2004

Case studies of early years settings

Louise Quinn
Queen's University Belfast

Karen Hanna

Edward Melhuish
University of Wollongong, melhuish@uow.edu.au

Iram Siraj-Blatchford
University of Wollongong, iram@uow.edu.au

Brenda Taggart
University of London

See next page for additional authors

Case studies of early years settings

Abstract

This longitudinal study assesses the attainment and development of children followed from the age of 3 until the end of Key Stage 1. Over 700 children were recruited to the study during 1998 and 1999 from 80 pre-school centres in Northern Ireland. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used to explore the effects of pre-school experience on children's cognitive attainment and social/behavioural development at entry to school and any continuing effects on such outcomes up to 8 years of age. In addition to the effects of pre-school experience, the study investigates the contribution to children's development of individual and family characteristics such as gender, family size, parental education and employment. This overview describes the research design and discusses a variety of research issues (methodological and practical) in investigating the impact of pre-school provision on children's developmental progress.

Keywords

settings, studies, early, years, case

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Authors

Louise Quinn, Karen Hanna, Edward Melhuish, Iram Siraj-Blatchford, Brenda Taggart, Kathy Sylva, Pam Sammons, and Gillian Donnelly

Effective Pre-school Provision Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project

**Case Studies
of
Early Years Settings**

Technical Paper 8

EPPNI

Case Studies
of
Early Years Settings

Authors:

Louise Quinn
Karen Hanna
Edward Melhuish
Iram Siraj-Blatchford
Brenda Taggart
Kathy Sylva
Pam Sammons
Gillian Donnelly

The views expressed in this report are the authors'
and do not reflect those of the funding bodies

2006

The EPPNI Research Team

Principal Investigators

Professor Edward Melhuish
Birkbeck College, University of London

Professor Kathy Sylva
Department of Educational Studies, University of Oxford

Professor Pam Sammons
Institute of Education, University of London

Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford
Institute of Education, University of London

Louise Quinn
Stranmillis University College, Queen's University Belfast

Research Coordinator

Louise Quinn
Stranmillis University College, Queen's University Belfast

Research Officer

Karen Hanna

EPPE – EPPNI Liaison

Brenda Taggart
Institute of Education, University of London

Contents

Page Number

Overview of the Project

This longitudinal study assesses the attainment and development of children followed from the age of 3 until the end of Key Stage 1. Over 700 children were recruited to the study during 1998 and 1999 from 80 pre-school centres in Northern Ireland. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used to explore the effects of pre-school experience on children's cognitive attainment and social/behavioural development at entry to school and any continuing effects on such outcomes up to 8 years of age. In addition to the effects of pre-school experience, the study investigates the contribution to children's development of individual and family characteristics such as gender, family size, parental education and employment. This overview describes the research design and discusses a variety of research issues (methodological and practical) in investigating the impact of pre-school provision on children's developmental progress. A larger, parallel study is being carried out in England, The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE). Technical Paper 10 (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2003) reports on a large number of intensive case studies (n=14) of practice across all major types of group provision in English Foundation Stage.

Previous Research on the Effects of Early Education in the UK

There has been little large-scale, systematic research on the effects of early childhood education in the UK. The 'Start Right' Enquiry (Ball 1994; Sylva 1994) reviewed the evidence of British research and concluded that small-scale studies suggested a positive impact but that large-scale research was inconclusive. The Start Right enquiry recommended more rigorous longitudinal studies with baseline measures so that the 'value added' to children's development by pre-school education could be established.

Research evidence elsewhere on the effects of different kinds of pre-school environment on children's development (Melhuish et al. 1990; Melhuish 1993; Sylva & Wiltshire 1993; Schweinhart & Weikart 1997; Borge & Melhuish, 1995; National Institute of Child Health Development 1997) suggests positive outcomes. Some researchers have examined the impact of particular characteristics, e.g. gender and attendance on children's adjustment to centre classes (Davies & Brember 1992), or adopted cross-sectional designs to explore the impact of different types of pre-school provision (Davies & Brember 1997). Feinstein, Robertson & Symons (1998) attempted to evaluate the effects of pre-schooling on children's subsequent progress but birth cohort designs may not be appropriate for the study of the influence of pre-school education. The absence of data on children's attainments at entry to pre-school means that neither the British Cohort Study (1970) nor the National Child Development Study (1958) can be used to explore the effects of pre-school education on children's progress. These studies are also limited by the time lapse and many changes in the nature of pre-school provision which have occurred. To date no research using multilevel models (Goldstein 1987) has been used to investigate the impact of both type of provision and individual centre effects. Thus little research in the UK has explored whether some forms of provision have greater benefits than others.

In the UK there is a long tradition of variation in pre-school provision both between types (e.g. playgroups, local authority or private centre or centre classes) and in different parts of the country reflecting funding and geographical conditions (i.e. urban/rural and local access to centres). A series of reports (House of Commons Select Committee 1989;

DES Rumbold Report 1990; Ball 1994) have questioned whether Britain's pre-school education is as effective as it might be and have urged better co-ordination of services and research into the impact of different forms of provision (Siraj-Blatchford, 1995). The EPPNI and EPPE projects are thus the first large-scale studies in the UK on the effects of different kinds of pre-school provision relating experience in particular centres and type of centre to child development.

Overview of Research Methods

The EPPNI and EPPE projects investigate three issues that have important implications for policy and practice:

- the effects on children of different types of pre-school provision,
- the 'structural' (e.g. adult-child ratios) and 'process' characteristics (e.g. interaction styles) of more effective pre-school centres, and
- the interaction between child and family characteristics and the kind of pre-school provision a child experiences.

The research design was chosen to enable investigation of the progress and development of individual children (including the impact of personal, socio-economic and family characteristics), and the effect of individual pre-school centres on children's outcomes at entry to school, through to age 8.

The aims of the EPPNI Project

- To produce a detailed description of the 'career paths' of a large sample of children and their families between entry into pre-school education and the first four years of primary school.

- To compare and contrast the developmental progress of 800+ children from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds who have differing pre-school experiences.

- To separate out the effects of pre-school experience from the effects of education in the primary school period years 1, 2, 3 and 4.

- To establish whether some forms of pre-school experience are more effective than others in promoting children's cognitive and social/emotional development during the pre-school years (ages 3-4) and the first four primary years (4-8 years).

- To discover the individual characteristics (structural and process) of pre-school education in centres found to be most effective.

- To investigate differences in the progress of different groups of children, e.g. children from disadvantaged backgrounds and both genders.

- To investigate the medium-term effects of pre-school education on educational performance at age 8 in a way which will allow the possibility of longitudinal follow-up at later ages to establish long-term effects, if any.

- To relate the use of pre-school provision to parental labour market participation.

The sample: centres and children

In order to maximise the likelihood of identifying the effects of various types of provision, the EPPNI sample was stratified by type of centre and geographical location. The centres were chosen to include a selection of nursery classes and schools, playgroups private day nurseries, reception classes and reception groups. Thus examples of all major types of pre-school centre in Northern Ireland were included in the study.

Over 700 children were recruited from 80 pre-school centres from all Education & Library Boards in Northern Ireland. Children and their families were selected randomly in each centre to participate in the EPPNI Project. All parents gave written permission for their children to participate. In order to examine the impact of no pre-school provision, an additional sample of 150 children with no pre-school experience were recruited from the Year 1 classes which EPPNI children entered.

The progress and development of pre-school children in the EPPNI sample is being followed over five years until the end of Key Stage 1 of primary school. Details about length of sessions and number of sessions normally attended per week have been collected to enable the amount of pre-school education experienced, to be quantified for each child in the sample. Two complicating factors are that a substantial proportion of children have moved from one form of pre-school provision to another (e.g. from centre to centre class) and some will attend more than one centre in a week. Careful records are necessary in order to examine issues of stability and continuity, and to document the range of pre-school experiences to which individual children can be exposed.

Child assessments

Child Measures at 3+ years
Around the third birthday, or up to a year later if the child entered pre-school provision after three, each child was assessed by a researcher on four cognitive tasks of BASII (Elliott et al 1996). These tasks were; verbal comprehension, naming vocabulary, knowledge of similarities seen in pictures, and block building. A profile of the child's social and behavioural adjustment (Hogan et al 1992), was completed by the member of the pre-school staff who knew the child best. If the child changed pre-school before school entry, he or she was assessed again.

Child Measures at start of P1
At school entry, a trained researcher administered a similar battery of cognitive assessments. These included pattern construction, verbal comprehension, naming vocabulary, knowledge of similarities seen in pictures and early number concepts. Knowledge of the alphabet, rhyme and alliteration (literacy measures) were also administered. These literacy measures were then computed to give an overall measure of pre-reading ability. The Year 1 teacher completed the social behavioural profile.

Child Measures at the End of P1
Children were again assessed individually at the end of their first year of primary school. The measures included early number concepts; BAS word reading, Marie Clay dictation and literacy measures. The primary 1 teacher again completed a similar social/behavioural profile to that at the beginning of P1.

Child Measures at the End of P2
Further assessments were made at the end of Year 2. In addition to NFER-NELSON standardised assessments of reading and mathematics, information on school progress, attendance and special needs were collected. Goodman's Social Behaviour Inventory was completed by the P2 teacher as a measure of the child's social behaviour.

Child Measures at the End of P3
At age 7, children were invited to report themselves on their attitudes to school. The Goodman's Social Behaviour Inventory was again completed by the P3 teacher.

Child Measures at the End of Key Stage 1
The end of Key Stage 1 results are collected directly from the school that each child attends

Measuring child/family characteristics known to have an impact on children's development

Parental interview
Shortly after the initial assessments of cognitive and social/behavioural development had been completed, one of the child's parents or guardians was interviewed. In the vast majority of cases the interview was with the child's mother. Parents were interviewed either in person when they were at the pre-school centre, or by telephone. The interview followed a semi-structured format with answers to most questions being coded into an established set of categories, and a small number of open-ended questions that were coded post hoc. The length of the interviews varied, depending on the complexity of the information to be collected, the conciseness of the parents and other factors. A typical interview might take between fifteen and forty minutes of the parent's time depending upon the complexity of the information supplied by the parent.

The interview contained questions dealing with the parents, the family, the child's health, development and behaviour, the child's activities in the home, the use of pre-school provision and the childcare history.

Information on individual 'child factors' such as gender, language and birth order was collected.

Family factors were also investigated. Parent interviews provided detailed information about parent education, occupation and employment history, family structure and pre-school attendance. In addition, details about the child's day care history, parental attitudes and involvement in educational activities (e.g. reading to child, teaching centre rhymes, television viewing etc) have been collected and analysed.

Pre-school Characteristics and Processes
Regional researchers interviewed centre managers on: group size, child staff ratio, staff training, aims, policies, curriculum, parental involvement, etc. 'Process' characteristics such as the day-to-day functioning within settings (e.g. child-staff interaction, child-child interaction, and structuring of children's activities) were also studied. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R, Harms, Clifford & Cryer 1998) and the Caregiver Interaction Scale (Arnett 1989) were also administered. The ECERS-R includes the following sub-scales:

- Space and furnishings
- Personal care routines
- Language reasoning
- Activities
- Interaction
- Programme structure
- Parents and staffing

In addition, four sub-scales, describing educational provision in terms of Language, Mathematics, Science and the Environment, and Diversity, known as the Early Childhood Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2003) were also used in each pre-school centre.

