

**The Early Years Enriched Curriculum
Evaluation Project (EYECEP)
End-of-Phase 2, Report 2**

**Inside EC Classrooms and Schools:
Children, Teachers and School Principals**

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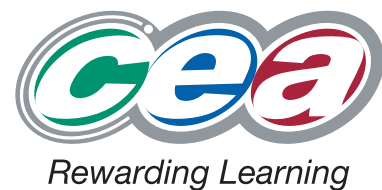
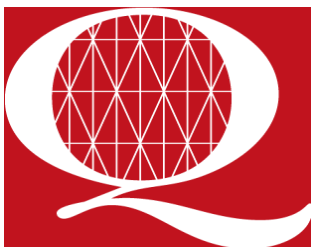


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Team of Fieldworkers: A group of 40 professionals mostly retired teachers, who were trained to administer our psychometric tests and questionnaires in the schools. Most of them remained active in the project over several years and greatly facilitated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

This report, the second of the series of four End-of-Phase 2 reports of the evaluation of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum (EC), concentrates on the experiences and perceptions of those *inside* the classrooms and schools that were the first to introduce the Enriched Curriculum. The perspectives of the main stakeholders in schools were studied — children, teachers and school principals. The evaluation adopted a multi-method strategy and, from the beginning, aimed to provide information on the impact of the curriculum from different perspectives. This report, called *Inside EC Classrooms and Schools*, complements the findings from the parental surveys (Report 3) and the longitudinal findings on children's outcomes (Report 4).

Specifically, the aim of this strand of the evaluation was:

- To examine the *processes* within EC classrooms through structured classroom observations. The particular focus was on the 'quality' of the learning which the children were experiencing in Years 1 and 2, and the extent to which teachers adjusted their practices in developmentally appropriate ways. The findings from the structured classroom observations are reported in Section 2 of this report.
- 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, how they implemented the curriculum in their classrooms, the challenges they faced and how they responded. Interviews and surveys were conducted with Y1 and Y2 teachers who were at the forefront of the changes and who were teaching the new EC, together with teachers who received the EC children into their classes for the remainder of Key Stage 1 and into Key Stage 2. The findings from the teachers' interviews and surveys are reported in Section 3 of this report.
- To give the school principals from the 24 evaluation schools an opportunity of 'looking back in time' at the implementation and the impact of the EC — on the curriculum, on the children, on the teachers, and more generally on the whole school. The findings from the principals' interviews are reported in Section 4 of this report.
- To give the children's perspective a louder voice in the evaluation, by including findings from an additional report on transitions which was separately commissioned by CCEA, and reported by some members of the research team (Walsh et al., 2008). A summary of the findings from the interviews with children are reported in Section 5 of this report.

The reader is reminded that detailed reports on classroom observations and teachers' perceptions have previously been included in the research team's annual reports, supplementary reports, and the final report of Phase 1 (end of the Fourth Year) in March 2005. All these reports can be found at <http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/>.

The current report extends the findings of previous reports by (i) substantially increasing the number of classroom observations that have been previously reported, particularly in Year 2 classrooms; (ii) extending the findings from teachers' surveys and interviews and presenting them within a systematic framework; (iii) including previously unreported interviews with school principals; and (iv) including the perspectives from children about their transitions from pre-school into EC classrooms, and from Year 2 EC classes into Year 3 Key Stage 1.

2. Inside Year 1 and Year 2 EC Classrooms: Observing Quality Learning

2.1 Background

The importance of the quality of learning is central to the evaluation of all educational provision¹. In the research literature, the meaning of quality has been closely examined in the context of early years education, particularly in pre-schools. In pre-school settings, quality is normally indicated by both *structural* elements of the settings, such as adult-child ratios or the levels of teacher/practitioner education and training, as well as *process* elements, such as adult-child interactions, the nature of learning activities, and learning opportunities available to the children. These process indicators of quality are normally assessed through structured observations and ratings by trained observers over a period of time, normally one day. Quality indicators in the pre-school have been shown to predict children's learning outcomes, both in terms of their academic progress and their socio-emotional development. This finding has been demonstrated not only at the end of pre-school but further into primary school, e.g., Effective Provision of Pre-School Education, EPPE in England (Sylva et al, 2004; Sylva et al., 2006) and its equivalent, EPPNI, in Northern Ireland (Melhuish et al., 2006).

¹ For example, 'quality of learning' in lessons is evaluated in all ETI School Inspection Reports.

The Quality Learning Instrument (QLI, Walsh and Gardner, 2005; Walsh et al., 2006) is a classroom observation schedule that is used to evaluate the quality of the children’s learning experience in this study. Unlike many well-known measures, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, ECERS (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998) and its later modifications (Sylva et al., 2003), the QLI takes into consideration a triangle of interactions in the classroom — the children’s actions, the teaching strategies and the role of the environment. One important aspect of quality is the way in which a learning environment or curriculum is “experienced by the participating children” (Katz, 1995, p. 120). It is this aspect of quality — how it might feel to be a child in the learning environment — that is the focus for QLI. Thus, the QLI rating in a classroom is determined by the way in which the learning and developmental needs of the main stakeholders, the children themselves, are being met within the affective, cognitive, social and physical context. It was developed specifically for use in Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms and has been subjected to considerable validity and reliability analyses.

Indicators of Quality: There are nine quality indicators against which children’s learning experience in a classroom can be assessed. These quality indicators are namely *motivation, concentration, confidence, independence, physical well-being, multiple skill acquisition, higher-order thinking skills, social interaction and respect*. Each quality indicator is explained more fully in Table 2.1. QLI takes into consideration the holistic and inter-relatedness of young children’s learning and development, the affective (confidence, physical well-being), social (social interaction and respect) and cognitive (multiple skill acquisition and higher-order thinking skills) domains, as well as the roots of children’s learning dispositions (motivation, concentration and independence).

The three aspects – children’s actions, teaching strategies, and the environment — are rated in relation to each of the nine quality indicators. Using a best-fit model each setting is rated against the QLI rubric on a scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high) for each domain (total scores can vary from 9-54).

Validity and Reliability: From several perspectives, the QLI has been shown to be a valid and reliable instrument to use in early years settings (Walsh and Gardner, 2005). The QLI has demonstrated face and content validity. Its design was embedded in the early years research literature and was developed from a series of observation studies in Year 1 settings in Northern Ireland and kindergartens in Denmark (providing examples of play-based practice at that time). A panel of early years experts confirmed the appropriateness of the content of the indicators, and the placing of category boundaries was calibrated

Table 2.1 A definition of each quality indicator from the QLI

Quality Indicator	Definition
<i>Motivation</i>	Children are interested in and inquisitive about their learning and show active signs of wanting to learn.
<i>Concentration</i>	Children are actively engaged in the learning process, not easily distracted and attentive for reasonable periods.
<i>Confidence</i>	Children feel secure and not under pressure in their learning environment and have confidence in their ability as learners
<i>Independence</i>	Children have an appropriate degree of control over their own learning and behaviour.
<i>Physical well-being</i>	Children are happy, well behaved, appropriately nourished and physically at ease in their learning environment.
<i>Multiple skill acquisition</i>	Children are provided with an holistic learning experience, covering a variety of skills and knowledge within an appropriate context.
<i>Higher-order thinking skills</i>	Children are given the opportunity to reflect on and synthesise their whole learning experience and in so doing develop their powers of such things as memory, listening, sequencing, sorting and classification.
<i>Social interaction</i>	Children are encouraged to learn in the company of others and to get along with each other and with adults.
<i>Respect</i>	Children display a tolerance and respect for themselves, others and their environment.

against their judgements. High levels of inter-rater reliability on the nine scales among the experts have been shown (0.73-1.0) and among our ‘trained’ observers (0.69-0.89), figures which compare favourably with similar studies (e.g., Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford et al., 1999) using other scales such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998). Analysis has also revealed that the scale has very high internal consistency². This finding validates the use of the total score as a useful general quality indicator.

Use of QLI in the current research: To assess the quality of learning in the EC classrooms, observations of Y1 EC classes were compared with observations from classrooms that were following the pre-existing curriculum. A sample of pre-existing classroom observations using the QLI had been collected prior to 2000 and was used as a control sample. A smaller sample of Y2 classes was also observed and was

² Cronbach's alpha, a measure of internal reliability, is 0.94 for the total score over all nine indicators in 90 cases. It does not drop below 0.92 when single items are removed. Principal component analysis with either Varimax or Direct Oblimin rotation confirms the presence of a strong factor loaded on all nine indicators, with a secondary factor positively loaded on motivation, confidence, independence, well being and social interaction and less strongly on the other four indicators.

compared to Y1 to evaluate the extent to which the quality processes were continued into Y2 as the teachers made the transition into more formal approaches.

As an additional indicator of classroom processes, the time spent during the day on adult-initiated activities versus child-initiated activities, and on different types of activities, was also recorded.

2.2 Method

Sample: 148 classes were observed, 110 EC classes and 38 classes who were following the pre-existing curriculum. There were 69 Year 1 and 41 Year 2 EC classes. The EC classes were drawn from 17 of the 24 evaluation schools and three additional EC schools in the Belfast area which did not feature elsewhere in the evaluation.

The pre-existing curriculum Year 1 classes were selected through a random sampling procedure in the Greater Belfast area (excluding the Irish-speaking and Enriched Curriculum schools). Forty schools were selected. Two schools could not take part, leaving 38 schools. These observations were collected prior to 2000 and the introduction of the EC into any schools.

As detailed in Table 2.2, the Year 1 and Year 2 samples are reasonably comparable in terms of free school meals, locality, class size and pupil-teacher ratio. However, the sample for the pre-existing curriculum has fewer classes from high deprivation schools.

Table 2.2 Comparability between the three participating samples

Sample	Average % of FSM	% of Inner City Schools in group	Average Class Size	Average P-T ratio
<i>Enriched Y1</i>	42.0	69 (n=39)	23	18.9
<i>Enriched Y2</i>	46.7	41 (n=29)	20	18.6
<i>Pre-existing</i>	32.4	38 (n=15)	24	20.2

How the observations were collected: Observations were conducted by trained observers³. Each class was observed for two full-day sessions that were considered to be 'typical', that is, the children were completing normal activities and not doing something extraordinary, for instance, having a special

³ Observers were trained by Dr Glenda Walsh who created the QLI, using video training methods.

event. The first day was spent recording the structure of the day and the second day on the structured classroom observation using the QLI.

On the first day, the main activities of the children were observed and classified as adult-directed or child-initiated. Adult-directed activities were those defined as chosen solely by the teacher and presented in a structured fashion (e.g., writing on the board, colouring-in exercises, and alphabet practice). Child-initiated activities were defined as those activities selected by the children and were more practical and play-based. The time spent on play-based, practical and written activities was also recorded. Play-based activities were those where children were free to choose from a range of play stations such as the house corner, sand, water and construction, and where the staff interacts, as appropriate. Practical activities were structured by the teacher and involved little written work. Teacher-led activities tended to be sedentary and usually involved a substantial amount of written work. On the second day, the QLI was administered by the same observer. Day 1 observations were about large 'chunk' activities that were relatively easy to observe and categorise. Through the Day 1 experience, the observer was better prepared to carry out the more in-depth observations required for QLI. Day 1 also enabled the observer to become familiar with the children, staff and setting.

2.3 Results

The results of the two days' observations will be presented in the following way:

- A broad overview description of the structure of the day in an EC classroom compared to a classroom following the pre-existing curriculum, together with how time was distributed over different types of activities (Day 1 observations).
- Statistical analyses from the QLI ratings – total score and subscale scores from the nine quality indicators (Day 2 observations).

2.3.1 Broad Overview of the Day

The pre-existing curriculum Year 1 classes: The structure of the day in classes that were following the pre-existing curriculum was organized around subjects, with an emphasis placed on teaching the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic). In the majority of classes, formal activities assumed priority throughout the day, where the main intention was to deliver aspects of the (then) statutory Northern Ireland curriculum. In 70% of these Year 1 classes, the school began with a structured play session of at least 45 minutes, often used by the teacher to listen to an individual child, or groups of children,

reading. These play activities were followed by more reading-related and writing tasks, which, in many cases, consisted of copying from the board, colouring-in or completing simple worksheets. Generally, a break of approximately 15 minutes was then taken during which the children ate a snack, went to the toilet and, if the weather permitted, played outdoors. The children then returned to a mathematics activity, which involved the completion of a worksheet. Letter instruction in the form of a phonics activity or handwriting exercise often followed. Lunch, lasting approximately 45 minutes, tended to take place at around 12.15 p.m. After lunch, the activities generally included listening to a story, watching television, participating in songs and rhymes or completing an unfinished activity.

Overall, the observations showed that the children were expected to conform to a traditional, school-like environment and a formal style of classroom management. There were deviations from this general pattern which included children commencing work-related activities immediately in the morning without any play session or, in some cases, included a short free-play session at the end of the day. Other observed activities included two physical education lessons, two religious education lessons and one science-related activity.

EC Year 1 classes: In the EC classes, a more varied curriculum was delivered, where the activities were shorter in duration and more practical in design. In all of the classes, the day began with play, where the children had some degree of choice of activity. Both teacher and classroom assistant supported learning during play. Play lasted approximately 1.5 hours. In 80% of the classes, a plenary concluded the play, encouraging the children to reflect on the play activities they had completed. After playtime, in the majority of the EC classes, the teacher read a story using a big book, focusing the children's attention on a particular reading skill. Break-time followed, where children had the opportunity to eat something and to play freely with their friends. In about half of the EC classes, children then played outdoors, time being spent on developing children's gross motor skills. On returning to the classroom, the teacher focused the children's attention on practical mathematics; a mathematical concept was taught in a practical and playful manner, for example, using a puppet, mathematics games or the computer. If time permitted before lunch, the teacher engaged with the children in some songs and rhymes.

