

**The Early Years Enriched Curriculum
Evaluation Project: First year report**

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Executive Summary

Context

The innovative Enriched Curriculum was jointly devised by The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and The Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) to address perceived problems in the formal traditional curriculum which had previously been on offer. The new curriculum was piloted in six schools within the Greater Shankill area of Belfast. A team from Queen's University Belfast and Stranmillis College was appointed to evaluate the pilot project in September 2000. The goals of the evaluation were to examine the children's classroom experience and their academic progress and to gather information on the views of the teachers and parents involved in the project.

Evaluation plan

In the first year of the project, evaluation comprised five strands:

1. Documentation of the history, nature and form of the Enriched Curriculum from data obtained in interviews, through training documents supplied to teachers and through informal discussions with personnel connected with the project.
2. Attainment testing on children in the intervention (Enriched Curriculum) and control groups.
3. Comparison of the child's experience in the intervention and control groups through structured observation using Walsh's Quality of Learning Instrument.
4. Exploring the views of teachers about the Enriched Curriculum via teacher interviews and focus groups.
5. Accessing the views of parents about the Enriched Curriculum via questionnaires, interviews and focus groups.

The nature of The Enriched Curriculum

At this time, the Enriched Curriculum is best characterised as an evolving curriculum. This is seen as a strength of the project, in that it allows teachers to exercise their professional expertise within the framework of the project and engenders a sense of ownership in the project staff. Fostering of this level of staff commitment is recognised as one of the characteristics of successful interventions (See Adey & Shayer, Ch. 9, especially page 157).

The principal aspirations and qualities of the Enriched Curriculum may be summarised as follows:

- Removal of the early experience of failure for the child. This is seen as a primary goal.
- Improvement of oral language skills through such activities as shared reading, circle time and structured play.

- Postponement of the use of formal reading schemes whilst concentrating on oral language and emergent literacy activities. This is accomplished for example by activities to enhance phonological awareness.
- Postponement of formal recorded arithmetic whilst laying the foundations for a strong sense of number through sorting, matching, counting and other basic activities.
- Promotion of good motor development at gross and fine levels through appropriate indoor and outdoor activities e.g. 'Brain Gym'.
- Encouragement of creativity through activities such as role-play.
- An emphasis on encouraging the children to take responsibility for their own learning.

Attainment testing plan

In November 2000, baseline assessment was carried out on a random sample of half the children in the intervention and control groups. Children were tested on:

- Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS), a traditional test of attainment, which allows comparison with a national sample. PIPS yields standardised reading, mathematics and total scores.
- The Boehm Pre-School Test, a test of concept development including many concepts underlying early mathematical thinking.
- The Bus Story Test, a test of many aspects of oral language proficiency, which also probes attention and memory skills. The test yields an information content score and a sentence length score.

Towards the end of the academic year, these tests were repeated on the same sample in order to compare progress in the two groups.

Results of attainment testing

Baseline testing

At baseline, the intervention and control groups were seen to be very well matched on all but one of the measures. Children in both groups performed just below average on PIPS and on the Boehm test. However, on the Bus Story Test, baseline scores indicated oral language skills, which were markedly below expected age norms. At baseline, there was no significant difference between intervention and control groups on the information score but the control group slightly outperformed the Enriched Curriculum group on sentence length.

Progress on PIPS

At the end-of-year testing, children in both groups had apparently lost much ground on PIPS as compared with a national sample, ranging from 4.8 to 9.4 standardised points on the various measures. These data are in accord with findings from earlier studies in the Greater Shankill area (Sheehy et al. 2000). These results are hypothesised to be due to a complex variety of factors, including the possibility that the national baseline is

artificially depressed. This would mean that both intervention and control group children were not as advanced on entering school as the baseline scores would suggest.

As expected, children in the control group outperformed children in the Enriched Curriculum group on PIPS measures. Control group children were significantly better on PIPS total scores and PIPS reading scores but not on PIPS mathematics scores. These results are attributed to the mismatch between a traditional curriculum and the Enriched Curriculum. The disparity is more marked in reading measures. The PIPS test was designed to assess children following a traditional curriculum. No test of attainment more appropriate to the Enriched Curriculum exists which would allow comparison with a wider population.

Progress on the Boehm Pre-School Test of Concept Development

Due to good progress in concept understanding, some end-of-year scores were very high on this test in both groups. These ceiling effects preclude meaningful comparison of intervention and control groups at the end of the year.

Progress on the Bus Story Test

At the end of the year, children in the Enriched Curriculum group had not only caught up with the control group on sentence length, they had slightly overtaken them. It is hoped that this will be the first indication of children in this group showing the vast improvement in oral language skills, which would be required to allow improvements in performance in other areas.

There was no significant difference between intervention and control groups on the improvement in the information content score.

Both groups remained, on average, at least eight months behind on both information content and sentence length scales.

Comparison of the learning experience in Enriched Curriculum and control group classrooms

Walsh's Quality of Learning Instrument allowed comparison of intervention and control group classrooms by a structured observation exercise. It was designed to assess classrooms on nine key themes:

- Motivation
- Concentration
- Higher Order Thinking Skills
- Well-being
- Social Interaction
- Confidence
- Independence
- Respect

- Skill Acquisition

The observer takes account of children's actions, teaching strategies and the role of the classroom environment in each of these domains.

Historical data from an earlier study also allowed comparison with a large group of classes.

- Enriched Curriculum classes scored more highly on all nine of the scales on Walsh's Quality Learning Instrument compared with control-group classes.
- The difference is particularly favourable for Enriched Curriculum classes on the social interaction and independent learning scales and is well marked on the concentration and well-being scales.
- Enriched Curriculum and Control Group classes both scored significantly better than classes in the historical group. It is possible that this is due to the leakage of the Enriched Curriculum to control group schools, for which there was some anecdotal evidence.

The views of teachers

Six of the teachers in the intervention group were interviewed individually and all took part in a focus group.

After initial doubts, teachers had all come to express confidence in the new curriculum by the time of the teacher interviews in February. All teachers expressed confidence in improving delivery of the programme in subsequent years.

Teachers agreed on the value of many aspects of the Enriched Curriculum. There was particularly strong agreement on the value of:

- Structured play
- Circle time
- The importance of physical play
- Shared reading

Teachers disagreed on:

- When to introduce formal aspects of reading and mathematics, i.e. more traditional aspects of literacy and numeracy in Year 1.
- The value and hence the frequency of practice of the 'Brain Gym' exercises.

Teachers believed that the views of parents had mirrored their own: Parents had had initial doubts but were becoming progressively more positive about the programme.

Teachers strongly emphasised the importance of the resources and training they had received. They particularly valued the support from the project co-ordinator, Heather Green. They described preparations as adequate but not lavish, stating that it would have

been impossible to have delivered such a profound change in practice without these provisions.

The views of parents

Twenty-seven percent of parents responded to the parental questionnaire, distributed in June 2001.

- Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the Enriched Curriculum.
- Many parents believe the Enriched Curriculum is emotionally and/or developmentally appropriate for their child.
- It is clearly important to parents that children enjoy their first year at school: Many parents revealed their anxieties for their children's happiness in the first year of school.
- The majority of parents reported increased time spent talking to or reading to the child or both. The majority of these attributed this to the Enriched Curriculum.
- Many parents show appreciation of the need for motivation of children.
- Many parents reported that play with the child following the Enriched Curriculum was more enjoyable or more creative or more productive of learning.
- Of those parents who responded, almost none are clearly unhappy with the entire programme. A slightly larger number revealed nuances of uncertainty about its value in some domains.

Two focus groups and six individual interviews were conducted with parents to assess their feelings towards the Enriched Curriculum. These interviews took place in June 2001 and were structured around six themes:

- Knowledge about the project
- Children's attitudes to and feelings about school
- Parental concerns and attitudes to the project
- Interaction with the school
- Family literacy
- Children's play

In general, responses strongly confirmed the findings from the parental questionnaire. These responses are summarised thus:

Parents were knowledgeable about and approved of:

- Shared reading
- The postponement of formal reading and recorded mathematics
- The increased focus on play-based activities
- The decrease in formal written work
- Music, singing and rhythmic games

Parents were not as knowledgeable about:

- The reasons for making such a gross change in the curriculum
- The goals of circle time
- Motor learning

Parents reported that children (both their own and other people's) had seemed generally happy at school during the year and that children were eager to learn. Parents with older siblings who had followed the more traditional curriculum reported that children in the Enriched Curriculum project were happier and more motivated. Parents believed this was not the result of dissimilar temperaments in siblings: They attributed the difference to the Enriched Curriculum.

Parents reported evidence of improved family literacy activities such as shared reading, initiation or increase of visits to school libraries and an increased number of books around the house.

There were instances where children showed signs of considering their work (reading and counting) as valid play activities. On occasion, parents had learned about the nature and value of children's play.

It should be noted that only a minority of parents' views were accessed, although in the short time available the response from parents was pleasing. In future evaluation work, efforts should be made to persuade a greater number of parents to come forward and give their views.

Concluding remarks

The pilot project has shown many indications of success in the eyes of parents and teachers. As expected, attainment indicators have not shown gains with the exception of a slight indication of improvement in oral skills. It is anticipated that it will be necessary to follow these children until the end of Key Stage 1 and even beyond, in order to fully explore the impact of the new curriculum. Such an evaluation should address all the factors, which have been explored in the first year. In addition, it should examine the effects on children's learning dispositions.

Recommendations

1. A written specification of the framework of the Enriched Curriculum should be produced.
2. A simple one-page document designed to inform parents about the Enriched Curriculum should be designed. If more information is required, several small documents would be preferable to one long one.

1. Introduction

The Early Years Enriched Curriculum Project was conceived as the result of a number of different strands of activity undertaken by a variety of groups of people. These groups, each from their own perspective, had become aware of the difficulties experienced by many children in Northern Ireland in coping with a traditional Year 1 curriculum.

In recent years, members of Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) curriculum planning teams had been taking note of changing attitudes in the wider world. The BBC Dispatches programme 'The Early Years' (1998), which explored the continental model of early years mathematics education, confirmed researches into the better performance of children in Europe and South-east Asia. This programme was followed by a House of Commons Select Committee on Education report which detailed the failing of early years education in the United Kingdom and proposed moving closer to the continental model (Early Years Report, 2000). Locally, the BELB began, in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), to formalise a proposal for joint funding for a pilot project to redesign and test a new Year 1 curriculum. This 'Enriched Curriculum' would draw on elements of the continental and South-east Asian models and on tried and tested elements from other sources.

Meanwhile, the evaluation of the Greater Shankill Early Years Project (Sheehy, Trew, Rafferty, McShane, Quiery & Curran, 2000) had drawn attention to the difficulties faced by the Year 1 children of the area in progressing through the established first-year curriculum. In all of the schools taking part in the project, there was a convergence between the teachers' views and the results of psychometric testing which indicated that the existing Year 1 curriculum was not well matched to the needs of the children. This view was in line with results from a study in Aberdeen (Cowie and Croxford, 1999) which also suggested problems with an overformal Year 1 curriculum, particularly in areas of social disadvantage.

A meeting of principals and project workers was held in December 1999 and it was agreed that principals would go back and examine the problem with all the Key Stage 1 members of staff who could contribute. As a result of these discussions, a consensus emerged that the very formal and traditional Year 1 curriculum which was in place was not meeting the needs of the children in the area. Children were coming to school with poor vocabulary and articulation, poor social skills, low self-esteem and in some cases, additional difficulties. These disadvantages rendered them incapable of benefiting fully from the type of education which was then on offer. In some schools, particularly Glenwood Primary School, some teachers had begun to explore a different approach which they felt was more appropriate for the children. One of these teachers, Heather Green, was approached to take a leading role in the proposed project which was beginning to be conceived. She was seconded to the project from the beginning of March 2000 and began research into the literature and the planning of training for teachers in collaboration with staff from BELB and CCEA.

The School of Psychology in Queen's University Belfast also became involved because of their previous engagement with the Greater Shankill Early Years Project. Research undertaken in the school had indicated that young children with May and June birthdays fared particularly badly under the traditional system (Menet, Eakin, Stuart and Rafferty 2000). This was further evidence that a lack of maturity was one of the factors which prevented children from fulfilling their potential within a traditional curriculum. Similarly, it was suspected that the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage was being heightened through the traditional curriculum in affecting various learning outcomes including language, social abilities and motor proficiency.

The input from these various groups was combined to initiate an innovative approach to design a curriculum which culminated in the inauguration of the pilot project in six schools in September 2000. The schools were all situated in the Greater Shankill area and nine classes were taking the Enriched Curriculum. Three classes from other schools in a similarly disadvantaged area of Belfast were designated to act as a control group.

A team from the School of Psychology in Queen's University Belfast and Stranmillis University College was asked to undertake an evaluation of the project. This report will present all the data available from the pilot year of the project. Sections 1 and 2 provide background information which sets the scene for interpretation of the data. Sections 3 – 8 present the views of teachers. Section 9 deals with the structured classroom observations. Section 10 covers the views of parents obtained through questionnaires and interviews. Finally, Section 11 deals with the progress of the children during the first year.

2. Demographic and contextual data

The Enriched Curriculum group consists of nine classes from six schools:

- 3 classes from Glenwood Primary School
- 2 classes from Edenbrooke Primary School
- One class each from Springfield, Blackmountain, Harmony and Ballysillan Primary Schools.

There are three classes in the control group two from Lowwood Primary School and one from Grove Primary School.

Several of the schools are suffering from falling rolls and this creates constant uncertainty about staffing levels in future years, leading to difficulties in forward planning.

Perhaps only one teacher could be said to be truly a volunteer for becoming involved with the new curriculum. In most cases, teachers were effectively volunteered by the Principal who was the enthusiast for the Project in the first instance. Once teachers were satisfied that they had the support of the inspectorate, they confirmed during interviews that they became keen to participate.

Teachers varied in experience from a year and a half to twenty-eight years teaching practice and they had between one and three years experience at teaching Year 1. All except the youngest teacher had had experience of teaching other classes at Key Stage 1. All teachers had obtained most of their experience at the school at which they now teach.

The composition of the teacher's classes varied considerably. Class sizes ranged from 15 to 27 pupils. One teacher was teaching a joint Year 1/Year 2 class and one teacher was teaching Reception/Year 1/Year 2 all together in the same classroom. All teachers had at least one full-time classroom assistant. In addition, some teachers had extra assistants for children with special needs. One teacher had voluntary help from a parent on three occasions per week to help deal with Gyrus computer sessions.

Four of the schools had been greatly affected by the social unrest on the Shankill Road in the late summer and autumn. There were large movements of families in the area and consequently, many children were changing schools. In other schools, children were generally more unsettled than usual and there were somewhat fewer changes in enrolment.