Case Studies
In addition to the quantitative data collected about children, their families and their pre-school centres, detailed qualitative data was collected using case studies. The case studies were chosen retrospectively on the basis of their quality as measured by the analyses of ECERS-R, ECERS-E and Inspection Report. This added the fine-grained detail to how processes within centres articulate, establish and maintain good practice. There are case studies of three pre-school centres in EPPNI.

The methodology of the EPPNI project is thus mixed. These detailed case studies use a variety of methods of data gathering, including documentary analysis, interviews and observations and the results will help to illuminate the characteristics of more successful pre-school centres and assist in generating guidance on good practice. Particular attention was paid to parent involvement, teaching and learning processes, child-adult interaction and social factors in learning. Inevitably there are difficulties associated with the retrospective study of process characteristics of centres and therefore it was important to examine field notes and pre-school centre histories to establish the extent of change during the study period.

The case studies are the subject of this technical paper.

Analytic Strategy
The EPPNI research was designed to enable the linking of three sets of data: information about children's attainment and development (at different points in time), information about children's personal, social and family characteristics (e.g. age, gender, SES etc), and information about pre-school experience (type of centre and its characteristics).

Longitudinal research is essential to enable the impact of child characteristics (personal, social and family) to be disentangled from any influence related to the characteristics of pre-school centre attended. Given the disparate nature of children's pre-school experience it is vital to ensure that the influences of age at assessment, amount and length of pre-school experience and pre-school attendance record are accounted for when estimating the effects of pre-school education. This information is also important in its own right to provide a detailed description of the range of pre-school provision experienced by different children and any differences in the patterns of provision used by specific groups of children/parents and their relationship to parents' labour market participation. Predictor variables for attainment at entry to primary school will include

prior attainment (verbal and non-verbal sub scales), social/emotional profiles, and child characteristics (personal, social and family).

The extent to which it is possible to explain (statistically) the variation in children's scores on the various measures assessed at entry to primary school will provide evidence about whether particular forms of pre-school provision have greater benefits in promoting development by the end of the pre-school period. Analyses will test out the impact of measures of pre-school process characteristics, such as the scores on various ECERS scales and pre-school centre structural characteristics such as ratios. This will provide evidence as to which measures are associated with better cognitive and social/behavioural outcomes in children.

Identifying continuing effects of pre-school centres until the end of Key Stage One

In the EPPNI research it is planned to explore the possible mid-term effects of pre-school provision on later progress and attainment in primary school until the end of Key Stage 1. Children's educational experiences are complex and that over time different institutions may influence cognitive and social/behavioural development for better or worse. This study will allow the relative strength of any continuing effects of pre-school attendance to be ascertained, in comparison with the primary school influence.

Summary
The EPPNI project studies the complicated effects of amount and type of pre-school provision experienced by children and their personal, social and family characteristics on subsequent progress and development. Assessment of both cognitive and social/behavioural outcomes are made. The relationships between pre-school characteristics and children's development can be explored. The results of these analyses and the findings from the qualitative case studies of selected centres can inform both policy and practice. Comparisons with the English study (EPPE) can further illuminate the interpretation of results.

Executive Summary

The Effective Pre-school Provision Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project is a longitudinal national research study, which follows the developmental progress of more than 830 children across Northern Ireland. Children (and their families) were recruited into the study when they were 3 years old, the age at which many enter their first pre-school setting. Those children, who were already enrolled in a group setting, entered the study at age 3+. Developmental progress was assessed regularly, beginning when children entered the study and continuing through school entry, at the end of Year 1, 2, 3 and end of Key Stage 1. Using statistical analyses the contribution of the pre-school setting to a child's cognitive and social/behavioural development and progress has been explored, having controlled for child factors (e.g. gender, health etc.) and family background characteristics (e.g. socio-economic status, mothers education etc.).

Detailed case studies using a variety of methods of data gathering, including documentary analysis, interviews and observations were included in the EPPNI project. The results will help to illuminate the characteristics of higher quality pre-school centres and assist in generating guidance on good practice. Particular attention was paid to parent involvement, teaching and learning processes, child-adult interaction and social factors in learning. There are case studies of three pre-school centres in EPPNI chosen retrospectively on the basis of their quality as measured by the analyses of ECERS-R, ECERS-E and Inspection Report.

In conducting the case studies a trained researcher, already familiar with the centres spent a minimum of two whole weeks in each centre. Case study data came from multiple sources to allow for triangulation by source and also by the method of data collection. It was only the range of documentary sources that have varied slightly between centres, for example some centres have more policy documents than others.

Key findings

Every effort was made to collect comparable data across the case studies and to provide a framework for analysis and reporting which would allow for comparison across centres. Case studies were compared in terms of their key quality characteristics, for example the pedagogy employed, the curriculum on offer, the ethos and the management and organisational strategies.

Management and staff

The data revealed that all three pre-school settings in which case studies were conducted had strong leadership and long serving staff. Technical Paper 3 indicated (Quinn et al, 2002) that there was a high turnover of staff in the private sector, however all of the managers and the majority of staff in these centres had been in post for over 3 years. In all of the settings the strong leadership was characterised by a strong philosophy for the setting, which was shared by everyone working in the setting.

A common theme in all three centres was that staff development and training was considered important and was encouraged and supported. There also appeared to be a high level of commitment to developing professional expertise as staff attended courses in their own time.

Staff at each of the three pre-school centres held a full range of qualifications with pre-school 23 (Nursery School, NS) being the most highly qualified in terms of staff. The role of the leader in each of the pre-schools included both administrative duties and the appointment of staff.

Within nursery schools/classes and reception groups/classes the legal minimum requirement is one adult to thirteen children, whilst a ratio of one adult to eight children is required for playgroups and private day nurseries. All three centres met and improved on the recommended adult: child staff ratios.

Ethos and Emotional Climate of the Settings

Perhaps most significantly, the case studies have shown how diverse early years settings are. They show that there is no 'level playing field' in terms of the training of staff, staff salaries and conditions of service, adult-child ratios, resources or accommodation. However common themes related to good quality provision emerged.

The nursery school settings were small with three or four members of staff. Private day nurseries however, were medium sized with 3-8 or more staff. All the centres on the whole had a warm, caring, safe, secure and supportive approach to their children. Children were generally treated with respect and the centres were warm and inviting places. Staff appeared calm and usually engaged well with the children. Resources and available space varied between type of centre, including the outdoor environments and equipment.

The atmosphere of all 3 centres appeared to be busy and active with children given the opportunities to engage in various activities including singing, dancing and construction etc. All the centres had detailed 'settling in' procedures, which aimed to help children settle into the centre in such a way as to minimise stress and anxiety. In all instances, children were provided with a climate in which staff related well to one another and to the children. Children and adults seemed to enjoy their time there and this was supported by the parental comments, which described, in many cases, the happiness of the children and the openness and warmth of the staff at the various centres. Parents appeared to be happy with their children's progress at all 3 centres with parents viewing the centres generally as warm and welcoming places, where children were treated with respect.

An emphasis was placed on treating children with respect and developing a sense of self-respect within the child and a sense of respect for others. The approach of the centres was to focus on encouraging good behaviour rather than punishing bad. Children were encouraged to share, take-turns and develop manners with positive behaviour being encouraged and praised. Any techniques designed to single out and humiliate individual children were not used and if children did misbehave they were dealt with on one to one terms, with staff getting down to the child's level.

Staff co-operation and relationships appeared to be supportive and professional. Staff collegiality appeared to be good and morale at all three centres appeared to be high.

The philosophy at each of the centres had a different focus. Pre-school 3 (Private Day Nursery, PDN) stressed a philosophy of partnership and care with emphasis placed on the importance of the relationship between staff and parents. At this centre there was a focus on the child as an individual and the importance of forming relationships in the

classroom. At pre-school 21 (Playgroup, PG) the manager stated that the centre was more of a care setting rather than educational. At this centre emphasis was placed upon play and developing the personalities of the children, rather than the academic side. In contrast pre-school 23 (NS) aimed to provide a 'rich and challenging' curriculum that would develop each child holistically and according to their own level, in a 'warm, positive, caring and colourful environment' with well qualified and committed staff providing a 'high standard of quality education.' At this centre, as in pre-school 3 (PDN) parents were seen as important partners and were actively encouraged to be involved 'at all levels of planning and representation.'

Parental partnership
The ways in which information was communicated to parents varied among the three centres and included, open days, prospectus, monthly newsletters, and a booklet outlining activities for the children, the role of parents and staff and the aims of the centre. A parent notice board was also utilised. At all three centres parents were made to feel that they could talk informally to staff about problems at any time.

At all three centres parents received informal reports concerning their child's progress from staff and at pre-school 3 (PDN) these informal reports were provided daily. At all three centres formal meetings were arranged if necessary.

Overall, parental attitudes towards these three centres were positive. Parents of children who attended these centres generally expressed the opinion that staff seemed to care about the children and that the children were safe and happy in their respective centre. Staff were usually described as caring and committed.

Pedagogy
Play was a central tenet of practice at all three centres, with a variety of activities being available for children. Play was held both indoors and outdoors, however, there was not as much outdoor play as would be appropriate at one of the centres. At all of the centres the quality of interactions was generally of high quality. The range of questioning to children was appropriate with both closed and open-ended questions being utilised. At all three centres opportunities to extend learning were taken.

The role of the staff varied from centre to centre. However, at all three centres it was the role of the staff to provide a safe, warm, loving environment where children could play and learn. At all centres the principal/centre manager was ultimately responsible for what happened at the centre. Children at all three centres generally worked at their own level and at their own pace using a wide variety of resources.

At two of the centres continuity and progression was ensured through the assessment of children at different stages throughout the year. These assessments gave staff a clear idea of what children were able to do and what they would do next. Pre-school 21 (PG) did not formally assess children and no record of children's progress was maintained. However, if a member of staff felt that a child was having problems with a given activity, the child's name was put on to a white board and it was the responsibility of all staff to observe the child's progress.

Independence was encouraged at all three centres with children being able to choose and carry out at least some activities on their own. Good manners, turn taking and sharing

were also encouraged at all centres. At all three centres social development appeared to take priority over intellectual development.

The Linked Study in England 1997-2003

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project is a linked project and is under the directorship of Professors Kathy Sylva, Edward Melhuish, Pam Sammons, and Iram Siraj-Blatchford. The study explores the characteristics of different kinds of early years provision and examines children's development in pre-school, and influences on their later adjustment and progress at primary school up to age 7 years. It will help to identify the aspects of pre-school provision that have a positive impact on children's attainment, progress, and development, and so provide guidance on good practice. The research involves 141 pre-school centres randomly selected throughout 5 regions of England. The study investigates all main types of pre-school provision attended by 3 to 4 year olds in England. The data from England and Northern Ireland offer opportunities for potentially useful comparisons.

Methodology for EPPE and EPPNI Case Studies
The selection of case studies differed between England and Northern Ireland.

In the EPPE project, the case studies were chosen retrospectively on the basis of analyses of their child outcome data. In other words, centers were grouped according to how well their children had progressed; given their own characteristics, the backgrounds they came from and their cognitive and social/behavioural assessments at the start of the study. Analyses of the quantitative data collected on every child in the study revealed that in some pre-school centres, children made better progress than expected given their baseline measures. These centers were identified as 'effective' centres.

