequencing of events and oral comprehension of stories.

It is crucial to understand that, despite not using a reading scheme, reading was taught and was considered important. For example, children were immersed in a print-rich and literacy-rich environment from the very beginning. Teachers reported that children also took books home from the beginning as part of the *shared reading* programme in which parents were encouraged to participate. The very first books were picture books. Thus even parents with poor literacy skills themselves were enabled to make a contribution to their child's education and many did so (Sproule et al. 2001). Teachers reported that children were encouraged to see themselves as readers as early as possible, in order to associate reading with self-esteem. Whenever children had achieved certain milestones, such as the ability to recognise several letters and a few common words, they were ready to move on to *guided reading*<sup>12</sup>. However, *systematic phonics*<sup>13</sup> training was not a feature of the Enriched Curriculum. As outlined in Section 2.3, the value of systematic phonics training has been researched for many years (National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgerson et al., 2006) but only more recently has it become prominent in the practice community and policy networks (Rose, 2006; National Strategies in England<sup>14</sup>). Interviews with teachers throughout the course of the evaluation, and plenary interviews with the 24 school principals in the evaluation sample, confirmed that systematic phonics instruction was not a common approach for teaching reading in the first years of implementing the EC, nor had it been in the pre-existing curriculum.

## 4.2 Training and support for teachers

Preparation and training of teachers for the EC was conducted by officers from the Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS) from each of the five Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland. Thus, training, and the funding for training, varied during the life-course of the project and depended on the location of the schools. In the initial stages, the EC was characterized as an evolving curriculum and this was seen as a source of strength, in that it allowed the teachers to exercise their professional judgements within the framework and it engendered a sense of ownership. Fostering a sense of ownership is recognised as one of the characteristics of successful

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<sup>12</sup> **Guided reading** is an approach which enables the teacher to support a small group of children at a similar stage in their reading development by talking, reading and thinking their way purposefully through an unfamiliar text. During guided reading, the teacher begins to address letter-sound correspondence in a more structured way, teaches other strategies for decoding words and continues to develop comprehension skills. Work during guided reading is also related to writing activities.

<sup>13</sup> **Systematic phonics** is any structured system of teaching the correspondence of letters and letter groups to the sounds of the language. Some systems are synthetic and concentrate on blending sounds to make words: Others are analytic and concentrate on breaking words down into their constituent sounds. Some systems use both. Recent research has indicated that such programmes are a necessary but not sufficient component of teaching reading (Rose, 2006, Torgesen, 2002). The lower the child's ability, the more systematic the programme needs to be.

<sup>14</sup> <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/>

interventions (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). As the curriculum expanded to include new teachers, new schools and additional Educational and Library Boards, and as children progressed through Years 2, 3, 4 and beyond, the effects of the lack of documentation and a more standard approach to training became more obvious. The main issue was the consistency in teachers' understandings of what was involved in the EC and the integrity of implementation across teachers and schools (see the section below on teachers' views).

In the first year, with the cohort of disadvantaged Belfast schools, there was an extensive training and support programme for the nine Year 1 teachers involved. Six full days training were provided and funded as part of the project, four of which were before the start of the school year. This was supplemented by monthly cluster group meetings for the teachers at which further training was provided and teachers had an opportunity to discuss issues amongst themselves within a mutually supportive environment. A teacher who had been very active during the planning stages of the project was seconded for the year to act as project coordinator. This teacher was able to visit each classroom once every two to three weeks to give additional support. Her additional role was to generate a cohesive framework for the project in what was then a relatively fluid and evolving situation, there being at this stage no extensive written framework document. At the various training sessions, much valuable written material was provided to teachers to supplement the topics covered. Teachers had the opportunity to view videos of early years practice in other European countries and to visit local nursery schools. The total funding provided to each school amounted to approximately £10,000, including substitute cover for teachers. At first, the EC was planned just for the children's first year at school. However, it was quickly recognized that the changes to the first year curriculum had implications for Year 2 /Year 3 teachers and beyond. Compared to Year 1 teachers, Year 2 and Year 3 teachers in these schools had much less training and support.

Another important resource issue was the role and training of classroom assistants in the context of the informal and play-based EC approach. From the beginning, Year 1 teachers reported that the new organisational structures in the classrooms made different demands on teachers' time. Children were more actively engaged with tasks, and there was less seated work; classrooms became more active places. In classrooms where there was already a classroom assistant, teachers reported changes in their role, helping to scaffold the children's learning and interacting with the teacher in new ways to supplement the adult support in the classrooms. There were knock-on effects into Year 2 classrooms where classroom assistants were previously less frequently employed.