3. An evolving curriculum

At the conception of the project, in the perception of teachers, the curriculum consisted of a series of ideas, some of which were more fully developed than others, particularly in the sense of putting them into practice. These ideas may be summarised as follows:

- Learning takes place at an appropriate pace for each individual child. Thus the high-ability child is challenged and the low-ability child is protected from the early experience of failure.
- Oracy and emergent literacy activities were a strong focus. In recognition of the fact that good readers have good oral language skills, a love of books and adequate decoding skills for their task, the aim was to give the child a strong foundation in each of these elements. For example, phonological awareness is taught as one precursor to decoding skills. To develop a culture of book awareness and book enjoyment, much time is spent in shared reading. Shared reading is also the first medium through which parents are encouraged to participate in their child's education. Oral language skills are actively promoted throughout nearly all classroom proceedings through teacher modelling, closed and open questioning and encouragement of high-level dialogue.
- Practical and mental mathematics took precedence over recorded arithmetic. The rationale is to encourage deep conceptual development and a sound basic number sense before moving on to handle symbolic arithmetic.
- There was much use of structured play in recognition of the fact that play is the natural and often the best way for young children to learn. Structured play is a teacher-guided endeavour in which the promotion of good language and social skills is particularly well addressed. Language learning may be topic-specific or general.
- Great attention was paid to the child's social and emotional development, in acknowledgment of the role that social maturation plays in both the child's general welfare and in his or her ability to benefit from the education system.
- Big (physical) play and/or outdoor play (which had to take place indoors in some schools) were perceived to have several roles. They were clearly central to motor development. Progress in balance together with gross and fine motor control were encouraged through suitable motor activities and exercises. Big play also provided another medium in which to develop social skills, including following instructions. Finally, physical play allowed the variety in the day necessary for young children, providing a vital opportunity to let off steam prior to returning to quieter and more controlled pursuits.
- Children were encouraged to be independent learners and decision makers with the goal of encouraging them to take appropriate responsibility in all aspects of their lives. For example, children were encouraged to tidy up after each event. In some classes, children used photographs of themselves to self-register each morning.
- Assessment with the Gyrus system was evaluated with a view to providing a firm foundation for appraising the individual needs of children.

The Enriched Curriculum may therefore be described as a developmentally appropriate curriculum which is child-centred, play-based and informal in character. The curriculum was founded drew mainly on practices common in the successful continental and South-east Asian models of early education and on tried and tested elements from other sources e.g. the visual timetable comes from special needs education. A more detailed discussion of the curriculum foundations may be found in the reports of Clare and David Mills (Britain's Early Years Disaster, 1997; Early Years Investigation, 2000). Some of the main points made in these reports are precised as follows:

- Delay of the introduction of formal literacy and numeracy skills is desirable to allow extensive practice of foundation skills essential for the development of children as successful practitioners of reading, writing and mathematics. Preparation for later formal work in reading and writing includes phonological awareness and the teaching of oral expression. Preparation for later formal work in mathematics focuses on the concrete at the expense of the abstract until the child has absolute confidence with the former. It also accords high status to conceptual understanding in various mathematics domains. Children are expected to achieve understanding of quantity (eg. the same as, less than), space (eg. in, on, under), size (eg. longer, shorter) and time (eg. yesterday, tonight).
- There is a focus on the development of attention and memory skills. This is often done through games. For example, a version of Kim's game, modified to make it slightly easier for younger children by giving clues, develops memory. Eye contact games develop attention.
- There is an emphasis on early development of the appropriate group behaviour necessary to take advantage of the later, more formal classroom environment.
- Conscious attention is given to development of the child's confidence through provision of experiences tailored to foster a sense of success and achievement in each individual. The child is actively protected from failure or even a sense of failure.
- Setting the goal of sending children into formal schooling as a more homogeneous group than is usual in the United Kingdom is a fundamental aim. This ensures that whole-class teaching will become a viable option for later formal teaching.

In addition, there was to be a strong influence on the Enriched Curriculum from research into neuro-physiological development in the brain. This research is beginning to suggest windows of opportunity for certain types of learning, such as reading and is providing further confirmation of the developmental delay of boys compared with girls (Blakemore & Frith, 2000). There was further input based on the work of Sally Goddard-Blythe and Peter Blythe (Blythe & McGlown 1979; Goddard-Blythe 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c) and Mats Nicklasson (2000). Their work recognises the effect of poor motor and balance skills on the child's learning by direct and indirect routes. For example, poor motor skills will directly affect a child's ability to hold a pencil. They further propose more indirect routes of influence, for example, that poor balance may affect a child's visual perception and hence be a barrier to learning. Finally, a child who has to concentrate on motor and balance activities will have less attention available for learning. These researchers have developed exercise programmes to systematically improve motor and balance skills. The lack of peer-reviewed evidence for the efficacy of this programme has been extensively

discussed elsewhere (Sproule, Murray, Spratt, Rafferty, Trew, Sheehy, M^cGuinness & Walsh, 2001). Nicklasson also emphasises the importance of contact physical play for a child's normal social and emotional development. These ideas were to be incorporated into the Enriched Curriculum through the medium of big play, musical activities and systems of brain 'exercises' such as Brain Gym.

For those interested in more detail on the research behind the curriculum, it is extensively reviewed in Sproule et al. (2001).

At the outset, at least some of the teachers would probably have been unable to articulate the basis of the curriculum as clearly as it has been done here. Through the training sessions and the opportunities afforded for interaction with other teachers in the Enriched Curriculum group, the early ideas summarised above were being continually extended and refined throughout the lifetime of the pilot project. Each teacher brought her professional expertise to bear whenever it was relevant while the project co-ordinator helped to keep practice within the framework that was being continuously developed. Nevertheless, the fact that by the end of the year the Enriched Curriculum was not specified anywhere in a single document, must be highlighted.

Recommendation

Although the evolution of the Enriched Curriculum throughout the first year has undoubtedly been a valuable exercise, its fluid nature may prove problematic when its application comes to be extended to other areas of Northern Ireland. Experience with specification of new interventions has led to the conclusion that inadequate specification tends to result in increasing loss of information. Indeed, it is only one of the prerequisites for successfully managed change (Fullan & Stiegelbauer 1991 paraphrased in Sproule et al. 2001). We therefore recommend that a framework document, which specifies the core of the Enriched Curriculum, be produced and disseminated to the widest possible audience.

4. Teacher training and ongoing support

Section summary

- Teachers rated the quality of the training as excellent in most respects.
- Sessions on phonological awareness and practical mathematics were particularly valued by members of the group.
- Teacher considered that it would have been helpful if training could have started earlier.
- All teachers had received excellent support from their school principal
- The role of Heather Green, the project co-ordinator, as a source of advice and a means of disseminating information was invaluable
- Teachers of other year groups had limited opportunity to find out about the programme and so were mainly neutral.
- In terms of the value of the cluster group meetings:
 - Teachers stressed the *novelty* of the opportunity to meet their peers and exchange ideas within the cluster group training sessions.
 - The Enriched Curriculum teachers gradually formed a cohesive social support network, which increased their confidence and was a source of fresh thinking.
 - Cluster group meetings allowed staff to give their undivided attention to a single topic over a protracted period. Teachers were enabled to engage in rich discussion of problems and solutions.

Teacher interviews - findings on teacher training

One teacher did not join the Project until late May or early June 2000 and so missed some of the initial training days. These days began in April 2000 and took place approximately once a month. Most teachers felt that the early training was somewhat rushed. They considered that it would have made their work in the early months more effective if training had started earlier. The value of early training appears to be an important lesson for wider application of the project in the future.

Training days were sometimes devoted to discussion and sometimes to a single topic, which was delivered by an appropriate specialist in that domain. The single-topic sessions that have taken place to date are as follows:

- Timetable planning - Heather Green (Project co-ordinator)
- Practical mathematics – Tina Adair (BELB)
- Oral language – Liz Crowe (BELB)
- Phonological awareness – Brenda Brown
- Circle time – Heather Green (Project co-ordinator)
- Shared reading – Joyce Evans
- Art and Design – Jenny Clarke (Nursery school principal in Belfast)

- Gyrus software training and brain development in young children – Patrick Reade (Gyrus Software Ltd.)
- Reflections and further timetable planning – Wilma Wise (DENI)

There were also visits to nursery schools (April 2000) and a session with nursery school principals in which nursery school principals discussed with teachers how they would design a curriculum if they were keeping children in nursery school for another term.

The following sessions are planned for the after the teacher interviews:

- How children think and learn
- Physical skills (balance and gross and fine motor skills)

Teachers were generally enthusiastic about the training sessions. In some domains, the sessions rendered teachers' pre-existing knowledge more explicit and provided supportive confirmation of what had been instinctive good practice. At other times, teachers appeared to gain a completely novel outlook on some activities. Some of them had their own favourite topics; for example one teacher had a particular interest in drama. It was noted that two sessions were singled out by the majority of teachers. These were phonological awareness and practical mathematics.

Teachers were very impressed with the variety of ways of training phonological skills, which were presented during the training session. The distinction between phonics and phonological awareness was drawn very clearly during the session and some teachers felt that they may not have sufficiently understood the difference before.

Many of the teachers had been exceptionally apprehensive about maintaining practical mathematics activities over the year. In terms of finding a sufficient range of meaningful activities for the children which would further mathematics learning, in particular conceptual learning, teachers had experienced great anxiety. This session greatly ameliorated their fears, and in practice, many teachers have not found it problematic to keep children (and themselves) interested in practical mathematics.

Teachers stressed that during the normal course of events, there was very little opportunity to benefit from the experience of other Year 1 teachers. Naturally, in small schools this interaction will always be more difficult, but even in larger schools there were always many extra-classroom issues which tend to take precedence over discussion of teaching skills and ideas in the staff room. Within KS1, staffs hold many formal and informal discussions about the curriculum and the problems of individual children. Nevertheless, because of time constraints teachers agree that these discussions seldom address the minutiae of teacher-pupil interaction, which are at the heart of the teaching process.

During cluster-group meetings (see page 18 for details), there were opportunities to exchange ideas in a relaxed atmosphere within a group, which became more cohesive throughout the months of training. As training progressed, mutual trust developed, thus allowing teachers to air their fears and problems within a supportive atmosphere. Teachers usually met on neutral ground in the ULIDIA Teacher Resource Centre.

In addition to their general value, many sessions provided the added advantage of input from an expert. Teachers felt that the supportive group situation allowed them to get the greatest possible value from the expert input.

The establishment of local networks of teachers, all practising within a given Key Stage, might be one way of perpetuating this useful form of interchange of ideas within groups sharing common goals and problems.

Teacher interview – findings on ongoing support

It was not surprising that principals were supportive since, in most cases, the school's participation had originated with the principal. However, the extent of the co-operation was very pleasing to teachers. Principals co-operated readily in giving time off for training and took a continued interest in the operation of the project. In some cases, principals lightened the load of extra-classroom duties for teachers or rearranged timetables to accommodate them.

Heather Green's role was seen as central and crucial to the success of the project. She made herself regularly available in each classroom and was always ready to supply extra help when required.

Marilyn Warren and Liz Crowe from BELB were also mentioned as being very supportive over an extended period.

Most teachers had given a presentation to other members of staff, usually on a Baker Staff Development Day. Reactions to these had varied but it was the opinion of teachers that the majority of other staff seems too occupied with their own problems to pursue the subject in any depth. When other staff did express opinions, these frequently leaned towards surprise rather than hostility. For example, one Year 4 teacher expressed astonishment that children in their first year were being taught to clap out the syllables of words. The children did not understand the meaning of 'syllable' but they were being taught how to break down words into syllables. The Year 4 teacher found that children in her class still had great difficulty with the concept of syllables.

Year 2 teachers were naturally more interested than most members of staff and were sometimes apprehensive about their role in the succeeding year. Transfer at the end of the year to Year 2 was widely recognised by teachers as an issue, which would need to be addressed well before the start of the new academic year.

In one school, KS2 teachers visited a Year 1 class and were shocked at the low levels of achievement of some of the new entrants to the school. They had not appreciated the extent of the problems faced by Year 1 teachers. Taken together with the changes that the Enriched Curriculum may bring to schools as a whole, this lack of teacher interaction suggests that development of within-school communication would be a worthwhile project in its own right. The advantages of teacher interaction have been further discussed above.

Teacher interview – findings on the value of cluster group meetings

As we have already mentioned, in the normal course of events, teachers have little opportunity for extended interchange of practice ideas with their peers. The cluster groups were a non-threatening and co-operative environment in which to raise concerns and benefit from the advice of others.

In addition to their general value, many sessions provided the added advantage of input from an expert. Teachers felt that the supportive group situation allowed them to get the greatest possible value from the expert input.

The establishment of local networks of teachers, all practising within a given Key Stage, might be one way of perpetuating this useful form of interchange of ideas within groups sharing common goals and problems.

Informal findings

In addition to formal interviews, there have been some opportunities to have informal contacts with a few teachers, headteachers and classroom assistants. All groups are generally positive and increasingly confident about the programme.

After the formal interviews, teachers continued to become increasingly convinced that the project was in accord with their instincts and professional judgement. All began to look forward to a second year of teaching the Enriched Curriculum with the benefit of a year's experience behind them.

A small number of classroom assistants are uncertain or hostile. This could be very damaging to the project, especially if the classroom assistant is more experienced than the teacher. It is suggested that classroom assistants would benefit from their own training scheme.

Two headteachers feel they have observed beneficial effects on the performance of staff teaching the Enriched Curriculum and on the learning dispositions of children. These teachers were observed by staff to be more motivated and less pressurised in a negative sense. This was attributed to teachers responding enthusiastically to a demanding but appropriate programme. Children were observed to be adjusting better to school than previous cohorts and to be more capable of independent learning. Children were observed to remain 'on task' without the need for frequent intervention by the teacher.

5. The role of the new resources

Section summary

- Teachers were emphatic that the project would have been impossible without the additional funding for new resources.
- A wide variety of materials has been purchased. Some important items were:
 - ◊ New books, especially large ones for whole-class use
 - ◊ Large soft equipment for physical play
 - ◊ Other play items with multiple uses, e.g. theatre
 - ◊ Items required for practical mathematics activities
 - ◊ A new computer (supplied with the Gyrus software)

Interview findings

Teachers emphasised during interviews that children were very sensitive to a rich physical environment. “They love all the new things with their bright colours and no bits missing and they take more care (of them).”

Previous reading schemes were not suitable for the Enriched Curriculum. Children ‘absolutely loved’ the colourful new books. As all children in the class have shared reading books, children were considered by teachers to less easily be able to discriminate between their high-ability and low ability peers. This was good for children at both extremes.

Children adored all the large play equipment and soft items were very safe. It was useful because:

- It helped to develop the gross motor skills, which are a necessary precursor for fine control of the hands and eyes.
- It allowed children to let off steam and settled them for more quiet pursuits, which followed in the timetable.