Within the EPPNI project, the case studies were chosen retrospectively on the basis of their quality as measured by the analyses of Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale- Extension (ECERS-E) and Inspection Report. The centres that scored higher on these measures were identified as high 'quality' settings and were selected for case study analyses. Particular attention was paid to parent involvement, teaching and learning processes, child-adult interaction and social factors in learning.

Within both EPPNI and EPPE, the case studies conducted in these more high 'quality' or 'effective' centres have added the fine-grained detail showing how the processes within the centres articulate, establish and maintain good practice.

Some Findings From EPPE (Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B., Sammons, P. & Melhuish, E., 2003)

Parental partnership
The case studies indicated that where a special relationship in terms of shared *educational* aims has been developed with parents, and pedagogic efforts are made by parents at home to support children, sound learning can take place even in the absence of consistently good pedagogic practice in the pre-school setting. The excellent settings shared child-related information between parents and staff, and parents were often involved in decision making about their child's learning programme. This level of communication was particularly the case in private day nurseries. While settings
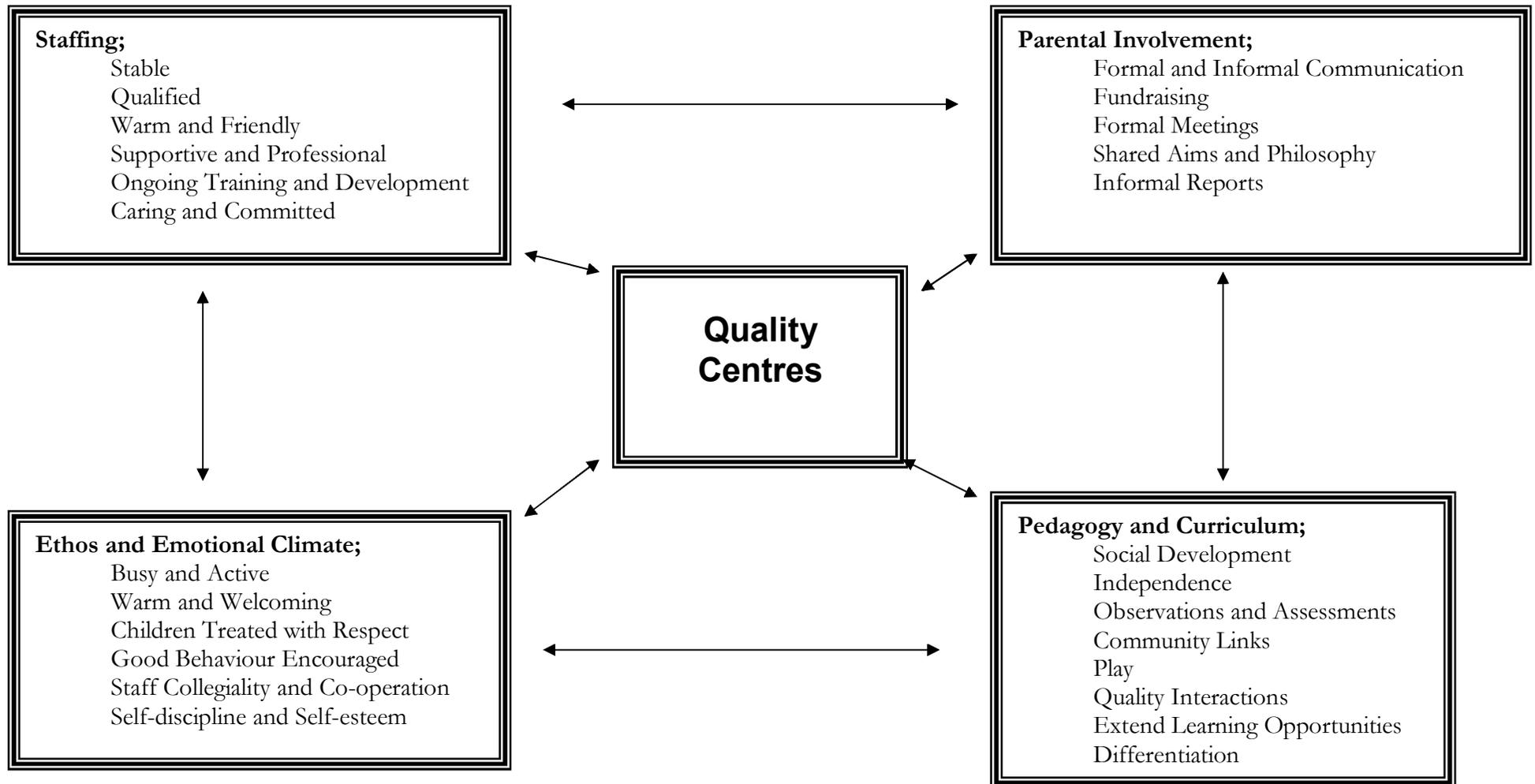
providing for the needs of children from the higher socio-economic groups benefited especially from this, the potential benefit of adopting a combined approach in settings serving more disadvantaged areas was also clear. In more disadvantaged areas, staff in settings had to be proactive in influencing and supporting the home education environment in order to support children's learning. The evidence suggests that the 'excellent' settings in disadvantaged areas recognised the importance of, and were pro-active in encouraging strong parental involvement in the educational process, by taking the time to share their curriculum, pedagogical strategies and educational aims with parents. They offered advice on how parents could complement this within the home learning environment.

Adult-child interactions

We found that the 'excellent' settings encouraged 'sustained shared thinking'. By this we mean an episode in which two or more individuals "work together" in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend 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 excellent early years practice, especially where this is also encouraged in the home through parent support.

In the 'excellent' of our case study 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 'modeling' was often combined with sustained periods of shared thinking, and that open-ended questioning was also associated with better cognitive achievement. However, open-ended questions made up only 5.1% of the questioning used in even these 'excellent' settings.

In the 'excellent' settings, the balance of who initiated the activities, staff or child, was very equal, revealing that the pedagogy of the excellent settings encouraged children to initiate activities as often as the staff. Also staff regularly extended child initiated activities, but did not dominate them. 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.

Staffing;
Stable
Qualified
Warm and Friendly
Supportive and Professional
Ongoing Training and Development
Caring and Committed

Parental Involvement;
Formal and Informal Communication
Fundraising
Formal Meetings
Shared Aims and Philosophy
Informal Reports

Quality Centres

Ethos and Emotional Climate;
Busy and Active
Warm and Welcoming
Children Treated with Respect
Good Behaviour Encouraged
Staff Collegiality and Co-operation
Self-discipline and Self-esteem

Pedagogy and Curriculum;
Social Development
Independence
Observations and Assessments
Community Links
Play
Quality Interactions
Extend Learning Opportunities
Differentiation

Introduction

This longitudinal study assesses the attainment and development of children followed from the age of 3 until the end of Key Stage 1. Over 700 children were recruited to the study during 1998 and 1999 from 80 pre-schools. The centres were randomly sampled, stratified by type of centre and geographical location. The centres were chosen to include a selection of all major types of pre-schools in Northern Ireland, including nursery schools and nursery classes, playgroups, private day nurseries, reception groups and reception classes. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to explore the effects of the pre-school experience on children's cognitive attainment and social/behavioural development at entry to school and any continuing effects on such outcomes up to 8 years of age. In addition to the effects of pre-school experience, the study investigates the contribution to children's development of individual and family characteristics such as gender, family size, parental education and employment.

The Effective Pre-school Provision Project Northern Ireland (EPPNI) is a study that identifies the 'value added' to children's developmental progress by the form of Early Childhood provision that they have experienced. In addition to controlling for the child's developmental level at entry to pre-school, EPPNI controls for the influence of the family and child characteristics when establishing the 'effectiveness' of each setting in its sample.

Methodology

Sample and data collection
To help illuminate the characteristics of more successful pre-school centres, detailed case studies were conducted using a variety of methods of data gathering, including documentary analysis, interviews and observations. There are case studies of three pre-school centres in EPPNI chosen retrospectively on the basis of their quality as measured by the analyses of Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales-Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998) Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales-Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2003) and Inspection Report. Particular attention was paid to parent involvement, teaching and learning processes, child-adult interaction and social factors in learning.

The data collected during the case studies included;

- Naturalistic observations, followed by discussion with staff
- Semi-structured interviews with parents and centre managers
- Documents such as policies, plans and information booklets

Since the EPPNI children had left the centres by the time of the case studies, (they had moved into primary school) it was necessary to ensure the centres selected had not changed drastically. In all three of the centres selected, the ECERS-R and E assessments were re-administered and the centres were only included if they achieved a similar or better score to that previously recorded. It was also important that centres were only included in the case study analyses if there had been no major management changes (same manager/deputy and senior management team), and that there were no difficult

circumstances associated with the centre around the time of the case study field work. (e.g. pending/recent inspection within one month).

The qualitative data that were collected were transcribed, 'cleaned' (i.e. anonymised), and then analysed.

This report details not only the conclusions drawn from the observations undertaken by researchers during their case study visits but also an analyses of documents provided by the centres themselves along with information from interviews undertaken with a range of centre personnel (including parents). Our aim has been to provide what Geertz (1973) has called a 'thick description' for all 3 case studies, which includes everything the reader needs to understand what is happening. Without this rich description of the cases it would be difficult for the reader to appreciate the uniqueness, diversity and richness of the data, or indeed, the practice and culture of the settings. All organisations, in this case early years settings, are complex and sometimes contradictory places, illuminating a range of practices, which can vary in quality. Only through reading the whole case can we appreciate the fuller picture of a centre's day-to-day life and the quality that the staff provides.

Individual Case Study Analyses

A case study was produced to document each of the 3 settings.

Sources of evidence

The data from each case study has been analysed to reveal a unique 'story' for each case study centre. The data come from multiple sources to allow for triangulation by source and also by the method of data collection. What managers and policy documents told us was triangulated with the observations of staff and children. A trained researcher spent between two and three weeks in each setting, where two members of staff were observed for two whole days, a sample of parents were interviewed from each setting, and research diaries were kept to collect vignettes of practice and to document any critical incidences. The centre manager was also interviewed towards the end of the case study. Similar core questions were asked of each manager and also questions related to issues, which had arisen throughout, were discussed. Documentary evidence was also collected for analysis and included detailed plans of the setting, which have not been reproduced in this report due to confidentiality and anonymity commitments. However physical space and resources were included in the analyses.

It should be noted the extent to which the range of sources of information included in the analyses varied across centres. For example, the sources obtained from the nursery school are more extensive compared to the playgroup, especially in the area of documentation, such as policies and specific documentation. Below is a list of possible sources of information.

