

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

End-of-Phase 2, Report 3

**Parents' Views and Perceptions
of the Enriched Curriculum over Time**

September 2009

Trew, K.¹, Sproule, L.¹, McGuinness, C.¹ & Walsh, G.²

¹School of Psychology, Queen's University Belfast

²Stranmillis University College

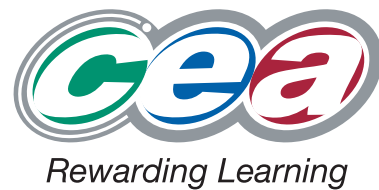
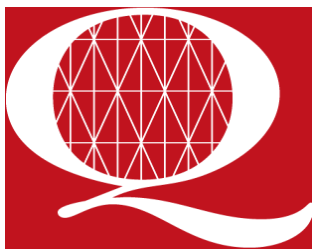


Table of Contents

	Page
Membership of the EYECEP Research Team 2000-2009	3
Acknowledgements	4
Statement on Ethics	4
1 Introduction	5
2 Background	6
3 Parental Survey Methodology	7
4 Results	9
5 Summary and Conclusions	21
References	25

Membership of the EYECEP research team 2000-2009

Professor Noel Sheehy	Lead Investigator 2000-2001, Research Team 2000-2004
Dr Harry Rafferty	Lead Investigator 2001-2004, Research Team 2000-2009
Dr Karen Trew	Lead Investigator 2004-2006, Research Team 2000-2009
Professor Carol McGuinness	Lead Investigator 2005-2009, Research Team 2000-2009
Ms Bridgeen O'Neill	Research Team 2001-2005
Dr Glenda Walsh	Research Team 2000-2009
Dr Katrin Dudgeon	Research Assistant 2000-2001
Dr Liz Sproule	Senior Research Fellow and Project Co-ordinator 2001-2009
Dr Diane Harvey-Smith	Research Assistant 2005-2008
Ms Jacqui Lockhart	Project Administrator 2003-2008

Statistical Consultant and Analyst

Dr Chris Bojke, Pharmerit International (formerly NFER) 2004-2009

Additional help from

Mr Geoffrey Caves	Online survey
Ms Michelle Drain	Scoring protocols
Dr Alissa Lange	Scoring protocols and data entry
Ms Grainne McKenna	Video analysis
Dr Gary McKeown	Statistics, graphics
Dr Victoria Simms	Scoring protocols and data entry
Mr Andrew Wilkinson	Data entry
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>
--

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to acknowledge:

the cooperation and contributions of the schools, teachers and pupils who have participated in the evaluation over the past 9 years and who have made this longitudinal study possible;

the parents of the children for their support and contributions;

the Board Officers from the Curriculum Advisory Support Service in all five Education and Library Boards who were involved in the Enriched Curriculum;

Dr Chris Bojke, statistical analyst now at Pharmerit International, who provided statistical advice and support on the multi-level modelling aspects of the statistical analyses;

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 third of four End-of-Phase 2 reports of the evaluation of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum (EC), concentrates on parental views. The evaluation adopted a multi-method strategy and from the beginning aimed to provide information on the curriculum from different perspectives. The Enriched Curriculum acknowledged the importance of parents in the education of children, and parents were contacted each year of the evaluation in order to sample their views about the Enriched Curriculum as well as their perceptions of the progress of their children in school.

The reader is reminded that detailed reports of parents' views have 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 (Sproule et al., 2005). All these reports can be found at <http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/>. In this current report we are concentrating on the continuities and changes in parental views across the whole period of the evaluation. Specifically, the major aim of the evaluation in respect of parents was:

- To study the views of parents about the appropriateness of the EC for their children as they progressed through the early primary school years and beyond. In Phase 1, parents were responding as their children were being taught the EC and immediately afterwards (Y3 and Y4). For Phase 2, parents were providing perceptions of their children as they progressed into Key Stage 2 (Y5, Y6 and Y7) and were coming to the end of their primary schooling.

The report is divided into four sections — in addition to this introduction:

- Section 2 provides a brief overview of previous research on parents' views on their children and the implications of this research for interpreting the research findings.
- Section 3 describes the methods we used to sample parental views and the achieved sample of parents.
- Section 4 reports the findings of the quantitative analysis of the questionnaire items completed by parents in each of the primary school years. It also employs parental comments to illustrate, and extend, the observed patterns of responding.
- Section 5 summarises the key findings and draws general conclusions.

2. Background

Our analysis of parental views has been informed by the literature on parental satisfaction with schooling which points to some of the issues involved in establishing parental views and perceptions. Following a review of previous US research, Jinnah and Walters (2008) suggest that the collection of parental satisfaction information in the evaluation of any intervention with children at school or in the community is important for the following reasons:

- Parents have the main responsibility for a child's development;
- Understanding parents' views can be used to prevent the rejection of interventions;
- Parents provide important information on the intended and unintended consequences of the intervention; and
- Parental views, as a form of consumer satisfaction data, are useful for convincing others of the viability of a project.

From their research, Jinnah and Walters suggest that parents tend to be fairly uncritical in evaluating any social intervention and that it is important to understand the factors that affect parental evaluations. For example, they found that there was an association between parental involvement with the project and increased parental satisfaction with its outcome but, on the other hand, parental involvement may lead to increased dissatisfaction with less well-organised projects.

In the United Kingdom, a recent survey (OFSTED, 2006) of parental satisfaction found that a very high proportion of parents in England and Wales were satisfied with the primary schools that their child attended. Parental satisfaction was highest when school effectiveness was judged by the Inspectorate to be good or excellent but even teaching that the Inspectorate judged as unsatisfactory was associated with satisfaction for 80% of parents from these schools. Further analysis indicated that parents' satisfaction was associated with the achievement of pupils but this link was weaker in primary than in secondary schools. The OFSTED report suggests that their findings could reflect both (1) the close connection that parents have with their children's primary schools and (2) that parents are interested in the social as well as the academic development of their children. Hence, parents' satisfaction with schools is likely to depend partly on qualities of the school other than the achievement data.

Lumby (2007) highlighted the importance parents place in their own children's emotional well-being, as well as their academic success, when he showed that the child's happiness

was a key factor in the mother's judgement of her child's education. In contrast, Lumby found that *teachers* in the study did not mention happiness in relation to young people's experience of school but focussed exclusively on their achievements. However, a different picture emerged from a survey of parents in Northern Ireland. Walsh (2000) reported that a large minority of the sample of parents questioned defined a high quality school programme for their 4-5 year old children in purely academic terms. This contrasted sharply with the sample of Danish parents included in her study, who all placed a high value on play as part of their child's experience. Thus, there are likely to be cultural differences in what parents value about education and what determines their levels of satisfaction.