After lunch in most of the EC classes, the focus was on shared writing. Unlike the pre-existing curriculum classes, where letter formation was prioritised, the aim in the EC classes was to encourage

the children to write something down creatively, irrespective of handwriting⁴ technique (or in some individual cases, even scribed by the teacher). After spending approximately 30 minutes on writing, the day finished with a television programme, a story or further songs and rhymes. In about a quarter of the EC classes, there was a news time at the end of the day, during which the children got the opportunity to discuss something of importance to them. Although not every EC class followed this exact order, the structure of the day was organized broadly around these activities.

The conclusions from this broad overview are confirmed by examining how time was spent in the classroom on various types of activities and who led the activities. Table 2.3 shows that, in the pre-existing Year 1 curriculum classes, 82% of the time was spent on adult-initiated activities compared to a more equal balance between adult-initiated (56%) and child-initiated (44%) in EC Year 1 classes. Also, when the time spent on different types of activities was quantified, 70% of time was spent on written activities in Year 1 pre-existing curriculum classes compared to 18% in EC Year 1 classes, where the predominant activities were either play-based (31%) or practical activities (51%), see Table 2.4.

The balance between adult- versus. child-initiated activities was maintained in Year 2 classes, with a small shift towards activities being more adult-led and written compared to Year 1 EC classes. However, even in Year 2, there were distinct differences in the level of formality compared with Year 1 classes in the previous curriculum, see Tables 2.3 and 2.4.

Table 2.3 Times Spent on Child-Initiated versus. Adult-Initiated Activities

Type of Curriculum	Time spent on Child-Initiated Activities		Time spent on Adult-Initiated Activities	
	Mean (mins)	%	Mean (mins)	%
Pre-existing	43	18	197	82
EC Year 1	103	44	133	56
EC Year 2	96	40	144	60

⁴ Approaches to teaching handwriting were modified in some schools after the first or second year of implementation, see interviews with school principals in this report.

Table 2.4 Times Spent on Play, Practical, and Written Activities

Type of Curriculum	Time Spent on Play Activities		Time spent on Practical Activities		Time spent on Written Activities	
	Mean (mins)	%	Mean (mins)	%	Mean (mins)	%
Pre-existing	43	18	29	12	168	70
EC Year 1	76	31	123	51	43	18
EC Year 2	70	29	114	48	56	23

2.3.2. Quality Learning in the Classrooms

Y1 control classes versus. Y1 EC classes. There are nine indicators on the QLI which are scored from 1 (low) to 6 (very high), giving a total score that can range from 9-54. The total score for the EC Year 1 classes was 43 compared to 26 for the control classes, which was statistically significant, $t(105)=12.7$, $p<.0001$. This showed that, across the nine indicators, the EC classes averaged 4.9 compared to the control classes that were averaging 2.9, on the 6-point scale.

Figure 2.1 shows the distribution of scores for each group and demonstrates the extent to which the majority of the EC teachers had moved their practices in the direction of a more developmentally appropriate curriculum. It also shows that, for a small minority of classes, there was still very little difference between them and previous practice.

A closer examination of the subscales of the QLI showed a profile of what was happening in the classrooms, see Figure 2.2. For each of the nine subscales, there were statistically significant differences between EC and control classes, with higher scores for the EC classes in all cases. The lowest score for the control classes was for the indicator *independence* ($m=2.3$) and the highest score was for *concentration* ($m=3.3$). For the EC classes, the lowest score was for *higher-order thinking* ($m=4.5$). The mean scores for the remaining eight indicators were between 4.5 and 4.9. EC classes scored particularly well on the social-emotional and dispositional indicators (*well-being, independence, motivation, confidence*).

Year 2 versus. Year 1 EC classes: The overall QLI score for the Year 2 EC classes ($m=41$) was slightly lower than for the Year 1 EC classes ($m=43$), but this difference was not statistically significant. Figure 2.3

shows the distribution of scores for both years. As expected from the average scores, the range of the distributions was very similar. As in Year 1 classes, there was a small group of Year 2 classrooms that were not scoring very high on the QLI; in addition, there were fewer very high scores in Year 2 classes when compared to Year 1.

Figure 2.4 shows the subscale profile over the nine QLI indicators, and perhaps reveals emerging differences as children progress from Year 1 into Year 2. The differences between the Year 1 and Year 2 classes were small, especially with reference to the previous comparisons. Nevertheless, Year 2 EC scored significantly lower than Year 1 EC classes on four of the nine indicators — *motivation, concentration, higher-order thinking and multiple skill acquisition*.

Figure 2.1 Distributions of total scores for QLI in Year 1 for EC (n= 69) and Control (n=38) classes

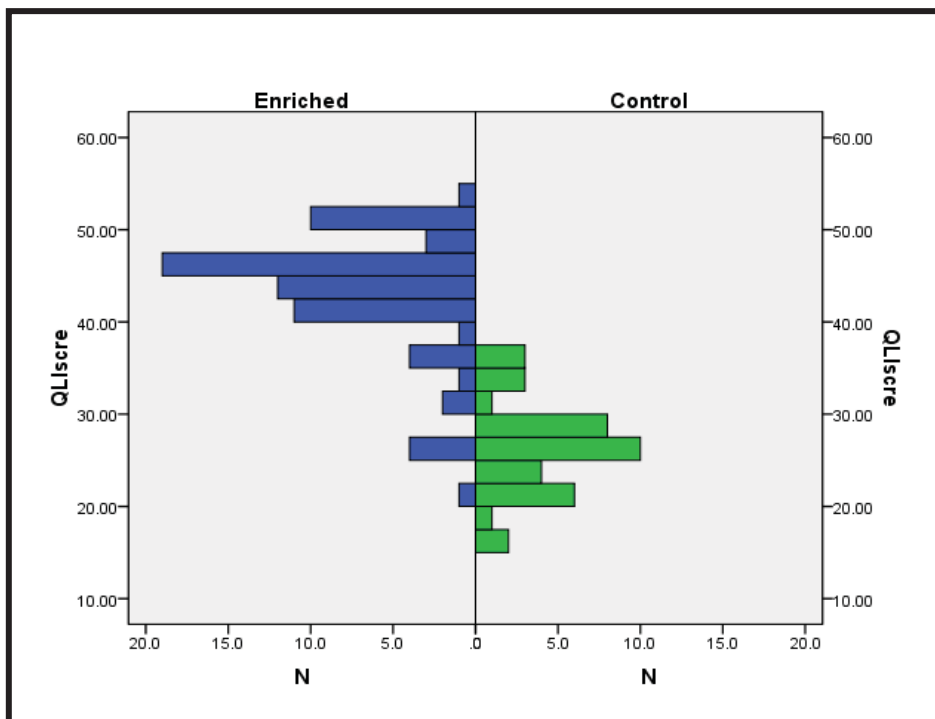


Figure 2.2 Comparison of QLI mean scale scores in Year 1 for EC (n=69) and Control (n=38) classes (all comparisons are statistically significant)

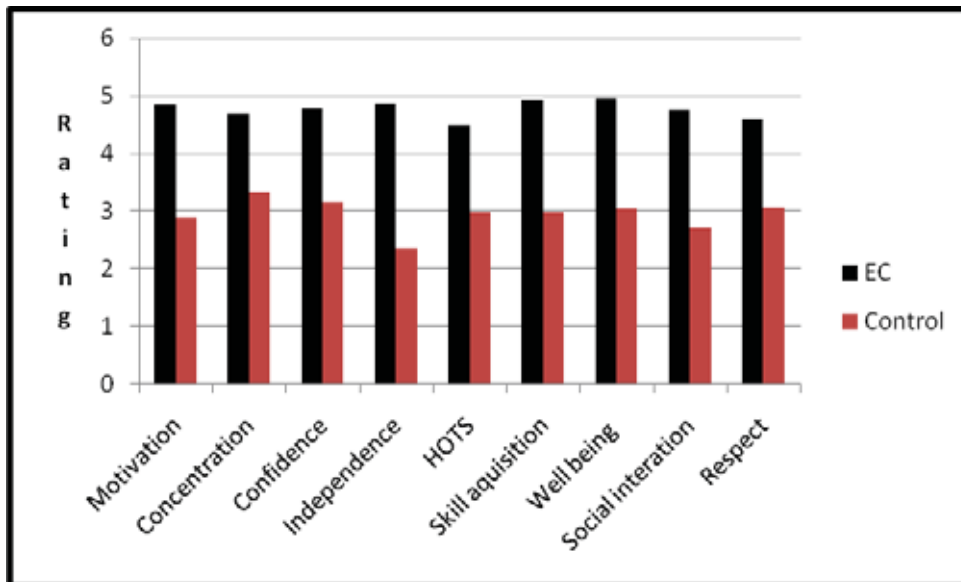


Figure 2.3 Distributions of total scores for QLI in Year 1 (n=69) and Year 2 (n=41) EC classes

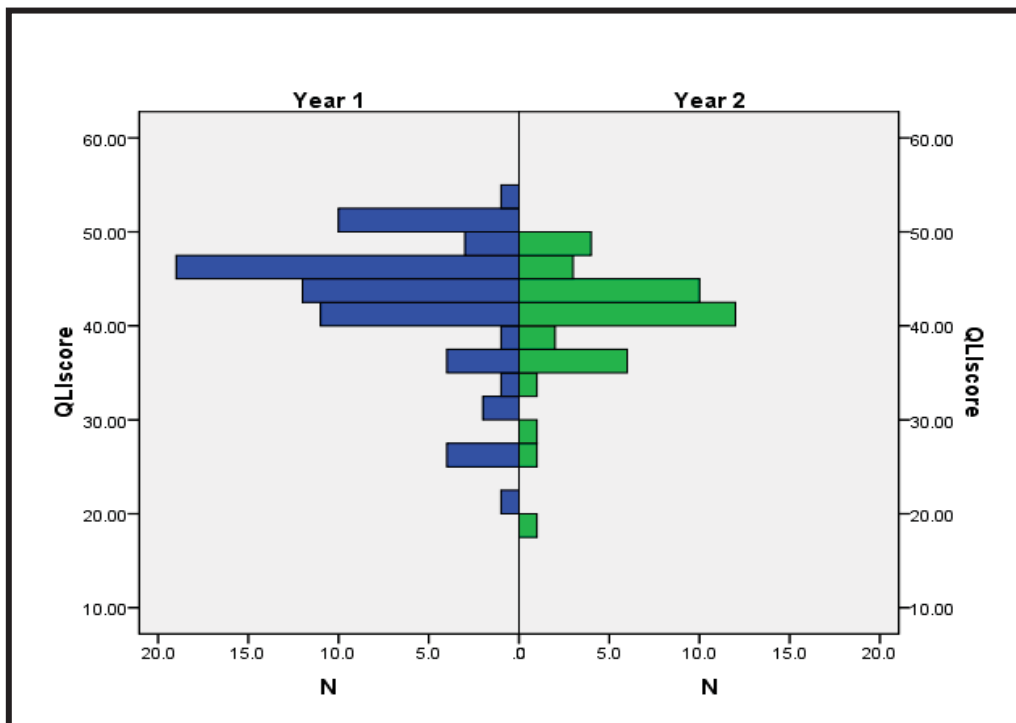
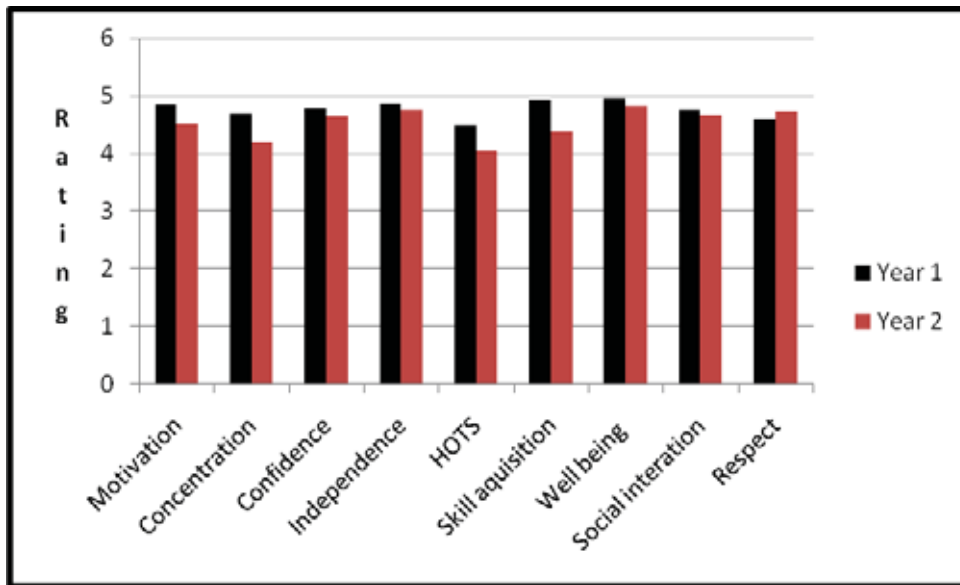


Figure 2.4 Comparison of QLI mean scale scores in Year 1 (n=69) and Year 2 (n=41) EC classes (comparisons are statistically significant for four indicators, *motivation, concentration, higher-order thinking, multiple skill acquisition.*)



2.3.3 Section Summary and Conclusions

The focus for the research was on the quality of the learning experiences for the children at this early stage of their lives in primary schools. The concept of quality was defined primarily through the nine quality indicators of the Quality Learning Instrument which sought to assess the affective, social, cognitive and motivational aspects of the children’s experience. The purpose of the comparison between Year 1 EC classes and Year 1 classes in the pre-existing curriculum was to examine the differences in classroom processes and routines, and the experiences of children under the two different curricula and pedagogical approaches. The purpose of the comparison between Year 1 and Year 2 was to identify any emerging issues related to progression within the context of a play-based curriculum. The conclusions are based on observations for two days in each of 140 early years classrooms in primary schools in Northern Ireland. The observations in the pre-existing curriculum classes were conducted prior to the year 2000. The majority of the EC observations were conducted in the first years of implementing the EC during 2000-2003, with additional observations during 2005-2006 when the new group of 12 schools joined the evaluation in Phase 2 (the CA2 schools).