Field notes
Inspection report
Manager interview
Adult/Child Interaction Scale
Interviews with parents
Vignettes
Critical episodes
Staff and general observations
Class lists
School Information Booklet for Parents and Visitors
Philosophy and aims document
Curriculum policy statement
Planning documents
- long-term
- staff weekly
- weekly
- specific (daily)
Parents' daily feedback sheet
Individual Child Tracking Observation Sheet
Interaction Screen document
Activity Evaluation Grid
Curriculum Audit Sheet
Behaviour Environment Checklist
Behaviour Environment Plan
Policy documents with particular reference to

- Behaviour
- Special Educational Needs
- Assessment
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Centre plans

Analysis

Every effort was made to collect comparable data and to provide a framework for analysis and reporting which was similar, so that centres could be compared in terms of their key quality characteristics, e.g. resources, the pedagogy they employ, the curriculum on offer, the ethos and the management and organisational strategies. As Miles and Huberman (1994) suggests that qualitative analysis consists of three concurrent areas of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis of these data from the case study centres was conducted using the following broad framework modeled on the procedures and analytical framework used by Siraj-Blatchford et al (2003):

1. CENTRE PROFILE
a) Accommodation, people, location
b) Funding, intake of children

2. STAFFING
a) Responsibilities
b) Retention
c) Relationships
d) Other Staff

3. MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP
a) Staff development
b) Training
c) Monitoring and Appraisal System

4. CLASSROOM ORGANISATION
a) Pupil organisation (age mix, grouping arrangements)
b) Layout
c) Resources
d) Outdoor provision

5. PARENT INVOLVEMENT
a) Communication to parents to help them understand the centre
b) Parents and the day-to-day life of the nursery
c) How parents are made to feel part of their child's education
d) What's expected of parents
e) Parent education

6. ETHOS
a) The atmosphere of the place for example:
    (i) The welcome
    (ii) The working climate for children
    (iii) The emotional climate for children (catering for gender, ethnicity and SENs expectations of behaviour)
    (iv) Staff co-operation / collegiality

(v) Support for staff
(vi) The centre philosophy
(vii) Ethos as portrayed through displays and booklets

7. CURRICULUM
a) Curriculum policies
b) Balance and breadth
c) Practitioner emphasis
d) Assessment
e) Curriculum planning, continuity and progression
f) The role of visits and visitors

8. PEDAGOGY
a) Practice
b) The quality of interaction
c) The role of play and direct instruction
d) The role of the teacher
e) Identifying children with SENs/equal opportunities
f) Ensuring continuity and progression
g) Developing dispositions

9. COMMUNITY OUTREACH

This framework has enabled the provision of what Geertz (1973) has called a thick description for each of the three case studies. In each case their story is told through the reading of each setting's policies, observed actions, organisation of the environment, priorities, philosophies and practices. One of each type of nursery school, playgroup and private day nursery was selected in order to reflect most of the types in the EPPNI study. None can be said to be typical of its type, nevertheless, the stories are compelling in their diversity. The case studies show that there is no 'level playing field' for providers in terms of type, nor in terms of their intake of children and their families, or even the resources available to them, the training of their staff or even the space that they inhabit. Much of this diversity may account for the analyses in later sections of the report.

The Caregiver Interaction Scale (Arnett 1989) showed a high degree of consistency in staff behaviour with a strong emphasis on positive responses to children and their emotional and learning needs. When the qualitative data were studied it was possible to confirm the quality of the interaction in that setting. The staff clearly enjoyed being with the children and engaged with them in a respectful and caring way, without criticism or harshness.

Three 'stories' of case study settings

In total there are 3 EPPNI case study centres; a private day nursery, a playgroup and a nursery school. Northern Ireland has distinctive educational arrangements: in particular, a lower starting age than both England and Wales and a single entry date to compulsory schooling in September each year. Arrangements for pre-school, therefore must take these factors into consideration (DENI 1998). Good quality pre-school education has important benefits for children, families, communities and society and the economy as a whole. Children who experience good pre-school education, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs, are better prepared for school and learn more quickly (DENI 1998).

All pre-school centres are expected to meet minimum quality standards. Providers in the grant aided education sector are required to conform to the standards set out in the relevant Education Regulations and DE Circulars. Other providers must meet the standards set out in Regulations and Guidance under the Children (NI) Order 1995 and be registered by the relevant Health and Social Services (HSS) Trust.

Specific staffing requirements exist in Northern Ireland legislation and regulations. An Adult: Child ratio of 2:26 is required for nursery classes and schools and should comprise of a qualified teacher and nursery assistant. For all other settings an adult: child ratio of 1:8 with at least half the staff holding a relevant qualification in education or childcare is necessary. Relevant childcare qualifications include National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2 and 3. Providers, other than nursery classes and schools, who are already required to employ a qualified teacher, must arrange support from either a qualified teacher or early years specialist (DENI 1998).

The following case studies are not meant to be generalisable of their type, however they do share many characteristics with their type and help to illuminate how case study analysis can show up degrees of difference e.g. in staffing, ratios, pedagogy etc. that the majority of children 3-4 years-of-age may experience during Pre-school in Northern Ireland. During the case study 'narratives' the source of data is referred to in brackets throughout.

Case Study Analyses

Three Case studies took place between 2001 and 2002 at different times of the academic year; the end of January and the first week of February; the first two weeks of December; and the last two weeks of June and the first week of July. The third case study was longer in duration than the other two as the leader of this pre-school returned from maternity leave at the end of June and the manager asked that she be included in the observations. For each case study, the data were reduced by analyzing documents, policies, detailed plans, field notes, observations of staff members, manager interview and 4 to7 parent interviews per case study lasting between 20-45 minutes depending on the information supplied. In each case study, the observations were of the most and least qualified member of staff and were conducted with the permission of the staff involved.

Centre Profiles

Centre profiles were quite different for the three individual case studies and are detailed below under headings; location, accommodation, catchment area, intake, admissions policy and funding. The purpose of describing the case studies together is to demonstrate the variation across pre-school types. As already stated there is no level playing field with regard to resources etc., yet all centres were described as offering a 'good' level provision based on the ECERS-R and ECERS-E scores and inspection report.

Location

The focus of case study 23 was a full-time nursery school (NS) purpose built in 1979. The school was situated in the middle of an inner city, working class and socially deprived housing estate. Nearby there was a feeder primary school, a secondary school, local shops and a library. Walls were graffiti covered and there were large security fences surrounding the schools and shopping areas. In recent years the area had been improved by the injection of new business, thereby creating new jobs. The Housing Executive who own and maintain the housing estate also made housing improvements. Centre 21 was a playgroup (PG), opened in 1980 that had been in operation for 22 years and was situated on the outskirts of a rural town. The focus of case study 3 was a private day nursery (PDN) in a newly restored Victorian house in the southeast of a city in Northern Ireland. It was 4/5 miles from the centre of the city and was set within a residential area of mostly privately owned houses (set back from a busy main road).

Accommodation

For centre 23 (NS) the building consisted of two classrooms, a kitchen (now used only as a servery), an office and a staff room. Toilets and washing facilities for the children led off from the classroom under study (Room 1) while a utility room, story room and the adult's washroom adjoined the other (Room 2) (detailed floor plans). The building was in need of attention as well as some internal improvements. New windows and central heating system were to be organised soon with funding granted from a project designed to improve the community (field notes). The playground was fairly small with both tarmac and grassed areas. There was also a garden for the children to use.

For centre 21 (PG), the setting comprised of a large purpose designed mobile consisting of a main play area and quiet room (which included a television). There was an area where the staff worked with the pre-school children on numbers and letters and other activities. There was also a 'messy' room, kitchen and an area where staff had tea, plus two adult sized toilets.

For centre 3 (PDN), the pre-school room within the centre consisted of two rooms knocked into one big room that was well planned by the staff to make good use of the space available. Access from the pre-school unit to the outdoor play area was via the backdoor of the centre.

Catchment area

At centre 23 (NS), the children came from working class families within the housing estate. Some attendees occasionally lived outside the catchment area although during the year of this case study all came from the local community (manager interview).

Centre 21 (PG) was situated in an area where there was a very high incidence of unemployment, much vandalism and single parent families. Approximately 5 children from single parent families that were known about attended the centre. However, some children were from stepfamilies and where the parents weren't married (manager interview).

Centre 3 (PDN) was situated in an area where parental employment was high with many from the professional/ managerial sector, with families from a middle class background.

Intake

According to the principal of centre 23 (NS), the school was designed originally for two full day classes of 26 children, however, at the time of the case study accommodated one full day class and two part-time sessions. This arrangement was in response to a 'social disadvantage' policy illustrated by the unemployment figures from the Statistics Branch of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which showed 8.9% of the total population of which 12.7% of men and 4.2% of women were unemployed. The centre admitted 78 children per year with 26 children from socially disadvantaged families in full-time places and the other 52 children split into two part-time classes. 52% of all children were entitled to free school meals. Almost all of these children attended full-time as 100% of the full-time class received this entitlement.

For centre 21 (PG), the opening time was 9.00am – 12.00 noon, Monday – Friday and it operated for approximately 40 weeks of the year. The pre-school centre could accommodate 24 children, but had only 23 enrolled, two places of which were reserved for children who had been referred by social services. However, there were no referred special needs children enrolled at that time. Fees were £12 per week. This fee was payable if the child was absent for any reason so that the place was held. There was a £5 registration fee. However, the centre did offer 2 reduced places each year and a flexible payment system for families of differing means.

Centre 3 (PDN) was able to accommodate 45 full time children at one time, but there were 64 children on the roll, including part time, full time and after school children. The after school unit was due to close in 2002. The legal adult:child ratio in this type of centre was 1:8. In this centre, the ratio was 1:5. If all the children were present along with the student nurse, the ratio was 1: 4. For centre 3 (PDN), fees were £107 per/week (full time), £72.50 per/week part time or £24 per/day. A 10% discount was given for a second child of the same family being at the centre.

Admissions policy

Centre 23 (NS) followed a strict set of criteria from which the children were selected for admission. Top priority was given to four year olds whose parents were in receipt of Income Support or Job Seekers Allowance followed by three-year olds with parents in similar circumstances. Next admitted were four-year olds and three-year olds of parents who did not receive such monetary support. Remaining places were then allocated in the

following order: children who had statements of Special Educational Needs or in the process of statutory assessment, children who had a family association with the school proceeding with the eldest child and following in chronological order. Part time admissions operated according to the same criteria as for full-time places. Finally, priority was given to children who were normally residents of Northern Ireland over those who were not. Application forms were sent to parents in the January of the year the child was due to start and places were allocated by the Selection Committee for Admissions according to the selection criteria. This committee consisted of the Principal and members of the governing body. Forms included all relevant information in relation to the application, including the child's birth certificate and if applicable stamped by the Social Security office to confirm eligibility. Children started the school year in September. Originally the admissions policy assigned part-time places to the younger children while the older children in their immediate pre-school year were given full-time places. With the operating policy at the time, both full-time and part-time classes contained a mixed age range. The school welcomed all children irrespective of their race, religion or disability and had an excellent reputation in the local community (policy documents).

The aim of centre 21 (PG) was to provide a place for every child/family who requested it. In the result of there being a shortage, priority was given to parents who required the service because they worked. The centre had an admissions policy that stated 'Children younger than 3 may be accepted at the discretion of the centre leader and social services'. However they appeared to operate on a first come first serve basis.

Centre 3 (PDN) was a private sector organization and had no admissions policy as the list was closed due to oversubscription and lack of room for more children.

Funding
Centre 23 (NS) received 100% of its funding from the Education and Library Board (ELB). The annual salaries of the Principal and the class teacher were above 25K and between 20K and 25K respectively, while the nursery assistants were both paid within the same band of between 12K and 16K. Centre 21(PG) was a registered charitable organisation. The majority of funding appeared to come from the Lottery. Centre 3 (PDN) was privately funded by the parents.