The Education and Training Inspectorate carried out a survey of parents of children in Y1 and Y2 classes as part of their evaluation of the quality of provision in 29 schools participating in the Enriched Curriculum pilot project (ETI, 2004). The brief report of their findings indicated that:

‘A majority of the parents who responded to the questionnaire were strongly supportive of the implementation of the Enriched Curriculum and they reported that their children were benefiting significantly from the programme.’ (p 18)

In sum, the literature suggests that parents' views are an important source of information regarding an educational innovation. High levels of satisfaction are to be expected from parents judging their children's schooling but their pattern of responding can provide useful information about public understanding of the Enriched Curriculum, as well as its perceived impact on the cohort of children who experienced its introduction in their primary schools. In Northern Ireland, previous research suggests that parents tend to evaluate the quality of an early years primary curriculum in academic terms and will welcome innovation if they consider that these changes will benefit their child.

3. Parental Survey Methodology

Parents' views of the Enriched Curriculum (EC) were investigated annually (over seven years) by means of questionnaires. These questionnaires were sent to the parents of all the children who were in the EC classes tested in that year. In 2005, a questionnaire was developed for parents of Year 7 children in the control classes in order to provide a comparison group for the analyses at the point when the child is ready to leave primary school.

From the beginning, anonymity of responses was optional to encourage responding, although many parents did identify themselves and their child and/or the school. As a result it is not possible to establish how many parents responded to the invitation to complete the questionnaire more than once but over 1500 questionnaires were completed and coded. Some parents failed to provide information on their child's year groups, and some questions were not included in the initial years of the evaluation so that the final numbers of responses to questions varied. Table 1 shows the number of respondents by year group for the analyses. Where names were available it was clear that mothers completed most of these questionnaires. As a result of the anonymity, it is not possible to determine the exact response rates but approximately one in three parents responded in most years. It seems likely that unless they felt strongly on an issue, parents did not respond consistently every year.

Table 1 Number of parents completing questionnaires ¹

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Total
Enriched Curriculum	154	170	275	293	254	138	56	1340
Control group							197	197

Although the questionnaire was modified slightly from year to year, parents from all year groups completed the same nine questions. These questions are analysed in this report. They include

- Two questions on the amount of formal work and practical activity in the classroom;
- Two questions relating to their child's progress in mathematics and reading;
- Three questions on the child's happiness, attitudes to learning and attitudes and curiosity about the outside world;
- One question about the amount of information the school had provided on the Enriched Curriculum and their child's progress; and
- One question on how parents' viewed the effect of the EC on their child's future success.

¹ 8 of the 9 questions included in this report were not introduced in their present form until the evaluation was in its third year, thus reducing the numbers of Y1 to Y3 parents available for the analysis. This should be noted when reading Figures 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7.

As well as responding to the questions on specified rating scales, many parents provided detailed comments on their ratings. These comments were analysed thematically to supplement the statistical analysis.

When parents identified themselves and their child, it was possible to match the responses over the years for those who chose to respond more than once to the invitation to complete a questionnaire. Two hundred and thirty-six parents from 20 schools, who identified themselves on the questionnaires, completed questionnaires in at least two years. Of these, nine parents responded in five or six years, 26 parents responded in four years and 60 parents responded in three years. Analysis of these parents' comments over the years has been used to illustrate stability and change in parental views across the years.

Each year a small sample of parents were invited to provide further information in structured interviews (n = 65) or focus groups (n=5) if parents in a school were not willing to be interviewed alone. Parents who had indicated their willingness to be interviewed were selected on the basis of their responses to the survey to permit further investigation of a spectrum of responses, including the most negative parents. The findings from these interviews have been described in detail in previous reports and these analyses have helped inform the discussion of parental responses over time.

4. Results

The questions we asked can be divided into those that asked about the curriculum and its impact, those that related directly to the parent's own child, and questions about the information provided by the school on the curriculum. In this section we present an overview of the main findings arising from the statistical analysis and the major themes gleaned from parental comments.

4.1 Parental satisfaction as reflected in views on the level of formal versus practical work in the Enriched Curriculum

When parents were asked what they thought about the amount of formal work their child was doing in class, 91% of Y1 parents considered it was 'about right' and subsequently no less than 82% of the parents in any year group agreed that the amount of formal work was about right (See Table 2). Very few parents in Years 1 to 5 considered that their child received too much formal work. Between 5 to 11 % of parents of children in all years

considered that their child had too little formal work. In Year 6 there were split views among the small minority of parents who considered that the amount of formal work their child was doing in class was not 'about right', with 8% considering that their child had too much formal work, and 5% considering that the child had too little.

Table 2 Percentages of parents responding to questions about the level of formality of work and amount of practical activity in the Enriched Curriculum

	Yr 1	Yr 2	Yr 3	Yr 4	Yr 5	Yr 6	Yr 7	Yr 7 Control
Number of parents	43	72	255	292	252	136	56	196
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Would you like your child to continue with a high level of practical work in primary school?								
Yes	96	93	94	92	89	96	98	---
Amount of formal work								
Too much	0	1	1	3	2	8	7	4
About right	91	90	92	88	89	86	82	89
Too little	9	10	8	10	10	5	11	7

There was also a general consensus among parents across the years that their child should continue with a high level of practical work in primary school (89%-98% across the years). Many comments on these questions indicated that parents were seeking a balance between formal and practical work as noted by the following examples:

There appears to be a good balance with sufficient activity and practical participation to engage the children and keep them interested — yet they do written work on their own too, preparing for the future. (Y3 boy's parent, r145)

Practical work seems to stimulate the child and small amounts of formal work helps them to evaluate what they have learnt. (Y3 girl's parent, r111)

As my son prepares to move on to secondary education, I feel he benefited from the practical nature of the Enriched Curriculum in the very early years of his primary education. He was highly motivated to learn through play and other less formal activities. (Y7 boy's parent, r217)

There were some very positive comments about the use of practical activities in the primary school as well as a few negative views. For example, on the positive side:

I feel the more practical activities carried out helps increase a child's confidence, and they are more likely to ask for help when they are unable to solve problems. (Y4 girl's parent, r11)

Yes — practical activity brings the learning alive and aids retention of information. (Y5 boy's parent, r17)

Practical teaching makes learning fun. My child talks eagerly about what he has learnt in science, maths etc. However, when a subject is introduced in a formal manner, he becomes stressed about learning. This is why I feel the Enriched Curriculum is the preferred method of learning in primary years. (Y5 boy's parent, r143)