In 2001-2002, additional funds were made available to the Belfast schools to fund classroom assistants for that year.

In the groups of schools who subsequently joined the evaluation, drawn from Education and Library Boards outside Belfast, each Board adopted a slightly different policy. Nevertheless, it would be fair to say that training and funding levels were never as generous as in the original group of Belfast schools. No other Education and Library Board had a project coordinator solely devoted to the project, as had been the case in Belfast. As part of their regular responsibilities, CASS officers were responsible for training and teacher support. In addition, each Board had its own policies with regard to classroom assistants but there was a general move to support their role within the context of the EC. For example, one Education and Library Board included classroom assistants in their teacher training programme.

A major issue with regard to the consistency of implementation was the absence of documentation on the EC Framework as well as documentation for training. The basic orientation of whole-child learning and an informal approach in Year 1 extending into Year 2 remained consistent, but different aspects were emphasised for different cohorts of teachers who were trained on separate occasions. Recommendations about the need for documentation were made in each End-of-Year evaluation report and in the End-of-Phase One Report (Sproule et al., 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005).

#### **4.3 The Enriched Curriculum as implemented at classroom and school level**

Conclusions about how the EC was implemented, the issues that arose and how they were addressed, are based on the following sources of data.

- Thirty-eight classroom observations (2 days per class) were conducted in Year 1 and Year 2 EC classrooms between 2001-02 and 2003-2004.
- Over the eight years of the project, 274 teachers who taught EC children in the 24 evaluation schools were either individually interviewed, participated in a focus group discussion, or were surveyed by questionnaire. Teachers from Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4, Y5, Y6 and some Y7 teachers contributed, thus building up a picture of what it was like both to teach young children using the EC approach, as well as to respond to EC children as they progressed up through the school.
- All 24 school principals were interviewed in November 2008 to gain retrospective accounts of how the EC had been introduced and how it had evolved in their schools.



- These sources of data will be reported in greater detail in subsequent reports. For now, they are integrated to give an overview of how the EC was implemented.

*Year 1* The main difference between the EC and the pre-existing curriculum, as reported by teachers and principals, was the shift from a formal to a more informal approach to teaching. This was confirmed through the classroom observations, when 32 EC classes were compared with 38 classes which were following the pre-existing curriculum (these latter classes were observed before 2000). The observations showed that time was distributed differently in the EC classes compared to the control; there was a more equal balance between teacher-led and child-led activities in EC classes compared to the more teacher-led activities in the traditional classes. Also, EC teachers engaged in more developmentally appropriate practices as indicated by the Quality of Learning Instrument used in the evaluation (Walsh et al., 2006). Thus, we can be confident that teachers did indeed shift their classroom practices in significant ways.

From what they described in the interviews, Y1 teachers were very consistent in their responses. They were enthusiastic about the EC approach, believed that it was appropriate for all children and found it rewarding for themselves. Their experience was so positive that they said they would resist any move back to the pre-existing curriculum/pedagogy. They showed good knowledge about how to develop the pre-requisite skills for reading and mathematics. They increased their interactions and discussions with children which gave them a better opportunity to assess each individual child's learning needs. They succeeded in maintaining a playful tone even in more structured activities. Interviews with the school principals also confirmed that the shift to this more informal approach to teaching in Year 1 had been a success. This pattern was reported across all three groups of schools.

*Year 2 and beyond* Initially, it was envisaged that the Enriched Curriculum would be confined to Y1, with a period of transition towards a curriculum like the pre-existing curriculum, perhaps in the first term in Year 2. But there were unanticipated knock-on effects. As children moved up the classes, teachers' perceptions of the EC approach and their understanding of how best to implement a developmentally appropriate approach was more mixed. This seemed to interact with the teachers' experiences of training, with availability of resources, and/or their ability to deal with the knock-on effects of what had happened in Year 1. Also, the vast majority of the reported concerns focussed on teaching reading. In general more difficulties were experienced with reading than with mathematics.

*Literacy and Numeracy* Y2 teachers were not accustomed to having so many children in their class at such an early stage in reading and were unprepared to deal with it. On the one hand, some teachers reported that the informal approach and the interactions with children provided them with better evidence about children's difficulties and they were thus able to adjust their teaching accordingly. On the other hand, some teachers reported that they were not confident about when/how to move children on to more formal work. In particular, ideas about what constituted good 'developmentally appropriate practice' differed. Some adopted a very maturationist approach, leading to "waiting for children to be ready" rather than preparing them to move on. Other teachers reported that they managed the transition to formal work very smoothly.