Staffing

Responsibilities
In Centre 23 (NS) the Principal and one full time teacher were supported by two full time nursery assistants, working one in each class. All staff were of White UK heritage and their ages ranged between 35 and 50 years. Both teachers were qualified to degree level (B.Ed) while the Principal also held an Advanced Diploma in Advanced Studies of Education (DASE). At the time of the case study, the Assistant teacher was attending the Advanced Diploma course at Queens University, Belfast. The nursery assistant supporting the Principal in Room 1 held a B-Tec Certificate in Nursery Nursing while the other held a Higher National Certificate in Early Childhood Studies. Both nursery assistants held Northern Ireland Pre-school Playgroups Association (NIPPA) Advanced Pre-school Playgroup qualifications (field notes and manager interview).

At centre 21 (PG) there were 6 members of staff who worked directly with the children. The staff were all female. The centre leader was only involved with the children for 3 days a week, with the other 2 days given up to administration. When the centre leader wasn't present, the responsibility rested on the centre assistant who had been there the

longest. The staff consisted of the centre leader (NIPPA Dip), 2 fulltime assistants (NVQ3), 1 part time assistant (NVQ2) and 2 students.

At centre 3 (PDN) there were six members of staff who worked directly with the pre-school children, a manager (who helped out with the pre-school children), an assistant manager, a pre-school group leader, two full time members of staff and one part time member of staff. All of the staff was female aged 20-42 years old. All senior staff working with the pre-school children (manager, assistant manager and group leader) held a minimum Diploma in Childcare and Education previously known as NNEB childcare qualification.

In each setting, the managers had overall responsibility. The managers were responsible for all the organisational and administrative decisions to be made in relation to the running of the centres. They were also responsible for the budget, creating and implementing policies and staff support. They were responsible for ensuring that the plans were implemented. They dealt with interviews for a place in the centre for children, interviews for staff, and all contractual issues concerning the staff. In some cases, the manager and the pre-school group leader dealt with issues including planning and curriculum jointly. They were also responsible for informing parents of everything that was going on. According to one case study's manager interview 'Responsibilities were shared. Some staff took a few children at a time, for example, to do colours etc, and there was shared responsibility for cleaning.' However, it was noted during observations that responsibility for the children was not always shared evenly as in one incident an assistant was left alone with 10 children and when offered assistance, she declined. At one centre, the cleaning was usually done on a Friday but as the centre leader was absent on this day she was unable to help with cleaning. It was also noted the centre leader organised the children but spent limited time actually playing with the children (observation).

Retention of staff
On the whole staffing was very stable. The centres didn't seem to have any major problems in appointing and retaining staff. However, in one of the centres, although retaining staff was not a problem, the manager saw finding substitutes as a major problem. Filling staff vacancies, especially with appropriately trained staff was also seen as a problem, but not as a major one. Two centres also employed ancillary staff, including a peripatetic French teacher and a gardener.

Other staff
Across the three settings it was not unusual to see work experience students from the local FE college and secondary school as well as nursing, NVQ, NNEB and Job Skills students on placement. Other professionals also provided regular input, such as the educational psychologist, the speech therapist, the dentist and dental hygienist, occupational and physiotherapists and the behaviour support team. Students from overseas who came to observe were also welcome.

Relationships
It would appear there were good inter staff and staff/children relationships, with the research officer describing them as 'warm' and 'encouraging' (observations in all three settings). The staff also appeared to have a mutual respect for each other. "Team work and relationships were very important" (Manager interview). Evidence from all settings suggested staff absences were rare and relationships appeared excellent. All staff regularly missed their breaks voluntarily to respond to the needs and wishes of the children. It also appeared that the staff had a good relationship with the parents, with the parents feeling

that they could raise any issue with the staff or ask for their opinions/advice on different issues. E.g. Parent 1: "When boy 1 was in toddlers, I asked the staff what the process was for potty training. Whenever I thought he was ready, I asked the girls *(pre-school workers)* if they thought he was ready and they said yes…The girls were also able to give me practical advice like, "Don't buy him the pull up nappies.""

Management and Leadership

Staff development and training
Staff development and training was mixed and appeared to depend on the type of setting. At centre 23 (NS), the extensive In Service Education and Training (INSET) record suggested that staff training and development was encouraged and supported. Furthermore the record indicated a high level of commitment in developing professional expertise especially as staff attended courses in their own time. Decisions over content were made according to individual requests and the perceived needs of the centre. The training records for the two teaching staff showed an appropriate balance of curriculum, pastoral and management training.   The Principal also delivered external training to teachers in classroom management and the nursery curriculum and as a trained facilitator for the 'Family Caring Trust Parenting Programme' planned and delivered courses in parenting at the centre. As a newly elected chairperson of the local branch of 'Early Education' she also organised training for members of the association (field notes and manager interview).

Particular to staff development and training at centre 21 (PG), all the staff were trained in first aid, safety and child protection, which was on going at the time of the case study. There were 2 certificates from NIPPA displayed on the wall, valuing early childhood (99 & 00). When the staff needed guidance they contacted a NIPPA advisor, and also attended refresher courses which helped to keep them up to date with 'Child order' etc. (Centre manager interview). This complied with their policy on staff and volunteer development training. Although regular staff meetings were mentioned in the centre policies, the research officer observed no evidence of this during her short visit. In the original centre manager interview it was stated the staff only had meetings when required.

In relation to staff development and training at centre 3 (PDN), the manager stated that most new members of staff already had some childcare qualifications when they entered the centre. When they first came in, they were given an induction day when they were shown each of the rooms, introduced to staff, policies and procedures with the manager. The group leaders then took over and explained about the needs of each child, what stage of development they were at etc. This was done in a friendly, informal basis. If the centre manager felt that staff were not well enough qualified, the assistant manager was an NVQ assessor and could put staff through their NVQs. The centre manager also had inset training throughout the year for first aid, child protection etc. She would also send staff to day courses outside of the centre if she felt that they would be valuable.

Monitoring and appraisal systems
In centre 23 (NS) a new written staff appraisal had been introduced. Once a year, the, manager spent a full day in each classroom, she then provided written feedback to staff. The report commented on the pre-school workers performance as an 'individual' and as a member of 'team'. In between these formal appraisals, the manager had informal chats with members of staff concerning their progress. New staff were given a three-month probationary period during which the manager, if she was not happy with their performance, could ask them to leave. Alternatively, if the new member of staff was not happy with the centre, s/he could leave without giving the manager any notice.

Conditions of service at the centre for the staff included written job descriptions and contracts, paid preparation/planning time, paid release, paid holidays, time for training and expenses to cover workshops. However, staff did not get paid for attendance at staff meetings that were usually run after hours. They also did not have access to a pension plan, although they were in the process of putting in place a facility for the staff to join one through the company (interview).

Conversely, in two of the centres, no specific system of appraisal and monitoring of the employees was observed. It appeared to be left up to the judgment of the centre leaders. In one of the centres, this issue was being addressed by the leader with her receiving training and setting her intentions in the School Development Plan and in the other setting, in the staff and volunteer development policy, it was stated the staff would be trained to the highest level and skills would be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Also the training needs of staff would be monitored regularly.

Classroom Organisation

Pupil Organisation

The pupil organisation between the 3 centres was quite different. At centre 23 (NS), the Principal worked with the full-time children who attended from 9.00am - 1.15/1.30pm in Room 1. The part-time children were housed in Room 2 and taught by the Assistant Teacher. These separate morning and afternoon sessions ran between 9.00 – 11.15/11.30 am and 12.30 – 2.45/3.00pm. The ends of the sessions were 'staggered' to ensure that parents had an opportunity to come and see their children at play or to speak with the teacher if necessary (school profile). At centres 21 (PG) and 3 (PDN) there were no assignation of specific children to particular assistants or rooms (register).

Age mix
At centre 23 (NS), the ages of the children ranged between 3yrs 2 months and 4yrs 2 months. At centre 21 (PG), the age range spanned from 2yrs 4 mths to 3yrs 11 months. At centre 3 (PDN), the age range of the children was between 6 weeks and 9 years old. This range was due to change to 6 weeks to 5 years when the after school unit closed.

Grouping arrangement
Practice observed showed children worked in a variety of self-chosen groups according to personal interests both indoors and out. They also worked in small groups on adult-directed activities where they worked individually and/or received individual attention. There were also regular whole group sessions for stories and rhymes at the end of the day (field notes).

Room layout
There was a great deal of variation in how the centres laid out their rooms for activities. Centre 3 (PDN) and centre 21 (PG) had limited scope because of the space available to them. Centre 23 (NS) was able to make the most creative use of space, for instance Room 1 was arranged to provide about twelve separate interest areas and tables with a good range of activities on offer. These included - a book area with chairs for reading, a home corner with dressing-up box, a large dry sand area and a smaller dry sand/beans/pulses tray, an office which also became a farm or construction site with vehicles, an arts and crafts table, a table for dough, a water tray, an area for blocks and tubes of all sizes, a construction table and a small indoor area for physical play. The space available seemed to have been considered thoughtfully to enable easy access and variety. However, as the water facilities were separated within the cloakroom area, water play and

other messy activities were somewhat restricted (plans and school profile). From the observational notes it appeared there were certain areas of the room that were under utilised. In particular the 'Home Corner' was poorly equipped and fairly meagre.

In centre 3 (PDN), the area was essentially split into two main sections: the 'messy' play area (water, sand etc.) and the 'clean' play area (field notes). There was a lack of tabletop space for construction activities in the clean play area and the children were not allowed into the messy area except at designated times (field notes).

Outdoor provision
Outdoor provision at the centres again showed considerable variation. The most popular provision included:
- Wheeled vehicles
- Wooden clatter bridge
- Bird tables, play houses and picnic tables
- See –saws, slides, climbing frames and sandpits
- Hoops and basketballs

- In the summer time many of the indoor resources were taken outside e.g. sand, water, painting, blocks etc. The use of grassed areas was interesting with areas where children could run around being set alongside of garden plots where children could plant bulbs and seedlings. One centre (3, PDN) had a wooded area where the children were allowed to explore.

Resources
Generally across all three centres resources were plentiful both inside and out and all the equipment appeared to be in reasonably good order. Most centres had provision for -
- Creative/Aesthetic Development
- Early Mathematical Experiences
- Language Development
- Early Experiences in Science and Technology
- Knowledge and Appreciation of the Environment
- Reading
- Imaginative play
- Large construction play
- Physical development
- Personal, social and emotional development
- Music

Apart from a lack of soft toys and furnishings for relaxation and comfort, ECERS scores showed that general provision in terms of furniture, indoor space and arrangement was of a high standard.

Even in the centres where the resources were not vast, materials were accessible and well organised in that they were at child level. There seemed, in some centres, to be an emphasis on resources for 'construction' over those that fostered creative play. In addition access to some equipment was predetermined by the pre-school workers who laid out particular resources/activities before session times.

Parental Involvement

Communication to parents to help them understand the centre
There were some interesting practices seen in the three centres regarding communication with parents, particularly the methods used to help parents understand how the centre functioned and their role within this.

Booklets/Prospectuses
Not all centres provided an Introduction Booklet/Prospectus. Where booklets/prospectuses were provided, their somewhat formal tone nevertheless conveyed all relevant information in relation to the administration and organization of the centre. Some of the booklets covered legal requirements, information on the importance and benefits of learning through play, the aims of the centre and the roles and responsibilities of staff and parents.