The findings show that the structure and routines of the EC classes differed substantially when compared with the previous curriculum.

- The routines of EC classes were more developmentally appropriate. The structure of the day was broken into shorter and more active time periods. There was a better balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities, and a substantial shift from written work towards a balance between play, practical and written activities.
- The majority of teachers had shifted their practice in this more developmentally appropriate direction but not all.
- With regard to the quality of the children's experience as shown in the QLI, the EC classes scored particularly well on social-emotional and motivational indicators, especially in Year 1.
- The pre-existing classrooms were particularly poor on the dimensions of *independence* and *social interaction*, consistent with the findings about the dominance of adult-led and more sedentary activities which were observed in the those classrooms.
- The indicator, *higher-order thinking*, was scored the lowest of the nine indicators in Year 1 and Year 2 EC classes, although it was considerably higher than that observed in the previous curriculum. But this general finding about higher-order thinking in EC classes does signal a warning that simply providing more play-based and practical tasks does not necessarily promote and extend children's cognitive and metacognitive processes, and that there is a clear need for teacher mediation in this regard. For example, there was some indication that a better balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities (fewer extremes) was associated with higher scores on the higher-order thinking indicator.
- EC Year 2 classes showed slightly lower quality scores compared to Year 1 EC classes, significantly so on four of the nine indicators. Linking these findings with teacher interviews (next section), raises questions about the understanding and meaning of a play-based curriculum as children moved from Year 1 to Year 2. We know from the teachers' interviews that Year 2 had less training in preparation for the EC; they had less previous experience of a developmentally appropriate and play-based curriculum than their Year 1 colleagues and were less knowledgeable about the pedagogy of play and their role in planning and delivering it. As a result, ensuring adequate progression, both cognitively and socially, through the medium of play may have proved problematic, and there is a worry for curriculum planners and practitioners that play, in many Year 2 classes, may simply be a replica of what was experienced in Year 1.

In conclusion, through the structured observations, it was clear that the children had much more rounded and higher levels of social-emotional, motivational and cognitive experiences than they would have had in the previous curriculum. Our findings also point to the need for a more extensive elaboration of what a play-based pedagogy means as children move from Year 1 into Year 2 and beyond. We will return to this issue in the final conclusions to this report when we integrate these findings from the classroom observations with the teachers' and school-principals' interviews.

3. Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences over Time

3.1 Background and Purpose

Over the course of the project, almost 300 teachers in the 24 evaluation schools taught EC classes at some point, and each teacher was approached to participate in the evaluation. Two hundred and sixty teachers (87%) were interviewed face-to-face, and/or were surveyed by written questionnaire. The interviews and surveys were conducted with Y1 and Y2 teachers who were at the forefront of the changes and who were teaching the new EC, together with teachers who received the EC children into their classes for the remainder of Key Stage 1, and into Key Stage 2.

The purpose was 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, how they implemented the curriculum in their classrooms, the challenges they faced and how they responded. The information and the feedback from the teachers was reported in each annual report and in the End-of-Phase 1 Report and provided crucial information over the years about the evolving nature of the curriculum, the adjustments that were made, and the new challenges that teachers faced as the EC children moved up the classes.

Instead of rehearsing those findings again in this End-of-Phase 2 Report, we have constructed an interpretative framework through which to view the perceptions, experiences and responses of teachers over time, and to make sense of what they told us. The framework is represented as a flow diagram in Figure 3.1 in Section 3.3, and forms the basis for this section.

3.2 Method

Sample: 260 teachers were either interviewed and/or surveyed over time. Table 3.1 shows the number of teachers in the sample for each year group. Year 1 and Year 2 teachers and the majority of teachers in other year groups were interviewed individually, but in three schools the information was collected in a focus group. All teachers were also surveyed; sometimes teachers who had been interviewed also completed questionnaires, and a small number of teachers responded through questionnaire only. The great majority of Y1 and Y2 teachers returned their questionnaire but response rates to the questionnaires declined as children became older.

Table 3.1 Distribution of the number of teachers who were interviewed and surveyed across year groups

	Year 1 or Y1/2	Year 2 or Y2/Y3	Year 3 or Y3/Y4	Year 4	Year 5+	Total ⁵
<i>Interview or focus group</i>	34	33	32	24	36	159
<i>Survey</i>	17*	28	46	24	15	130

* *High deprivation schools were not surveyed in the first year of the evaluation*

Questions in the interview schedule and in the survey questionnaire were structured to elicit information about:

- Changes in teachers' pedagogy and classroom routines, and the rationale underlying them, including any adapted and adjusted practices as EC children moved into Y3 and above;
- Changes in teachers' beliefs about how children learn and develop;
- Preparation, training and support to implement the EC;
- Additional resources that were made available and/or needed;
- Perceptions of the outcomes for children;
- Responses of parents; and
- Any other comments.

Each year, descriptive statistics were generated from the survey questionnaire and the interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic content analyses. Further confirmation of many of the findings was obtained during the structured classroom observations (Section 2) and through case studies (which will form part of the teacher guidance report).

⁵ The total in the final column in Table 3.1 is greater than the total number of teachers involved in the study, as some teachers were **both** interviewed and surveyed.

3.3. Teachers' Experiences over Time: An Interpretative Framework

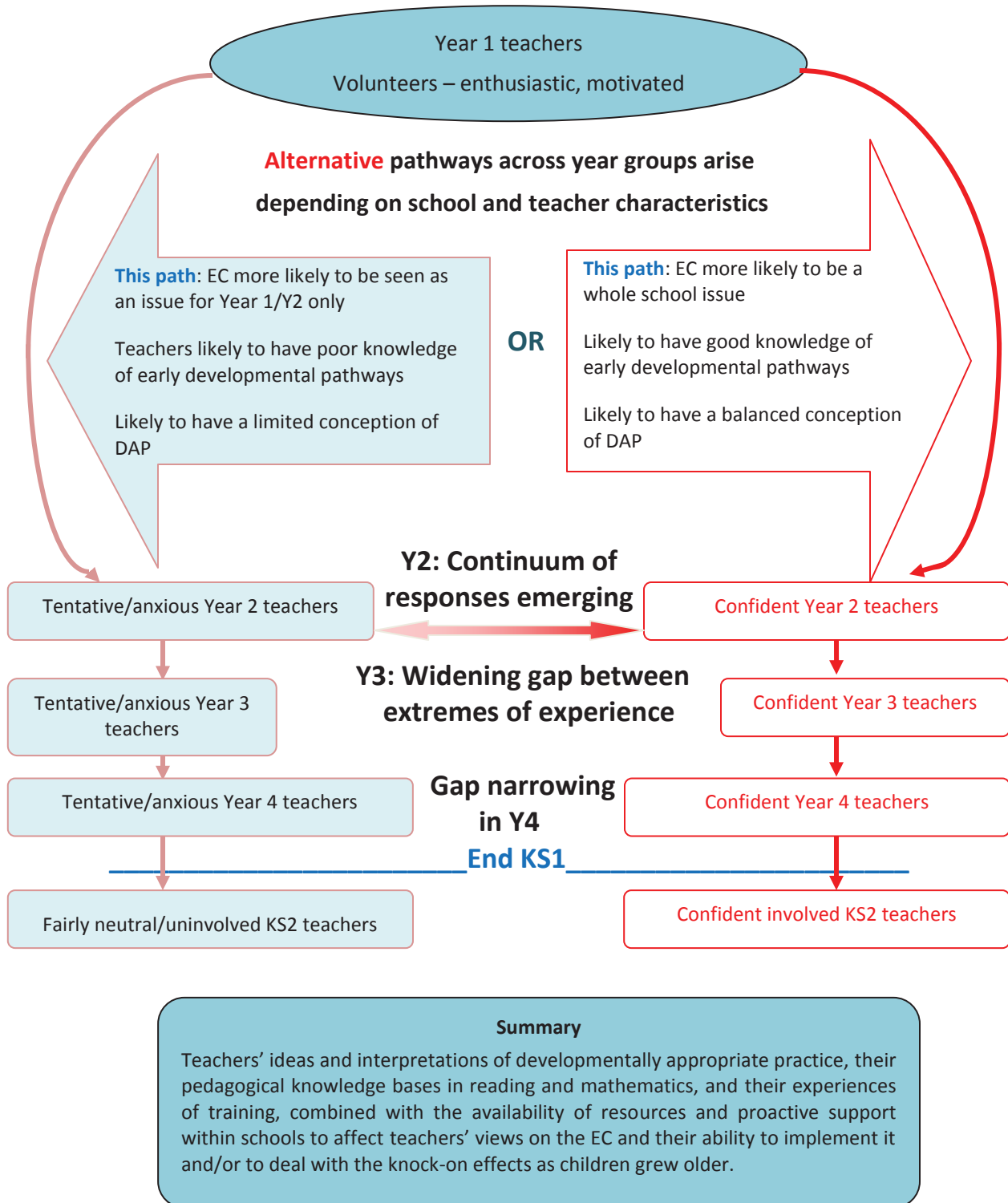
3.3.1 Factors that influenced Teachers' Experiences: The first point to note is that the teachers' experiences of implementing the EC, their beliefs about it, and their responses to the changes that were demanded, were varied. In particular, teachers in different year groups reported different experiences. Y1 teachers' responses were the most similar to one another. After that, several school and teacher characteristics were associated with changing patterns. We have identified three important characteristics which consistently appeared in both the interview and survey data:

- The extent to which the school embraced the EC as a whole school project compared to an early years approach;
- The knowledge and confidence of teachers about developmental pathways in the early years — particularly, reading and mathematics development;
- The ideas and beliefs that the teachers held about the meaning of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and curriculum.

These three factors operated — sometimes separately, and sometimes in harmony — to produce alternative, and very differing, experiences reported by the teachers. Figure 3.1 is a flow diagram that attempts to show how these factors influenced the alternative pathways. It should be remembered that the alternative pathways represent the end-points of a continuum; many schools and teachers experiences were distributed across the continuum and the balance may have changed from year to year within a given school. Nevertheless, the alternative pathways outlined in Figure 3.1 show a pattern and help to make meaning of widely differing experiences as reported in the interviews and surveys.

EC as whole-school approach versus. confined to the early years: Interviews with the teachers, and subsequently with the school principals, showed that schools responded in different ways to the EC, especially in the early years of its implementation. The extent of these differences can be seen in Figures 4.1 and 4.2 in Section 4 of this report. For some schools, the EC was considered as of primary importance only to Y1 and Y2 teachers; these schools anticipated an easy transition for the children into Y3 and beyond and were not fully prepared for the knock-on effects. Other schools considered that the EC needed a whole-school response from the beginning; the ripple effects and the implications were embraced within the whole school policy. Teachers reported that this distinction made a big difference to the planning of the curriculum, the transitions from year to year, the degree of support which was available and extended to the teachers in various year groups, and in the general flow of communication.

Figure 3.1 Teachers' Experiences over Time: An Interpretative Framework



Teachers' knowledge and confidence about developmental pathways in the early years: Teachers who had secure knowledge of early developmental pathways were much better positioned to implement the

new curriculum. Many teachers explained that, when reading schemes and mathematics work schemes were removed from their practice, they had to construct their own schemes of work as they went along. This demanded a higher level of planning than with the pre-existing curriculum. It also asked for a higher level of flexibility, as teachers tried to take into account the needs of individual children and to be responsive to children in order to maintain motivation. Particularly during the least formal activity, structured play, those teachers who had the goals of the activity, or the order of acquisition of new concepts, securely in mind were best able to adapt. Teachers with either poor knowledge, or poor confidence in their knowledge, were put under pressure and struggled to adapt their practice. For example, for many teachers Eunice Pitt's⁶ model for development in mathematics was considered invaluable, and teachers were generally satisfied with the support and guidance from the NI Numeracy Strategy materials. For reading development, the picture was more mixed. Teachers understood well the transitions between shared and guided reading, but they were less clear about the specifics. Teachers explained that they were not always clear about the developmental sequences around, for example, phonological awareness and phonics teaching. They generally embraced a whole language approach, and were not clear about the merits of a more balanced approach between *learning to read* and *reading to learn*. Within early years pedagogy, there is now a strong emphasis on teachers' ability to scaffold children's learning through teacher mediation and joint activity, to move children on to a stage where they are not yet able to operate independently⁷. Without a deep understanding of developmental pathways and concept knowledge (where appropriate), it is very difficult for teachers to respond flexibly and to scaffold children's learning either in adult-initiated activities or when responding to children's own initiatives.