Some important differences emerged between the schools groups with regard to teaching reading in particular. The delay in adopting a formal approach to teaching reading and mathematics in Years 1/2 seemed to particularly suit the intake of children in the high deprivation schools in Belfast, whose oral language, listening skills and vocabulary were particularly poor on school entry. They needed considerable help in developing pre-requisite skills for reading. For example, several of those teachers reported that the children in their classes were not ready to move on until *towards the end of Year 2*. However, when the EC was expanded to schools outside Belfast, the training advice with regard to teaching reading did not appear to adjust sufficiently to accommodate the language development of more socio-economically advantaged children who attended these schools. In many of these schools, children arrived with good aural and oral language skills and some could also recognise common written words. Some were probably ready to move on to guided reading as soon as they settled into school. Mixed messages from the training about when to begin a more formal approach to reading, especially for the schools outside Belfast, confused some teachers and often led to active discussions at the school level where some principals and/or senior management staff intervened and took decisions appropriate for their schools (Sproule et al., 2002, 2003).

From the interviews with Year 3 teachers, there was a wide variety of views expressed. Some were very anxious, as they noted much larger numbers of children at an earlier stage of reading and recorded arithmetic than in the pre-existing curriculum, and were worried about pending KS1 assessments. Some teachers found EC children's ability to speak out challenging and the children were often judged to be harder to 'settle'. On the other hand, some teachers responded positively to the changes and adapted the general EC approach to a form of activity based learning as appropriate for these older children.

In Y4, teachers said that they felt less anxious about children's progress and less involved with what had gone before. This trend continued into Key Stage 2, with awareness of what had been involved in the EC practices in the early years becoming very limited in schools that had not adopted a whole-school approach.

The research evaluation's first and second reports became a source of formative feedback for those involved in training. Some of the problems outlined above in relation to literacy in particular were addressed in subsequent training for teachers who taught the second Enriched Curriculum cohort (EC2) and in time for third-wave schools, which joined in September 2002. Further, Belfast Education and Library Board began to develop a separate intervention project on systematic phonics (called Linguistic Phonics) and the second cohort of EC children in some of the high deprivation Belfast schools also participated in that research project.

*Wider effects* Outside of literacy and numeracy, there were very positive experiences reported by both teachers and school principals and much less diversity with regard to changes in other aspects of the curriculum. The emphasis on the development of the whole child was universally welcomed and teachers recognised the value of the new approach for groups of children who had been less able to cope under the pre-existing curriculum, for example, young-for-year-group boys, less confident children, and those with special needs. Almost all teachers believed that oral expression, self-confidence and self-esteem had improved.

Some schools saw the value of adapting some of the Enriched Curriculum methods for older children because of the enthusiastic response of children in Year 1. Thus the Enriched Curriculum became a whole-school project for some schools. In these schools, (i) structured play gradually transformed into activity-based learning as children got older, (ii) the project began to interact with other interventions, such as Assessment for Learning, to deliver a more individualised and meaningful curriculum where possible, and (iii) the role and value of motivation was better appreciated, for example, by building on the children's own interests when possible. The latter was particularly relevant in schools in high deprivation areas, where a few children had been consistently difficult to motivate in the past.

At its best, the Enriched Curriculum provoked a total rethink of primary education throughout certain schools; this, in turn, gave rise to major changes in pedagogy and in the children themselves. Some principals have described how the Enriched Curriculum gave rise to reflective teachers, who

were no longer passive recipients of training but able to think through the implications of the training, adapt it to the needs of their individual children and go beyond it to develop it further. In some schools, there was an impressive systematic review of much of the curriculum, with further development in the pedagogy of creative writing skills, thinking skills and other domains. A few principals described a total change in the atmosphere of their schools and the relationships within them and a transformation in the children's confidence and behaviour. More usually, these gains were reported in more restrained terms but nevertheless giving rise to (i) warmer relationships, (ii) all children, even the weakest, wanting to come to school and increased attendances, and (iii) children who were more confident, especially in oral work and public speaking. Yet, it is certainly the case that, faced with the new demands of the EC, some teachers struggled to reconceptualise their practice.

#### **4.4 External Factors in the local and educational environment that might impact on the implementation of the Enriched Curriculum**

As well as the factors which affected the implementation of the EC in classrooms and schools, there were external factors in the local and educational environment that may have been important for implementation.