Newsletters and notes
Newsletters were used in the pre-school centres as a family- friendly form of regular communication to parents. They reminded parents of events, kept them informed about what topics their children were covering and often contained information to parents about how they could support their child's learning at home (i.e. information on songs and rhymes). Most centres also sent personalised notes home with information relating to a specific class or child.

Pre-enrolment visits
It was usual for prospective parents to be shown around the centre. Although sometimes formal, these visits provided opportunities for parents to ask questions and meet the staff. They also provided a forum for parents to talk candidly about their own child's temperament, eating habits etc. as well as their opinions on discipline.

Private meetings
All centres encouraged parents to chat on an informal basis (when picking up or dropping off children) or to make a private appointment if they had a concern or worry.

Notice boards
Notice boards were used to communicate with parents and often contained information about Northern Ireland Pre-school Playgroups Association (NIPPA).

Questionnaires
One centre (PDN) provided parents with a questionnaire at the annual parents' meeting. The questionnaire, which was anonymous enabled parents to voice any opinions or concerns. The results of this questionnaire were published in report form and distributed to parents.

Parents and the day-to-day life of the centre
The case studies documented a number of ways in which pre-school staff tried to involve parents in the day-to-day life of their centre. Parents were more likely to participate (i.e. come in and talk to children about their jobs, extend the curriculum or make costumes etc.) when they felt the staff were non-judgmental and provided informal opportunities to chat without parents feeling they were in the way.

Parents welcomed opportunities to stay with their children during the settling in period. Other opportunities for involvement included fundraising, outings and social events.

Parents and their child's education
Practices in reporting children's progress to parents varied across centres. Parents seemed to value staff monitoring children's progress on a daily basis and taking the time to talk to them at the end of the day. Other means of reporting were monthly developmental checklists, which were shown to parents and end of year reports. It was common to see children's work being sent home at the end of a week or at the end of term.

The research saw invitations to parents to attend Open Evenings to examine the centre's resources and become familiar with the environment, as well as talk to pre-school staff about their child's progress. There was evidence that Open Evenings were arranged so that parents were able to have a private meeting with their child's key pre-school worker. Parents often had to sign up in advance for Open Evening sessions.

In relation to curriculum and planning there was evidence of parents being given a copy of the curriculum sheets telling them what their child will be doing and giving suggestions of how this can be followed up at home.

Formal monitoring and evaluating sheets were also used to record children's progress and these were shared with parents. These sheets/checklist gave parents information on a child's physical, personal and social development, as well as information on development 'milestones' (e.g. sitting up).

An interesting method of keeping parents informed about education was specific parents' evenings that featured an aspect of learning. For instance, one centre held a 'back to play night' when parents were invited to come along for an evening. Toys were laid out and the staff stood back and let the parents play. Feedback from parents suggested that the evening had enabled them to better understand what their children were doing at the centre. They also began to understand the learning that could take place through play (centre manager interview).

What's expected of parents
Practice observed at the 3 centres revealed what was expected of parents at enrolment, varied enormously. In some centres a great deal of family background information was required such as incomes and Social Benefits. In addition parents were also asked to provide information about their child's personal and medical details including previous pre-school experience and the child's current feelings about attending full time nursery school.

There was evidence that centres also expected (or encouraged parents) to:
- Consider how their own behaviour could best support their children
- Read monthly newsletters and become involved in the centre's events
- Contribute (by attendance or monetary contributions) to events (such a outings, parties, bulb growing and cookery)
- Accept the school's approach to behaviour management and support its implementation. This may also mean employing similar methods within the home in accordance with advice from the staff.

Parental attitudes towards the centre
Parental attitudes were generally positive from all case studies with parents reporting that their children seemed to benefit from attendance at the centre (parent interviews). The major benefits that parents identified in their children were increasing independence,

calming down, becoming more co-operative and sociable and acquiring more mature eating habits. There was a common feeling that pre-school staff cared about their children. Parents felt confident leaving their children in pre-school assured that they would be happy and treated well. They felt that the patience and commitment of the staff and their ability to work with children were important contributions to the success of their children.

One of the aims and objectives of two of the centres was to provide a good balance between care and education, and to provide a good all round curriculum. The majority of parents agreed that the child's social and personal development within a loving, caring and safe environment took precedence over the academic side of things such as reading etc. When asked 'What do you think is important in good quality child care education?' the centre manager of one centre replied ' All play programmes will be allowed to nurture feelings of security, for each child to respect the feelings of others and to be able to form friendships, learn manners, and to derive a positive self concept. These aims were reiterated in the replies of the parents when asked 'What do your children get out of going to ----?' One parent replied 'Quite simply the children are happy here – because they feel safe and secure'.

Where parents expressed negative views of one of the centres it tended to focus on the lack of space for quiet reading areas and storage as well as the length of the part-time sessions, which were regarded as too short (parent interviews).

Parent education
Centres varied in their capacity to provide education for parents from regular workshops and courses provided to none offered. The most innovative practice observed at one centre was courses and workshops set up for parents on a variety of child-centred issues including curriculum matters. In addition the Principal regularly ran a seven-week Barnardo's Family Care Trust parenting programme. The Principal had plans to encourage parents to spend more time in the classrooms to observe what was going on with a view to increasing their understanding and interest in the learning process. At another centre, if funding permitted, the centre held a 'Veritas' parenting programme, which was held one night per/week for seven weeks. During this programme, parents could come and share their ideas and situations with other parents. The centre manager claimed that the group often became quite close and exchanged thoughts about what had happened to them in certain situations etc. They also shared ideas about how to deal with children (centre manager interview).

Ethos

The atmosphere of the place
The atmosphere was welcoming at all 3 centres. At centre 23 (NS), security has always been an issue for the school as it was built at the height of 'the troubles' and has had to function within a nationalist community that has, at times, been highly volatile. The large security fence surrounding the centre was not a welcoming symbol, especially as everyone must access the building via an inner security gate. However, the entrance of the school was bright, colourful and welcoming. Displays showed work relating to the current theme or topic and there were photographs and a notice board for parents (field notes). The researcher's observations suggested that children and adults alike appeared to enjoy their time at the school and parents were happy to leave their children. The children appeared happy, excited and busy. They showed pride in their work and engaged in activities with sustained concentration and perseverance. There seemed to be a strong sense of caring for each other in the way that the children included one another in their

activities and made gifts of their work to adults or other children. The centre appeared to be held in high regard not only by the community but also by other professionals and received many visitors. It was a popular place for students from a variety of courses (see other staff) to be placed as part of their training.

Similarly at centre 21 (PG), the researcher's field notes suggested that the centre offered a warm welcome to children and parents. Parents who wished to stay to help a child to settle in were welcome to do so and reported feeling comfortable enough to do this (parent interview). The stated ethos of the centre was, 'to provide a secure, safe, stimulating and friendly environment for the children (manager interview), and the centre aimed, 'to give each child a positive sense of themselves' (manager interview). The centre also aimed to enable children to recognise their own needs and realise that the needs of others may be different.

A standard statement from centre 23 (NS) stated that, 'All children, in partnership with parents, who attend this centre, will be developed physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially to their maximum potential within a safe and loving environment.' The observations tended to support this statement, describing a busy environment with children partaking in a wide variety of activities including water and sand play, dressing-up, floor puzzles and painting and drawing. Parents also felt that the above statement was proved true, with parents describing the environment as 'a very loving' one where their children were 'loved and stimulated'. The centre manager described the ethos of the centre as, 'a philosophy of partnership and care' (taped interview). The centre manager claimed that s/he and the centre staff followed through the parents' ideas on how their children should be brought up, even if they did not agree with the parent's wishes. The manager believed that it is important, '…never to forget that they (the children) are not ours and that they belong to the parents and whatever they want, we have to do'. This centre was non-denominational and was located in a 'mixed area', with staff having varying religious backgrounds. Because of the current politico-religious situation in Northern Ireland, the centre manager viewed religion as a 'dodgy area', and claimed that the only aspect that the centre did not cater for is spiritual. However, the centre has provided children with some experience of religions, which are not commonly found in Northern Ireland. For example, at one time the centre employed a member of staff who was Jewish. She took the opportunity to teach the children about Hanukah, and the children then celebrated Hanukah, as well as Christmas. At the time of the case study, the centre employed a member of staff who had a Muslim background, and she was asked to teach the pre-schoolers about Ramadan.

The working climate for the children
Centre 23 (NS) claimed that they, '…endeavour to ensure that each child is provided with the individual stimulation required to increase his/her potential for physical, intellectual, emotional and social development', and many parents felt that this individual stimulation was provided. This seemed to be the case for all three centres. At one of the centres, the timetable suggested a busy routine of free play occurring simultaneously with a variety of adult directed activities. There were also regular times when the children were directed as a whole class for Stories and Rhymes, PE, Music and Movement and Ring Games. Outdoor play was confined to 40 minutes during the day separated into two sessions of 25 and 15 minutes. If the weather was bad the children tended not to go out but played in an inadequately small entrance area (school timetables).

On the other hand, the working climate of the children may have been affected negatively by the regular interruptions and absences incurred by the leader in carrying out her role as manager and classroom teacher. Classroom observations recorded regular

interruptions from the telephone and visitors that could have marred continuity. In addition supply cover was regularly used for absences for meetings and training that as a manager and policy maker the leader was obliged to attend. Evidence suggested that in the cases where a supply teacher covered, the quality of the education was not so high (observations). Otherwise, adults appeared to use every opportunity to further learning, generally in the form of introducing new vocabulary and offering explanations in their ordinary everyday dealings with the children, for example, introducing positional and mathematical concepts such as opposite, beside, number of sides/corners to the tray, during communal lunch times. This approach could have been viewed negatively and could seem like a constant running commentary that was not conducive to either capturing attention or developing careful listening. However observations and field notes suggested new vocabulary and concepts were introduced naturally as part of ongoing conversation. For example, at lunchtime, Boy 1 (4 years 0 months), "I want to sit beside Girl 1" (who he is in love with and is going to marry). Principal "Well Girl 1 is sitting beside Boy 2, who are you sitting beside?" "Look Girl 1 is behind you".

Apart from the confines of the daily routines and timetable it seemed clear to suggest that children could exercise autonomy in their choice of activity and could change its direction if they wish. For example, during free play some of the children dressed up in the nativity costumes and asked if they could do the play. The leader came over and did an impromptu Christmas play.

At centre 21 (PG) the researcher found evidence that the children had opportunities for music, singing, dance, painting and drawing. There was also evidence of tactile science activity i.e. making play dough, where the children had the chance to learn about changing properties and discuss colour changes. The centre also placed a strong emphasis on the provision of construction activities. The craft tasks included making and painting a large Santa Claus. However, field notes also suggest that this may have been at the expense of some outdoor activity as children were limited in their opportunities to participate in gross motor/ physical play either outdoors or indoors.

Research observations saw evidence of both free choice play by the children and adult led play in the case study settings. Children were allowed to choose the activities in which they participated. However, occasionally these activities were limited by the resources that the staff chose to make available.

The working climate could on occasions, have appeared noisy and boisterous. There were however, other situations where play did appear to be very productive with children focusing on a given task and seeing it through to completion (observation notes).