More generally, some scepticism was expressed about the meaning of a play-based curriculum as children moved beyond Year 1. For example, Year 2 teachers had less training in preparation for the EC; were probably less knowledgeable about the pedagogy of play and their role in planning and delivering it. As a result, ensuring adequate progression, both cognitively and socially, through the medium of play may have proved problematic (see Section 2 of this report on classroom observations using QLI).

Ideas and interpretations of the meaning of developmentally appropriate practices: There is a substantial research literature to show that the beliefs that teachers have about children's learning have implications for their approach to teaching and classrooms practices (e.g., Daniels and Shumon, 2003).

⁶ Eunice Pitt reference

⁷ Within a Vygotskian approach, this is referred to as working within *the zone of proximal development*.

The broad principle that guided the EC was that a shift to an informal and play-based approach was a more appropriate approach to learning for young children, compared to the methods of the previous curriculum. The interviews with the teachers, and the classroom observations (Section 2, this report), confirmed that the EC involved a substantial shift from their previous practices for most teachers. However, in implementing the general approach, the interviews with the teachers showed that they drew on various ideas and theoretical approaches. In Table 3.2, we have attempted to classify these and to draw out some of the positive and negative consequences for classroom practice. For example, a dominant viewpoint held by the teachers could be classified as 'maturationist', which stresses that progress in learning in the early years is largely due to maturation. However, an over-reliance on that viewpoint can lead to the teacher adopting a passive role and not intervening in an appropriate way to move children on. Equally, an over-emphasis on practical activities can lead to insufficient attention to oral work, and to developing children's capacity for symbolic representations.

Teachers differed not only in their interpretations, but in the extent to which they drew on more extreme versions. Some teachers held balanced views on the meaning of developmentally appropriate practice and created a mix of pedagogical strategies that included a balance between adult- and child-initiated activities. Others had more limited interpretations and, in particular, tended to be overly swayed by the maturationist viewpoint.

These three school and teacher characteristics combined and steered alternative pathways for teachers' experiences, perceptions and responses, extremes of which are exemplified in Figure 3.1.

Table 3.2 Teachers' differing interpretations of early years pedagogy and developmentally appropriate practice

Beliefs about children's learning in the early years	Possible positive implications for pedagogy	Possible negative implications for pedagogy if taken to extremes
<i>Progress is largely a process of maturation in the early years —the predominantly 'maturationist' viewpoint.</i>	Children are not pressurised at an early age. They get time to settle into school.	Passive teacher role: Waiting for children to be ready to move on rather than preparing them to be ready.
<i>Pedagogy should be entirely child led; i.e. should follow the children's interest and children should make most of the choices about what and when to learn.</i>	A strong disposition to learn is developed. Children learn fastest when their interest and attention is engaged.	Learning is limited by child's range of experiences and interests. The teacher may need to expand experiences.
<i>Children of this age learn best by doing.</i>	Learning is appropriately grounded in actions and concrete situations. Coarse and fine motor skills are given many opportunities to develop.	Can lead to insufficient oral work and insufficient emphasis on developing children's capacity for symbolic representation.
<i>Children have preferred learning styles, e.g., visual, kinaesthetic, and should be allowed to use them whenever possible.</i>	Recognises individual differences and alternative routes to learning.	Too much focus on a single sensory input can limit multi-sensory stimulation.
<i>Scaffolding — teachers need to be responsive to the level of individual children's learning.</i>	Helping children to learn what is beyond their immediate capability with the assistance of an adult.	Teachers are stressed trying to accommodate individual children's learning versus. the whole class.
<i>Developing memory skills is inappropriate in the early years.</i>	Over emphasis on rote learning is avoided; children are not switched off.	Children need to develop working memory capacity for recounting stories, and remembering sequences, etc.

3.3.2 Teachers' Experiences across the Year Groups

Year 1 teachers: Year 1 teachers constituted a fairly homogeneous group with the following characteristics. Almost all of them had volunteered into the project when their school had initially decided to join. They were enthusiastic, highly motivated and felt ownership of the process. They found the new pedagogy exhausting and challenging but very worthwhile. As children were doing less seatwork than in the previous curriculum, they found a classroom assistant to be invaluable. They held varied ideas and interpretations of developmentally appropriate practice, but less so than teachers in other year groups. They had a good professional knowledge base about the early developmental pathways in reading and mathematics. The EC allowed them to increase their levels of classroom discussion and individual interaction with children, so that they became more sensitive to children's difficulties and were able to respond more appropriately. They extended the notion of playfulness into more structured activities, by maintaining a playful tone. They generally employed positive discipline techniques. They found the project co-ordinator (where available) invaluable for validating approaches, suggesting alternatives and keeping them 'on message'. For some teachers, there was a concern about approaches to teaching reading which had been recommended in training (Sproule et al., 2005), but otherwise, Y1 teachers were happy with the changes.

After Year 1, the teachers' responses became more varied and were distributed across a continuum, influenced by the three factors that we have previously outlined. We have profiled the end-points of that continuum, and, for illustration, have characterised two groups of teachers at each year.

Confident Year 2 teachers: These groups of teachers were still usually positive about the EC but more measured than Y1 teachers. They normally enjoyed good interchange of ideas with colleagues, especially Y1 teachers and had balanced views about developmentally appropriate practices. They tended to have a strong professional knowledge base about developmental pathways in reading and mathematics and could easily adapt aspects of Y1 pedagogy to provide a smooth transition to more formal work. They were confident about *when* to move children on to more formal work in literacy and mathematics. They generally maintained a playful tone, even in more formal activities, and employed positive discipline techniques. They handled any parents' concerns confidently. They stressed the need for a classroom assistant in order to give children an adequate experience.

Tentative and/or anxious Year 2 teachers: These teachers were more often found in schools where the EC was seen as an early-years issue and/or where Y2 teachers had not been consulted about its

introduction. Their perception was that they were less likely to enjoy the proactive support of the principal and senior colleagues. They were more likely to have a purely maturational viewpoint of DAP, leading to waiting for children to be ready rather than preparing them to move on; and/or an overly child-led model of DA practice, leading to a lack of balance between child-led and teacher-initiated activities. They had poorer knowledge of developmental pathways in reading and mathematics and missed the security of reading and mathematics schemes. They found the EC children's confidence in speaking out challenging rather than desirable, and often employed negative discipline techniques and/or inappropriate praise. They believed that they could not manage the new curriculum at all without a classroom assistant. For some, their insecurity about the pedagogy was exacerbated by their negative experiences when raising their concerns at training sessions. Despite their anxieties, they usually had something positive to say about the EC.

By Year 3, the gap between the two profiles of teachers was at its widest point.

Confident Year 3 teachers: These teachers were similar to confident Y2 teachers and quite likely to be found in the same schools. They found appropriate ways to adapt some of the new pedagogy for their class. They felt that the EC children were more confident in oral skills and welcomed the children's confidence in speaking out. They were confident that EC children were progressing at least as well as previous cohorts in reading and mathematics. They felt that classroom assistants were very desirable in Year 3.

Anxious Year 3 teachers: They were usually quite similar to anxious Y2 teachers and quite likely to be found in the same schools. They were sensitive to external criticism of children's progress, by senior staff, Y4 teachers and parents. They felt they were pedagogically unprepared and were very anxious at having to deal with more children than usual who were at a very early stage of reading. They tended to feel less anxious over the course of the 3rd year, as children's reading made rapid progress. They often found the children difficult to settle to written work. They tended to think that the EC was only suitable for weaker children; and did not always have suitable resources for weak readers, in content and/or in level of difficulty. They felt they could not adapt their pedagogy to the children's needs without a classroom assistant.

From Year 4 onwards, the divergence of responses became less marked as children's attainment caught up with that of controls and teachers began to feel more distant from the EC.

Confident Year 4 teachers: These teachers were similar to confident Y2/3 teachers and quite likely to be found in the same schools. They looked forward to statutory assessment in reading and mathematics at the end of Y4 with confidence in the children's attainment. They were able to articulate the benefits of the EC with regard to children's attitude to work, confidence in speaking out in class and working in groups.

Anxious Year 4 teachers: These teachers were usually quite similar to tentative/anxious Y2/Y3 teachers and quite likely to be found in the same schools. They were not confident that EC children would equal the performance of previous cohorts in statutory assessment. Nevertheless, they often felt more positive about particular subgroups such as weaker children or boys.

After statutory assessment at the end of Year 4, the children moved into Key Stage 2 (KS2), the character of responses, and hence the profiles we have created, changed somewhat.

Confident KS2 teachers: In many respects, these teachers were similar to confident KS1 teachers, yet they felt sufficient distance from the EC to judge it dispassionately. They tended to use activity-based learning to a greater extent than the other KS2 teachers who were interviewed. They were positive about any perceived changes in children but in a fairly low-key way. They felt that children's attainment was largely unaffected, one way or another, by the EC.

Neutral/uninvolved KS2 teachers: These teachers had only a very general idea of what had been involved in the EC in their schools and were likely to have weaker connections with their KS1 colleagues. They were likely to feel that the EC was definitely not their concern. They could be anxious but were not necessarily so. They sometimes felt that their class was progressing as well as previous classes but many believed that there had been a negative impact on aspects of attainment, particularly related to reading/literacy.

3.4 Section Summary and Conclusions

The shift to the more informal and play-based approach in the early primary school years was a big change for most teachers and had implications beyond the immediate Y1 and Y2 classes for whom it was specifically designed. In the first years of its implementation, some schools did not fully anticipate these

knock-on effects. For successful implementation, teachers needed substantial internal support from their schools as well as external support, and sharing of their experiences with colleagues in cluster meetings.

The teachers' experiences and perceptions over time present a complex picture which has been simplified by presenting it as **two** alternative experienced pathways, influenced largely by **three** factors. The situation was considerably more complicated. Nevertheless, from this condensed version of the teachers' interviews and surveys, several conclusions can be drawn.

- Nearly all Y1 teachers believed that the EC was appropriate for all children and was rewarding for themselves. Their experience was so positive that they said they would resist any move back to the pre-existing curriculum/pedagogy.
- As the children grew older, teachers' ideas about developmentally appropriate practice, their professional knowledge levels about early years developmental pathways, and experiences of training, interacted with the availability of resources and support within their schools, to affect their views of the EC and their ability to implement it and/or to deal with the knock-on effects.
- From Y2 onwards, this led to a diverging range of experiences and responses among the teachers. Maximum disparity of views appeared in Y3, when at one extreme, some teachers showed greatest anxiety about children's progress in attainment. In Y4, teachers began to feel less anxious about children's progress and less responsible for what had gone before. This trend continued into Key Stage 2, where some teachers felt quite distant from the project, especially in schools which had not adopted a whole-school approach at the beginning.
- The findings highlight the importance of good professional knowledge about developmental pathways in reading and mathematics, especially in a curriculum that depends on flexible teaching and is responsive to individual differences and the needs of children. When reading and mathematics work schemes were withdrawn, some teachers struggled to adapt their practices (cf. Section 4 of this report, where some principals later reported re-introducing more structured approaches to reading in Year 1).
- The findings highlight the necessity to interrogate and explicitly address teachers' ideas and interpretations about DAP and how these can impact on pedagogy. Teachers with balanced models of DAP appeared to recognise and deal with the tension between allowing children sufficient time to mature, and the necessity to maintain forward momentum in their learning.

They were able to find the balance between providing sufficient challenge for children and allowing them adequate time to understand new concepts fully and to practice new skills. They appeared to strike the right balance between child-led and teacher-initiated activities.

- There are clear messages here for both initial teacher training in the early years and for continuous professional development.

4. School Principals' Perceptions: Looking Back

4.1 Purpose

The purpose of these final interviews was to give the principals an opportunity *to look back and reflect* on their experience of managing the implementation of the EC, and how it had progressed in their schools since it began. In the interviews, we wanted to find out about the demands that implementing the EC made on themselves and their teachers, the areas that it affected most, how the children responded and reactions of teachers as the EC children moved up the school⁸. We also wanted to find out the extent to which participating in the EC had prepared their schools for the Foundation Stage of the new Northern Ireland Revised Curriculum (The Education [Northern Ireland] Order, 2006).

4.2 Method

This section reports on the views and perspectives of 26 school principals. The group consisted of 17 who had been school principals from the time the EC was introduced into their schools; two who were acting school principals but had been in the school throughout the time of the EC; five who were recently appointed to the post and were relatively new to the school; one who was a past principal of one of the schools; and one who was a principal of an EC school not involved in the evaluation⁹.

The interviews were conducted by two members of the research team during November, 2008. For 20/26 interviews, two members of the research team conducted each interview; due to time constraints the remaining 6 interviews were conducted by one member only. The majority of the interviews were conducted on the school premises. For convenience, 4 interviews were conducted elsewhere.

⁸ The majority of the principals had been interviewed previously during the course of the project, and some had been interviewed several times.

⁹ This principal was interviewed because of his role on a relevant curriculum committee and does not contribute to the graphical data in this section.