Items such as kitchen equipment and puppet theatres were finding multiple uses within the classroom. For example:

- They provided opportunities for structured play e.g. the puppet theatre became a shop
- It allowed the children to develop their imagination
- It was an opportunity to learn social skills by interaction with classmates

Other smaller materials which teachers had wanted but could not previously afford were very important also. e.g. mathematics games, jigsaws.

Teachers appreciated the value of the computers although some of them showed signs of being ill at ease with such an expensive piece of equipment. Teachers knew about the range of exciting software available for Year 1, which would run on the new computers, and were looking forward to being able to buy some of this in the future.

6. Understanding and delivery of the Enriched Curriculum

Section summary

- Some teachers find it easier to abandon the old, formal curriculum than others
- Teachers have shorter lessons but spend the same amount of time on basic subjects
- Teachers differentiated questioning according to ability in whole-class teaching in order to make lessons appropriate for all groups.
- Teachers agreed on the value of many strands of the new curriculum, but especially on the following aspects:
 - Circle time. One school had found this so successful that they were introducing it throughout the whole school.
 - Structured play
 - Big play ((physical play on large equipment)
 - Shared reading
 - Practical mathematics
 - Teachers disagreed on the value of the implementation of ‘Brain Gym’

In evaluating the programme, it will be necessary to take account of the variations in circumstances between schools and between teachers, particularly the following factors:

- There is strong evidence of some ‘leakage’ of aspects of the Enriched Curriculum to control-group schools.
- Control-group schools did not receive the same substantial extra funding for equipment as Enriched Curriculum schools.
- Control-group teachers did not receive the support from a cohesive peer group in the same manner as the Enriched Curriculum teachers.
- Some teachers have composite classes and some do not.
- Some schools were more affected by the social unrest in the area than others.
- Professional experience ranged from 2 - 28 years.
- Some schools have other projects ongoing in the Enriched Curriculum classrooms.

Interview findings on understanding and delivery

Since the curriculum was evolving throughout the project, teachers were able to bring their own previous experience and their instincts to bear on its implementation. This naturally led to some marked differences in understanding and delivery. On the other hand, teachers agreed that their understanding was making continued progress through the training days and that a consensus was being reached on the main aspects of delivery through ongoing debate within the group.

When asked to articulate the core components of the project, teachers tended to talk in terms of outcomes. They talked in terms of improved concentration, memory, listening skills and conceptual awareness through practical number work. Others talked in terms of the curriculum being less formal and more practical but were less able to talk about the theoretical underpinnings of the project. In the researcher's view it would be helpful to

teachers to have these theoretical bases stated at the outset of training and to be able to refer back to them at the appropriate times during the training process. This is not to say that teachers were unaware of these theoretical underpinnings of the project at some level. Rather it is conjectured that if these paradigms were stated more explicitly, teachers could perhaps maintain them in mind more easily and hence implement the curriculum more effectively. If the project is to be implemented across a wider area, it will become even more important to communicate the central framework of the Enriched Curriculum to prevent dilution and misunderstanding.

The time at which word boxes were introduced in schools (to the most able children) varied between Halloween and mid-February. Halloween was exactly the time at which more able groups were traditionally given word boxes in most schools. During the interviews, this was the most obvious indicator of the difference in the extent to which teachers felt able to let go the formality of previous years. This is corroborated by data in the structured observation report. Some teachers remarked that they knew they were more formal than others and one frequently referred to herself as “too formal. I know I’m too formal.” On the other hand, teachers all agreed that they would be more confident about abandoning formality in subsequent years. This finding is extremely important for the interpretation of academic progress. Evaluators must remain aware that it may take two or three years for teachers to implement the new curriculum fully in all areas and thus, for academic progress to be fully manifested. Staff, especially those who are being asked to change the habits of a lifetime, will need continued support to allow their confidence in the Enriched Curriculum to become fully established.

Teachers varied in the extent to which they had changed their teaching practice. Most teachers said that they now had shorter lessons, typically 10 to 15 minutes. Teachers still would spend about an hour on literacy per day but they now tended to break it up into shorter sessions because they understood the importance of maintaining the child's attention. Most teachers said that they now did more whole-class work but perhaps differentiating the type of questioning they would address to the more able children compared with the less able children in order to ensure that the lesson was challenging for all. There were many fewer work sheets and much more play, music and drama. Teachers stress that their use of time was now very different in several further ways. There was more talking and listening. There were many more practical sessions, there was much more structured play, there were more stories and more teaching from big books.

Teachers were very impressed with the value of circle time. Although some of them had used some sort of circle time prior to the project, the training session on this topic had deepened their understanding of its methods and roles. Teachers agreed that it made strong contributions in the following areas:

- Self-discipline
- Maintenance of attention and concentration
- Learning the social conventions of turn-taking in conversation
- Listening carefully to others and interpretation of meaning in oral speech
- Confidence in speaking in front of others

- Resolution of disputes.

Structured play was seen as an opportunity for independent learning as well as being actively linked to other topics currently being studied in the classroom. It was also found to be worthwhile in promoting the learning of social skills, such as sharing and taking turns.

Besides giving children an opportunity to let off steam and hence making a contribution to improved attention and concentration in quieter lessons, teachers agreed that physical play:

- Developed gross motor skills and balance
- Developed careful attention to oral instructions
- Facilitated the learning of sharing and taking turns
- Gave opportunities for use of the child's imagination in creative play

Teachers were pleasantly surprised at the extent to which shared reading gave children a love of books. One teacher said, 'They think of themselves as readers.' Several teachers described how it took learning into the home and laid the foundations for family literacy. Teachers believed that many parents, some of whom had possibly never before sat down with their children and had a quiet time with them, were participating enthusiastically in shared reading on a regular basis.

Teachers found the use of the visual timetable very helpful. They stated that it gave the children a sense of time long before they were being asked to actually tell the time. They added that if a child did not like a particular activity, the child was able to see that it would be followed by some more preferable activity and this allowed the child to accept the less desired part of the timetable. One teacher, who had a particularly difficult child with ADHD, stated that she had used the visual timetable up until Christmas. She had then removed it but she was going to put it back again because this boy tortured her with requests to do PE every day, whereas when he had been able to look at the visual timetable, he had been able to see for himself whether or not PE featured on the programme for that particular day.

Teachers used more music and rhythm. One teacher remarked that music was now more often used in the background. There was a lot of opportunity for children to listen to and create rhythms through the use of their own body and through simple instruments. There was a lot more use of drama than before. One teacher who had a particular interest in drama was thrilled to have its use validated, as she perceived it, by the new curriculum. It was pointed out often that it was very valuable for children to have to listen to instructions so frequently in the context of all these activities.

Some teachers used 'Brain Gym' very regularly and others hardly at all. At the time of the interviews, the researcher had not been employed long enough to understand what was meant by 'Brain Gym' and no teacher was able to describe it with sufficient clarity to alter this situation. All of the teachers were able to give examples of exercises in the system but seemed unable to explain their exact purpose. One teacher got as far as mentioning something to do with improving the connection between the left and right

side of the brains. Despite this, some of the teachers were insistent that the exercises had produced noticeable improvements in performance. They seemed to feel that this improvement was valuable, but it was not clear whether they felt this was important purely in terms of improving motor skills or whether they felt it had wider benefits. The lack of peer-reviewed evidence for the efficacy of Brain Gym has been discussed elsewhere (Sproule et al, 2001). The evaluators cannot endorse its use, but there is apparently little harm in it as long as exercises are safe. One teacher expressed fears about an exercise in which she feared she could hurt a child's neck. Manipulation of another person's neck, no matter how gently, is certainly a job for a professional. Teachers should not be asked to undertake procedures for which they have insufficient training.

All teachers expressed the opinion that the new curriculum was very good for building self-confidence and self-esteem in the children, they felt that communication within the classroom was much better than it had been in previous comparable years.

Despite the obvious enthusiasm of teachers, many of them expressed worries in terms of an expected failure to show improvements in psychometric measures. For example, many children were clearly not going to be recognising as many words as they had done in previous years. Teachers also doubted that assessment at the end of the year would not reflect the greatly improved conceptual understanding in mathematics, which they strongly agreed that the children were displaying. Indeed, there were signs that some teachers had not previously appreciated fully the difference between procedural learning in mathematics and true conceptual understanding until the Enriched Curriculum allowed children in the Enriched Curriculum group to demonstrate the latter.

One teacher felt that able children had wider access to vocabulary than they would have done under a traditional reading scheme. That is, the traditional reading scheme would, by its nature, have restricted them unnecessarily. Although additional reading material would always have been provided, children could have abstracted the message that this material did not have equal weight in terms of reading achievement. Under the Enriched Curriculum, all books are equally important and enjoyable.

The evaluation team hopes that the varied testing instruments will allow the children to display the better understanding that teachers feel they have achieved, even though they may not have the same level of skill at reading individual words and will certainly be unlikely to understand recorded arithmetic. However, it is anticipated that the full value of the Enriched Curriculum may not become apparent until children are tested at the end of the second or even the third year. Teachers are strongly of this opinion also.

Interview findings on the effect of school context

The issues of funding and support related to a fair comparison with control-group schools may be ameliorated by the availability of data from the Greater Shankill Early Years Project and Walsh's study.

One of the most important variables was the difference between split classes and straight Year 1 classes. The former had some advantages and some disadvantages. Weak Year 2 children were able to benefit from some of the less formal activities but clearly, there was a danger that the amount of time spent in formal work with Year 2 children might be restricted. One of the teachers felt that her class corresponded quite closely to this situation and that the Enriched Curriculum had helped her to manage the class to the advantage of both groups. On the other hand, another teacher was coping with virtually the opposite situation. She had a very able Year 2 group and a young, immature Year 1 group giving a very pronounced gap between their needs. The result was a constant tension between adequately providing for needs of each.

There was very severe disruption of classes in some schools before Christmas and less in others. As a result, some of the Enriched Curriculum classes were very well settled at the end of October and others were not.

The effect of professional experience has not yet been fully analysed. It is possible that older teachers may find it more difficult to abandon a format, which they have used for many years, and some have admitted to this. On the other hand, a younger member of staff is more vulnerable to external disapproval of the scheme. At least one teacher was under pressure from a classroom assistant who did not like the programme. This last point highlights the need for training of classroom assistants in any future programme in order to obtain their full co-operation.

One teacher had three different projects happening in her classroom. In addition to the Enriched Curriculum, there was a project for bright children, which was running through from the attached nursery class until the end of KS1. For the Year 2 children in the classroom, there was also a mathematics project in progress. As a result of this, there were five adults present in the classroom on one afternoon per week, three teachers and two assistants each with their own immediate goals. The danger of project fatigue should be apparent.

7. Teachers' views of parental reaction

Section summary

- As would have been expected, some parents expressed doubts to teachers initially. By the spring term, many were making opportunities to tell teachers that they were very satisfied with the progress and enthusiasm of their child.
- Teachers think that parents feel more a part of the education process as a result of the project and they also seem to sense that they are welcome in school.
- The majority of parents were co-operating on shared reading. Some had made teachers aware that they were learning themselves through helping their children

Interview findings

All schools had explained the new curriculum at meetings for the new intake the previous summer. Some of these meetings were addressed by Heather Green (project co-ordinator) and Liz Crowe (from BELB). Many had also taken other opportunities to inform parents informally. Despite this, some parents had doubts. However over time they, like the teachers, had become progressively more enthusiastic.

Parents had described to teachers how relaxed and happy the children are at school. They discuss with teachers how eager the children are to do their shared reading and to talk about school experiences. Those parents who have older children have compared the experience of the younger child favourably with that of the older sibling who had experienced the traditional curriculum.

Parents, even some with their own learning difficulties, seem to be becoming more confident that they can make a contribution to their child's education. Many of the parents have reading difficulties themselves, but in the context of the shared reading books where they can talk about the pictures, this does not matter so much as it does in a reading scheme. Several parents have expressed great pleasure in this activity to teachers.

Parents have commented to teachers on the new resources and have compared the equipment favourably with that of neighbouring schools. Parents are therefore very aware of the provision for their children and appreciate the added investment in their child's future occasioned by the project.

Most teachers said that parents could make an appointment to see them at any time. One teacher said that she kept more or less open house for parents and apparently, no parent had abused this privilege by turning up at awkward times or persistently entering the classroom. Teachers had been afraid that parents would be constantly asking 'Where were the word boxes?' This had been a strong feature of parent-teacher interaction in previous years in any case, when high-ability groups had been given words first. To their surprise, parents showed greater acceptance of the difference between ability groups (which still persists within the project to some extent) under the new system. It was surmised by teachers that parents associated the absence of word boxes with children

doing nothing to prepare for reading whereas the shared reading books demonstrated that reading activity was taking place. A few parents had still enquired about word boxes but were easier to satisfy than formerly when it was explained that their child was not ready and that he or she needed more time on preparatory activities.

One teacher described the importance of regularly changing displays of children's work in the corridors and classroom. From their comments, he was convinced that parents appreciated this and that it helped to stress the teacher's interest in each child's work.

8. Teachers' opinions of the Gyrus software

Section summary

- Several technical and practical problems were experienced with the use of the Gyrus software.
- As a result of floor effects in the performance of children at the beginning of Year 1, teachers felt the data supplied by the software would be more valuable in Year 2.
- Teachers felt that Year 2 data from the software would be a useful source of evidence to support teacher opinion which would have the advantage of being perceived to be unbiased by parents.
- To get the most reliable data from the Gyrus software, teachers felt it was necessary to have an adult working with the child during testing.

Interview findings

The technical difficulties, which teachers experienced, interacted with the practical difficulties with some of the tasks and the lack of teacher expertise with computers to render this aspect of the project not fully successful during the current year. During interviews, teachers showed evidence of residual computer phobia. Whilst teachers are reasonably confident with software that is less complex to use than Gyrus, the combination of this complexity with the knowledge that the computer is a very expensive piece of new equipment puts teachers under considerable pressure. No teacher seems to have completed administration of all the tasks.

Technical difficulties with Gyrus software included:

- The need to replace items of hardware (e.g. the dongle).
- Crashes with software, following which teachers were sometimes unable to reboot.
- Lack of sufficient teacher training in running the programme. Teachers found it difficult to switch between administrative mode and testing.
- No local help was available in Northern Ireland. This would not have been a major difficulty except that some teachers do not have a telephone anywhere near their classroom. This necessitates running backwards and forwards to the school office whilst making a long-distance call in peak time. Teachers understandably found this stressful.

Difficulties with the computer tasks included:

- During tracking tasks, an even pressure of the finger on the screen was required. The researcher has personally investigated this problem. Even for an adult, it is quite difficult to maintain a sufficiently even pressure, especially on a screen that has been smeared with sticky fingers. More recently, the researcher has consulted with the designers of the software and has ascertained that this problem is being addressed.