By its very nature, educational research in real world contexts will always be subject to external factors or variables outside the control of the stakeholders and the evaluation team, irrespective of how well the study is designed. These factors can affect the performance of individuals or groups in a random fashion, that is, they are as likely to affect the control groups as the intervention groups; or they can be systematically different for one group vs. another, thus threatening to invalidate any conclusions which can be drawn. Random factors are dealt with using statistical methods: sufficient sample size and outlier analysis are used. Some systematic factors affecting both groups equally, such as socioeconomic status, are known from previous research and controlled for in the analyses. The research team is vigilant in respect of systematic factors that are likely to bias either EC or control groups alone. Where they are seen to occur, they are reported. Again the sample size offers a degree of protection.

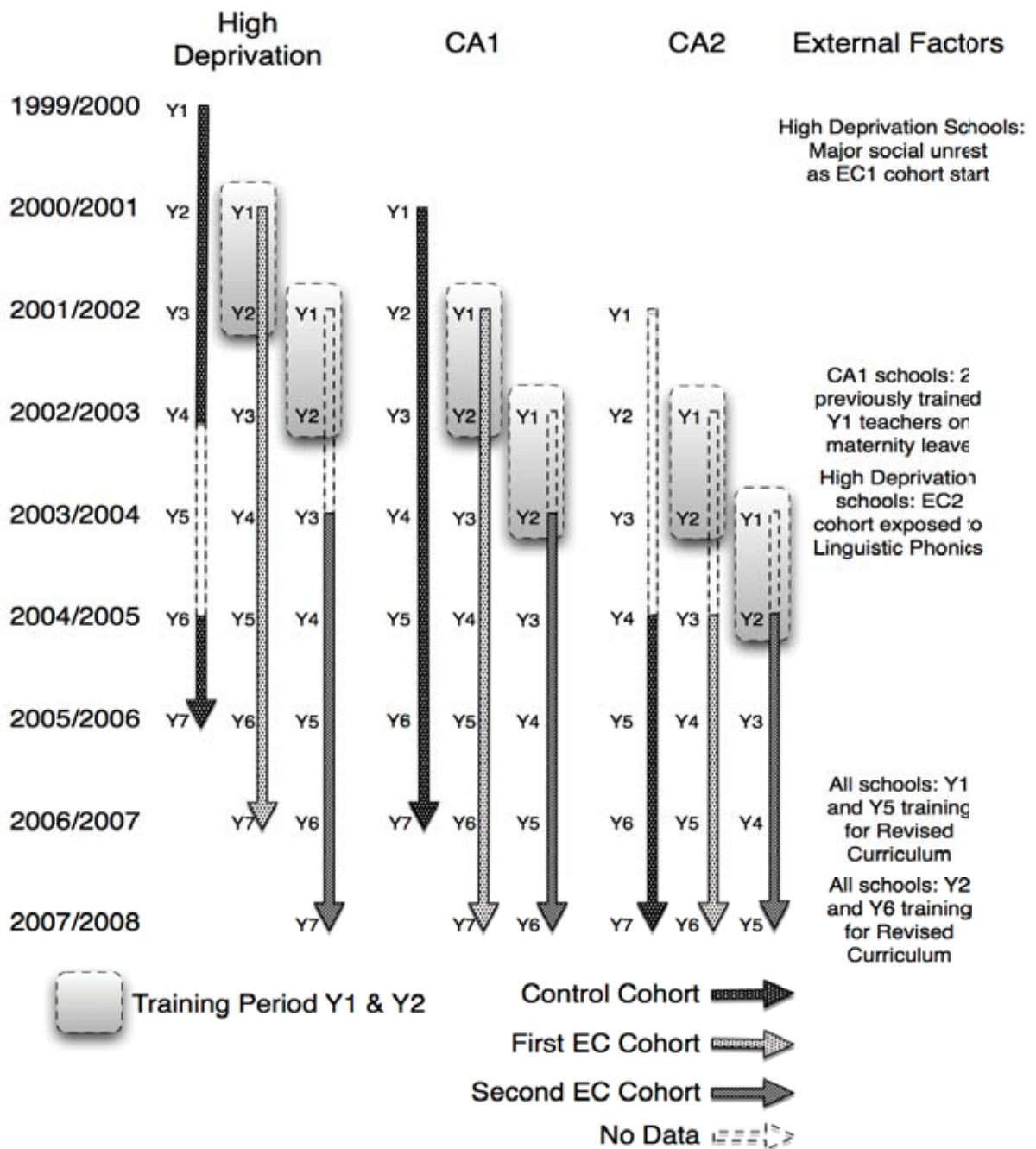
Figure 3 shows the timeline for data collection for all cohorts and highlights which classes in the different schools/cohorts constituted the focus for the data collection in each year together with external factors that may have had an impact. During the period of the evaluation, major events

happened both locally — specific to schools — and nationally, as part of other educational developments. For example,