The interview was **structured** around the following headings:

- The main changes associated with introducing the EC, changes in classroom practices and pedagogical approaches;
- Any significant adjustments and changes that were made after the first year of implementation;
- Training, resources, impact of staff turnover;
- The impact of the EC overall, on specific areas of the curriculum, on different groups of children;
- Teachers' reactions as the children moved up the school;
- The impact on how special educational needs were determined;
- The impact on the atmosphere of the school;
- The extent to which the EC was a preparation for the Foundation Stage of the Revised Curriculum, and the advice they would give other school principals who were just beginning to implement a more informal and play-based approach to the early years in their schools.
- Involvement with other projects.
- Ratings: at the end of the interview, each principal was asked to rate two statements on a 10-point scale,

“In global terms, what has been the effect of the EC on children’s learning?”
(1=negative effect, 10= positive effect)

“To what extent was the EC a whole school project or one confined to the early years (first two years, Y1 and Y2)?”
(1= confined to the early years, 10= whole school approach)

All school principals participated enthusiastically and spoke at length about the experiences of the school over the past 8 years; the interviews lasted on average about 90 minutes. Three interviews were much shorter because of time constraints. The interviews also elicited views on topics that were not initially planned, such as the perceived changes in children’s oral language competence when they come to school, their school’s use of published tests to monitor progress, and their experience of computerised adaptive testing (InCAS¹⁰) for the first time.

Notes were taken at the time of the interview, recurrent themes were identified and summarised under the above headings. We use statements from the interviews to illustrate points.

¹⁰ Interactive Computerised Assessment System, run by the CEM centre at Durham University.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 What were the main changes associated with introducing the EC in Year 1?

Principals agreed that the EC involved a substantial shift in practice towards a play-based and more informal approach compared to the previous curriculum. For some schools, this was a bigger shift than for others. Several principals commented on the change from a philosophical point of view, while others commented on what it implied for classroom practices.

These three principals highlighted some of the underlying assumptions that guided them:

Philosophically, it was more centred on the child, not rushing kids into failure. (r18)

It was never about holding children back. It was not so prescriptive (as the previous curriculum)..... Shouldn't be about dos and don'ts..... equally, no pressure for weaker children. (r26)

It was part of the direction we were going anyway, but it became more skills-based, with continuity from nursery schools. But there was total immersion in literacy from day one..... maths became more practical and enjoyable, engaged boys more. (r25)

Other principals commented more on the changes in classrooms.

The pedagogies were very different. There was more play which was definitely structured. Lots of group work. (r10)

Less formal, more choice and hands-on activities. Play-based with more variety. (r14)

More talking and learning through play. More emphases on the senses — visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learning. It needed more planning. (r4)

One principal noted in particular, the demands that the changes made on some Year 1 teachers:

Needed to change the psyche of the P1 (i.e. Y1) teacher — who was very experienced in the formal curriculum. (r1)

In addition to these more general comments, some principals made specific reference to the changes in how reading and mathematics were taught, especially in the first year in which the EC was implemented. For example,

The practical maths was super.....and reading was a big success, especially for boys. (r2)

No reading scheme. We did shared reading, oral language, Big Books, phonological awareness, 4 stories a day, rhyme time, practical maths, no sentence building until 3rd term and then only

with the most able. We used Letterland.....handwriting stopped until emergent skills were ready. We modelled conversations for them. (r5)

We didn't need to change maths much because the NI numeracy strategy was very good. (r9)

There were no workbooks, but more phonics and it was more practical. Eunice Pitt had said play should be free, that there should be more talking with children, and more play with them. (r20)

There was more oral language and work developing phonological awareness, more play-based, word attack skills before guided reading started. (r11)

We did it our own way. Some kids are ready for reading books in Y1. We had much more outdoor play. (r15)

4.3.2 What adjustments were made to the EC after the first year(s) of implementation?

When asked about adjustments and refinements that were made after the first year, all the principals who had been in post during the full period of implementation were able to outline what had happened.

You wouldn't recognise it now. It needed ongoing training. Our teachers were uncertain about when to be formal or informal. We know when to move on now. (r1)

We just revised and revised again..... (r25)

We have tighter planning, and use the child's interest more, tried to be more developmentally appropriate for each child. (r23)

We took a total look at planning and goals across the school.....introduced activity based learning, and thinking skills..... (r15)

We challenged high ability children more, did work on emotional intelligence and on peer mediation. (r8)

We are more confident but not much changed. It may have been the impetus behind changes elsewhere such as the pupil council..... (r20)

Ten principals made specific reference to adjustments about teaching reading. For example,

We brought in a reading scheme in P1 if they were ready. Further up, the kids have set reading to do. (r10)

If children are ready to read in P1, go ahead. We reintroduced learning tables and spellings. A lot of pupil self-evaluation — reflective learners, 2 stars and 1 wish system. (r12)

Re-introduced a reading scheme to give structure..... staff were at breaking point. (r22)

Handwriting was reintroduced in P1, and more on sound-symbol correspondence. (r16)

Handwriting was reintroduced in P1, can't undo bad habits. (r3)

And later

We introduced Linguistic Phonics and did more work on oracy. Breakthrough Literacy. Our pastoral care developed more. We introduced a school council. (r5)

From these comments it is clear that the EC approach and classroom practices took time to become embedded. The adjustments in the first few years showed that the EC was perceived as leading to new developments in the school (e.g., a school council) and was connected to other approaches and initiatives (activity learning, thinking skills, assessment for learning, peer mediation). However, for many schools, specific adjustments were made with regard to literacy, with a focus on providing more structure to teaching reading in Year 1, making more individualised and informed judgements about when to move to a more formal approach, and about handwriting. Refinements in teaching mathematics were not mentioned. These adjustments reflect the issues that were encountered in the teachers' interviews and that have been reported in the previous section.

When asked specifically about approaches to teaching phonics during the first years of EC implementation, 17 schools were characterised as having an informal approach, 5 used Letterland, 2 used Jolly Phonics, and 1 school used different systems in different years. At the time of interview in November 2008, all schools had either moved, were in the process of moving, or were discussing moving, to a more systematic approach to teaching phonics — reflecting the renewed impetus given to systematic approaches through recent research and the Rose Report on Teaching Reading in the Early Years in England (Rose, 2006).

4.3.3 What about Training, Resources and Staff Changes?

The research team knew from earlier interviews with the teachers and with the school principals that there were mixed views about the training provided from the Education and Library Boards (ELBs). Also, schools in different ELBs had received different levels of funding and support.

Training: There was a range of views expressed about the quality of the training and they are captured in the quotations below. Overall, 11 principals considered that the training was very good/good, seven had more mixed views and/or were very critical, while five felt that it had been a steep learning curve for all involved, even for the training staff. Three principals felt that they were not in a position to give feedback.

Good for Y1/2. Invigorating, transformative. Sometimes bombarded with too much information. Y3/4 would have needed more. (r4)

Cluster groups were excellent, we tried to keep them going, but there was no funding. (r5)

Very good. (r20)

Comprehensive. (r14)

Generally okay; staff haven't moaned. (r8)

Not brilliant, but set teachers on a reflective path, training staff were feeling their way too. It improved with time. (r 25)

Good for Y1, not much guidance on reading progression later. (r10)

Told us what not to do, but short on what to do. (r7)

Thought to be extreme views — we did it our own way. (r15)

Mixed messages, airy-fairy, no pencils, chairs, worksheets. (r16)

Very poor in the first year, no support when we had a problem. (r22)

Resources: There was general agreement among the principals that the EC was more expensive to resource than the previous curriculum. The inner-Belfast disadvantaged schools had received higher levels of funding and support than the schools from the other ELBs. The Belfast principals were generally satisfied with resources and spent the money on books, reading sacks, outdoor equipment and practical maths. Y1 was better supported than the later years. Several principals stressed the importance of classroom assistants and of their training. In one school, classroom assistants were trained with the teachers and this had very positive benefits. Principals reported that individual teachers put a lot of effort into making their own resources. In general, schools found money from other funding streams to help with EC implementation and classroom assistants.

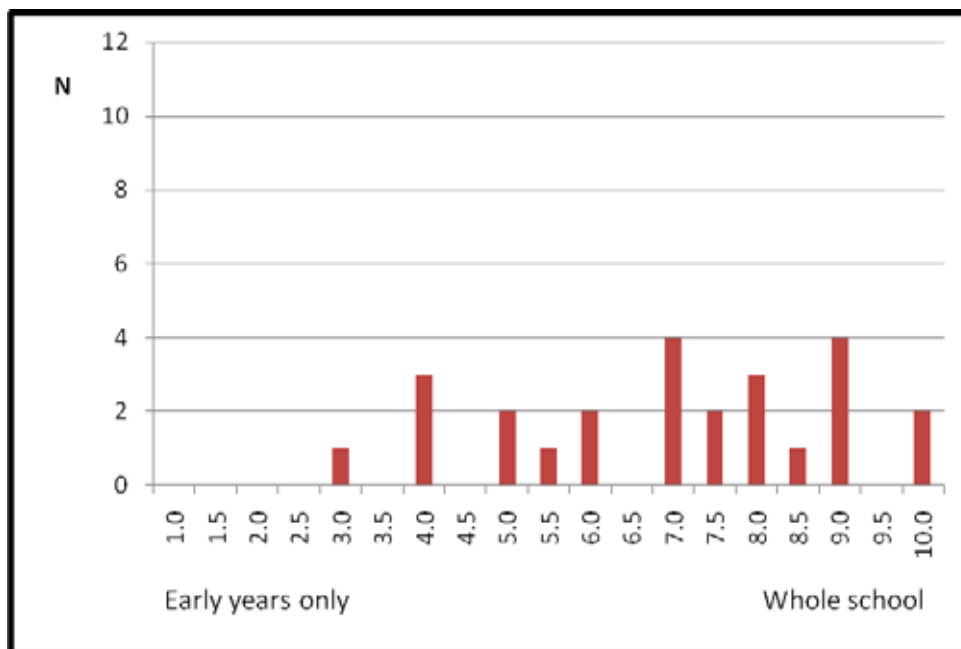
Staff Changes: During the early period of implementation, 15/24 schools experienced some changes in their Y1/Y2/Y3 teachers due to maternity leave, secondments, retirements and staff leaving for other jobs. Not all of these changes were disruptive and principals welcomed the stimulation and input from new staff. New staff were inducted into the EC approach through both formal and informal 'in school' training, e.g., formal presentations in the school, visits to other classrooms in the school, mentoring arrangements, and an example of observation and feedback by the school principal. 11/15 schools had

some formal training for new staff. Informal training tended to be in smaller schools, where the lines of communication were easier.

4.3.4 Whole School Approach

One of the important differences between the schools was the extent to which the EC was introduced as a new approach to early years education and was of primary interest only to Y1 and Y2, compared to schools in which the EC had a ripple effect and the implications were embraced within the whole school policy. The principals were asked to rate this distinction as it applied to their school. Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of ratings; ratings from 5-10 indicate a whole-school approach, ratings from 1-5 indicate an approach that was more confined to the early years. The majority of responses are in the direction of a whole school policy response. Many principals said that, when the EC was first introduced, they considered it as confined to the early years. Increasingly, as the years progressed, it became more integrated into whole school policy. For some principals, a whole-school response was more dominant from the beginning.

Figure 4.1 Principals' ratings of the extent to which the EC was a whole-school project



4.3.5. What were the main effects of the EC on the children?

Positive effects on children: 22/26 principals mentioned that EC had impacted on the **social, emotional and motivational aspects** of children's development.

Their comments were wide ranging and enthusiastic, emphasizing children's confidence, independence, better social skills, higher motivation and so on. Below is a sample from schools across all geographical areas:

Kids are much more positive. (r1)

They are much more confident and independent, have higher self esteem, and aren't afraid to speak out like before. (r2)

No bickering in the playground, teachers respect children and vice versa. (r3)

Kids love coming to school. Kids are delightful, independence and motivated learners. (r25)

Kids are more empowered, are more confident, have better social skills, can express opinions, talk to adults confidently. (r9)

SEN kids are still there but they are happier to learn, no talk of 'I can't do'. (r4)

There is a lack of failure, kids are happy, talking and listening better, very articulate, able to persevere. Kids are given a voice. They are able to work better in groups and are more confident. (r11)

There is more independence in P1/P2, and a smooth transition from pre-school. (r13)

We have abolished the culture of reading failure, even if they are not reading well, children are not switched off. (r17)

The children are more motivated and can speak out. Better children are not held back. Teachers have more freedom to engage children's interests such as boys. (r20)

Less able children have better self-esteem. They can demonstrate progress to themselves. (r12)

Negative effects: Twelve principals identified specific negative effects. Five principals made reference to deteriorating **handwriting**, at least until adjustments were made (see earlier quotes). There was also a collection of other concerns that were mentioned by only one principal; for example, children being less prepared to respond in formal testing situations (e.g., InCAS), poorer presentational skills (related to their work), low level behavioural problems, inability to settle and lack of respect for the teachers. One principal pointed out that the successful implementation of the EC needs very skilled teachers.

Benefits for Specific Areas of the Curriculum: Nine principals made specific reference to the positive impact of the EC on **teaching and learning mathematics in the early years**. There was a new, or a renewed focus, on activity learning and practical maths. For example, here are some comments:

Better mental maths. (r11, r15)

There were fewer textbooks and more activity-based learning — right up the school. Not much rote learning. (r12)

The whole spectrum of ability was challenged. (r1)

There was less pressure to record when the children were not ready. (r6)

We had always adopted a practical approach to maths. We built on that. (r17)

Had to rethink, and become more active. (r19)

The children had a better understanding of concepts but there was a difficult transition to formal work. (r13)

No problem, except when we were told not to teach notation! (r23)

In answer to a question about what gains came about as a result of the EC, seven principals made specific reference to the positive impact of the EC on **physical development**.