There were only a few negative comments and of these a tiny minority referred directly to the curriculum rather than the child's lack of progress or shortcomings of a specific school. Two negative comments illustrate some of the main concerns with the Enriched Curriculum. The father of a Y7 girl, who also completed a questionnaire when his daughter was in Y5, reiterated his view that his daughter had not been stretched when he wrote that:

She often finishes work early and no additional work is ever given, she is often sent to help others with their work. (r89)

The mother of a Y5 boy also repeated her views across two years when she noted:

The Enriched Curriculum is great... as long as the teachers are well trained in it. Different teachers also seem to interpret it in very different ways. One of the problems I found with it is the attitude to spelling. Children are encouraged to 'have a go' which Simon² unfortunately interpreted as 'you can spell words the way you like. It doesn't matter'. (r220)

Another mother was enthusiastic about the EC from Year 1 but she expressed some concerns:

End Year 1: With shared reading we feel we are making a difference to add to her classroom learning. Praising her more, to give her more confidence to forge ahead and experiment ... The only slight criticism we would have, is the formation of letters — although they appeared to spend a little time learning how to write and form letters, this was not carried through in sentence writing.

End Year 2: I liked the concept of the programme and still do, but I feel that because the writing habits may now be hard to break, and this may be to her detriment in later stages of her education.

End Year 3: Most enjoyable and memorable for her was a two-day history lesson about Florence Nightingale. The way in which this was taught has really stuck with her! Although the teacher is happy with her spelling, we think she should have made more progress in this area.

End Year 5: She loves the practical and interesting way of learning mundane subjects... Keeps interest going better. We have big concerns about the lack of importance placed on spelling — lack of correction has meant that she does not place any importance on it. Work is not rechecked for corrections.

End Year 6: Have approved of most of it (i.e. The Enriched Curriculum) apart from the lack of concentration on spelling as her spelling has never been corrected, she places absolutely no emphasis on correctly spelt words.

End Year 7: More convinced in the last year that they do 'catch up' compared to other schools — not so sure before, but transfer test results were comparable to other schools, writing improved this year also. (r38)

² All children's names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

4.2 Parents' views on children's progress in reading and mathematics

Although, as reported previously (End-of-Phase 1 Report, Sproule et al. 2005), children following the EC compared to control children had depressed test scores on traditional measures of attainments in Y1 and Y2, parents' views on their children's progress in reading and mathematics were generally very positive. The vast majority of parents appeared to be satisfied with their child's progress in reading and mathematics and rated their progress 'as expected', 'better than expected' or 'much better than expected'.

Figures 1 and 2 are displayed together for ease of comparison. They show that more than half of the parents who completed the questionnaires in Years 1 to 4 considered that their child's progress in reading and mathematics was 'better or much better than expected'. Parents of children in years 5, 6 and 7 were positive but not as positive as parents of younger children and were more likely to rate their child's progress in both reading and mathematics as being at a level they 'expected' rather than 'better than expected'.

Reading

Relatively few parents at any stage expressed dissatisfaction with their child's progress in reading (range 9-14%), but the comments revealed that initially some parents had been worried that their child was slower to read than the children of friends. As one mother noted over the years:

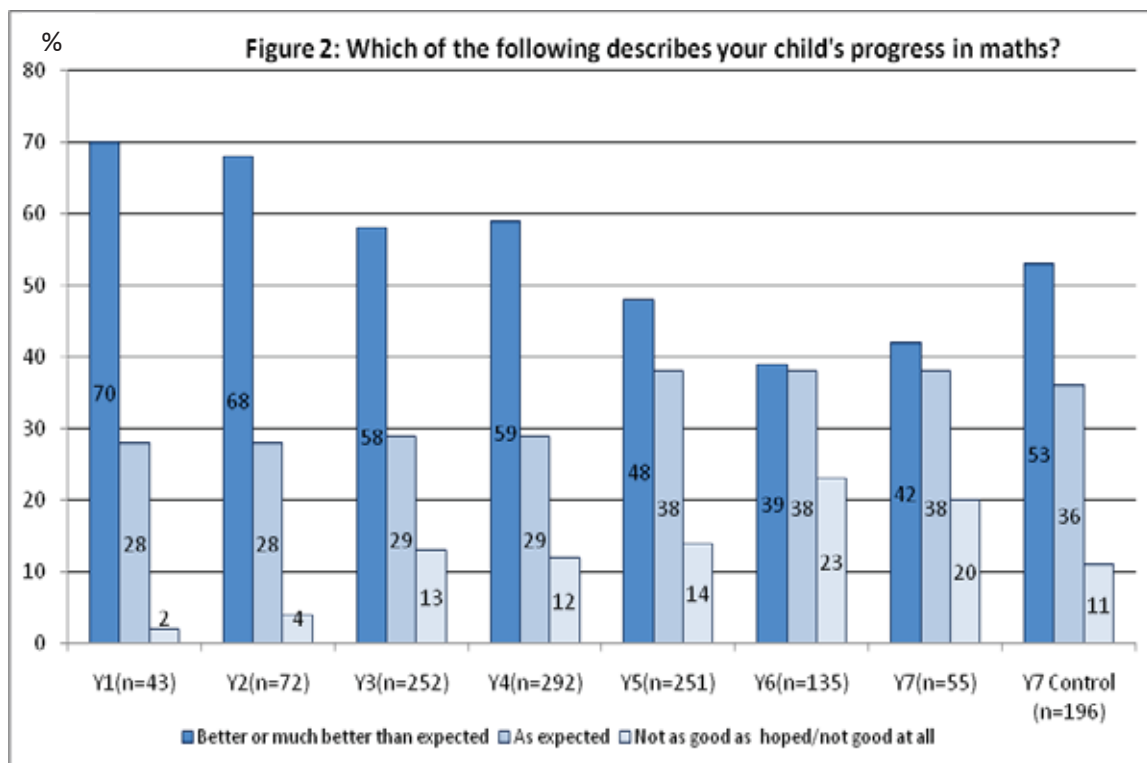
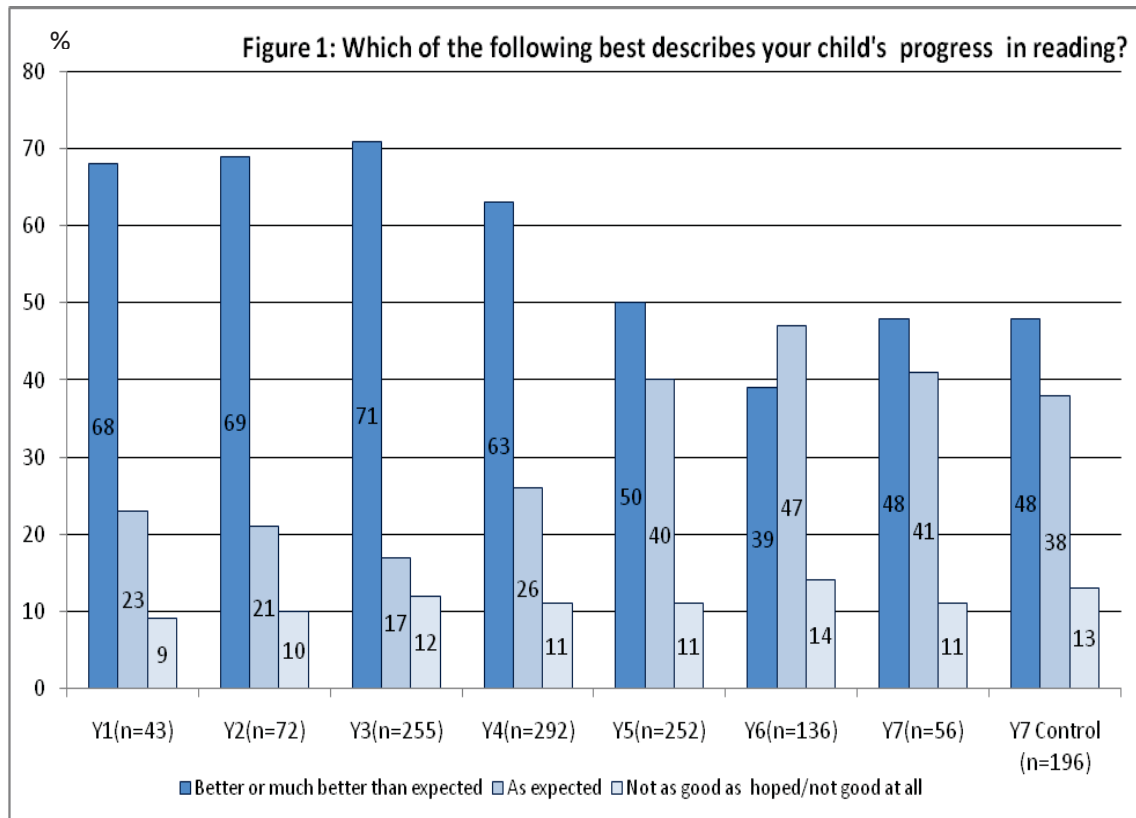
End Year3: I was very worried in P2, as Jenny was not reading as well as I would have expected... My main concern was Jenny's reading ability. This has now progressed and I am very satisfied with Jenny's progress this year. I shared my concerns with Jenny's teacher and was reassured. The teacher was excellent and Jenny made great strides this P3 year.