The emotional climate for the children
Care was taken at all three settings to provide a safe emotional climate for the children. Evidence from one centre showed it was clear that the process of settling-in had been given some sensitive thought and designed to minimise anxiety and stress. Policy for settling in the full-time children began in the June before the new academic year when parents and children were invited into the school for an Open Day. Parents received the school booklet during the summer holidays with the final details and settling-in taking place during the first half of the Autumn Term. The class was divided into morning and afternoon sessions to which each received 6 children at the beginning of the first week. This was followed by 4 more children coming to each session during the next week and a final 3 children in the third. This meant that while the numbers slowly increase from 6 to 13 the children were experiencing just half a day. This pattern continued during week 4 when sessions remained the same with 13 children attending either morning or afternoon

sessions. Finally, at the beginning of week 5 the two sessions amalgamated to form the complete full-time class of 26 (documentation).

The children enjoyed a climate where staff related to one another well and worked successfully as a team. They also regarded parents as partners and encouraged them to participate in workshops and courses run by the school. Parents were satisfied with the education their children received, admired the commitment of the staff and were appreciative of the efforts made to develop their parenting skills and knowledge of the learning process. Thus relationships between the adults involved were good and stable ensuring a comfortable and secure environment for the children at the centre. The children themselves were treated equally with respect and dignity and it was significant that during the two-week case study a raised voice by an adult was never heard. They were also given plenty of praise and encouragement (observations and parent interviews). At another centre, praise appeared to be used to increase children's self-esteem and to reinforce appropriate behaviour. For example: Teacher 1 gave out toast and praised each child as they said 'thank you'. Children were also praised for their performance in play and knowledge of numbers, colours, songs etc (observation notes).

The centre manager of centre 3 (PDN) felt that an extremely important element of a child's emotional and social development was the ability to form a relationship. Within the centre, there was a big priority on children having respect for each other, being kind to each other and respecting teachers. This was seen in the emphasis placed on sharing and manners. The centre manager believed that, '…if a child is happy and has a friend that they can trust and get on with, the learning comes with it'. She also believed that if a member of staff was trying to teach a child through play and they were nervous or didn't feel like part of a group, they would not learn effectively. 'I think the child's emotional state is the utmost of priority with our group, and then after that everything falls into place'.

Behaviour
At all centres, it seemed that the behaviour of the children was exceptionally good with very few cases where any discipline was necessary. When children did need guidance with their behaviour the adults spoke respectfully and quietly to them on a one to one basis. Evidence suggests this strategy was very effective (observations). However, there was one incident in which two boys where fighting over a tractor. Instead of a member of staff asking who started the fight or why it was started, the tractor was simply taken away from both boys (observation notes).

Encouraging positive behaviour was valued in all three centres. It was believed that developing self-respect in each child and respect for others underpinned the climate for good behaviour. It was also clear that no child would ever be subject to ridicule or embarrassment and the development of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-discipline were also regarded as important components in this approach. Field notes suggested that children were encouraged to share, take turns and be nice to each other. When children did behave in unacceptable ways physical punishment was neither used nor threatened. The intention of the staff was to create an atmosphere of calm where differences could be discussed and resolved as they arise and it would seem from the evidence that this was common practice.

It was assumed that misunderstandings and poor behaviour patterns were caused by the child's developmental inability to see the point of view of others. Evidence from one of the centres showed that it did not subscribe to implementing rules but preferred to respond with immediacy to each individual situation aiming to develop greater

understanding of the consequences of particular actions. There was also an understanding of the importance of adults modeling the behaviour and qualities they wanted the children to develop.

Parents were kept informed if any particular difficulties arose and were expected to adopt similar approaches at home following advice from the staff in order to maintain consistency (manager interview, documentation).

Centre 21 (PG) provided the research officer with a behaviour policy which stated, 'We believe that children and adults flourish best in an ordered environment in which everyone knows what is expected of them and children are free to develop their play and learning without fear of being hurt or hindered by anyone else.' However there was little evidence in the field notes to suggest the existence of an ordered environment within the centre. Children were allowed to choose which activities they participated in and could leave an activity at any time. They were, however, free to develop their play and learning without fear of being hurt or hindered by anyone else.

Evidence from centre 21 (PDN) showed that the centre manager felt that it was very important to help children develop a positive self-concept. This was reflected in the method of discipline employed in the centre. While the centre manager stated that there was no formal behaviour policy as such, a key objective for staff was that, 'staff will deal with adverse behaviour in a positive manner, and in association with parents'. The centre manager viewed the staff's style of discipline as extremely important. The view at the centre was that it was essential that children are disciplined in a loving manner and that reinforcing good behaviour and ignoring bad is much more effective. This view of discipline was evident in the observation field notes. E.g. Teacher 1: 'I'm only taking boys and girls outside who are sitting in their seats.' The children rushed to their seats but it took too long and they begin to get up again. Teacher 1 then told those children who are seated to line up at the door and five boys and four girls were taken outside. Thus, this member of staff reinforced good behaviour and ignored the bad. Appropriate behaviour was rewarded and encouraged through praise, which was used in abundance at this centre. For example, Boy 1's (M, 4yrs, 9mths) behaviour was a cause for concern, so the teacher encouraged good behaviour saying, 'Boy 1, you are one of my big pre-schoolers, could you help show the younger ones how to be good?' This was also an example of peer teaching, whereby the children learned from example.

Special needs
Special needs policies and information for parents were good in parts but could be improved in some cases. At centre 23 (NS), the Principal, who was the SENCO, referred children following parental permission, directly to the clinical medical officer, speech therapist, educational psychologist and/or any other specialist. At the time of the case study there were three children at the centre with identified special needs. One child was profoundly deaf and one had spina bifida. These two children shared a special needs assistant. The third child had been diagnosed as having Asperger's Syndrome and so was being monitored according to SEN practice. Although, the prospectus informed parents of the processes involved with special educational needs in some detail the language, however, was presented in a tone and style that was formal and professional and lacked the support expected from an early years setting to parents who might need support coping when presented with such circumstances.

At centre 21 (PG), the special needs policy of the centre stated that, 'The centre and staff will accommodate all children with special needs as far as they are able, taking equipment and premises into consideration.' However improvement was required as there was no

ramp for wheelchair access, and there was no disabled toilet (observation notes). The policy claimed that a special needs worker dealt with 'slightly impaired' children (speech, hearing problems etc). Children with special needs were identified through observation and by parents (observation notes). If it was thought that there was a possibility that a child may have some special needs, s/he was observed by a member of staff throughout a session to assess any difficulties that were then reported as necessary (special needs policy). There was a designated special needs teacher within the centre, however, there were no children with special needs this year (observation notes). During, the year prior to the case study there was a child whose mother was deaf and dumb, so the special needs teacher learnt sign language and the child showed the rest of the group how to sign some words.

Centre 3 (PDN) had no children with special needs at the time of the case study. However, there were plans to admit children with special needs in the future and the centre also had a system in place for identifying children with special needs. Special needs would be identified through close observation, ensuring that any problems would be identified at an early stage. Parents would then be notified and encouraged to see a health visitor. Parents would then come back and tell the centre manager to whom they have been referred. Then, with the parents permission, the centre manager would contact the professional and ensure that, if the parents had been given a list of things for the child to do at home, these could also be carried out in the centre. The centre had a ramp for wheelchair users and all staff were trained to deal with children with special needs. Speech and language problems were identified as the most common special need. There was a centre close by for children with special needs and when the children from the centre were playing in the 'secret garden', children with special needs sometimes came and joined in, introducing both sets of children to the needs of the other.

Equal opportunities
Evidence from one centre concerning the equal opportunities policy claimed that the centre was open to, '…all children regardless of disability, learning, gender, minority group, culture, religion or race.' This agreed with the policies of the two other settings. The policy, it was claimed, is in accordance with all relevant legislation including the Disabled Persons Act (1958, 1986), the Race Relations Act (1976), the Sex Discrimination Act (1986) and the Children Order (1995). The policy covered, among other things, child and staff selection and stated that the advertising of the centre would appear in publications circulated to all sections of the community. The policy went on to claim that resources would be chosen to give children a balanced view of the world and an appreciation of the rich diversity of our multi-racial society. According to the policy, 'materials will be selected to help children to develop their self-respect and to respect other people by avoiding stereotypes and derogatory pictures or messages about any group of people.'

While such an equal opportunities policy did exist, it was difficult to assess the extent to which the policy was implemented.

Staff co-operation and collegiality
Settings generally regarded teamwork and relationships among staff as very important (centre manager interview). Where this was the case, inter staff and staff/children relations within the centre were warm and encouraging (observation notes). Staff collegiality appeared to be good and in one such centre the staff recruitment policy stated that, 'All staff will receive ongoing support and supervision, and their contributions to the running of the group will be regarded as equal in value to any permanent/ full time member of staff.' This reflected generally all of the settings.

Another indicator of good staff co-operation and collegiality was observed in centre 3 (PDN) when a member of staff was off sick. In this instance the centre manager helped out in a room. Managers also covered for other staff (i.e. the cook when sickness or holidays occurred) when called on to do so.   It was interesting to note the extent to which there were differentials between different members of staff for instance whether it was always the assistants who cleared up and set table for lunch and mangers/teachers who read the stories to children during lunch periods.

Staff morale
At all centres it would be fair to suggest from the evidence that morale was high. Field notes suggest that all members of staff, including students and part time staff were valued and treated equally. Lines of communication between the centre managers and their staff were informal and staff felt that managers were approachable.

Particular to centre 23 (NS), the centre enjoyed an 'excellent reputation' in the local community. At centre 3 (PDN), staff attended meetings monthly and were given the opportunity to voice any concerns or opinions. Staff worked well as a team with many parents feeling that, '…all the girls in the rooms are extremely friendly and pleasant and appear to be very happy in their jobs' (parent interviews).

The centre as a learning community
Improvements could be made to develop the centres as learning communities.
Centre 23 (NS) provided regular courses and workshops for parents and encouraged them to join in educational visits and open days. It also offered informal advice and formal courses on parental issues. Students from a variety of courses including Nursing, B-Tec, NNEB and NVQs were frequently placed at the centre as part of their training.

At centre 3 (PDN), there was some evidence that the centre did form a 'learning community'. The centre had, in the past, students who could often inject new, up to date ideas. There was also evidence that members of staff were willing to take on board ideas and opinions from parents, and parents were also willing to ask for, and act upon, the ideas and advice of the members of staff. However, when one parent suggested that more musical instruments could be introduced to the children, the centre manager replied, 'consider it done'. No evidence of musical instruments was found after this suggestion.

Conversely, centre 21 (PG) had not yet become a true learning community. While the staff shared what they knew with each other and with students who came into the centre, they did not seem open to learning from new groups. Staff appeared open to suggestions from parents regarding their children, but these suggestions usually regarded diet or special needs rather than the child's learning. Parents, while welcome in the centre, were not openly encouraged or invited to bring new ideas or experience into the centre (observation notes).

Philosophy
Similar philosophies were upheld by all 3 cases. At centre 23 (NS), the aim was to 'provide a rich and challenging' curriculum that would develop each child holistically and according to their own level. It was intended that these aims would take place in a 'warm, positive, caring and colourful environment with well-qualified and committed staff offering a 'high standard quality education'. Parents were seen as important partners in this process and were actively encouraged to be involved 'at all levels of planning and implementation' (documentation).