Excellent — big stars. (r1)

Physical development had got a bit forgotten, it was brought to the fore by the EC. (r6)

Gave it a much higher profile. (r12)

Fantastic, outdoor time every day. (r19)

One the best things — big improvement. (r23)

Impact on the results of the Transfer Procedure: We asked the principals if the EC had made any difference to the transfer results for their schools. Not all principals could answer this, as their first cohorts of EC children had not yet reached Year 7. However, 11 principals said that they saw no change; three said that their results were getting worse, and two saw some improvements. The principals all attributed change to the intake for that year rather than the effects of the EC. Several principals mentioned that small numbers, variations in intake and in class sizes from year to year made it difficult to judge.

4.3.6 What were the teachers' reactions further up the school?

From previous teachers' interviews, the research team knew that, as the EC children progressed up the school, they presented new challenges for teachers who had to adjust and adapt their previous teaching practices in a variety of ways. How teachers responded and adapted has already been characterised and analysed in the previous section. The school principals confirmed the variety of responses from teachers further up the school. 18/26 principals mentioned the anxieties and worries that teachers had. For example,

Teachers further up the school found it hard to understand the value of play. (r4)

Activity-based learning was difficult for some. (r11)

There still is a concern about what the children can't do, even with our new P2 teacher. (r1)

Year 3 teachers had particular worries:

There were huge implications for Y3, so Y2 teachers later tried to prepare kids more. There was little comment from KS2 teachers. (r25)

P3/P4 teachers were not too happy. (r13)

P3 teacher was very worried. The division between upper/lower school did pose a communication problem. I advised them to go visit the early years classrooms. (r12)

Some principals mentioned the worries that teachers had about children's behaviour

Some teachers found the children very chatty and independent. They couldn't settle to more formal work. (r3)

Some did comment that EC children were rowdy, and were worried about presentation. They thought they (the children) would be further behind by the end of P4, but they weren't. (r16)

Two principals pointed out that teachers were also pleasantly surprised by the children:

Pleasantly surprised at what brighter children could do. (r24)

[The teachers] never saw the children as cheeky. Children should be able to express how they feel. (r18)

The school principals confirmed that the impact of a shift in philosophy towards a more play-based curriculum was not confined to the early years and that it had ramifications up the school. Some teachers found it difficult to adapt but many did and experienced new satisfactions from their teaching.

As well as adjusting and refining the EC approach over the first few years, school principals also adopted strategies to help communication between what was going on in the EC classrooms and the rest of the school.

4.3.7 What was the impact of the EC on determining special educational needs?

Principals were asked about the impact of the EC on determining special educational needs as this issue had been identified in teacher interviews as a potential source of difficulty arising out of the implementation of the EC (Sproule et al., 2003). Teachers had reported a range of scenarios as follows:

- When children did not sufficiently demonstrate emergent reading skills in the first year, some teachers were uncertain whether this was due to a specific reading difficulty or a child who just needed a little more time.
- If teachers believed there was a specific reading difficulty, they had difficulty knowing when to refer the children for remedial reading work. Traditionally, programmes such as Reading Recovery had started in Year 2 but there was now a view that they should not be referred to Reading Recovery until Year 3.
- Some teachers believed the reduced amount of written work made it more difficult to assess learning difficulties; other teachers felt that the increased personal interaction with children allowed deeper and more individual assessment.
- In high deprivation schools, there were much larger numbers of children identified by teachers as being on the SEN scale¹¹ but did not have a statement (Sproule et al., 2005). In some classes, the SEN 'load' was very high, with the highest reported being 11 out of 16 children on the register. Since such children tend to have poor self-organising skills, they need additional support during the less structured activities of the EC. Some teachers struggled to cope with the load, even with a classroom assistant. The perceived need for extra support in such a class could continue into Year 4.

When asked about this issue, 11/24 principals highlighted a move towards a more structured approach to determining special needs since the EC was first implemented. There was a drive to identify those with special needs as early as possible and to intervene with additional support immediately. Testing

¹¹ Children in the evaluation sample were assessed by teachers on the following SEN scale. 1- additional help required in class, 2- SENCO consulted, 3- outside agency consulted, 4 – waiting for assessment by an educational psychologist and 5 – having a statement of SEN.

was used more extensively than before to provide evidence for referral if appropriate. At the same time, there was a reluctance to label children with a specific difficulty until they were sure. The type of support available was more varied than before as follows:

- SENCOs¹² provided additional support during normal classroom lessons (this was more likely to happen in large schools where the SENCO did not have his/her own class).
- Small groups were withdrawn for additional reading help (referred to in one school as 'being on a course').
- Greater efforts were made to train teachers in Reading Recovery and similar methods without sending them to formal training, which is very expensive.
- More additional outside help was accessed — interdisciplinary teams such as speech therapists, occupational therapists and social skills therapists.

The reluctance to label children was evident from the responses of a further 5/24 school principals and they reported no changes beyond moving Reading Recovery to Year 3. A further 3/24 principals reported increased differentiation within classes and target groups as the main changes. The remainder did not report much change. It was not always clear whether the changes in practices reported by the school principals were due specifically to the EC or to other initiatives in the ELBs on identifying children at risk.

Despite the new approaches, principals still had two areas of concern. The most pressing was the cap on the number of children who can be referred from a single school. Principals reported that many of the children in the six high deprivation schools who ought to be assessed by an educational psychologist were not being assessed under the present system. The second issue was the level of oral language skills children are demonstrating on school entry. Nine/26 principals said this was getting worse, most from the high deprivation schools.

It was notable that no principal mentioned failure to progress in mathematics as an issue, echoing the lower levels of concern shown by teachers and parents in this regard.

¹² Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators.

4.3.8 What about parental involvement?

One of the intentions of the EC was to ease the transition of children from pre-school (playgroups, pre-school, nurseries, home) into compulsory school settings, and so the involvement of parents both with the activities in the school, and with sharing activities between school and home, was identified as important. The Belfast schools identified parental involvement as a priority. They all reported high levels of involvement or at least higher than it had been before the introduction of the EC. For some schools, getting parents involved had been hard work, but they were all now pleased with the partnerships they had created.

All schools, regardless of geographical location, had a policy of parental involvement, but there was a mixed pattern of success. Principals noted that parents tended to have a higher involvement if a child has some difficulty. Many schools had specific strategies for involving parents, e.g., parenting programmes, opening schools to outsiders, surveying parents, inviting them in to observe EC classrooms. All the principals emphasised how important it was to get parents involved so that they understood the intentions and approaches of the EC (cf. the parental survey in Report 3).

4.3.9 What was the more general impact of the EC on the school atmosphere?

This question was intended to invite the school principals to reflect on the impact of the EC in a general way on the school and to evaluate its impact — if any — on the school climate, the interactions between teachers and children, on flows of communication and so on. 17/26 school principals felt that the EC had a general positive effect on the school: the others did not attribute recent positive changes in the school to the EC or felt that it had few general effects. No principal said that it had a negative effect on the school atmosphere. The following quotations show the variety of responses from the school principals:

It was a total transformation. We have no major behaviour problems now. P7 boys that we thought might give trouble did not. They are so respectful. (r4)

It was not a literacy and numeracy project — a lifestyle change. Children are so much happier coming to school. I could never go back. Teachers and the principal are as happy as the children are. (r27)

Improved behaviour. A respecting rights school with a school council. Result — teachers talk to the kids, not at them. (r12)

More positive, wanting to learn, new understanding between teachers and kids, makes a difference throughout the whole school. (r17)

More relaxed, warm, open, two-way relationship. (r19)

Had a good relationship with children anyway but there are stronger bonds now between teachers and classroom assistants, for example. (r11)

Motivation is high, but no great impact. (r 13)

Don't know but the ethos is very good and behaviour is not a big issue for us. (r21)

Uncertain of any effects. (r22)

Was always good. (r25)

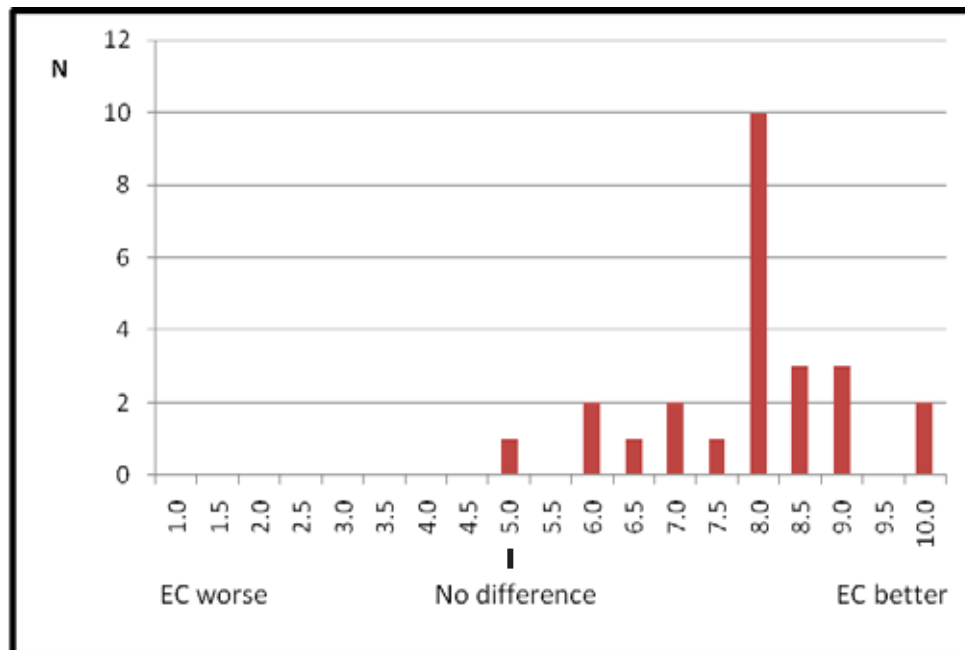
For some schools, participating in the EC had clearly been transformative and had a wide range of unintended and largely positive effects. For others, it had a good impact and improved communication between teachers and children. Other principals felt that the EC had had more limited general effects.

4.3.10 Overall Evaluation of the EC

At the end of the interview, the school principals were asked to rate on a 10-point scale what was the effect of the EC on children's learning. They were asked to think carefully, to weigh up the pros and the cons, and to give an evaluation 'in the round'. Figure 4.2 shows the frequency with which the principals assigned the scores. All ratings¹³ are in the positive direction (above 5). Eighteen of 25 principals gave a rating of 8 or above, showing high levels of positive evaluation of the EC on children's learning. Principals rated the overall impact of the EC positively, irrespective of whether it had been implemented as a whole approach or more confined to the early years (rated in Figure 4.1).

¹³ These figures are based on 25 ratings

Figure 4.2 Principals' ratings of the global effect of the EC on children's learning



Three principals asked to give separate ratings for the effects of the EC on children's reading, and one asked to rate mathematics separately. The three ratings for reading were all below 5 — 3, 3.5, 3; the rating for mathematics from one school principal was also negative, 3.5. Relative to the majority, these principals also gave low overall ratings.

4.3.10 Participation in the EC as a preparation for the new Foundation Stage

The Foundation Stage as part of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (The Education [Northern Ireland] Order, 2006) was introduced into all primary schools in September 2007, and training for Y1 (and Y5) teachers took place during 2006-2007. The interviews with principals were conducted in November 2008. They were thus in a good position to evaluate the extent to which participation in the EC prepared them for the new Foundation Stage. An overwhelming majority (18/25) agreed that their schools were very well positioned with regard to the new Foundation Stage. Here are some examples of what they said:

Great preparation from the EC. (r1)

Easier for us, while others think it has been foisted on them. (r2)

EC an enormous preparation for the Foundation Stage, which is flexible, allows for individual development. (r4)

Very well prepared but never a done deal. (r5)

Light years ahead..... (r9)

Best thing we ever did to prepare. (r10)

Quiet an easy road, but more work at KS2. (r14)

A step ahead, other schools not taking it seriously. (r 20)

Had complete advantage, flows naturally from the EC. (r26)

Very well prepared, teachers coming back from training saying we have done all that. (r12)

The principals were also asked what advice they would give to other principals who were about to embark on changes to the early years curriculum. They had three clear messages which are illustrated below through their comments — commitment to and embracing change; pacing, planning and monitoring; and keeping parents involved.

Embrace change and believe:

Be assured of its value and take your time. (r20)

Embrace it — it's more child-centred, more balanced, visit an EC school. (r4)

You have to embrace change, don't run away, don't reinvent the wheel, seek out good practice. (r9)

Don't look back. Change is not going to go away. r15)

Pace, plan and monitor:

Believe and pace things. (r8)

Read the Revised Curriculum documents — go in small steps. (r5)

Implement in a planned way. You are where you are at the start of the changes. Be flexible. (r15)

Reception is too early for formalised work but don't throw the baby out the bathwater. You need good structure, integrated planning across the school. (r18)

Support your teachers, be hands on. Observe, reflect, take small steps, it's a journey. Learn from mistakes. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. (r26)

Keep parents involved

Start with the environment, keep parents involved. (r20)

See it in action, keep parents involved, keep tracking children. (r13)

4.3 Section Conclusions

Before summarising and drawing conclusions, it is important to remember the characteristics of the schools that participated in the evaluation. Although not a random sample, the schools were representative of NI primary schools on many demographic characteristics — percent of free school meals, mix of urban/rural locations, size of school and management type¹⁴. Nevertheless, they were a 'special' group of schools, in the sense that they had opted into the EC at an early stage and, in addition, had agreed to participate in the evaluation. These school principals clearly welcomed innovation — which was obvious from their schools' participation in many different projects. They were open-minded and welcomed feedback. From visiting the schools, it was also clear that every school was a unique school. The meaning and significance of the EC in the school was different, and needed to be different — depending on whether it was introduced into a disadvantaged inner city school, a small rural school, or a more advantaged suburban school. Given this diversity, a surprising degree of consensus emerged from the interviews with the school principals.