End year 4: Jenny has progressed very well in P4..... She progressed well in reading, this was an area I was concerned about but she has come on well. I must praise her teacher.

End Year 5: Unsure about the Enriched Curriculum. I continue to be concerned about my child's reading ability... She shows no interest in reading a book. I have bought her books, encouraged her to choose books but she loses interest after a few pages. (r78)

A mother of a Y6 girl and a Y3 boy wrote

In P1-2 I had little faith in it (The EC) however once she got to P3 I found it all slotted into place. I would hope to see that same change in my next child who has just gone into P3 and at the minute I feel like I did with my older child — a bit apprehensive so hopefully it will come right! (r25)



Another Y3 mother noted that her son had always been thoroughly prepared for his homework but for her:

The most pleasing aspect has been his new found enthusiasm in reading for pleasure and I am delighted to see him doing this unprompted every night. (r09)

There were a few parents who distinguished between the methods used to teach reading and the Enriched Curriculum. One of these parents had become very concerned about her son's reading and had intervened to help him outside school but she noted:

I feel that the Enriched Curriculum eases children especially boys into the education system gradually and gently. However, I am concerned that the wrong strategies are being used to teach reading and in particular that the children who have difficulty processing sounds are not getting early enough intervention. I think the EC is simply in need of fine-tuning the approach to beginning reading. As the present methods are failing the portion of our children who have difficulty processing sounds and that to me is not acceptable. (Y3 boy's parent, r214)

A small number of parents with children who had reading problems were concerned that their child's problems had not been noticed at an early stage. For example, a father of a Y5 boy who he noted 'has dyslexia' wrote:

...I feel if the work had been more formal in P1 and P2 his condition would have been detected quicker. (r116)

This father felt that in the initial years there was 'too much play and not enough work' although he added:

But I do know from my second child that it has improved and that they have introduced more formal work. I think they may have the balance right now!

Other parents considered that their children had been helped by the EC. For example, one mother noted that her Y4 daughter 'had a visit from the psychologist and they think she has dyslexia'. At that stage, this mother wrote that 'I think that with my child the practical work helps with learning.' Two years later, when her daughter was in Y6, this mother noted that:

I still think it (the EC) suited my daughter because she has very bad concentration so at least the practical aspect kept her interested. (r141)

The impact of the EC on good readers was also praised. The mother of a Y6 girl wrote:

My child has always been a good reader. Her teachers have gone out of their way when she was ahead of her class reading material, to provide her with a more challenging level. Because of this, her spelling, comprehension and imagination have developed rapidly and at times above her class level. I feel that it is due to the enriched curriculum that the teachers have been able to help my child and never let her become bored. (r49).

Overall, parental comments on children's progress in reading indicate that some parents did initially have some concerns over the delay in teaching reading but the progress of their own children contributed to the satisfaction expressed by the majority of the parents of older children in their children's reading progress.