- Some tasks take too long for children of this age and/or stage of development. As a result, the tasks are timing out and children come to recognise their lack of success and hence become reluctant to continue.
- Children liked the headphones used in some tasks. However, when these tasks timed out, teachers could not hear where or when the child had gone wrong. This made it difficult to discover whether the problem was the result of difficulty with the task or misunderstanding of the instructions. This problem could be cheaply and easily solved by use of an adapter, which would allow simultaneous use of two sets of headphones.
- For all but the most able children in the Enriched Curriculum group, the tasks were too difficult. Quite a number of Year 2 children found them too difficult also. Teachers thought that the best time to administer the tests to most of the children would be towards the end of Year 2.

If the problems outlined above could be sorted out, many teachers envisaged the tests being a useful source of evidence in Year 2 classes. For example, parents who disagreed with the teacher's opinion of their child's ability could be shown independent evidence which would be perceived by them as 'scientific' and therefore, beyond dispute.

The single teacher who had some success with the Gyrus software had a volunteer parent with computer expertise coming into class on three occasions per week. Many teachers remarked that an adult working alongside the child was required to operate Gyrus successfully. This may imply that even if the difficulty of many tasks were reduced and the other problems were overcome, it would be too demanding on teacher or classroom assistant time to administer the tests early in Year 1 when most children are not sufficiently settled to work on their own.

Heather Green, the project co-ordinator has since suggested that many teachers, whilst trying to comply with the goal of testing children within a short time, administered the tests in chunks that were too large. Children were unable to maintain attention over such a long period. Mrs. Green feels that further training for staff, in the light of this year's experience, will overcome many of the difficulties. The researcher feels that teachers would need a great deal of reassurance that the computer is a robust piece of equipment in terms of non-physical interaction in addition to further training with the software. The availability of on-line help would be ideal but network facilities are possibly too expensive.

9. Structured classroom observation: Walsh's Quality of Learning Instrument

Section summary

- In all cases, Enriched Curriculum classes score more highly on all nine of the scales on Walsh's Quality Learning Instrument compared with control-group classes.
- The difference is particularly favourable for Enriched Curriculum classes on the social interaction and independent learning scales and is well marked on the concentration and well-being scales.
- The lowest difference between groups was shown on the higher-order thinking skills scale.
- There are some differences within classes in the Enriched Curriculum group and this is a strong factor in the group comparison results for higher-order thinking skills.

Procedure

For this aspect of the evaluation, each of the Enriched Curriculum and control group classes was observed for one school day and these data were used to assess the class as a learning environment using Walsh's Quality of Learning Instrument (QLI). The QLI is based on an experiential model of learning. It takes in to consideration the whole learning triangle; the children's actions, the teaching strategies and the environment. The QLI had been used in an earlier study by Walsh (2000), which obtained data from 38 Year 1 classes in schools throughout Northern Ireland. The QLI was calibrated during this study by a team of early-years experts. These data from the earlier project is referred to below as 'Walsh's 2000 data'.

The observations on the Enriched Curriculum group were carried out by fourth-year students from Stranmillis University College who had been trained on the use of the QLI. A high level of inter-rater reliability was shown.

The instrument has nine scales or aspects of quality and the class is graded on these according to a three-point scale:

- Motivation
- Concentration
- Confidence
- Well-being, e.g. as reflected by children's pleasure in activities
- Respect for the child, for children towards each other and adults and for children towards materials in the classroom
- Social interaction
- Independence, e.g. as demonstrated by initiative, adult encouragement and independent learning
- Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS)
- Multiple skill acquisition (linguistic, mathematical, scientific, problem-solving, physical and creative activities)

Results

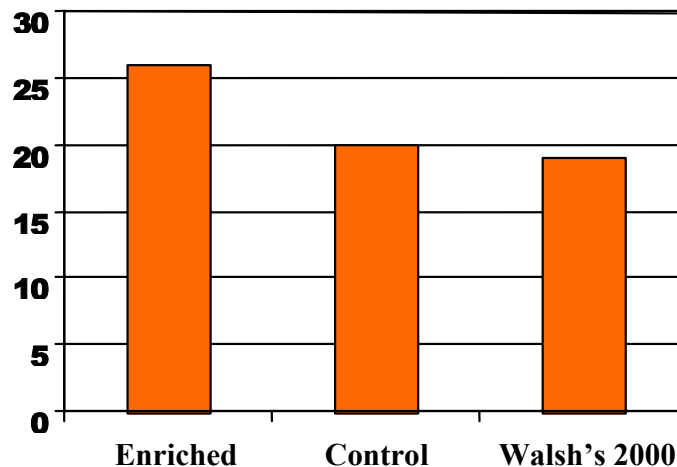
The scores from the nine scales are summarised in Table 9.1 for all three groups. On all scales, the best scores were obtained by the Enriched Curriculum classes on average although there was within-group variation (details will be supplied in the final report). On all scales, enriched classes scores were ≥ 2.3 , which indicates high levels of quality in the learning environment. In most cases, the control-group schools had scores intermediate between those of the other groups.

*Table 9.1
Comparative average scores on Walsh's QLI scales for schools in each group*

Aspect of quality	Enriched classes	Control classes	Walsh's 2000 classes
Motivation	2.4	2.0	1.8
Concentration	2.6	2.0	2.0
Confidence	2.7	2.3	2.0
Well-being	2.6	2.0	2.0
Respect	2.6	2.3	2.0
Social interaction	2.7	1.6	1.8
Independence	2.3	1.6	1.4
HOTs	2.3	2.0	1.9
Multiple skill acquisition	2.8	2.6	2.0

By combining the scores on all scales, an overall 'index of learning quality' may be defined for each group. A comparison of the groups on this index is found in Figure 9.1.

*Figure 9.1
Comparative index of quality scores for schools in each group*



As measured by the Mann-Whitney U test, there was a very highly significant difference in the index of learning quality scores shown in Figure 9. 2, between the Enriched Curriculum classes and other classes { $U=39$, $p < .001$ }.

Within the Enriched Curriculum group, teachers appeared to have more time available to interact frequently with the children and support their learning. Within this group, as fewer demands were placed on the teachers to listen to reading and to engage in highly structured tasks, the teacher was more often at liberty to keep the children's interests to the fore. As a result, the degree of choice offered to the children was greater and the activities on offer were more practical in nature. This had a strong influence on the children's level of motivation as displayed in the following cameo of an Enriched Curriculum class:

Two boys were playing with a phonics mat, initially throwing a bean bag onto a letter and then finding a picture around the mat which begins with that sound. They laughed, clapped their hands and cheered each other on. They remained at the activity until all the letters were covered. They even asked the classroom assistant questions about some of the pictures and invited her to join in for another game.

In all but two of the Enriched Curriculum classes, confidence levels appeared to be high. Few children were observed in situations where they could feel a sense of failure, as a consequence of the emphasis on process rather than product. Although teachers in both types of classes were observed being warm and supportive, those in the Enriched Curriculum classes seemed to be under less pressure to ensure children got the correct answer. Hence, they seemed to have more time for the children's emotional and social needs and were less likely to respond in a judgmental fashion. In the comparison classes, more emphasis appeared to be placed on academic achievement with the result that there was pressure to complete work within a certain time. This tended to reduce the children's overall level of confidence as evidenced in the following statements:

Can I start now teacher?

Will I colour it yellow?

Teacher, I can't!

In approximately two-thirds of the Enriched Curriculum classes, the level of social interaction was said to be high. The more practical/play-based activities seemed to allow the children to engage in group and pair work to a greater extent. Although the actual size of the Enriched Curriculum classrooms was no greater than those of the comparison classrooms, the environment in Enriched Curriculum classrooms tended to be designed to encourage interaction among the children. In contrast, in the emphasis in comparison classes was placed more on individual and written tasks, with the degree of social

interaction consequently appearing more limited. In fact, on several occasions the children were observed being actively encouraged to concentrate on working on their own, as evidenced by the following statement:

*"Come on children, I want to hear less talking.
Please get on with your own work."*

An interesting observation was that, perhaps due to the lack of pressure being placed on children, there appeared to be less misbehaviour in the Enriched Curriculum classes. Here, the children were observed to remain better on task and to tell fewer tales of one another.

In all of the Enriched Curriculum classes, the level of independence of learning and action was said to be at least satisfactory. Children were openly being encouraged to use their own initiative, make their own decisions and exercise an appropriate degree of choice. In both Enriched Curriculum classes and comparison classes, the environment supported the children's independence, as the shelves were within children's reach and material was appropriately organised. The difference in the level of independence observed lay in the fact that the children in the Enriched Curriculum classes were more free to use the material as they wished, whereas in the comparison classes, the highly structured programme restricted the children's freedom and choice as displayed in the following teacher comments:

*"You must colour the trees green, the sky blue and
the flowers red and pink."*

*"When you have finished your worksheet you can then
get another sheet from the busy box."*

With regard to the higher-order thinking skills, the difference between the Enriched Curriculum classes and comparison classes appeared less pronounced. The majority of the Enriched Curriculum classes were at least satisfactory with some degree of problem-solving and logical reasoning encouraged. However, in some Enriched Curriculum classes, the activities could be described as low-level as the children were left at times to engage in free play with very little demands being placed on them.

In some of the comparison classes the children appeared to be appropriately challenged as evidenced by the questions posed, the tasks available and the degree of reflection being encouraged. On the other hand, the observations also revealed that to allow the teacher time to interact with a particular child or group of children, the remainder were asked to engage in trivial, undemanding colouring-in activities for a considerable part of the day.

Interpretation

It would be incorrect to overinterpret the findings at this stage. Results for the QLI must be integrated with the findings in other aspects of the evaluation. However, the initial indications are that the Enriched Curriculum classes show higher scores on each of the scales and markedly higher scales overall.

The intermediate scores of the control-group classes may reflect the leakage of aspects of the Enriched Curriculum to these schools.

There are some indications that higher-order thinking skills are not being addressed as successfully by the Enriched Curriculum as they might be in an ideal classroom. In the next stage of the project, this will be an important focus for planning.

10. The views of parents

Section summary

Twenty-seven percent of parents responded to the parental questionnaire, distributed in June 2001. A few of these parents were later interviewed individually or took part in focus groups. Teachers had originally been sceptical that parents would wish to co-operate. In the event, we were pleased with the response in view of the short time available before the end of term and the social unrest in the area. However, we cannot be said to have accessed a representative sample. Since parents were accessed through the schools, it is possible that some parents who were not well disposed towards the programme would have hesitated to come forward.

Of those parents who did take part, the majority were very positive about the programme. Typically, a parent was initially somewhat concerned but as the programme progressed, parents were increasingly convinced of its value. This opinion was based on intuitive parental knowledge of the conditions in which a young child will make good progress in school. Parents retained nuances of concern about opportunities for able children to make sufficient progress. These data correlate strongly with teachers' perceptions of the attitudes of parents.

Report on the findings from the parental questionnaire

Main findings

- Over one-quarter of parents responded to the questionnaire.
- Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the Enriched Curriculum.
- Many parents believe the Enriched Curriculum is emotionally and/or developmentally appropriate for their child.
- It is clearly important to parents (probably mostly mothers) that children enjoy their first year at school. Many parents revealed their anxieties for their children's happiness in the first year of school.
- The majority of parents reported increased time spent talking to or reading to the child or both. The majority of these attributed this to the Enriched Curriculum.
- Many parents show appreciation of the need for motivation of children.
- Many parents reported that play with the child was more enjoyable or more creative or more productive of learning.
- Of those parents who responded, almost none are clearly unhappy with the entire programme. A slightly larger number revealed nuances of uncertainty about its value in some domains.

Format of the questionnaire

It was necessary to keep the questionnaire short and simple in order to encourage a response from as many parents as possible. Inevitably, the questionnaire does not therefore cover all the issues the research team would like to have addressed. Further,

there was some sacrifice of demographic data, such as the relationship of the responding adult to the child, which might have been useful.

The format attempted to strike a balance between closed questions and open questions. The former could be answered via tick boxes which suited parents who did not wish to devote a great deal of time to the exercise. The open questions allowed parents to give reasons for their answers. Finally, parents were invited to give us any other information which they considered might be useful to us. The full questionnaire is given in Appendix A.

Administration of the questionnaire

Headteachers and teachers agreed that children could take the questionnaire home in their schoolbag. An envelope was supplied to parents so that their responses could be sealed. This may not have been sufficient assurance for some distrustful parents but time was short because of the late start to the evaluation contract.

Results

Forty-two parents (27% of the intervention group) returned the questionnaire, an excellent response in such a short time. A breakdown of this figure by school would not yield any useful data as schools were differentially affected by the social unrest in the area at this time.

Some parents only responded by using the tick boxes but a larger number responded more fully. Many wrote extensive comments. Some of these showed an impressive degree of understanding of the ethos of the curriculum.

The overwhelming tone of the responses was favourable towards the Enriched Curriculum but there were a small number of dissenting voices. It must also be recognised that some parents would not have felt confident about expressing adverse comments in this fashion. In order to assure parents complete confidentiality in future, parents will be supplied with a stamped, addressed envelope to return the questionnaire directly to the evaluation team.

Note: Pseudonyms are used to make quotations easier to read. Spelling, grammar and punctuation in parents' responses have not been corrected.

Question 1

Why do you think the school decided to change the way children are taught in their first year?

Results are displayed in Figure 10.1. Most parents believed the change was because schools believed it would be better for the children. Quite a large minority were uncertain.

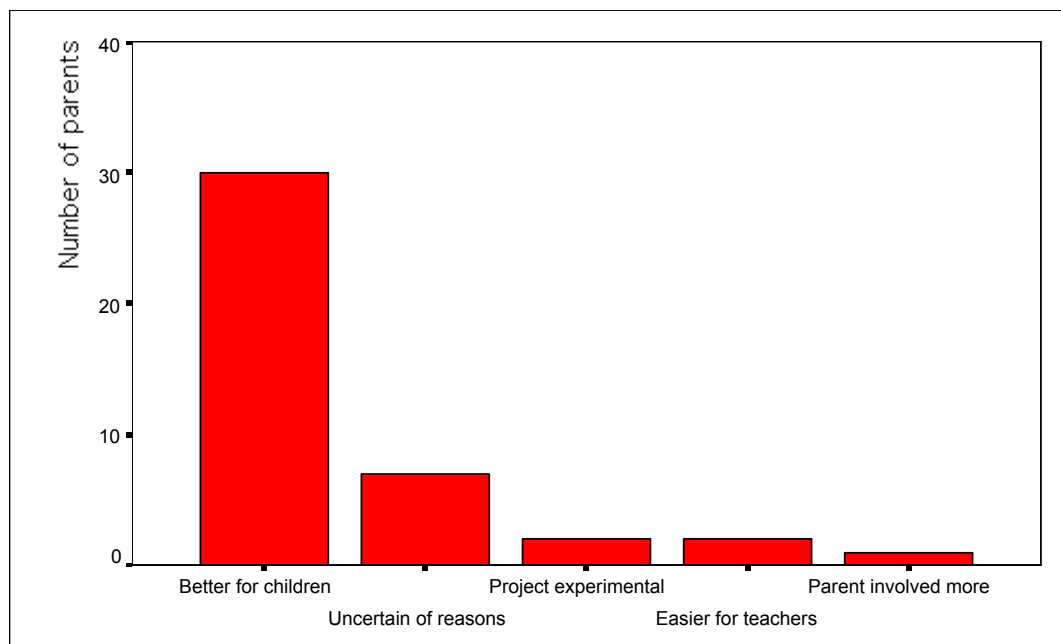


Figure 10.1
Perceived reasons for school adopting Enriched Curriculum

Question 2

a. Do you think this programme will help your child to succeed in his or her education?