All principals welcomed the shift in emphasis from a more formal approach in the early years of primary school towards a more play-based and practical activity-based curriculum. Despite concerns on specific aspects of the implementation (see below), they considered that it had an overall positive effect on children's learning. There was high agreement that the EC had positively influenced the children's social, emotional and motivational development, for example, their confidence, self-esteem, independence, and ability to express opinions. Practical approaches to the teaching and learning of mathematics, and the new emphasis on physical activity and physical development, were also mentioned as positive outcomes for children.

¹⁴ See Table 1, End-of-Phase 2 Report 1 for sample characteristics.

With regard to implementation, most principals acknowledged that the EC took more than one year (and sometimes several years) to become a 'settled' practice in their Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms, and was subject to adjustment and refinement, especially after the first year. This was particularly true with regard to teaching reading. After the first year, many schools had re-introduced more structured approaches to teaching reading, and teachers learned to make more confident judgements about when to move children on from emergent reading activities to more formal teaching approaches. In particular, several principals expressed concerns about handwriting in Year 1 and adjusted their approach. The EC had unexpected knock-on effects for teaching reading and, to a lesser extent, mathematics. When the EC children moved beyond Years 1 and 2, Year 3 and Year 4 teachers were sometimes concerned about their level of reading, and had to adjust their expectations and their teaching approaches. The EC created the need for better communication between early years teachers and those further up the school and, in many instances, made for a better flow of information.

Many principals made comments that showed the EC helped to create a more individualised and personalised approach to teaching young children, and mentioned how they were now better able to accommodate individual differences — high/low ability, boys and girls, young-for-year-group children, children with special needs, different learning styles, different temperaments, from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with English as an additional language. In addition, in many schools, the EC had created a new awareness about the identification of special needs and led to more structured assessment approaches and interventions.

As well as the areas of common agreement, there were divergent views.

There were mixed views expressed by the school principals about the training and preparation of the teachers provided by the ELBs for the introduction of the EC. The views ranged from very high levels of satisfaction to being highly critical. With few exceptions, the general feeling was that the support for the implementation at Year 1 was satisfactory but that additional support, direction and guidance was needed at Year 2 and beyond. Those principals who were most critical felt that extreme messages had been given in the training, and that the level of guidance was not sufficiently specific. It was generally acknowledged that everybody — including the training staff — was on a steep learning curve in the first few years. A small minority of principals was still concerned about the reading progress and, to a lesser extent, mathematics progress, within a play-based curriculum.

There were differences between school principals in their perceptions of the wider effects of the EC on the school atmosphere and on the general relations between teachers and pupils. These differences depended to some extent on whether the school had embraced the EC as a whole school project or as primarily an approach to early years teaching. For some schools, the EC had a transforming effect and led to major reviews of the curriculum and changes in pedagogy. More usually, the wider effects were described as creating warmer relationships between teachers and pupils. Some principals did not attribute positive changes in the school solely to the EC, and a few others felt that it had very little general effect.

Perhaps the main lesson to be learned from the principal interviews can be summed up in the views which they expressed about the degree to which their participation in the EC had prepared them for the Foundation Stage of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (The Education [Northern Ireland] Order, 2006), and the advice they would give to other principals who were about to introduce a more informal and play-based approach in the early years. The overwhelming viewpoint expressed was that they were well-prepared and a step ahead of the majority of primary schools. The main messages that they gave to other principals can be summed up as a model for change management — commit to the change; pace the introduction, plan small steps, monitor and get feedback; keep all the stakeholders, particularly the parents, involved.

5. Making Transitions: Children’s Voices from EC Classrooms and Beyond

5.1 Introduction

An important impetus behind the introduction of the EC was to ease the transition between play-based approaches to learning that are normally associated with pre-school and the more formal approaches of the primary school. The idea of ‘transition’ has become more prominent in early years research in recent years. For example, Yeboah (2002) referred to the transition from pre-school to primary education as

“different phases in the education continuum, with distinct differences in policies, curriculum, teaching methodologies, environment and surroundings, role of parents and what is expected of the children”(p. 51).

Furthermore, Fabian (2007) defined transition as less about structures and more about the child's experience and growing status —

“a change of culture and status..... leaving the ‘comfort zone’ and encountering the unknown: a new culture, place, people, roles, rules and identity” (p. 7).

An important point to remember is that a transition is not a single event that happens to a child in isolation. Instead, the transition from play-based to formal education is a course of action which is heavily influenced by

“the transition ecology — the inter-connectedness of relationships among child characteristics; and peer, family, school and neighbourhood contexts — and how these connections develop and change (Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta, 2000, p. 501).

In the context of this dynamic understanding of transition, it is recognized that moving from pre-school to primary school, or from a junior class to a more senior class, is not simply about a new classroom and a new curriculum. Rather, it can involve changed relationships with parents and siblings, making new friends and missing old ones, as well as becoming accustomed to new spaces and new classroom routines. Parents can also have different relationships with schools and teachers than they had with pre-school, nursery and playgroup leaders. These new and different adult relationships can themselves impact on the child's experience of transition.

With these new concepts of transitions in mind, a research report on transitions was completed by a sub-group of the research team (Walsh et al., 2008). Clarke and Sharpe (2003) point out that, despite the growing emphasis that has been placed on easing children's transition to formal schooling, the views of the main stakeholders, i.e. the children's viewpoint has been neglected. The aim of this section of the report therefore is to present the views and perspectives of children about to make the transition —

- from pre-school into Y1 EC classrooms; and
- from Y2 EC classroom into Y3 Key Stage 1 classroom.

5.2 Method

This section reports on the views and perspectives of 72 children — 36 boys and 36 girls. Children were drawn from six schools who were participating in the EC and whose early years practice had been identified as 'high' or 'excellent' using the Quality Learning Instrument (see Section 2 of this report for details). Four separate groups of children were interviewed:

18 pre-school children in the nursery schools associated with the EC schools; these are called the Transitioning Pre-Schoolers;

18 Y1 children in the EC classes; these are called the Transitioned Y1s;

18 Y2 children in EC classes; these are called the Transitioning Y2s

18 Y3 children in Year 3 Key Stage 1 classes; these are called the Transitioned Y3s.

The interviews were conducted during April and May 2007, so that transitioning children (pre-school and Y2s) were close to entering their next school phase, and the transitioned children (Y1s and Y3s) had experienced almost a full year in either Year 1 or Year 3 classrooms. The children were selected by month of birth, i.e. those in the class whose birthdays came closest to the 15th January of any given year.

The children were interviewed in groups of three to make them feel more at ease and to support each other's responses. To help with this, the interviewer invited the children to explain what they meant to a teddy bear, who wanted to know all about 'what they were looking forward to in their new classrooms?' or 'what had happened in the nursery school/the P2 classroom?' The interviews took place in a quiet area in the children's own setting. The main topics addressed included views and aspirations, curriculum and teachers.

5.3 The Transitioning Pre-schoolers (N=18, average age 4yrs 4mths) : Looking Forward

The children were asked questions relating to their views and aspirations about starting Year 1. All the children interviewed appeared excited and enthusiastic about starting school with the comment "*I just can't wait*" expressed on several occasions. When asked to qualify their response, the themes that emerged are illustrated below.

Being perceived as 'grown up': There was a general consensus amongst the pre-school children that

In P1¹⁵ you will be big.

Several children seemed very excited about being perceived as a big boy or girl in Year 1, where interesting work would be carried out.

Playing with 'big' toys: The children considered that being able to play with big toys in Year 1 was very important. Some children used the word 'big' in connection with Year 1 play. It was as if Year 1 was

¹⁵ Children refer to their class as P1 (Primary 1) rather than as Year 1.

viewed as a place where both people and toys were physically bigger, and that only big boys or girls could play with them. Some of the comments expressed included:

I can't wait to be in P1 'cause they have real big toys up there.

Cos you are big in P1 you can drive big nails in.

In P1 you still get to play but it is not baby play you know. You have to be big to play there.

Learning new things: The children were asked about what activities they thought they would be doing in Year 1 and what they would like to be doing. Their responses included: **reading, writing, stories, counting and play.** Some of the children felt that there would be little difference between the activities at pre-school and Year 1.

It will be good fun up there.

You will get to bring books home.

You will learn to read.

You will get to play sometimes.

Other children expressed the view that the **work might get harder.**

You do big hard sums up there.

If you do your work well you get sweets on a Friday.

You learn lots of new things up there.

Despite this emphasis placed on work, the children did not appear anxious about it and seemed to be **looking forward to the new challenge.**

Stricter discipline: The children seemed to have learned about the traditional discipline routines in the Year 1 classroom. Some comments included:

You are not allowed to shout up there.

You have to put your hand up.

You can't run and you must line up.

It looked as if the children were being prepared for the more formal aspect of schooling either by their family and friends or the pre-school staff.

The importance of friends: Many of the children were excited about going into Year 1 because their friends would also be going. On a few occasions, the opportunity to make new friendships was also referred to:

James from Sunday School is also going to my big school and I will sit beside him.

Worries: When specifically asked if there was anything that they felt nervous about or would make them sad about going to Year 1, most of the children responded negatively. However, being hurt emotionally or physically, particularly in the playground, appeared to be a key issue:

*Outside in P1 is a bit scary.
There are naughty boys in the playground.
You could get hurt.*

Settling in: The key factors identified by the children that they believed would help them with the settling in process included being older, friends and teachers. The following quotations express this thinking more fully:

*My friends will all be in P1 too and we will have much fun.
It will soon be my birthday and when you're 5 you will be big enough.
The teacher is real nice up there.*

5.4 The Transitioned Y1s (N=18, average age 5yrs 4mths): Looking Backward

Although this was a different group of children, there were remarkable similarities in the themes that emerged from their interviews. The children were asked about what they liked in Year 1 and how it differed from nursery schools. Their views about what they had liked about being in Year 1 were categorised and are illustrated below.

Variety of experiences: The majority of the children expressed having enjoyed the variety of learning experiences that had been available to them in Year 1. These included, according to the children — **drawing with charcoal, making kites, baking buns, painting around themselves, having PE in the big hall and using the computers.** The **practical aspects of literacy and numeracy** appealed to several of the children, for example;

*I love it on Fridays when you get to play maths games.
I like listening to the big books.
Sometimes you get to play games with words and that's fun.
Word bingo is the best. I'm real good at it.*

Play: The children explained that they enjoyed play, both during class and at break times. The school playground is an opportunity for socializing and making friends for most children, but for some it can be a place of isolation. For this sample, all the children appeared to be having a good experience of the school playground. Comments included:

*Outside is great 'cause you get to play.
You get to run around in the playground.
Play is great outside but it is too short.*

Friends: Peer relations were again identified as an integral part of their experience in Year 1 as summed up by one little girl who said,

I really love playing with A and T. They are my friends. They make P1 special.

Differences: What was **different in Year 1**? According to the children, Year 1 differed from their nursery experience in two distinct ways: curriculum experiences and the physical environment. In particular, Y1 children made reference to **literacy and numeracy** activities. For example,

You do maths in P1.

You have reading groups in P1. You don't read in nursery.

You do real writing in P1 and Jolly Phonics. I can write now you know.

In nursery you play, play, play. In P1 you do big work.

P1 is great 'cause you do big work here.

Most of the Year 1 children who were interviewed highlighted a change in the **physical environment** between Year 1 and nursery, where Year 1 was described more in school terms. Comments included:

There are not as many toys in P1.

There is no hospital in P1.

You have to sit at tables.

The playground is smaller.

There is no climbing frame.

Nursery class is bigger and there is a sand pit.

Nursery was better fun. The sand and water stayed out all day.

Sense of loss: In general there appeared to be a **sense of loss** expressed by the Year 1 children of physical objects that they had enjoyed at nursery. Loss in terms of snack and lunchtime in the nursery settings was also referred to by a few children,

You don't have dinner in the classroom in P1. You have to go to a big canteen and it can be very noisy and scary there.

There is no toast and pancakes in P1.

When asked about **what had made them sad** in P1, responses included:

You have to stay a long time.

The teacher shouts if you talk at task time.

Big boys in the playground shout at us.

The dinner hall is noisy and scary.

Settling In: As for identifying those people or things that had helped them settle into Year 1, the majority of children referred to the teacher and their friends.

Mrs B is real nice. She smiles all the time.

The teachers help you with your work.

When I am sad, my friends make me laugh again.

In addition, parents also were mentioned by a few children, as were other adults including the classroom assistants and the dinner ladies.

Whenever someone is cheeky to me I tell my mum and dad and then it is okay.

Mrs H the dinner lady tells me that she watches out for me. She helps me to cut up my dinner.

5.5 The Transitioning Y2s (N=18, average age 6yrs 4mths): Looking Forward

The Year 2 children were asked similar questions to the nursery children about going into Year 3 — moving from the Enriched Curriculum classes into Key Stage 1. All but one of the children replied that they were excited about going into Year 3. When asked to qualify their responses, two principal themes emerged — feeling more grown up and the physical environment.

Being more grown up: Like several of the nursery children, the majority of the Year 2 children expressed their excitement about going into Year 3 in terms of “*being more grown up*”.

In P3 you get to do joined-up writing.

I can't wait for the big hard questions.

You don't have to do baby things anymore in P3 like having to colour-in all day.

