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## RESEARCHING EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY IN THE EARLY YEARS

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### **Introduction: Identifying 'effective' settings**

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), now the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), commissioned the Institute of Education with the University of Oxford to undertake an investigation of effective pedagogy in the early years. The Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years study was largely based on intensive case studies conducted in 'effective' Foundation Stage (FS) settings reflecting all types of provision.

This study was commissioned in parallel with the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (the SPEEL project). See DfES Research Brief No. RB363.

### **Key Findings**

- Effective pedagogy in the early years involves both the kind of interaction traditionally associated with the term "teaching", and the provision of instructive learning environments and routines.
- Good outcomes for children are linked to:
  - Adult-child interactions that involve 'sustained shared thinking' and open-ended questioning to extend children's thinking.
  - Practitioners having good curriculum knowledge as well as knowledge and understanding of child development.
  - Shared educational aims with parents.
  - Formative feedback to children during activities.
  - Behaviour policies in which staff support children in being assertive, at the same time as rationalising and talking through their conflicts.
- The most effective settings provide both teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities. Children's cognitive outcomes appear to be directly related to the quantity and quality of the teacher/adult planned and initiated focused group work for supporting children's learning.
- The settings that view cognitive and social development as complementary achieve the best outcomes.
- Trained teachers were most effective in their interactions with children, using the most sustained shared thinking interactions. Less well-qualified staff were significantly better pedagogues when they were supervised by qualified teachers.
- The research findings support the general approach taken in *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage (CGFS)*. The study suggests that the Foundation Stage has yet to make a major impact on the practice of even effective childminders.

## Methods

Twelve of the case study settings were chosen because their children had been found in the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (EPPE) project to make excellent or good developmental progress over the pre-school period. Two reception classes judged as effective were added to the twelve EPPE settings to make a total of fourteen case studies. In addition forty-six 'effective' childminders were selected according to the professional judgement of local authority experts. Careful, detailed case studies were conducted in each setting which involved detailed documentation of naturalistic observations of staff pedagogy, and systematic structured target child observations of children's learning. Information was also gathered and analysed using interviews with parents, staff and managers and through intensive and wide ranging documentary analysis and a literature review of pedagogy in the early years. Further information was collected from the forty-six childminders using telephone interviews to identify the impact of the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* (CGFS) on their practice.

Project EPPE is a longitudinal national research study which follows the developmental progress of more than 3,000 children from the age of 3+ across England. The full design of EPPE is explained in EPPE Technical Paper 1 (Sylva et al 1999). Both qualitative and quantitative methods (including multilevel modelling) have been used to explore the relationship between the quality of individual pre-school settings and children's intellectual attainment and social/behavioural development at entry to school.

EPPE is a study that identifies the 'value added' to children's developmental progress by the form of Early Childhood provision that they have experienced. Thus, one of the main questions in EPPE is: *Which are the centres where children make more developmental progress than would be predicted by their assessments at entry to pre-school?* One of the aims of EPPE was to identify the most effective pedagogical strategies that are applied in the Foundation Stage to support the development of young children's skills, knowledge and attitudes, and ensure they make a good start at school.

The 12 EPPE case study settings were therefore selected from the 141 centres which comprise the EPPE sample. In this way centres were selected on the basis of their scores in children's developmental progress in the cognitive, linguistic and social-behavioural domains. In the 'excellent' case study settings, children made outstanding progress while in the 'good' settings children made more progress than their pre-test scores would have predicted.

### Pedagogy in effective settings

The term *Pedagogy* is applied here to refer to the instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place. It refers to the interactive process between teacher/practitioner and learner, and it is also applied to include the provision of some aspects of the learning environment (including the concrete learning environment, and the actions of the family and community).

For most practitioners, the declared priorities in the early years are on the development of positive dispositions to learning, self-confidence and independence. Staff and parents normally give priority to social development, but our evidence suggests that those settings which see cognitive and social development as complementary, achieve the best profile in terms of child outcomes.