Responses to this question are summarised in Figure 10.2a. All but one of the parents agreed that the programme was conducive to the educational success of the children. The parent who replied 'Don't know' was very negative in other parts of the questionnaire as the following extract illustrates:

I don't agree with them saying we will wait until the child will ask if they can write etc. All the class should be sat down together and be given work to do. It's only obvious children would rather play than work. To be honest, I think this programme is [expletive deleted]. They didn't really get much homework at the start – books with NO words, then some with

words, 2 a week – from May they have homework every night which is all being packed in at the end of the school year.

One would have imagined that this parent would reply to this question with a resounding ‘No!’ The fact that s/he didn’t suggests ambivalence about the programme. There are also strong indications from the expressed anger that his/her concerns were either not voiced or not sufficiently addressed. Although no other parent expressed such strong feelings, we shall see that there are some indications of similar concerns.

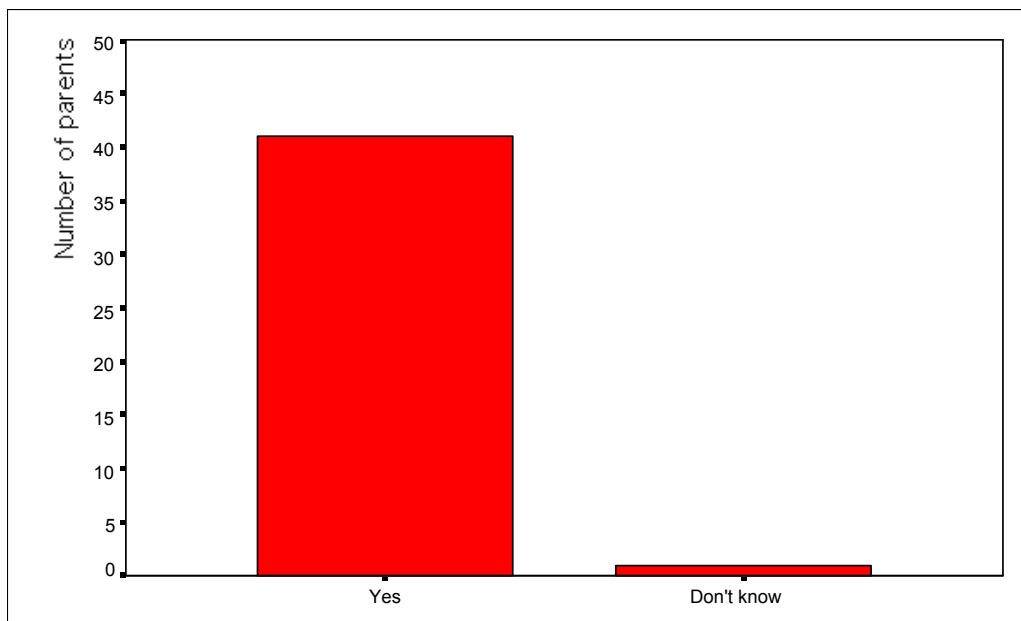


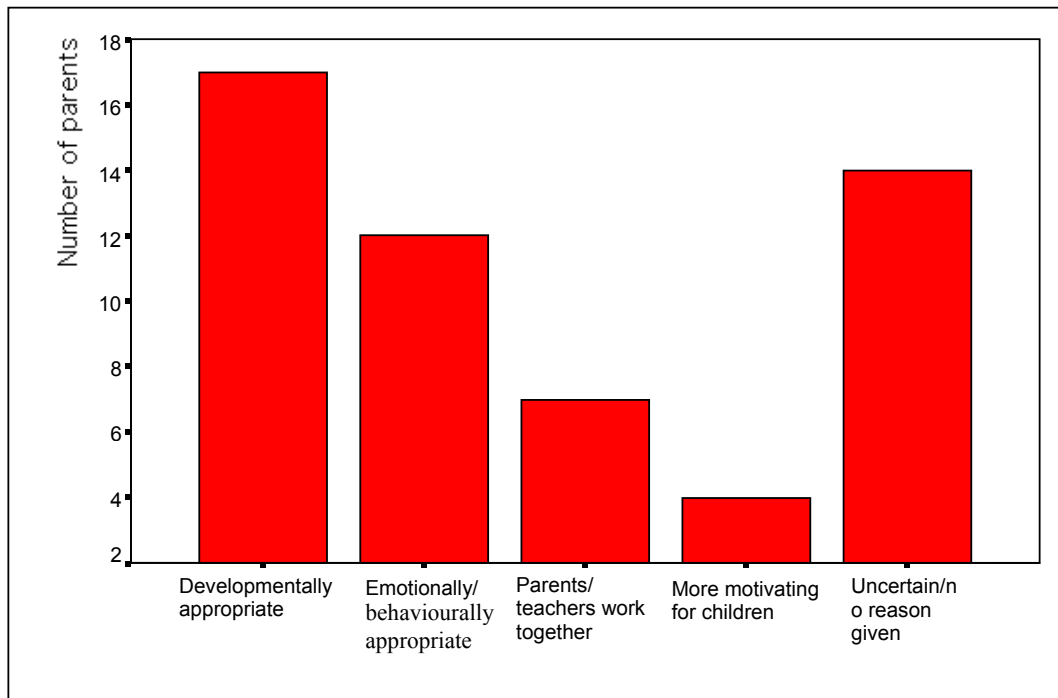
Figure 10.2a

Do you think the programme will help your child to succeed in his or her education?

b. Can you give any reasons for your answer?

Some of these categories of response to this question necessarily entail some interpretation by the researcher. ‘Emotionally/behaviourally appropriate’ was designed to reflect a concern for emotional and/or behavioural readiness for school in the child, as indicated by comments such as ‘First year children are still very young and not ready to be overpowered with work’. ‘Developmentally appropriate’ was designed to indicate parents’ perception that work must be matched to ability and/or attainment level of each child. It was expressed by comments such as ‘Children can go at their own pace’ or ‘Children are all individuals in their work’. ‘More motivating for children’ referred to children working harder because of increased enjoyment and/or interest in their work.

Responses are summarised in Figure 10. 2b.



Note: Some parents gave more than one reason for the success of the programme.

Figure 10. 2b
Perceived reasons success of Enriched Curriculum

The responses to this question are particularly pleasing for all those concerned with parental attitudes to the Enriched Curriculum. There is clear evidence that the majority of respondents understood the most important reasons for the introduction of the programme. For example, the following extracts indicate that parents can be well aware of the significance of a child-centred approach:

My son has a speech problem and was very shy and I know without this project he probably would not of coped very well and enjoyed school very much.

The same parent, in giving reasons for preferring the new method added:

All children are different. My daughter of thirteen was taught the old methods. I remember when she was in P1 it was all work, hardly any play. I thought the old method pushed the children to hard especially when the children cannot keep up.

Under the space for free comments, she concludes:

At the beginning of the year I was worried sick about Edward how he would cope and like school. Edward is a different boy he talks a lot more to people and some of the conversations [are]

about school and the people in school. Edward has really enjoyed P1 with Miss Smith. He cannot wait to go to school each morning. Also I thought the reading books were great. Edward really enjoyed them.

Some parents referred to effect of improved motivation directly as a reason for the expected success of the Enriched Curriculum. Although many others might be interpreted as implying that improved motivation follows from a developmentally or emotionally appropriate curriculum, these were not included in this category in Figure 10. 3, as they would have swamped those making a more direct reference to motivation. An example of a more direct reference to motivation would be:

If a child is more interested in school, he or she is going to learn more.

One parent who agreed that the Enriched Curriculum would help the child to succeed, did not see any difference in levels of attainment:

I do not see any reason why they should not succeed. They seem to be achieving on the same levels as the old method at present.

In addition to the above reasons for the perceived success of the Enriched Curriculum, a number of parents gave responses which indicated their pleasure in feeling able to participate in their child's education and to work with teachers to overcome problems. They clearly feel this is conducive to success. For example, Anne's mother writes:

[The Enriched Curriculum] encourages parents to discover areas of weakness which can then be targeted in the home. I feel that if I do discover an area of weakness, then I could raise the issue with the teacher and a joint approach could be decided upon.

And Robert's parent reports:

With teachers and parents working together, hopefully he will succeed in his education. We spend time reading together and making sentences. It also keeps me in touch and includes me in his schoolwork.

A third parent says:

I feel I have been more involved and my son talks about what he does in class more than my daughter did when she was in P1.

Under the responses to Question 5, we shall see that one parent rather resented being asked for participation in the education of their child.

Question 3

How did your child feel about school this year?

It is clear from the responses in Figure 10. 3 that the vast majority of parents felt their children were happy in their first year at school.

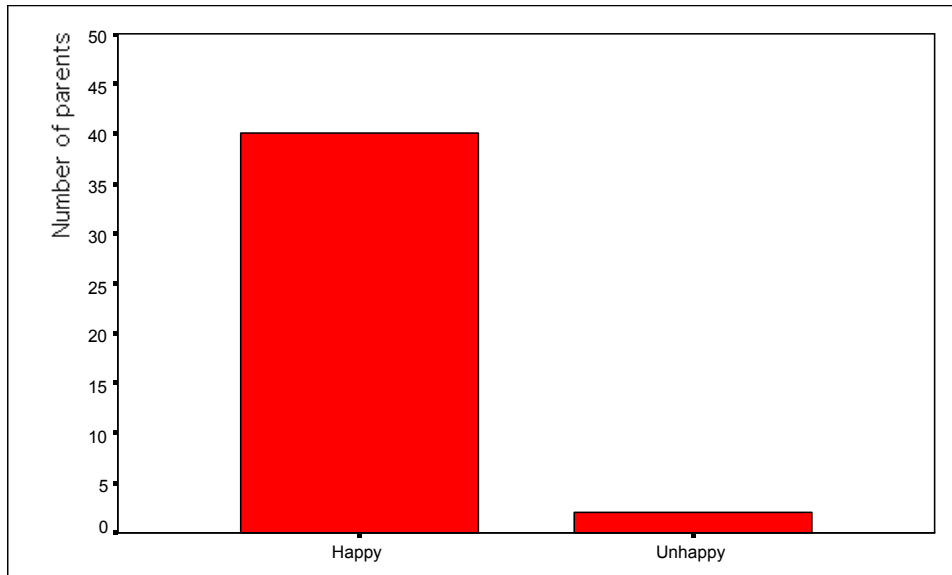
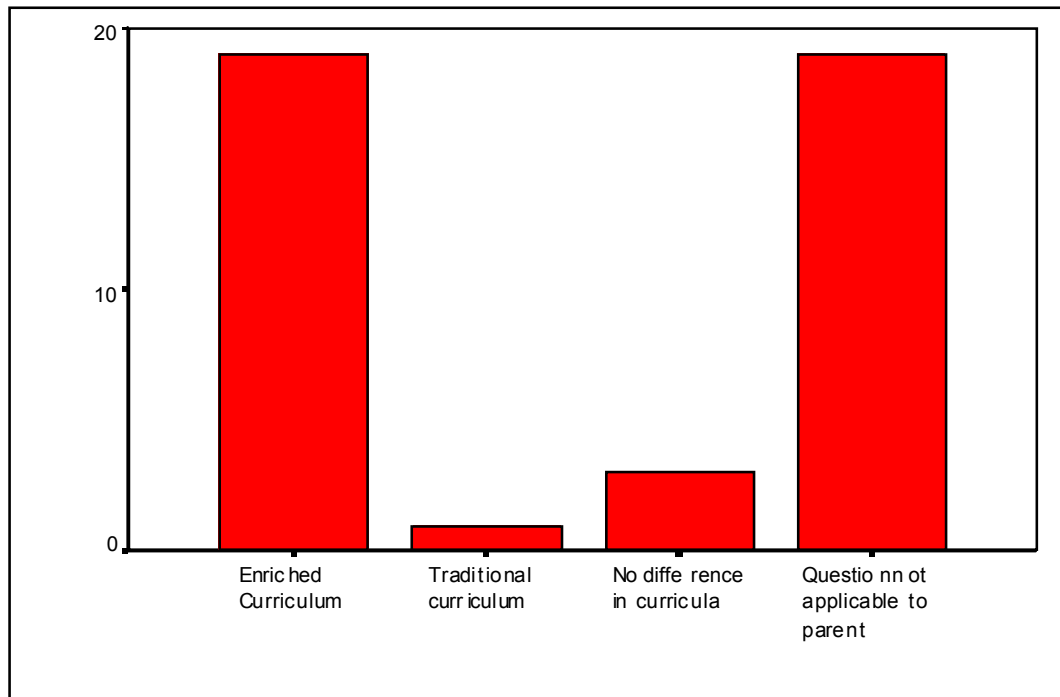


Figure 10. 3
How did your child feel about school this year?

Question 4

If you have an older child, do you prefer the old methods in P1 or the new way of teaching this year?

The results are summarised in Figure 4a. For the great majority of parents to whom this question was applicable, the Enriched Curriculum was preferred.



*Figure 10. 4a
Curriculum preferences*

b. Can you give any reasons for your answer?

Again, some categories require interpretation. Preference for the Enriched Curriculum because it gave children ‘a better start’ was indicated by expressions of parents’ beliefs that their Year 1 child was performing to a higher standard than would be expected from previous experience with older siblings.

A belief that more was expected from children under the old system and that this produced better results was recorded as ‘Old – children pushed harder’, even when this belief was reflected in the answer to one of the other questions.

Those in the ‘less pressure’ category specifically mentioned it specifically:

There is not as much pressure to learn lots of new words at once. My {older} daughter found this quite difficult when she started school but my son has no problem... Some children are ready to read or write at this age and others aren't. Children can learn when they are ready.

My older child had no problems with the old method but I feel this method puts less pressure on my younger child who is not so keen on school.

Enjoyment was often specifically mentioned:

I think it will benefit because for instance Gary loses concentration when faced with long periods of work. This way with playing games it doesn't seem like work or learning {to Gary}. It is more enjoyment rather than a chore.