Mathematics

Although the majority of parents viewed their child's progress in mathematics as at a level 'they expected or better than they expected', as the children progressed through school, parents became less satisfied with the children's progress. Figure 2, on page 13, shows that the views of parents of EC children in Year 7 on their children's progress in mathematics were slightly more negative than those of the control group. This difference was not statistically significant. Overall, parents of pupils in Y5 to Y7 were more dissatisfied with progress in mathematics than in reading, with one in four of Y6 parents indicating that they felt that the progress of their child was not as good as they hoped. However, very few parents felt strongly enough about the teaching of mathematics to comment on it. One mother of a Y6 child noted that her daughter's progress in mathematics was not good at all and she explained that this was because:

Not enough time is given to explain work. There is so much going on in the school year. I felt maths is getting left behind. My daughter can't tell the time. (r189)

Another mother of a Y6 boy noted that her son had to cope with too many new concepts in maths. She wrote:

He is having difficulties with certain areas and seems to be learning a lot of different maths topics at once, i.e. fractions, %ages etc. I feel he would have coped better had a little more formal work been introduced at an earlier age. (r03)

Other comments tended to be positive, as one parent of a Year Y5 boy noted:

The EC has worked particularly well re maths. John has a real conceptual grasp of numbers, their relationships and their applications. (Y5 boy's parent, r65)

I am more than happy with my son's maths ability. He shows lots of interest in this subject so enjoys it fully. (Y4 boy's parent, r194)

4.3 Parents' perception of the child's socio-emotional well-being and the perceived impact of the transfer tests

The pattern of responding to the three questions on the parental questionnaire relating to children's socio-emotional well-being is illustrated in Figures 3, 4 and 5, which are presented together for ease of comparison. Nearly all parents of children in Y1 rated their own child's happiness, attitude to learning, and attitude and curiosity about the world very positively.

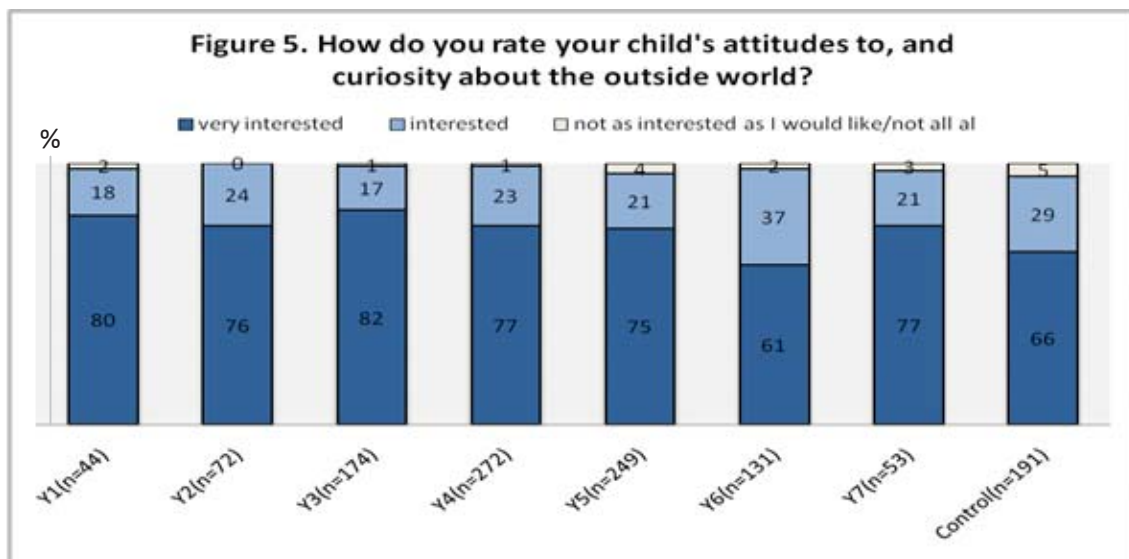
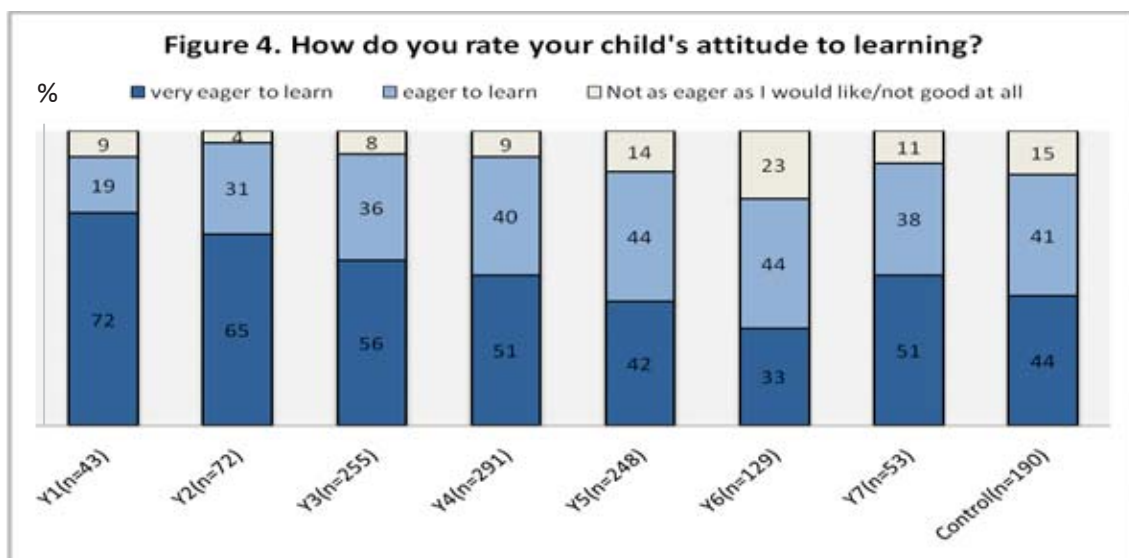
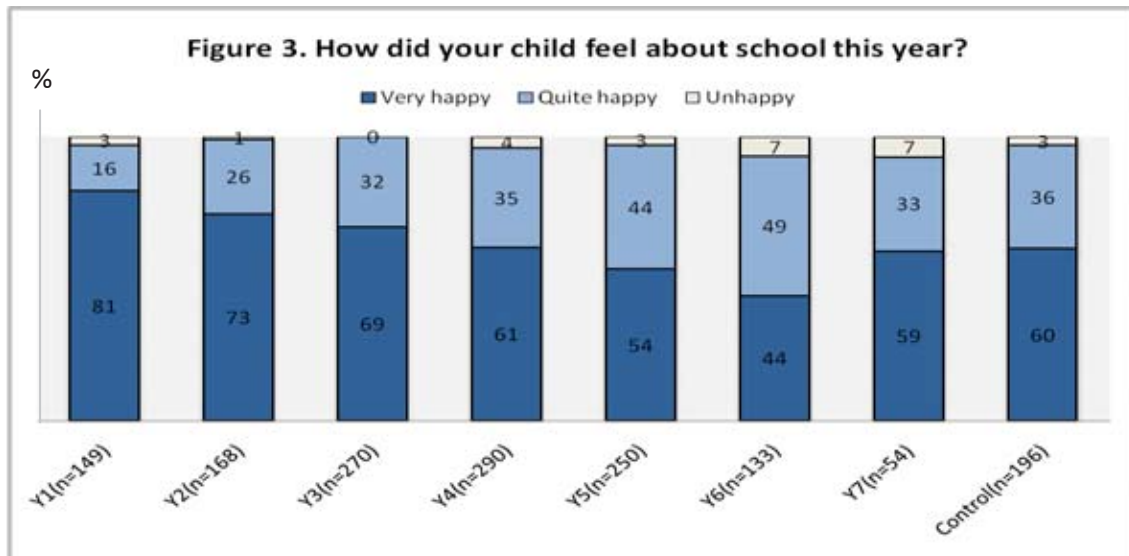
However, over time there was a decline in the percentages of parents rating their children as 'very happy, 'very eager to learn' or 'very interested in the outside world'. For example, the parents of 81% of Y1 but only 44% of Y6 children considered that their child was 'very happy' (Figure 3), the parents of 72% of Y1 but only 33% of Y6 children considered that they were 'very eager to learn' (Figure 4). Eighty percent of Y1 children's parents considered they were 'very interested in the outside world' as compared with 61% of Y6 children's parents (Figure 5). It was notable that parents of Y7 were more positive than their Y6 counterparts on each of these scales.