- Major social unrest in the inner Belfast area during 2000-2001 almost certainly negatively impacted on the first EC Y1 cohort (EC1) in that group of schools, but also the Y2 control group. However, Y1 may have been more vulnerable because it was their first year at school.
- The introduction of a systematic approach to phonics (called Linguistic Phonics) in some of the inner Belfast schools in 2003-2004 most likely had a positive effect on reading attainment in the second EC cohort (EC2) in those schools.
- Turnover of staff/temporary teachers may well have negatively impacted on the second cohort of EC children in the CA1 schools.
- In the first years of the evaluation, there was considerable debate and discussion about the NI Literacy Strategy.
- Finally, we know that some schools were also involved in other projects (e.g., Assessment for Learning, Accelerated Learning, and Primary Movement). These probably affected both EC and control groups.

In the statistical analyses we carefully note the timeline of these factors and return to them to aid the interpretation of the data.

**Figure 3** Timeline of data collection for the three groups of schools and external factors that might have affected outcomes



## **5. Conclusions**

**5.1** Because the evaluation has stretched over nearly 10 years, there have been many changes in early years policy, research and practice since the EC was originally conceived. Some of these changes have already filtered into early years practice in primary schools in Northern Ireland, especially with the introduction of the Foundation Stage as part of the Revised NI Curriculum. Many of the changes have been due partly, though not exclusively, to feedback from the evaluation of the pilot EC project.

**5.2** When drawing conclusions about implementation and outcomes, it is important to re-emphasise that the EC began as a local initiative in a small number of schools, gained momentum, and was then implemented by schools in all five Education and Library Boards. The growth could be described as organic and bottom-up rather than being centrally organised and directed. From the point of view of the evaluation, what began as a short-term local evaluation, changed to an evaluation with the potential to inform policy revisions to the Northern Ireland Curriculum, for teacher training, resources to schools and so on. Indeed, many curriculum innovations are introduced at national level without an evaluation of this scope and quality.

**5.3** Even at this stage, several important general lessons can be learned from the EC evaluation that apply to any model of curriculum innovation and implementation. The importance of

- a clear conceptual underpinning to the curriculum that is well understood by the main stakeholders;
- the best available evidence base to inform the design of the programme;
- being responsive to new evidence and feedback as it becomes available;
- good documentation, and consistent training and teacher support;
- good leadership at the school level;
- good liaison between schools and parents; and
- a favourable and consistent policy direction.

There is nothing surprising about this list and their importance have been previously identified in the research literature (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991). Nevertheless, essential elements were missing at crucial points during the implementation of the EC, especially as the curriculum model moved beyond the “initiating” group. In the beginning, the EC was largely a teacher-led and school-led initiative and the degree of ownership was influential in maintaining teacher commitment and motivation. However, as the curriculum model was rolled out, and training was delivered by the different boards, the evolving nature of the curriculum — which had been a strong point in the

beginning — became problematical. Again, Earl et al. (2003), in their analysis of sustaining curriculum reform, comment that there is a need for local autonomy and central direction at different times in the process of curriculum change. As the curriculum model expanded in 2001 and 2002, there was probably a need for greater central direction, as was pointed out in earlier reports from the evaluation team.

**5.4** The diverse manifestations of the Enriched Curriculum presented the research team with a more immediate problem. Could the EC be considered as a unitary curriculum for the purposes of the evaluation or were there, in effect, different curricula implemented especially across school groups? Evidence from the analyses in Phase 1 indicated that there were sufficient common elements to proceed with a single unitary approach, but also that separate analyses should be considered for the school groups who experienced different training, had different resources and so on.

**5.5** Beyond evaluating the relative merits of a developmentally appropriate and play-based early-years curriculum, the evaluation provides a unique longitudinal dataset. During the course of the research, the progress of a representative sample of Northern Ireland children was longitudinally evaluated through their primary school years in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The effects of social disadvantage, gender, age in class, and baseline ability at school entry — as well as curriculum — were evaluated. The dataset thus provides a benchmark for future comparison, especially with regard to ‘closing the achievement gap’.

**5.6** The multi-method evaluation strategy which was adopted also provides insights into how teachers, parents and children’s perspectives can inform educational innovations.



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