A few responses were more difficult to categorise. This one was included under 'more motivating':

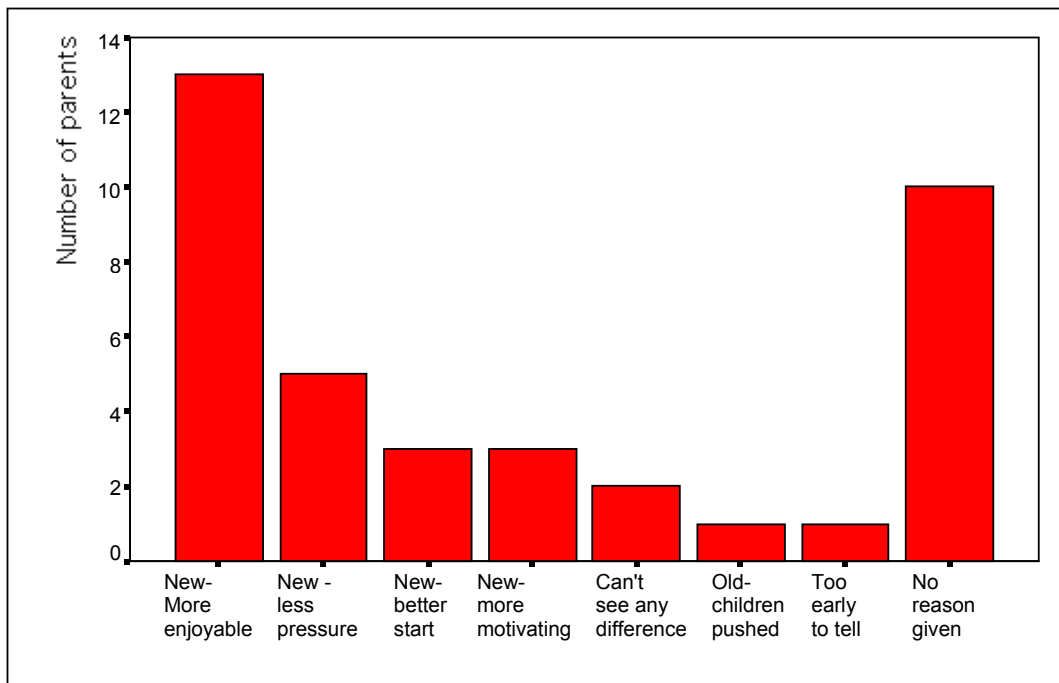
Young children learn best through play and non-threatening things.

The results are summarised in Figure 10. 4b below. The first four columns represent reasons why parents with experience of a traditional curriculum and the Enriched Curriculum preferred the latter. It is notable that the child's enjoyment of the first year of school was clearly important to more than half of the parents who gave a reason for their preference. Parents may feel that when the child does not enjoy the first year, it is difficult to recover the situation later. About one-fifth of those who answered cited the lower levels of pressure as a reason for preference but there were indications elsewhere in the questionnaire that this was important to other parents also. When a parent did not state so explicitly, it was not recorded here. Motivation was again mentioned by a small number of parents. Those who had mentioned it as a reason for the success of the programme earlier may not have felt it necessary to mention it again. Finally, a small number of parents thought that the better start for the children's education was a reason for preference. (In one sense, all the other categories also indicate that parents think the children have a better start but it is more useful to break them down.)

Two parents could not see any difference in the two methods. They based these responses on the fact that older siblings were perceived to have done well under the traditional curriculum.

The parent who felt that the children were pushed harder under the traditional curriculum was the only parent to be very negative in responding to the questionnaire. Unfortunately, we cannot assume that there are no other parents amongst the non-respondents who feel the same way. Such parents may feel powerless and may disbelieve assurances that we welcome their views.

One parent perceptively remarked that it was too early to judge the efficacy of the Enriched Curriculum, perhaps guessing that this is the role of the evaluation team. However, one would like to be assured that such a parent knew that the change in curriculum was strongly evidence-based. For this reason, the evaluation team suggest that provision of a very short fact sheet might be helpful to parents.



Note: Some parents gave more than one reason for preferring the Enriched Curriculum.

Figure 10. 4b
Reasons for preferring either the new (Enriched) curriculum
or the old (traditional) curriculum

Question 5

a. Has the new programme made any difference to the way you work or play with your child?

Results are represented in Figure 5a. The majority of respondents said that the Enriched Curriculum had made a difference to the way they interacted with their child.

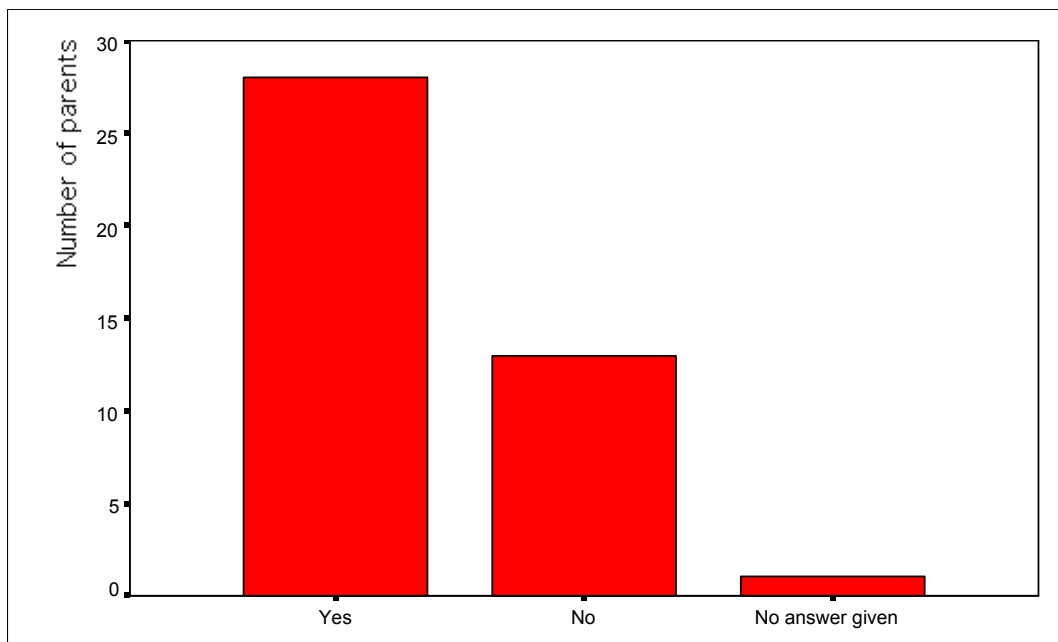


Figure 10. 5a
*Has the Enriched Curriculum made a difference to the way
 you work or play with your child?*

b. If yes, what difference has it made?

A few parents did not answer this question in the space provided. However, elsewhere in the questionnaire, they indicated changes in their mode of interaction with the child and these changes were what this question was trying to probe. Accordingly, these responses in other sections were categorised along with the answers to this question. The results are summarised in Figure 10. 5b below. Many parents gave complex answers which did not fall into a single category.

Many parents talked about doing a lot of reading with the child and discussion of what they had read together. Many also described an increase in conversation in other contexts. Comments most frequently fell into one or both of these categories. In addition, there is plenty of evidence that parents and children have been encouraged to spend enjoyable time together on school-related activities. Taken together, these are strong indications of the value of the Enriched Curriculum in enhancing parental involvement in a very desirable way. It was also clear from the language skills of some respondents that these effects were not limited to the most able parents. The following extracts give a flavour of some of the comments:

We would read a lot more and break words down to see if she knows what they are and she would do it with her name a lot and also would sometimes count and write it on a page so she writes down numbers. So I think it is good for them.

I think that my child enjoys things more and is more creative than my other children were in P1. He really enjoys reading a lot and seems more advanced in his learning than my other children.

We look out for things she has been talking about both at school and at home. We enjoyed finding different things both in colour and in shape to take to class.

Homeworks are more like playing games as well as learning which the children have more attention and are willing and looking forward to their homework.

It has made a difference because I know more things that I can try out with my child.

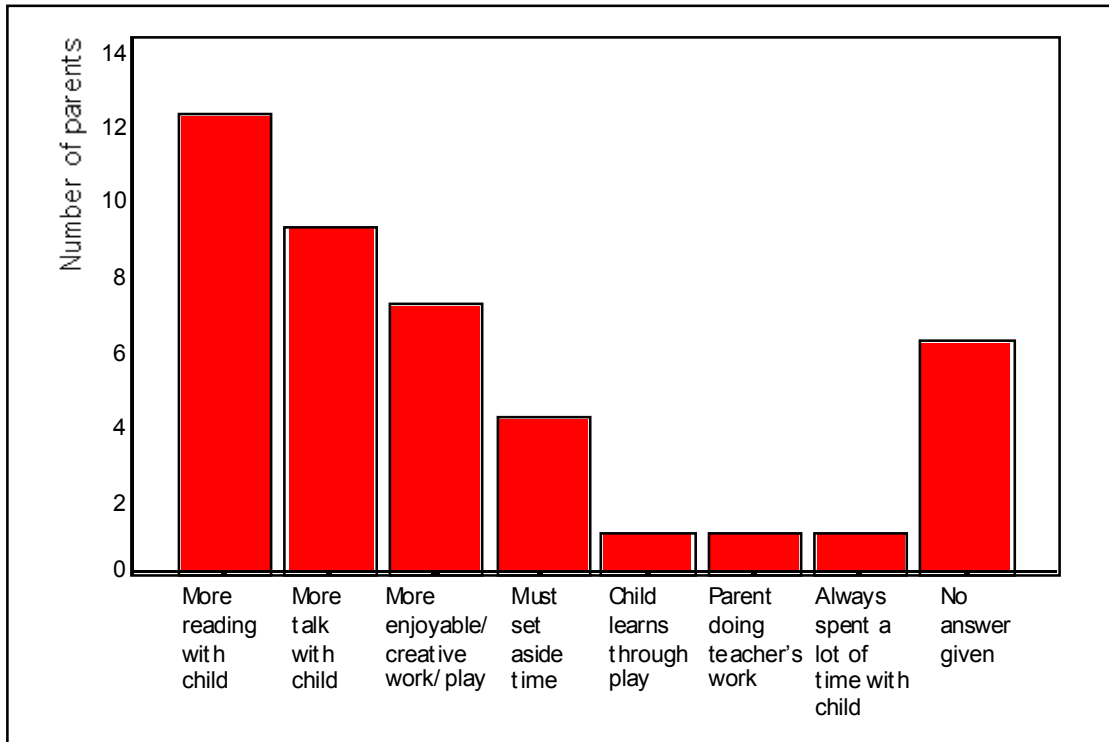
I spend more activity time with her and she enjoys to be able to read to me.

Several parents mentioned fixing a definite time to spend with the child each day. Although they did not explicitly state that they recognised the value of this, the context of other comments often suggested that its importance was appreciated:

It means that out of a busy day there must be a period set aside to spend time with the child.

Only one parent showed a negative attitude. This parent was not entirely negative throughout the questionnaire:

It feels as if the parent is doing more work than the teachers.



Note: Some parents responded in more than one category.

Figure 10. 5b
Ways in which parental interaction with the child has changed

Free response section

In this section, parents were invited to comment on anything they felt might be of interest to us. It was suggested, as examples, that they might like to tell us which activities their children talk about and seem to enjoy or that they might want to tell us about talking to the teacher about their child.

The importance of communication was highlighted in this section. Many parents mentioned how pleased they were with the level of communication:

I find Ivan's teacher very approachable regarding his work and know I will be kept up to date if he has any problems.

I am very pleased with Anne's teaching. It is good to be able to interact with Mrs. Marks w(h)ether it is about work or behaviour I feel I am always well informed.

On the other hand, some parents had concerns about communication:

I would like to see Caroline's teacher and find out if she is progressing well.

I have found that Gary, when reading books from class practically reads the story from the picture, i.e. If he sees a red lorry he will piece together words like 'This is a red lorry.' I think he does this rather than read the words but at least he is using his imagination perhaps the words will come later. I try to sound the letters he hasn't yet grasped this but hopefully in this case practice will make perfect.

This is a perceptive comment from Gary's parent. Very probably, Gary is behaving exactly that way. It is clear that this is a source of parental worry even though the tone of this person's comments is generally very positive. It would seem that this is an instance where the parent would benefit from more information. It is very likely that this parent did attend a session in which this type of emergent reading behaviour was explained. Unfortunately, due to the difficulty of getting parents to attend frequent meetings, schools may be forced to supply rather a lot of information for a layperson to assimilate during these sessions. This is another reason that a fact sheet might be helpful to parents, or even a newsletter once or twice a term. Inevitably, some parents will lose it or fail to read it but it could be valuable to those who are interested and it would insulate schools from charges of failure to communicate.

Anecdotally, the research team have learnt that one teacher write regular short letters to parents. Although this is clearly an added burden for teachers, Jeremy's mother would appreciate it:

I think the new programme should have two parent interviews a year with the teacher to discuss your child's progress. There are times throughout the year when you don't know what work your child is doing and what stage they are at.

Jeremy's mother is not a critic of the programme, as revealed below. She just wants to take a very active part in his education:

I have seen a great change in Jeremy this year. He is more confident and can express himself much better. His interest in learning has been great. He enjoys the maths. He is very good at adding up sums in his head. He also has to sit at home and do circle sums (these were shown to me by Mrs. Black). Jeremy enjoys learning through activity books. After reading stories, he likes to discuss it afterwards. This was new to me and very encouraging.

Parents mentioned many activities children enjoyed or didn't like. Stories were mentioned by many parents as a great source of enjoyment in class. As we have already seen above with Jeremy, other parents mentioned a variety of activities:

Ivan enjoys circle time. He also talks frequently about the physical activity he does. He enjoys going outside to play. He enjoys reading but sometime finds it more difficult than working with maths.

My daughter most enjoys building big blocks, stories and singing.

My son gets me to play things like a shop, counting and a library like they do in school.

I have noticed Gary enjoys colouring in books and pictures. He has recently become better at it as he is taking his time and staying within the borders.

He really loves books and trys to read everything.

The evidence of a book-loving culture in this last comment is also mentioned during interviews and focus groups with parents. It will undoubtedly be a source of great satisfaction to all those who have participated in the Enriched Curriculum.

In this final part of the questionnaire, concerns about a slow rate of progress were mentioned on a few occasions:

My child did not enjoy the shared reading as she found it boring, unchallenging and very repetitive. It was extremely hard to get her to participate the last three months.

I would ask her teacher how she would be getting on when we had the parent-teacher meetings and she would of told me how she was getting on with different things but some things she would try and others she couldn't do but her teacher said it would come to her, but I think the new programme is very good. I think my daughter has done alright since she went into P1 as she is still only four years of age.