Our analysis has also gone a long way to provide explanations for the statistical relationships which were found in the EPPE project data analysis. Four areas of impact were identified for special attention. Our close analysis of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale suggested that we needed to investigate each of the following practices further, to identify how some practitioners supported the children in making a great deal of developmental progress while others were less effective in this respect:

- adult-child verbal interactions;
- differentiation and formative assessment;
- parental partnership and the home education environment;
- discipline and adult support in talking through conflicts.

### Adult-child verbal interactions

If learning comes from a process of cognitive construction that is only achieved when the child is motivated and involved, we have argued that it is entirely consistent to treat the part played by the effective educator in the same way. The cognitive construction in this case is mutual, where each party engages with the understanding of the other, and learning is achieved through a process of reflexive 'co-construction'. A necessary condition is that both parties are *involved*, and, for the resultant learning to be worthwhile, that the content should be in some way *instructive*. Our analyses of the qualitative and quantitative data have substantiated this model. Our research has also shown that adult-child interactions that involve some element of 'sustained shared thinking', or what Bruner has termed 'joint involvement episodes', may be especially valuable in terms of children's learning.

We found that the most effective settings encourage 'sustained shared thinking' but we also found that this does not happen very frequently. In 'excellent' settings there were significantly more 'sustained shared thinking' interactions occurring between staff and children than in the 'good' settings. When it did occur, it extended children's thinking. Our investigations of adult-child interaction have led us to view that periods of 'sustained shared thinking' are a necessary pre-requisite for the most effective early years practice, especially where this is also encouraged in the home through parent support. Parent interview data suggest that in some of our very middle class case study settings (notably the private day nurseries), it is less the staff's interventions and more the parents' pro-active behaviour towards their children's learning, in the embedded, cultural context of the home, that has provided a good basis for 'sustained shared thinking'.

The analysis has shown that practitioners' knowledge and understanding of the particular curriculum area that is being addressed are vital. A good grasp of the appropriate 'pedagogical content knowledge' is a vital component of pedagogy and it is shown to be just as important in the early years as at any later stage of education.

The research found that, even in these effective settings, there were examples of inadequate knowledge and understanding of curriculum areas, especially in the teaching of phonological skills. Our study shows that early years staff may need support in developing their pedagogical content knowledge in the domains of the *Early Learning Goals*.

In the most effective (excellent) settings, the importance of staff members extending child-initiated interactions was also clearly identified. In fact, almost half of all of the child-initiated episodes which contained intellectual challenge, included interventions from a staff member to extend the child's thinking. The evidence also suggests that adult 'modelling' is often combined with sustained periods of shared thinking, and that open-ended questioning is also associated with better cognitive achievement. However, open-ended questions made up only 5.1% of the questioning used in even these 'effective' settings.

In the excellent and good settings, the balance of who initiated the activities, staff or child, was very equal, revealing that the pedagogy of these effective settings encourages children to initiate activities as often as the staff. The children in reception classes experienced a different balance of initiation, with a much greater emphasis upon staff initiated episodes. In all of the case study settings we found that the children spent most of their time in small groups. But our observations show that 'sustained shared thinking' was most likely to occur when children were interacting 1:1 with an adult or with a single peer partner. Freely chosen play activities often provided the best opportunities for adults to extend children's thinking. It may be that extending child-initiated play, coupled with the provision of teacher-initiated group work, are the main vehicles for learning.

We found that qualified staff in the most effective settings provided children with more experience of academic activities (especially language and mathematics) and they encouraged children to engage in activities with higher cognitive challenge. While we found that the most highly qualified staff also provided the most direct teaching, we found that they were the most effective in their interactions with the children,

using the most sustained shared thinking. Further, we found that less qualified staff were significantly better as pedagogues when they were supervised by qualified teachers.

### Differentiation and formative assessment

Our teacher observations suggest an association between curriculum differentiation, formative assessment, and curriculum matching in terms of cognitive challenge, and 'sustained shared thinking'. The interviews, teacher observations and documentary evidence suggest that the better the setting does on each of these dimensions of good pedagogic practice, the more effective it will be in supporting children's cognitive progress. Evidence confirms the importance of formative assessment to meet children's particular needs, especially formative feedback *during* activities.