Parents of Year 6 children were completing their questionnaires at the end of the year that the children were being prepared for the Transfer Procedure. We did not question parents directly about these tests, but from the beginning, parents spontaneously expressed their concern about the influence of the Enriched Curriculum on their child's performance on the Transfer Tests. We note that this concern is reflected in the observed pattern of responding to the questionnaire as shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5 as well as in the rating of progress in mathematics and to a lesser extent reading (Figures 1 and 2), where Y6 seems to stand out as different from the other years. For example, one parent wrote:

I still feel very positive about the philosophy of the Enriched Curriculum. However in real terms it has been introduced into a system geared towards 11+ (Parent is referring to the Transfer Procedure) — my feeling is that they may be incompatible. (Y5 boy's parent, r17)

Another parent noted:

I feel that there was some incompatibility/ conflict between what was required for the transfer test and how the experiential learning was carried out, though only from the point of view that a lot of intensive work had to be fitted in a small time frame, unlike the development of work generally undertaken by the practices adopted in the Enriched Curriculum programme. (Y6 girl's mother, r14)

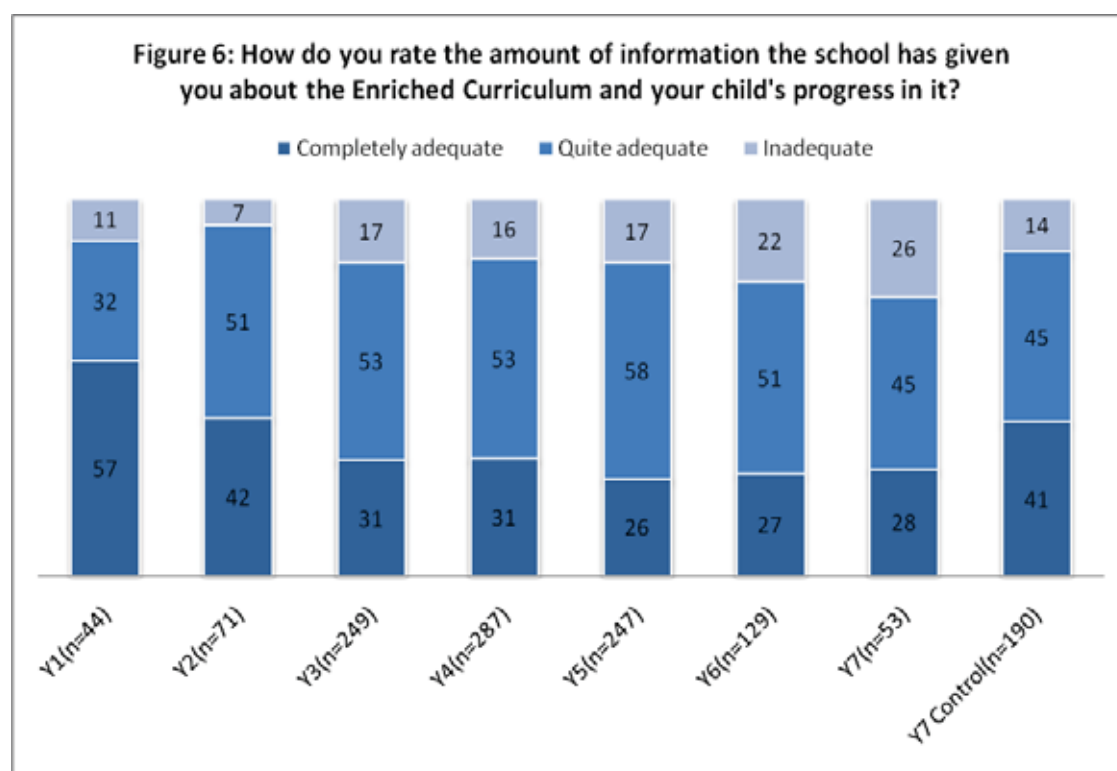


4.4 Parental views on communication with school

The major criticism expressed by parents throughout the evaluation related to the amount of information they had received from the school. Although over half the parents of Y1 children considered the information completely adequate, the parents of older children were less satisfied with the information they received from the schools about the curriculum (see Figure 6³). In commenting on the communications they received from the school, parents also referred to the importance of parental involvement. For example, one mother chose to make this point in both Y4 and Y5:

End of Y4: parental involvement is very important without it I feel children will do less well in school.