Finally, Eva's mother expressed relief at the effects of the Enriched Curriculum in building confidence. This was a sentiment echoed by several other parents:

The news circle is a very good way of building the child's confidence. Before Eva started P1, I was more concerned

because she was a lot more attached to me than her elder brother. But now I've found she has gained a lot more confidence she settled into school very quickly and I have had no problems with her.

Report on parental interviews

Main findings

- Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the Enriched Curriculum.
- Many parents believe the Enriched Curriculum is emotionally and/or developmentally appropriate for their child.
- It is clearly important to parents that children enjoy their first year at school. Many parents revealed their anxieties for their children's happiness in the first year of school.
- The majority of parents reported increased time spent talking to or reading to the child or both. The majority of these attributed this to the Enriched Curriculum.
- Many parents show appreciation of the need for motivation of children.
- Many parents reported that play with the child following the Enriched Curriculum was more enjoyable or more creative or more productive of learning.
- Of those parents who responded, almost none are clearly unhappy with the entire programme. A slightly larger number revealed nuances of uncertainty about its value in some domains.

Two focus groups and six individual interviews were conducted with parents to assess their feelings towards the Enriched Curriculum. These interviews took place in June 2001 and were structured around six themes:

- Knowledge about the project
- Children's attitudes to and feelings about school
- Parental concerns and attitudes to the project
- Interaction with the school
- Family literacy
- Children's play

In general, responses strongly confirmed the findings from the parental questionnaire. These responses are summarised thus:

- Parents were knowledgeable about and approved of:
 - Shared reading
 - The postponement of formal reading and recorded mathematics
 - The increased focus on play-based activities
 - The decrease in formal written work
 - Music, singing and rhythmic games
- Parents were not as knowledgeable about:
 - The reasons for making such a gross change in the curriculum
 - The goals of circle time
 - Motor learning

Parents reported that children (both their own and other people's) had seemed generally happy at school during the year and that children were eager to learn. Parents with older siblings who had followed the more traditional curriculum reported that children in the Enriched Curriculum project were happier and more motivated. Parents believed this was not the result of dissimilar temperaments in siblings: They attributed the difference to the Enriched Curriculum.

Parents reported evidence of improved family literacy activities such as shared reading, initiation or increase of visits to school libraries and an increased number of books around the house.

There were instances where children showed signs of considering their work (reading and counting) as valid play activities. On occasion, parents had learned about the nature and value of children's play.

It should be noted that only a minority of parents' views were accessed, although in the short time available the response from parents was pleasing. In future evaluation work, efforts should be made to persuade a greater number of parents to come forward and give their views.

Selection of parents for interview¹

Parents were selected by asking teachers to sound out those who would wish to be interviewed. At first, teachers did not believe parents would be confident about coming forward. Eventually however, interviews were arranged with parents in five of the six schools. All the interviewees were female and almost all were mothers of the children. Six people were individually interviewed. There were also group interviews in two schools. One group contained four parents and the other group contained seven parents.

During the next phase of the project, additional efforts will be made to enable any disgruntled parents to express their views and to reach a wider sample. It may be appropriate to conduct interviews in some place other than school which would constitute neutral ground.

Parents' responses

Knowledge about the Project

There was a degree of variety in the depth of knowledge about the Enriched Curriculum between the different schools in the project and between parents within the same school. At the start of the school year, all the parents were informed that the project was taking place. The process of informing the parents involved meetings with the parents informing them of the changes in the curriculum and question and answer sessions. In some schools information was also sent out to the parents. The differing levels of parental knowledge

¹ Pseudonyms are used to make quotations easier to read.

may be due more to the level of interest of the parent and their ability to retain that information rather than being a reflection of the effort of the schools to inform the parents.

Most parents had retained a good deal of informally structured information. Looking first at the least informed end of the spectrum one mother, who was very nervous, did not remember how she had heard about the Enriched Curriculum other than that the headteacher had mentioned it “in assembly”, which parents can attend. This parent did not know the meaning of ‘shared reading’ but further questioning confirmed that she did undertake shared reading and counting activities with her son at home. She was very embarrassed at her lack of knowledge but keen to voice her approval of the school and the Enriched Curriculum. This is obviously uninformed praise, but it did indicate that this parent was comfortable with the school and the teacher and did her best to support her son’s schoolwork with home activities. She seemed pleased to be able to make a contribution to his learning although she did not rate her own efforts highly.

Very few parents had any clear idea of the rationale for changing the curriculum. A typical response when asked why they thought the curriculum was being changed is presented below:

I haven’t any idea why they decided all of a sudden because up until then I assumed it would be the same. I have no idea... .. No it was just explained to us that it was something new and they were part of it. And Miss Smyth went over [it] and said that she didn’t see a problem with it and set our minds all at rest so.

Other parents had some general ideas about the reasons for the change, which might be teased out with difficulty:

Interviewer: Why do you think the school decided to change the way of teaching in P1 this year?

Parent: It would be better for the pupils themselves, easier for them to learn.

Interviewer: What do you think was wrong with it before?

Parent: It was because the kids were just...just coming out of nursery so they were

Interviewer: What do you think the children do now in school that they didn’t do in previous years?

Parent: Well they play through there {their} work now, so they do.

The above parent seems to realise that teachers had been concerned about the transition from nursery school and that the Enriched Curriculum is more play-based than the traditional curriculum. Possibly, the most informed response from a parent was:

I think they realised that they were trying to teach the children too young and they were making it more like fun time. That's what Miss Brown said - like play learning rather than teach, teach, teach.

Further, knowledge of the differences between the traditional and Enriched curricula was patchy. The best informed parents were those who had had children in the school before:

Well I think it's been made more fun for them than when Michael was at school. I think Fiona has settled in better. Because when Michael was in P1, I think the work was too much emphasised on the writing and doing this and doing that, whereas I don't think - They are making up wee sentences and that but I don't think they are doing as much writing and that as what they did when Michael was in P1 you know. I think its more fun.

Well I find - just comparing with my wee girl {an older sibling} - that now by this stage in P1 she would have had a reading book and stuff like that. Where {= whereas} I think its better this way that they are doing it now. Because I think a child will memorise things and [they're] not really taking it in. Where I think the way they are doing it now it's sinking in more to the kids.

This latter quotation shows great insight on the part of the parent. She is able to appreciate to some degree the difference between superficial rote learning and deep understanding in children.

Parents more readily discussed the changes, which added something new to the curriculum rather than discuss those things that had been removed. When asked what was in the previous curriculum that is not in the Enriched Curriculum, the responses most frequently alluded to the fact there was less writing in the Enriched Curriculum. It seems clear from the context of these responses that parents were referring to formal work, such as worksheets, when they talked about writing.

It is recommended that all schools produce a fact sheet for parents containing a broad description of the Enriched Curriculum and stating the reason for the change in terms of matching the curriculum to the child. Undoubtedly, many parents would ignore such a fact sheet or lose it but for interested parents, it would provide a continuing reference.

Child's attitude to school and individual activities

The parental perceptions about their children's attitude towards school were overwhelmingly positive. When asked how the children felt about going to school all the parents said their child loved it:

Tara Loves it. I have no bother - haven't had any bother - I was more concerned about Tara starting P1 than I was of Paul, because he was a more outgoing child than what Tara was. - I haven't had any problem. Tara is great. She just loves school so she does.

However, one mother did express a belief that her daughter was getting bored towards the end of the year. The mother believed that her daughter was very keen on books and was not finding the level of reading a challenge as the year drew to a close. On the other hand, the mother believed that the year as a whole had been good for her daughter. This child did seem precocious. She had a brother in P3 and the mother said she could give her brother the answers to sums and often read his books better than he did. The mother was obviously concerned for the older boy and wished that he had had a chance to experience the Enriched Curriculum.

Parents indicated that they believed other children in their child's class were responding well to the environment also:

They have been very settled in no time, I have seldom seen anyone cry this year from P1 ... I remember when Daniel was in P1, nearly every other day some child is clinging to its mummy didn't want to go but the P1s this year have been really settled"

Parents agreed that their children enjoyed their work. When asked if their children ever made excuses to avoid going to school the response was always "No!" including this dramatic admission:

Never. Even when she is sick she wants to go.

Responses become more varied when parents were asked how much the child talked about school at home. The responses ranged from "All the time" to "No". This is probably due to individual differences between the children rather than effects of the curriculum.

The parents were asked what the children talked about if they talked about school, and the structure of the interview prompted parents on a number of the key elements of the Enriched Curriculum. These elements were: circle time; music/singing/rhythm games; playing with shop/theatre/other large pieces of equipment that encourage pretend play; physical/gymnastic play; pretend play; books; stories; counting and/or numbers; jigsaws or shapes.

Circle time was not mentioned by most of the parents directly by name; however some recognised that their children had been talking about it when it was described to them. One mother who did recognise circle time said:

Well Caroline would have said, "Mummy we sat in circle time to-day." And then "Such and such said this." or "Such and such said that and Steven is moving house." You know things like this.

Parents were uncertain of the goals of circle time but ventured good guesses like "getting them to share whatever is happening to them", "to take turns" and "teaches them that everyone has something to say and they should be listened to".

Music, singing and rhythmic games were mentioned by all the parents, and the children seemed to carry on these activities at home. Similarly playing with the large pieces of equipment was an activity that seemed to carry over to household play in the form of pretend play without the equipment and all the parents mentioned this type of play. Only two parents said their children mentioned physical play at home. Pretend play was also only mentioned by two parents. Books were very important with all the parents saying how much their children loved books, and reporting that story time at school was also mentioned by some of the children. Counting was another activity that the children seemed to talk about and carry into the home. One parent said:

Yes. That would be one of his favourite things. We would - he was just at it yesterday, and he went, "2 and 2 is 4, 3 and 3 is 6." And I went, "What's 4 and 4?" And he [wasn't sure] - and I held up my fingers and he counted them - I was all chuffed I was.

Finally, jigsaws and playing with shapes were mentioned as an enjoyable activity by parents from three of the schools.

Parental Concerns and Attitudes

Overall, parental responses were very positive towards the project as is illustrated in the comment below:

"Actually – it's {= it has} relaxed an awful lot or something. They are not being the stern teacher do you know – 'cause that's the way it used to be. You were taught and that was it but now... ..I would think that if it does continue through P2 - I know they do have to gradually go up a wee bit more in their work, but if that relaxed feeling is carried through, it's a good thing"

When parents were asked if there was any aspect of the Enriched Curriculum that appealed to them, several mentioned activities related to work at home. For example:

Being able to share their reading with them.

and

I think sending the wee words home for the sentences is good idea. They actually put speech marks in [the children's word boxes]. And I thought that was brilliant because I remember with my son even in P5, I was still telling my Peter 'full stop' going through his work. whereas when she was making up her sentences she knows. It's a capital letter and a full stop at the end. And I think its great to let them know.

When the converse was asked, if there was anything they did not like about how their children were being taught, they all answered that there was nothing that they were unhappy about or would change. The only concern raised by one parent was that this type of teaching would not be carried on into the following year:

I was just worried. I said to Miss Brown about this here new programme, "Is it going on? Is it continued right through?" because I was worried in case all of a sudden, then when he goes into P2 he is going to get all this work thrown at him. But she turned around and said that it's going right the way through. And that's the only concern that I had.

The parents were then asked if they thought their children were doing better or worse than they would have been if they were being taught with the normal curriculum, in this question the most enlightening responses came from those who had other children a year older or knew other children at a similar stage. In the first quotation illustrating this situation, the mother is talking about her son who went through the normal curriculum, and her daughter who is doing the Enriched Curriculum.

No he didn't [like it]. And I think - em, I think P1 work then. He found it - I remember him saying to me, "Mummy, don't force me. I don't know that. Don't force me." I think he found it awful hard, whereas she enjoys it. When she comes home with a reading book she is on the sofa and she is reading it to me. She has read it to her dolls. She is round everywhere reading it. And now and again she would even open the book and make her own story with the pictures. He would never have dreamt of that - he would never - I used to have to, as soon as he came in from school, [say] "Right get the reading done." because you had no [chance] of getting it done later on so you hadn't. So I think he found it hard whereas I think she enjoys it more.

When asked if this result may be due to individual differences between the children, the mother replied that it was the daughter she had been more concerned about, and the daughter had been the later developer at a pre-school stage. In another example below a mother compares her son to his cousin who is in the year above the son.

Oh better - probably the same - 'cause he has another cousin and he is a year older than him and he... .. He has an older cousin so he does. And at the minute, them two would sit down. They would sit and copy words and he's doing the same thing as [his cousin] is doing at the minute, so he is.

The parents were then asked if they were happy for their children to continue the Enriched Curriculum into P2 and P3, and the answers were all positive. When asked if they would recommend the Enriched Curriculum to other parents, all were very positive, either replying "Yes." or a more emphatic word such as "Definitely".

Interaction with the school

The general responses to the level of interaction with the schools were very positive. There were no negative comments; all the parents were very happy about the interaction with the teachers. They felt that they could approach the teachers at any stage and as often as they liked, and that they could easily talk about any concerns or worries that they had with the teachers. It was clear that easy access to the child's teacher was highly valued by parents.

Other forms of interaction between the school and the parents were more subtle. Few of the schools had formalised homework books or diaries, most just sending reading books home with the children. One school did have a workbook that was sent home and was used to convey information to the parents. This information was often extra-curricular, concerning sales and school trips. The only concern raised by any of the parents was one who stated that any information that was sent home should be kept to one or two pages or else it was unlikely to be read. Schools are probably already aware that information should be kept concise if it is to be effective. If schools desire to present written information about the Enriched Curriculum to parents, it may therefore be necessary to present it in a series of fact sheets rather than a single long publication.

Family literacy

The parents generally enjoyed the shared reading aspects of the Enriched Curriculum. One has been quoted previously stating that she felt it was an important part of the curriculum. Another felt that it helped to build confidence in her daughter, who was making up the parts of the story she couldn't read:

I think it gives them a wee bit of confidence to do - sometimes kids - I would find with Jenny she could be shy. Say for instance if somebody came into the house she would - I think it gave her a wee bit of confidence. [Jenny would say proudly] "You know I can do this now." Because she is actually reading the pictures in the story and maybe some of the words. She will be saying

something else, but whatever is in the story - like some book she had she took back today. It was about something - a wee girl wanted the apple and the wee boy wanted the apple off her. Well [my daughter] was going, "He wants that apple and she wants the apple. And the wee boy says, 'I want the apple'" or something like that there. That's the way she was just doing it but I was just reading along the bottom of it and then she was... .. she was filling in her bit.

Several other parents also reported children making up stories to go with pictures. This could be regarded as a sound basis for creative writing.

None of the parents seemed to think that it was particularly time consuming and even one went so far as to say it helped her to set aside time to be with her child.