### Parental partnership

The case studies suggest that where a special relationship in terms of shared *educational* aims has been developed with parents and pedagogic efforts are made at home to support children, sound learning can take place even in the absence of good pedagogic practice in the pre-school setting. The most effective settings shared child-related information between parents and staff, and parents were often involved in decision making about their child's learning programme.

In more disadvantaged areas, staff in effective settings had to be proactive in influencing and supporting the home education environment in order to support children's learning.

### Discipline and adult support in talking through conflicts

The most effective settings adopted discipline/behaviour policies that involve staff in supporting children in being assertive, while simultaneously rationalising and talking through their conflicts. In settings which were less effective in this respect, our observations showed that there was often no follow up on children's misbehaviour and, on many occasions, children were 'distracted' or simply told to stop.

### Key Points for the Foundation Stage

- The curriculum is differentiated according to age. Younger children experience more personal, social and emotional development and creative development. Older children experience more language/literacy and mathematics and less personal, social and emotional development.
- Research findings support the general approach taken in the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* where the emphasis is upon an 'emergent' and 'cognitively orientated' approach to learning.
- Effective practitioners assess children's performance to ensure the provision of challenging yet achievable experiences. They model appropriate language, values and practices, encourage socio-dramatic play, praise, encourage, ask questions and interact in a sustained way.
- The Foundation Stage has clearly improved the relationship between nurseries and school. There are still major concerns about transition from the nursery to the school reception class and also at the end of reception, from the Foundation Stage to Year 1.
- Many respondents were critical of the common practice of schools of admitting all children at the start of the year instead of throughout the year.

### Organisation

Three major approaches to early education were identified in a review of the literature:

- The teacher-directed, programmed learning approach.
- An open framework approach where children are provided with 'free' access to a range of instructive learning environments in which adults support children's learning.
- A child-centred approach where the adults aim is to provide a stimulating yet open-ended environment for children to play within.

We argue that effective pedagogy in the early years involves a balance of the first two approaches, both the kind of interaction traditionally associated with the term 'teaching', and also the provision of instructive learning environments and routines traditionally associated with 'open' approaches. Where young children have freely chosen to play within an instructive learning

environment, adult interventions are especially effective. However, we have also noted that these interactions are not as frequent as they should be – even in settings we have classified as “effective” on the basis of child outcomes.

### Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Generally speaking, pedagogical practice in terms of the ICT curriculum was found to be relatively limited at this time. All but one of the case study settings was found to be equipped with at least one computer that was available for the children's use every day. Unfortunately the computers were used in a limited way, predominantly in supporting creative development, and by programmes that were chosen to encourage the acquisition of literacy skills.

Staff rarely engaged in scaffolding or interactions which encouraged sustained shared thinking during children's computing activities, suggesting a very skills-based and technical approach.

### **'Effective' Childminders**

Our findings suggest that the present training provision for childminders may be having a positive effect. It would seem to have provided an increased awareness and understanding of a range of relevant issues and has resulted in increased status, higher levels of security and self-esteem. As a result childminders feel better equipped to develop more professional relationships with parents.

Despite these improvements, this study suggests the training programmes geared towards implementing the CGFS have yet to make a major impact on the general practice of even these 'effective' childminders. Over a quarter (26%) of those surveyed said they had no knowledge of the initiative.

Whatever the level of training received, the childminders in this study felt confident that play (however they defined it) was central to learning for children in the Foundation Stage and this featured as a constant in their daily and weekly routines. Many also felt that children learn best from being supported while pursuing their own interests.

Formal and informal networks offering both personal and professional support were important in the lives of the childminders interviewed, irrespective of where they lived.

### **Reference**

Sylva, K. Sammons, P. Melhuish, E. Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. *Technical Paper 1 - An Introduction to the Effective Provision of Pre-school Project*. London: Institute of Education, University of London

### **Additional Information**

*Copies of the full report (RR356) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

*Copies of this Research Brief (RB356) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/>*

*Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".*

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