You get going out to the proper playground now.

You have to stay in school longer 'cause you are bigger.

The teacher asks you to do real jobs for her.

Better equipment: There was a perception by the children that the environment would be better equipped and more exciting, for example,

They have lots of computers in P3.

You get to play with the bee bots.

The classroom is much bigger.

You get sitting at big tables.

There is one of those computer boards there.

Worries and Unease: The Y2 children expressed a greater unease about their new transition compared to the pre-schoolers. Issues that made the Year 2 children feel nervous surrounded three key themes — **written work, friends and teachers**. It was evident that the children in Year 2 were anxious about the amount of written work that they would be expected to do in Year 3, as well as homework and tests.

In P3 you have to write, write, write and my hand might get sore.

You will have to write lots and lots and you don't get to play.

You get a test every Friday and if you don't finish it you don't get going out at break time.

Some of the children mentioned that it would sadden them if **their friends** would not be beside them.

I love sitting next to J and maybe in P3 the teacher will not let us sit beside each other.

I wouldn't want my friends to go away. I love playing with them.

If I sit at a different table next year, then J and S will not be my friends.

I will be lonely in P3 if I have no friends.

Good friendships had clearly been formed by the end of Year 2 and the children were concerned about losing them.

Having an insensitive and **strict teacher** was a concern for some children. The discontinuity of moving from a teacher described by one child as “*lovely and helpful*”, to one who might be “*bossy and cross*” was an issue that some of the children were anxious about. The following quotations help to clarify this thinking:

*In P3 the teacher will not allow you to talk or play.
The teacher in P3 always shouts. My big brother always complained about that.
Maybe if I get an answer wrong in P3, the teacher might not help me.
My friend K told me that when you move up the stairs the teachers don't smile any more.*

An interesting comment was expressed by one Year 2 girl:

If you got the chance to be in your new classroom and stay there with the new teacher for a while, you might not be so scared.

Like the pre-school children, most of the Year 2 children seemed to be looking forward to going to Year 3. When asked about what they would be doing there, a variety of responses were given which tended to focus on the formal **aspects of reading, writing and arithmetic**

*harder spellings
longer books to read
writing exciting stories*

and doing pages of sums with little place for play:

No play, not even a shop.

Despite **the regrets**, the majority of the children seemed ready to embrace the challenge. As one boy said:

My mum says you can't play for ever. In P3 you just have to work hard to get a good job. But I hope it is exciting.

5.6 The Transitioned Y3s (N=18, average age 7yrs 4mths): Looking Back

Like the Year 1 children, Year 3s were also asked about their views and aspirations about being in Year 3 and how it differed from their experience in Year 2. The main themes arising from what they had particularly enjoyed about Year 3 included learning experiences and the physical environment.

Learning Experiences: The children appeared to enjoy the harder work that they were experiencing in Year 3. They now were getting longer and harder home works and the responsibility of maintaining a homework diary. At this stage of their education, the children appeared ready for the challenge of “*harder reading and maths*”. However, they still appeared to enjoy it more when such experiences were made playful, for example, using “*the maths machine*”, “*task boxes*” and “*writing silly poems*”. When

asked if they were happy in Year 3, most of the children responded positively, displaying a readiness for the formal learning they were experiencing. Comments included:

Yes I love it. The work is better. You do experiments.

Yes I am older and colour neater and don't do baby things.

P3 is great. You have to really think now.

Physical Environment: The majority of children seemed to find the physical change in the environment from Year 2 to Year 3 to be positive. Several of the children commented that the Year 3 classroom was not situated next to Year 1 and Year 2 and this seemed to please them, giving them the impression of being older and wiser. For example,

We have a door leading onto the playground.

Our classroom is upstairs now

Worries: Anxiety in Year 3 was associated with having **no one to play** with or being left out in the playground. Too much **written work** was also commented upon as was the **teacher shouting** too much and being cross.

Settling in: When asked about what had helped them settle into Year 3, all children responded in terms of **friendships**:

Having friends to make you feel welcome.

If my friends had not been coming too, I would have found it impossible.

Changes in the curriculum: As for the curricular experiences in Year 3, the children, in the main, reported having a very active school curriculum. They described their experiences principally in terms of *literacy tasks, reading, creative writing, mental maths, tables, computers, art, drama, science, the World Around Us and French weeks*. The majority of the children appeared to have made the shift in their thinking from a play-based curriculum to subject knowledge and areas of learning. However, the children in some of the schools still reported having frequent playtimes but a few said they would like more playtime. Activities identified by the Year 3 children as being different to Year 2 included *drama and watching TV*. However it would appear from the Year 3 responses in general, that their Year 3 experience was enjoyable and that they had learned a lot. This is summed up in the following comment:

I love P3. You learn real important stuff here. It is still fun and it is better.

5.7 Section Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of these interviews was to give the children a stronger voice in the evaluation. Recognising the distinctiveness of early years education, we focussed on the theme of transitions — from pre-school into the first year of primary school, when children were between 4 and 5 years, and from the second to the third year of primary school, when children were between 6 and 7 years. All the children who were interviewed were from schools that were participating in the EC pilot project, and the children transitioned into, and out of, EC classes that had adopted an informal and play-based pedagogical approach. In addition, the early years classes that the children experienced had previously been identified as providing high quality early years education, as assessed through classroom observation, using the QLI (Section 2 of this report). Consequently, the purpose of the study is not to compare the EC children's experiences with other children who had attended classes under the pre-existing curriculum. Rather, the purpose is *to listen to the experiences of the children* as they make important transitions at this early stage of their lives *within* EC classrooms and schools. Several important themes emerged from the interviews:

- A striking theme was the extent to which the children looked forward to a more 'grown up' future and this was true both for the pre-schoolers and the transitioning Y2s. They recognised the change in role that accompanied the transition, where they would do harder work, play with bigger toys, take on more responsibility by doing 'real' jobs for the teacher, and move away from 'baby' things.
- The children told the story of the changing role of play in their lives at school, as they moved from nursery schools into early primary school classrooms. They described how central play was to their daily experiences in nursery and how it changed to big play, outdoor play, fewer toys — in Years 1 and 2 — to less play or no play (not even a shop) in Year 3, but maybe more PE.
- They valued the variety, the novelty, and the challenge of different learning experiences as they moved from setting to setting — harder sums, big books, new things, doing experiments, thinking hard, writing exciting stories, writing silly poems, the maths machine, working with computers.
- They recognised the growing significance of literacy and numeracy activities in their experiences, as they described the change from — big books, word games, maths games,

reading groups, Jolly Phonics — to real books, real writing, joined-up writing, too much writing(!), and then moving on to a more extended curriculum experience that included mental maths, tables, creative writing, computers, drama, science, and French weeks,

- The extending social world of the child was expressed through their emphasis on the importance of growing friendships in their own age-group — friends to sit beside, friends to play with, friends to laugh with, friends to help them with their work, friends to make them welcome and to help them settle in. They expressed fears and anxieties that these friendships would be disrupted through transitions.
- The importance of the role of ‘helpful’ adults was also expressed — nice teachers, smiling adults, helpful classroom assistants and dinner ladies, mothers and fathers to turn to in times when they were upset.
- They showed how important the physical environment was for the children, both as a source of comfort and a source of anxiety — bigger tables to sit at, bigger playgrounds, climbing frames, bigger canteens, doors that open out to playgrounds, rooms upstairs.
- Their worries and anxieties also were also coherently expressed. They were worried about stricter discipline — lining up, putting their hands up, teachers getting cross with them; their work — too much writing, getting wrong answers, not getting their work finished on time; feeling isolated — not having friends, having no one to play with; or feeling scared — scary playgrounds, bigger boys to frighten them. They explained how important their friends and helpful adults were in giving them reassurance, to buffer them when they were worried, and to help them settle in. Overall, and despite their worries, this group of 72 children appeared to be making positive adjustments and were enjoying their new classrooms and the learning and social opportunities that were provided.

In conclusion, the interviews clearly show how the children experienced the transition from the more informal and play-based approaches of the pre-school through Ys 1 and 2, to the more formal teaching style and the changed expectations for the children in Year 3. They illustrate that the EC classrooms in Year 1 provided continuity with their nursery experiences and eased their transition to school. They also show the complex ecology of early years classrooms and the dynamics of transitions for children.

6. Conclusions across the Perspectives and over Time

The report sought to examine the processes and changes inside EC classrooms and schools, from the perspectives of the people who were most closely involved — the children, the teachers and the school principals.

The report draws on an extensive data base collected over 8 years. Almost 300 days were spent observing classrooms — 2 days in each of 148 classes — to study the quality of the children’s learning experiences in Year 1 and Year 2. Seventy-two children were interviewed to get their views on what it was like for them to move from nursery schools into an EC classroom and then to move on up the school. Over 250 teachers were interviewed across 7 years, and their perceptions, views and interpretations provided a contemporaneous year-on-year commentary as the first cohorts of EC children moved through the primary school. The interviews with the 24 school principals towards the end of the project, gave them an opportunity to provide retrospective accounts and evaluations of the experience of implementing the EC, and of its impact on the children, teachers and the general atmosphere of the school.

Integrating across the different forms of data, there were several strong and consistent findings.

6.1 Changes and positive effects

- The schools that adopted the EC in the early stages were generally innovative schools, who were involved in several different projects; they were open-minded and welcomed change.
- The shift from a more formal style of teaching in the early years to an informal and play-based curriculum, which the EC represented, was welcomed by the school principals and especially by the Year 1 teachers, the vast majority of whom would resist any return to the previous formal practice.
- From the classroom observations, it was clear that the children had a very different experience than they would have had previously under the pre-existing curriculum. The structure of the day was broken into shorter and more active periods. There was a better balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities and a substantial shift from written work towards more practical and play-based activities. The evidence from the children also showed a degree of continuity between their experiences in nursery schools and their first year at school. When

the quality of the children's experiences was evaluated through the Quality Learning Instrument, it was clear that the children had a more rounded experience than they might have had under the pre-existing curriculum, with higher levels of social-emotional, motivational, and cognitive experiences. Although there were some differences between Y1 and Y2, the quality picture was good across the two years.

- There was a high degree of agreement among the school principals that the EC had positively influenced the children's social, emotional and motivational development, and, for many schools, had a more general positive influence on the school climate.

6.2 Issues about implementation

- There were problems with implementation in the initial years. Most principals acknowledged that the EC took more than one year, and sometimes several years, to become a settled practice in their Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms. Their schools made several revisions and adjustments, especially after the first year. This was especially true for teaching reading.
- Because of the local origins and organic growth of the EC, it had different levels of resources and support available across the ELBs. Mixed views were expressed by both teachers and school principals about the training and preparation provided by the ELBs. The views ranged from very high levels of satisfaction to being highly critical. It was generally acknowledged that everybody — including the training staff — was on a steep learning curve in the first few years. In general, the inner city Belfast schools had higher levels of support and more intensive training.
- The shift to the more informal and play-based approach was a big change for most teachers and had implications beyond the immediate Y1 and Y2 classes for whom it was designed. In the first years of implementation, some schools did not fully anticipate these knock-on effects.
- As the EC children grew older and moved up through the primary classes, several factors combined to affect the teachers' ability successfully to implement the EC and to respond to the knock-on effects. These were identified as: the extent to which the school embraced the EC as a whole school project compared to an early years approach; the knowledge and confidence of teachers about developmental pathways in the early years — particularly, reading and mathematics development; and the ideas and beliefs that the teachers held about the meaning of developmentally appropriate practice and curriculum.
- From Y2 onwards, teachers expressed a diverging range of experiences and responses, ranging from confidence and enthusiasm about the EC to tentativeness and anxiety. The greatest

divergence was found among Y3 teachers some of whom were very anxious at having to deal with more children than usual who were at a very early stage of reading. They tended to feel less anxious over the course of the 3rd year, as children's reading made rapid progress.

6.3 Interpretations, Meanings and Progression in a Play-based Curriculum

- The broad principle that guided the EC was that a shift to an informal and play-based approach was a more appropriate approach to learning for young children, compared to the methods of the previous curriculum. The interviews with the teachers, and the classroom observations, confirmed that the EC involved a substantial shift from their previous practices for most teachers. However, in implementing the general approach, the interviews with the teachers also showed that they drew on various ideas and theoretical approaches. For example, a dominant belief was that learning progress is largely dependent on maturation in the early years — the maturationist viewpoint. However, an over-reliance on that viewpoint can lead to the teacher adopting too passive a role and not intervening in an appropriate way to move children on. The maturationist viewpoint underplays the role of adults in scaffolding and co-constructing children's learning. Teachers differed not only in their interpretations, but in the extent to which they drew on more extreme versions. Some teachers held balanced views on the meaning of developmentally appropriate practice and created a mix of pedagogical strategies that included a balance between adult- and child-initiated activities. Others had more limited interpretations and, in particular, tended to be overly swayed by the maturationist viewpoint.
- There was unease and a degree of anxiety displayed by some of the teachers with regard to effectively implementing a play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum beyond Year 1, while simultaneously maintaining and ensuring overall progress, especially in reading. The notion of progression in play to meet the progressive developmental needs of children was not always fully understood by teachers. The findings point to the need for a more extensive elaboration of what a play-based pedagogy means for the early years in primary school. They also confirm the need for a more complex, balanced and integrated pedagogy which values both child-initiated and teacher-directed activity, which blends apparent dichotomies and contradictions, and can thus sustain developmentally appropriate practice beyond Year 1 into Years 2, 3 and 4.

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