But I think that [shared] reading's good. Especially - I mean I work full-time and to me, that is quality time with her. That's why I like the shared reading because when you come in from work, you are tired yourself but you know you have that time to do.

The interest in books shown by the children was said to be very high, all the children are described as loving books one was described as "book crazy" other parents said "they love reading". A typical quote from a mother is given below.

So does Julie she loves - she has paper everywhere in my house. Every corner you look in there is paper and a pencil sitting, wee books here, wee books there, just loves scribbling and writing.

This interest was not confined to girls:

He would go and get a book and want to sit and read the book. And before, he would not have done that. And he wants to write so he does.

Most of the parents said that their children asked them for books and were very enthusiastic about them, the only child who did not ask his parents for books "has loads". When asked about libraries some of the parents mentioned taking their children to the library. For most parents however, it was the school library that was used because no local library was convenient for them. They talked about how many books the children were allowed to take overnight and over the weekends.

Children's play

When asked about how much time the parents were able to set aside to play with their children, the answers varied widely, depending on the circumstances of the parent. Some parents were employed full time and had to send their children to play clubs after school.

Other parents had babies who demanded much of their attention. Nevertheless, they generally recognised the need for shared play and said they played as much as possible with the children. Some of the parents said their children asked them to play with them:

He would go up and get games and that and bring them down to you.

When asked if the play was noticeably different from the start of the year, not many parents responded however one did comment:

At the start of the school year he wouldn't have sat down with you. He was awful lively. He has calmed down a wee bit - he understands how to sit down and play so he does.

Some comments suggested that children did not differentiate play from work. There were quite a number of instances where parents reported children counting for fun:

He has only started counting. He's setting things out in front of him and sort of counting them up – putting them separately and putting them together and adding them up.

They also got wee sheets home, wee problem sheets...Eva loved doing them. She said "Make some up Mummy." And you would have to go. "Four cars in a park and two were blue [and so on.]" She loves that – wee problem-solving things.

Keating et al. (2000) discuss the importance of early years play and the anguish of teachers forced to deal with a very formal curriculum for this age group against their instincts. They emphasise the difficulty of communicating the importance of play to parents and the need to make explicit 'what the children are getting out of play'.

Also when asked if they would like the teacher to suggest games that they could play with their children two of the parents responded that this was already the case.

Some parents had made discoveries about aspects of children's play. For example, after a talk with the teacher, one parent had recognised the importance of physical play for her son to promote development of his motor skills.

Jeremy is not very physical [in my opinion]... I let him bounce the ball and no problem, whereas before I wouldn't let him. And I see him coming on now. And he has learnt to keep his hand steady because it will help when he comes down to writing.

Summary

Attitudes of parents were largely very positive. In both questionnaires and interviews, there were nuances of concern about whether the Enriched Curriculum allowed able children sufficient challenge. On the other hand, parents of less able children seemed to

understand that the Enriched Curriculum had provided a window of opportunity for the less able child to adjust to school and to formal work. Parents recognised the value of the more gradual transition from nursery education to formal work. There was plenty of evidence that a culture of book enjoyment was being created. In many cases, there was evidence that the appreciation of books was successfully extended to the home. There were also indications that home 'play' included counting activities first practised in school. Frequent practice is important for sound foundations in mathematics.

It must be remembered that the sample of parents was small. On the other hand, the interview findings are consistent with responses to the parental questionnaires. Nevertheless, there may be a group of parents who are disgruntled and have not felt sufficiently confident to express their opinions. Further efforts will be made in subsequent years to encourage parents to contribute their views in an atmosphere of confidence.

It is hoped that these findings contain information that may assist schools in refining their explanations to parents of the goals and methods of the Enriched Curriculum. The widest possible dissemination of this report amongst interested groups is therefore suggested.

Recommendations arising from the investigation of parents' views

The evaluation team suggest that a short fact sheet for parents explaining the reasons for the introduction of the Enriched Curriculum, its evidence base and its main components, would be very useful.

11. Report on progress in attainment

Section Summary

In November 2000, baseline assessment was carried out on a random sample of half the children in the intervention and control groups. Children were tested on:

- Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) testing phonics, reading and mathematics
- The Boehm Pre-School Test of concept development
- The Bus Story Test, a test of many aspects of oral language proficiency

Towards the end of the academic year, these tests were repeated on the same sample in order to compare progress in the two groups.

Baseline testing

At baseline, the intervention and control groups were seen to be very well matched on all but one of the measures. Children in both groups performed just below average on PIPS and on the Boehm test. However, on the Bus Story Test, baseline scores indicated oral language skills, which were markedly below expected age norms. At baseline, there was no significant difference between intervention and control groups on the information score but the control group slightly outperformed the Enriched Curriculum group on sentence length.

Progress

At the end-of-year testing, children in both groups had apparently lost much ground on PIPS as compared with a national sample, ranging from 4.8 to 9.4 standardised points on the various measures. These data are in accord with findings from earlier studies in the Greater Shankill area (Sheehy et al. 2000). These results are hypothesised to be due to a complex variety of factors, including the possibility that the national baseline is artificially depressed. This would mean that both intervention and control group children were not as advanced on entering school as the baseline scores would suggest. Children in the Enriched Curriculum group had statistically poorer scores on PIPS total and reading measures than the control group but not on PIPS mathematics scores.

At the end-of-year testing on the Bus Story test, children in the intervention group had caught up with and slightly overtaken control group children on sentence length. There was no significant difference between the groups on information scores. Both groups remained at least eight months behind on sentence length and information score.

Sampling and testing plan

A random sample of half the children taking part in the project and half the children from control schools was selected before the baseline assessment to take part in the evaluation.

A breakdown of the original sample is given in Table 11.1. Classes from six schools in the Greater Shankill area formed the intervention (Enriched Curriculum) group and classes from two schools in the Shore Road area formed the control group.

Numbers tested at baseline were N=80 for the Enriched Curriculum group and N=47 for the control group. There was a high degree of social unrest during the second testing period, leading to extended absence of children. This circumstance reduced the number of children tested fully to N=73 for the Enriched Curriculum group and N=40 for the control group.

*Table 11.1
A breakdown of children participating in the evaluation*

	School number	Number of classes	Number of boys	Number of girls	Total no. of pupils
Enriched Curriculum group schools	1	1	3	5	8
	2	1	5	0	5
	3	2	6	7	13
	4	3	21	15	36
	5	1	10	3	13
	6	1	2	3	5
Enriched group totals		9	47	33	80
Control group schools	7	1	12	7	19
	8	2	14	14	28
Control group totals		3	26	21	47
Grand totals		12	73	54	127

At baseline, all children in the sample were tested on start-of-reception PIPS, a traditional-type test of attainment that allows comparison with standardised scores for a national sample. PIPS yields reading, mathematics and total scores. PIPS analyses of large samples from a wide variety of children tested all over the United Kingdom have shown that the total score is the best predictor of future performance (Tymms & Henderson 1996, Tymms, Merrell & Henderson, 1997, Tymms & Preedy 1998). Further information on PIPS is available at <http://cem.dur.ac.uk>.

Half of the children in the sample were tested on the Renfrew Bus Story Test and the other half did the Boehm Pre-school Test of Concept Development.

The same children were tested on the same tests again at the end of the year. At this time, the appropriate PIPS test was PIPS end-of-reception.

Additional PIPS data was available for comparison with earlier cohorts in the Greater Shankill area in a study also undertaken by Queen's University Belfast (Sheehy et al. 2000).

Performance across intervention and control groups

Performance on PIPS

At the beginning of the academic year, there was no significant difference between Enriched and control groups on any PIPS scale, indicating a good match on attainment between Enriched and control groups.

In the context that children from the Shankill area have performed poorly on PIPS in previous studies when compared to a national sample (Sheehy et al. 2000) and that there is a mismatch between PIPS and the Enriched Curriculum, the evaluation team did not expect children in the Enriched Curriculum or control groups to perform well on PIPS at the end of their first year at school. As anticipated, the results show that children in both groups taken together scored a mean total of 48.9 standardised point on baseline PIPS (against a national average of 50). These children lost an average of 7.7 standardised points in their total scores over their first year in school. These findings are partially explained by comparison with data from studies using PIPS in deprived areas of Aberdeen (Cowie & Croxford 1999). This study found that children attending schools in areas of deprivation lost standardised points over the first year depending on circumstances; points were lost as follows:

- If the child was entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) (-3.3 points in reading, -4.0 points in mathematics).
- If the child lived in an area of deprivation (-2.1 points in reading, -1.8 points in mathematics).
- If the school in general had a high incidence of FSM (in reading: -0.14 points per 1% of pupils with FMS; in mathematics: -0.11 points per 1% of pupils with FSM).

In other words, a child in a school with average or above average baseline scores will do better than the same child in a school with below average intake. Below average children were found to be further disadvantaged by disadvantaged schools. This finding is likely to arise from a variety of factors, including differences in family support, peer support and school resources.

Performance on the Renfrew Bus Story Test

In the Renfrew Bus Story test, the assessor tells the child a story with picture prompts and the child then retells the story immediately afterwards. The test yields an information score, which reflects the content of the child's story, and a mean sentence length score, which reflects the length of the five longest sentences.

Although PIPS had rated the children in both the Enriched Curriculum and control groups just below average at the start of the year, the Renfrew Bus Story Test rated them well below average. At the time of baseline testing, both groups should have been reaching

age norms of 4 years and 7 months on the Bus Story test. However, children in both groups were, on average, reaching age norms of less than 3 years and 9 months for information content of the story: That is to say, the children were well off the bottom of the scale. On sentence length, the Enriched group were off the bottom of the scale and the control group were just reaching the bottom of the scale and the difference between the groups was statistically significant ($t= 1.7, p < 0.5$).

Standardised scores for a national sample are not available for the Bus Story Test but these data would undoubtedly suggest that both the intervention and control groups are well below average academically at the start of the year. The discrepancy between PIPS and the Bus Story Test may be partly due to the use of interested parties to carry out PIPS testing nationally. Another source of discrepancy might lie in the fact that the Bus Story test accesses listening, attention and productive oral language skills and children in deprived areas may have a particular deficit in these domains.

Age norms are not accurate to the month for the Bus Story Test but it is possible to say that at the end of the year, children in both groups remained at least eight months behind age norms on average on both scales. This is in accordance with findings from other studies that the oral language skills of children in deprived areas are poorer than we would expect given their intelligence (Francis 1974, Tough 1977).

Boehm Pre-school Test of Concept Development

The Boehm test investigates children's understanding of basic concepts, many of which underlie mathematical thinking. The test has a multiple-choice pictorial format.

Enriched and control groups did not differ significantly on scores at the beginning of the year. Unfortunately, the end-of-year scores were subject to ceiling effects in some cases; some children were scoring full or almost full marks because the test was too easy for them, reflecting excellent progress in concept development. In these circumstances, it is not appropriate to compare end-of-year scores. During the second phase of the project, a more advanced form of test will be used at the end of the child's first year.

Group differences at the end of the first year

PIPS

PIPS results are summarised in Table 11.2 and Table 11.3. Table 2 allows easy comparison of mathematics, reading and total scores between the Enriched group, the control group and the group examined in the earlier Greater Shankill Early Years study (Sheehy et al 2000). This earlier study tested children in schools in the same area as the Enriched Curriculum group. Table 3 details levels of significance of differences between the three groups on changes in PIPS scores over the first year.

There were no significant differences between the Enriched and control groups on any PIPS scores at the beginning of the year.

At the end of the year, the Enriched group had lost significantly more ground on the standardised total score than the control group or Greater Shankill group children. On average, Enriched group children lost 8.9 standardised points over the year compared with 5.4 for control group children and 6.9 for Greater Shankill group children. This result is thought to be at least partly due to Enriched-Curriculum-group children's lack of experience of a formal reading scheme or of recorded arithmetic experience.

At the end of the year, the Enriched group had lost significantly more ground on the standardised reading score than the control group or Greater Shankill group children. On average, Enriched group children lost 9.4 standardised points over the year compared with 4.8 for control group children and 5.8 for Greater Shankill group children. This result is thought to be at least partly due to children's lack of experience of a formal reading scheme when following the Enriched curriculum in their first year.

There was no statistically significant difference between the losses of ground in standardised mathematics scores among Enriched group children compared to control group children. Enriched group children had lost significantly more ground on the standardised mathematics score than the Greater Shankill group children. On average, Enriched group children lost 7.4 standardised points over the year compared with 5.8 for Greater Shankill group children. The superior performance of Enriched group children on mathematics compared with their performance on reading may be attributed to the fact that PIPS matches the Enriched Curriculum more closely in mathematics than in reading. Approximately half of the mathematics questions on the end-of-year test cover mental mathematics, which many Enriched group children are able to attempt, rather than recorded mathematics, which they are not able to attempt. For the reading test, at least two-thirds of the marks are for reading words without the help of cues, which Enriched group children are not taught to any great extent in the first year of school.

Renfrew Bus Story test - Differences between the Enriched and control groups

There was no significant difference in the information score between Enriched and control group children at the beginning or end of the year.

The Enriched group children were significantly lower on mean sentence length (6.4 words) at the beginning of the year compared with control group children (7.2 words) ($t=1.7, p < 0.5$). By the end of the year, the Enriched group children had caught up and slightly overtaken the control group children in terms of sentence length. Enriched group children improved sentence length by 1.3 words on average to 7.7 words whereas control children improved by only 0.4 words on average to 7.6 words.

Research Note

During the pilot project, we became concerned that the Enriched Curriculum and control schools differed in important respects. In particular, the social unrest patterns were different in the two areas. We therefore suggest the implementation of the strategy of using the group's one and two-years ahead of the intervention group as controls. Baseline PIPS data is available on these one and two-year ahead cohorts from the earlier Greater Shankill study (Sheehy et al 2000). This research design accommodates the earlier introduction of some elements of the Enriched Curriculum, a fact that has come to the attention of the evaluation team during the pilot study. It ensures a near perfect match on extra-curricular factors between intervention and control groups. By taking the two studies together, baseline data are available on >80 children for three successive cohorts.

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Appendix A Parental Questionnaire

1. Why do you think the school decided to change the way children are taught in their first year?
2. Do you think this programme will help your child to succeed in his or her education?

Yes Don't know
Can you give any reasons for your answer?
3. How did your child feel about school this year?
Happy Unhappy
4. If you have an older child, do you prefer the old methods in P1 or the new way of teaching this year?
Doesn't apply to me Prefer old methods Prefer new way
Not sure which method I prefer

Can you give any reasons for your answer?
5. Has the new programme made any difference to the way you work or play with your child?
Yes No

If yes, what difference has it made?

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about the new programme, please write it on the page below. For example, you might like to tell us which activities the children talk about and seem to enjoy or the activities they don't like. Or, you might want to tell us about talking to the teacher about your child.