End of Y5: I was always happy with the programme from the beginning. However I feel that parental input is very necessary to facilitate this teaching method. (r06)



Another mother noted that she had raised specific concerns about her son with the teacher who responded very positively:

I have always been amazed and delighted at how the teacher responds to each and every child as an individual and encourages active dialogue between herself, parents

³ The question for the control group was 'How do you rate the amount of information the school has given you about the curriculum and your child's progress in it?'

and children. I feel this sharing of information and encouraging each child to reach their own potential goals is a very positive and worthwhile practice within this educational system and school. (Y3 boy's parent, r30)

Parents were not asked to indicate the nature of their contact with the school but some parents reported that they could not answer some of our questions because they did not know what was involved in the EC. As one parent of a Y3 girl noted:

We go to evenings at the beginning of school year but don't know exactly what goes on in class on a day to day/ weekly basis in the Enriched Curriculum. My child enjoys school and as long as she's happy we're happy. (r895)

The parent of a Y4 boy provided a blueprint for communication, when she wrote the following list:

*Web site for parents re information would be helpful;
Teacher to give reading list, ideas for maths (fun activities) for over summer period.
i.e. 10 mins per day with ideas how to do it;
Develop library services to promote early years Enriched Curriculum e.g. reading hour in summer, story telling, selection of books;
Tell us what are bad ideas too;
Support group on internet to discuss problems and keep parents motivated;
Outcome/progress of research;
Dietary advice to promote mind and body. (R 755)*

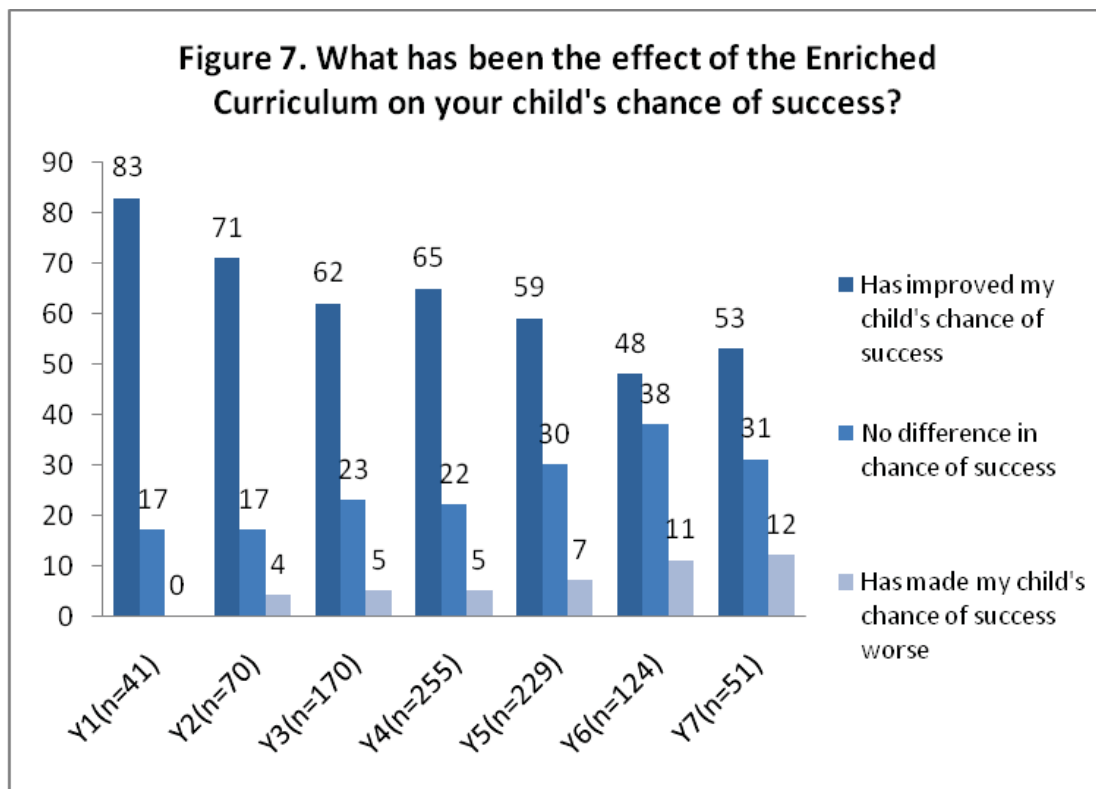
4.5 Perceived longer-term effects of the Enriched Curriculum

When parents were asked to reflect on the longer-term effects of the Enriched Curriculum, parents of children in the early years were extremely positive, with 83% of the parents of Year 1 children and 71% of the parents of Year 2 children considering the curriculum had improved their child's chances of success (Figure 7).

By Year 6 however, only 48% of parents considered the curriculum had improved the child's chance of success, while 38% felt that the EC had made no difference to their child's chance of success. The Y7 parents were slightly more positive than their Y6 counterparts.

Among the minority of Y6 (11%) and Y7 (12%) parents who considered that the EC had made their child's chances of success worse were parents who commented on their child's poor writing and/or spelling skills. For example, one parent of a Year 6 girl noted that:

Not enough English skills were put in place in P2 or P3 and it is only now that you can see just how behind the P6 class is — my child never learns the meaning of words only how to spell them, what help is this?? Comprehension is awful and grammar isn't much better. She's not corrected for untidy work either. When she goes to Post Primary they will see what poor standards the Enriched Curriculum has. (r18)



Other dissatisfied parents were concerned about the transfer procedure. As one parent of a Y6 girl wrote:

While my daughter loves school, I feel that the Enriched Curriculum has been a complete disaster.... To give our daughter the same chances as other children who have not done the Enriched Curriculum — we have had to send her to a private tutor. (r24)

Overall, few parents considered that the curriculum had made their child's chance of success worse. Rather, many were very eloquent in their praise of the child's school experience. For example:

His teacher has been a tower of strength for Sean ...I can't fault this school — both they and the Enriched Curriculum has provided him with the chance to achieve a great deal. I am quite certain that if he had been taught as my generation was he would have found it much more difficult. They have given a child who has severe low esteem support — and a belief that he can achieve something with his life. (Y6 boy's mother, r13)

I have another daughter who is 14 years older than Sara and I feel that it is such a shame that the Enriched Curriculum was not available then. Sara's confidence in her schoolwork has totally amazed me, which I think is totally down to the way in which she has been taught to learn. I have always believed in the new Enriched Curriculum from day one and 4 years down the line has just confirmed what I thought from the information given to us as parents. (Y4 girl's parent, r137)

Joan has had immense support and totally dedicated teaching throughout with a diverse range of material and approaches used. In total all this has given her a superb start to learning and promotes the desire to strive for more. I feel the day-to-day work is presented in a second to none manner from which the children could only be inspired to produce their best. Well done to all concerned! (Y7 girl's mother, r14)

Our daughters are in Y1 and Y3. They have very different temperaments and yet the EC seems to suit them both very well. Our Y1 was anxious and reserved about starting school. However she has blossomed into a confident reader and is interacting socially very well. She loves 'show and tell' something I envisaged her having difficulties with. She is much more confident now, pointing out 'repeating patterns' and insisting on reading the 'parents opening page' to her reading books. Their skills are well developed. They feel valued at school as people and their opinions count. They are developing broad and open minds. (Y3 girl's parent, r07)

The question for the Y7 *control group* of parents was 'What has been the effect of your child's education on your child's chances of future success?' This question asks parents to make a general evaluation of their child's education rather than of the curriculum per se. As such it is not directly comparable to the question posed to the EC Y7 parents. 73% of the Y7 control parents agreed that their child's education had improved their child's chance of success, 22% said that it made no difference, and just 3% felt that it had a negative effect. Parents in this group also commented both positively and negatively on their child's education.

5. Summary and Conclusions

This report presents a snapshot of parental views of the EC over time. Although we are aware of some of the complex issues involved in sampling parental satisfaction, we consider that the large scale survey of parents across the years provided unique insights into the impact of the EC. The wide lens offered by rating scales completed by over 1,500 parents is enhanced by the comments which some of these parents added to their questionnaires.

In summary, the findings clearly show that the vast majority of parents were satisfied with their children's scholastic progress and their well-being in school. Overall, there was a trend for parents to be more positive in their ratings and evaluations of their child in the first years

of primary school compared to the later years. Parents welcomed the Enriched Curriculum and described the benefits: this was as much a feature of their views in Y7 as it was in the early years. Specifically:

- Parents recognised the shift to a more informal approach that was associated with the EC. They were very supportive of a high level of practical activity throughout primary schools, especially in mathematics and science but sought a balance between the teaching of basic skills and practical experiences.
- Parents' perceptions of their child's social-emotional well-being, taken from their responses to questions about being happy in school, eager to learn, and curious about the outside world, were higher in Years 1-4 than in Year 5 and 6, although there was a slight increase again in Year 7. When compared with perceptions of Y7 children who had been following the previous curriculum (control children), EC children were perceived as more eager to learn and more curious about the world. Perceptions of the well-being of children in Year 6 were the lowest of all seven years. For example, only in Year 6 were substantial numbers of parents worried about their children's eagerness to learn (23% reported that their child was 'not as eager as I would like'/'not good at all').
- With regard to scholastic progress, there was a tendency for parents to rate progress in reading higher than progress in mathematics across the years. This was surprising given that many of their written comments expressed concerns about reading development rather than mathematics. Again, progress in Years 1-4 was rated better than in Years 5-7. Parents were most concerned about scholastic progress in Year 6, reflecting concerns about the Transfer Procedure and the preparations that normally happen during that year. Children's perceived progress in reading was almost identical when Year 7 EC children were compared with Y7 children who have followed the pre-existing curriculum. In contrast, Y7 EC children were perceived as making marginally poorer mathematics progress, when compared with the control Y7 classes.
- The general trend for parents to rate their children more positively in Years 1-4 than in Years 5-7 may reflect the general transitions that children experience as they

progress through primary schools rather than the specific features of the Enriched Curriculum per se.

- With regard to the perceived impact of the EC on their child's future, perceptions were most positive in the early years and parents were less confident of the positive impact of the EC by Year 7.

Throughout the eight years of the evaluation, the research team were aware of a small number of parents who held very negative views of the EC. The negative views were reflected particularly in the parents' views on their child's progress in reading and mathematics where a minority of parents (from 2-23% across the years) rated progress as 'not as good as hoped/not good at all'. Throughout the evaluations, we deliberately sought out these parents' views in order to gain a good understanding of their concerns. Some of their concerns reflected the initial problems experienced by teachers adopting a new curriculum and the issues raised by parents were part of the formative evaluation of the curriculum. Other problems arose because of specific factors, which were unconnected to the curriculum. Nevertheless, some parents were clearly very anxious about their children's progress and turned to private tutors or intervened themselves. At all stages of the evaluation, it was clear how important it was for schools and teachers to ensure that parents were able to discuss their concerns with the teacher and that they were kept informed of curriculum changes.

In reflecting on parental views of the EC, we found that many parents drew our attention to the *complexities* of the issues involved in rating their satisfaction with their child's educational progress. For example, several parents noted the importance of taking account of the child's own characteristics. As the mother of a Y6 boy wrote:

I don't particularly attribute the outcome of Frank's literacy development to the Enriched Curriculum. I think it is very possible that the outcome would have been similar anyway. I think other important factors are his sex and he is a 'June' birthday. We have a daughter in P3 who has had an almost identical experience (same teachers/reading material) — she adores reading, has high level of attainment ... (mother Y6 boy, r17)

And the mother of a Y7 boy noted:

Lack of progress is down to my son's personal difficulties rather than school. He has developed a block with his maths. (r143)

This recognition of complexity was not only reported by those with children who had experienced problems at school. As the parent of a Y5 boy suggested:

My son enjoys school and learning. Whether this is as a result of the EC or whether he would have been like this anyway is impossible to tell. (r112)

A number of parents commented on the specific advantages of the EC for boys as shown by these comments:

I feel that EC really supports boys in their reading and learning and there is recognition of different genders in the learning — proves boys like hands on learning! (Y3 boy's mother, r234)

Activity based learning appeals to my son and increases his interest in topics. I think it is important that EC encourages child to reach his/her full potential. (Y5 boy's mother, r30)

In conclusion, the parental survey strand of the evaluation provided a unique viewpoint on the EC as it was experienced by the first groups of children who participated. As well as illuminating the perceived strengths and limitations of the EC, it provided a more general framework for evaluating how parents view both children's scholastic progress as well as their social and emotional well-being in school. This survey confirmed the more general finding in the UK that primary school parents are satisfied with their children's education and provide positive accounts of their children's progress (OFSTED, 2006). Surveys of parental satisfaction are now seen as an integral component of the evaluation of schools in the UK. This survey highlights the particular importance of consulting parents during periods of curriculum innovation and curriculum change.

References

ETI Report (2004). *Report of a Survey of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Pilot*. Downloaded: www.etini.gov.uk/earlyyearsrichcurrpilot.pdf

Jinnah, H. A. & Walters, L. L. (2008). Including Parents in Evaluation of a Child Development Program: Relevance of Parental involvement. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 10, 1

Lumby, J. (2007). Parent Voice: Knowledge, Values and Viewpoint. *Improving Schools*, 13, 220-232.

OFSTED (2006). *Parents' Satisfaction with Schools Report*: HMI 2634. Downloaded: www.ofsted.gov.uk

Sproule, L., McGuinness, C., Trew, K., Rafferty, H., Walsh, G., Sheehy, N. & O'Neill, B. (2005). *The Early-Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project: Final Report Phase 1*. Report produced for Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum Assessment and Examinations (CCEA).

Walsh, G. (2000). *The Play versus Formal debate: A Study of Early Years Provision in Northern Ireland and Denmark*. Unpublished PhD thesis, submitted to Queen's University, Belfast.