In centre 21 (PG), the manager viewed the centre as, '...more of a care setting'. Education at the centre was through play, and only through play, for example, through finger rhymes, singing and construction work with duplo etc. The centre manager stated that staff at the centre were not parents or teachers but a link between parents and school. The manager did not agree that children should be taught to write etc. in the centre. Staff at the centre were more concerned with developing the personality of the children rather than with the academic side (centre manager interview).

At centre 3 (PDN), the manager stated that the centre's ethos was based on a philosophy of partnership and care. Parents' ideas and opinions regarding how their children should be brought up were all taken into account and acted upon. There was, therefore, a partnership between parents and staff at the centre. The centre manager believed that every child should be seen as an individual and that children should be brought to their highest potential. Guidelines for the centre stated that children did not move up to the next level until they were ready, regardless of age. Many of the centre's long term targets focused on the child as an individual, including, encouraging the child to, 'feel happy and secure at school and to be a confident individual' and 'to make choices and attempt new tasks with confidence.' The centre manager also believed that, '... if a child is happy and has a friend that they can trust and get on with, the learning goes with it'. The perceived importance of the child as an individual and of forming relationships was evident from the research field notes. The atmosphere in the classroom was a busy one in which the children often worked in groups involved in sand and water play, dressing-up, floor puzzles etc. Individuality was also encouraged with each child being encouraged to tell the class their own, 'news', and with each child making a contribution to wall displays. In fact, many of the wall displays were child orientated and showed the children's own work.

Display
The variety of types of display varied between the 3 cases. Centre 23 (NS) believed that the 'learning environment was one of the most important resources available to the teacher' and so considered display with some priority. It was the intention that displays should show admiration and respect for the children's work, demonstrate progress in skills and perceptions and show parents how a theme is reinforced. It was also policy that displays should provide opportunities for discussion and language development as well as aiding expression. Case study notes recorded that displays around the centre illustrated themes and were bright and colourful. Classrooms were display rich, both walls and tables showed children's work, things they hade brought in and features from the current topic. Appropriate information and news was displayed for parents on their notice board in the front entrance porch as well as a good selection of booklets relating to various health areas (profile). At centre 3 (PDN), many of the wall displays were child orientated and showed the children's own work.

From centre 21 (PG), field notes suggested that displays were mostly of art activities, which had been led by a member of staff. For example, on one occasion the research officer observed a display of children's letters to Santa being made. A member of staff constructed the display board herself and the children's role involved sticking their letters to it. In the 'messy room' there was evidence of children's work on display in the form of drawings and handprints on the walls. There were also some water words and pictures coloured by the older children. However, in the main room there was little evidence of the children's work on display (observation notes). Even though photographs shown to the research officer showed walls covered with children's work, this was not the case currently. There was some evidence that displays were changed regularly with two new

displays being added while the research officer was at the centre. The staff also made use of purchased posters (observation notes).

Curriculum

Policies
Policies at the different centres varied in their content and ease of use and included;
Northern Ireland Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education
Long term aims and objectives of the centre
Admissions
Collection
Settling in policy
Educational Visits
IT
Healthy Snacks
Assessment and Record Keeping
School Discipline
Special Educational Needs
Northern Ireland Code of Practice
Health and Safety
Child Protection
Equal opportunities
Code of Conduct for Staff
Grievance procedures for trainees
Staff recruitment
Pastoral Care
Confidentiality
Complaints

All started with general principles and rationales followed by aims and guidelines. Even though a broad range of policies were supplied, at one centre, the tendency of formal tone and official language noted in the policies did not present them as user-friendly working documents although further examination of their contents showed that it was clear that this was their intention. Lack of dates suggested that a regular process of review was not formally employed.

The leader appeared to be responsible for writing the centre's policies. At centres 23 (NS) and 3 (PDN), these policies were written articulately, clearly and concisely in relation to their expectations. Field notes and observations from the research officer indicated that the content of the policies, to a certain extent, reflected the practice observed with the exception of one centre for parental involvement. One centre also provided a topic planning sheet and a medium term planner, both of which reflected Northern Ireland Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education and the long-term targets of the centre. All topics were planned under the different headings of: personal and social development, knowledge and understanding of the world, language and literacy, physical development, mathematics and creative development.

Centre 21 (PG) didn't adhere to any specific pre-school curriculum and they didn't take any guidance from the Department of Education. However the centre's approach was to provide a secure, safe and stimulating environment for the children and to give the child a positive sense of self (manager interview).

Balance and breadth

Evidence from the 3 centres showed that the curriculum varied greatly between centres with differing emphasis being placed on different curricular domains. At centre 23 (NS), the Northern Ireland Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education underpinned long term planning. Curriculum planning formed around themes showed that thought was given into offering a rich and varied range of activities that were age appropriate. The curriculum as presented showed an awareness of offering balance and breadth and covered all areas of the curriculum. In order to supplement and develop gross motor and imaginative play found more normally in larger and more fully resourced outdoor spaces a special area within the classroom had been designated for this purpose. Equipment was chosen carefully to suit developmental stages and changed every four weeks to offer progressively challenging experiences throughout the year. Plans showed that this 'equipment' functioned around the components of a climbing frame with a slide and ladder and lessons were given to ensure that it was used safely and with control. Where the balance seemed less broad, at centre 21 (PG), there were less opportunities for outdoor physical and imaginative play and an over reliance on 'table top' and construction activities.

At centre 3 (PDN), the research officer did not observe evidence of such a broad and balanced curriculum. However, children were able to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of a wide range of concepts and ideas (e.g. number, colour and alphabet), indicating that a broad and balanced curriculum probably was in use throughout the year. A document outlining the Northern Ireland Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education for parents stated that, the main educational aims of the centre were, '…to potentiate the physical, intellectual, emotional and social development of all three and four year olds.' Evidence suggested that this centre met this aim by providing children with experiences that did, in deed, potentiate their physical, emotional and social development. Some examples of these experiences that are evident of good practice are provided below:

Physical development

At centre 23 (NS), children went outside as much as possible in all weathers. An outline of the Northern Ireland Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education provided to parents indicated that outdoor play forms a very important part of the learning environment for young children. The outdoor apparatus provided opportunities for gross motor physical activity (climbing, swinging, and sliding). The centre stated that, as well as being used to develop motor skills; outdoor play was also used to help develop self-confidence, exploration and experimentation. Children were also involved in planting and growing vegetables in a cultivated area of the playground. Children were then encouraged to care for their plants, learning cycles of life and learning to appreciate and respect other living things.

Emotional and social development

It was evident from the researcher's field notes that children's emotional and social development was seen as very important. All centres' long term targets for personal and social development focused around the child developing confidence, feeling happy and secure at school, respecting others and chatting and interacting with adults and children alike. Indeed, when asked to prioritise certain areas of learning, the centre manager of centre 3 (PDN) felt that a child learning to form a relationship was of utmost importance. Both in the classroom and outdoors, children were encouraged to interact with others in a confident and respectful manner. When using different apparatus, children were encouraged to share and take turns. Manners were usually encouraged and praised with an emphasis placed on saying 'please' and 'thank you'. Children's' self-

confidence and self-esteem were encouraged through praise. Effort, as well as success, was praised constantly. Social interaction, language, emotional and physical skills were also encouraged through imaginative play. There was a dressing-up area in the classroom where children were often involved in role-play, which helped to develop imagination, invention, improvisation and empathy.

Intellectual development
As stated previously, the research officer observed little evidence of a broad and balanced curriculum within centre 3 (PDN). However, the fact that children were able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a wide range of concepts indicated that such a curriculum did exist within this centre. For example, a long-term aim of the centre was that children should be able to read and write their own name. Many children in the centre could do this. Children were also able to demonstrate understanding of number concepts and colour.

Creative development
Children were also exposed to art and music. They were given the opportunity to use a wide range of creative materials including pencils, paints and scissors. Children had experience with different colours and textures and were often involved in producing wall displays. Children were also given the opportunity to sing a variety of songs and rhymes, but there was no evidence of children having any experience with different musical instruments.

Practitioner emphasis
Emphasis was placed on care and education to differing degrees in all three centres. Centres 23 (NS) and 3 (PDN) aimed to integrate care and education. This balance was evident in practice, with staff both caring for the personal safety and well being of the children and helping them to develop socially, emotionally and intellectually. Great emphasis was placed on children learning to develop relationships. The manager of centre 3 (PDN) believed that learning to form a relationship was the most important skill to learn in pre-school. Settling the children in and ensuring that they were happy, knowing what is expected of them and understanding the simple rules was seen as having priority over formal learning. At centre 23 (NS), the manager believed that, firstly, it was important to make the child feel important and, then, after that, their physical, intellectual and creative skills are developed. Within this classroom the children were involved in a wide range of activities that helped to develop these skills. Activities were based on the Northern Ireland Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education and included outdoor play, music, dressing-up, floor puzzles and table tasks. There was evidence that these activities were planned on a term basis. There was, then, a balance between social and academic development of the children, with more emphasis placed on social development.

At all three settings social behaviour was considered and encouraged with an emphasis on turn taking and table manners. There was also observational evidence that the staff placed some emphasis on encouraging the children to take turns, say please and thank-you and recognise right from wrong. There was frequent reference from the staff to being kind and sharing.

On balance, centre 21 (PG) emphasised care rather than education. This was acknowledged by the centre leader who during her interview reaffirmed the centres 'strong care emphasis'. A range of evidence indicated the centre's emphasis on encouraging the children and praising their efforts. 'There is one student in the 'messy

room.' The children are concentrating well on their activities and are encouraged by the staff and are praised for their efforts when building a jigsaw'. (Observations).

Assessment
Assessment varied between centres both in regularity of assessment, the in/formal nature and detail. In order for staff to make meaningful assessments it was important for them to have a sound knowledge of child development and learning styles. At centre 23 (NS) specifically planned and incidental assessments were made and the type of technique used depended on the information required and the time of year in the child's schooling.

All staff were involved in assessing and observing the children and reported progress informally to parents on request although an informal meeting was also arranged for this purpose during the first term. Meetings between the class teachers and parent/s were also arranged during the second and third term for more formal discussions on their children's progress.

The main assessment techniques used were examining samples of children's work and observations. There were also opportunities given for children to develop self-assessment skills by asking them to make judgments about their feelings and progress during an activity.

Observations were regarded as providing the most informative type of assessment. 'Observation days' were usually planned for one particular staff member when the staffing complement was at its fullest. Observations may have been focused on an area of the child's learning, or the use made by the children of the provision. Personal, social and communication skills were also assessed during these times. Examples of observations include:
-Time sampling
-Child tracking (Effective Early learning) (EEL)
-Child involvement (EEL)
-Checklists

Observations were usually done when the children were involved in independent play activities and written up at the end of the session. Staff thought that observations were only significant in the context of knowing the children and their level of development. Observation notes were kept in a file for each child divided into the seven areas of learning as recognised by the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education and each member of staff had their own notebook for any other observations. Records of activities by staff enabled each activity to be evaluated, which in turn influenced the planning for the next week (manager interview, field notes).

Thus all children were observed, assessed and evaluated on a regular basis and were allowed to develop at their own rate.

In contrast at centre 21 (PG), there was no set policy on assessment. Evidence suggests there was no formal, systematic way of assessing the children e.g. a baseline. The assessment appeared to be based on observations. In the original interview the leader reported that her staff were provided with in-service training in relation to observational techniques, and relied on their own knowledge and experience to assess the children.

There was some evidence of work being collected, saved and sent home with the children as a record of their progress and of time spent in the centre (observations).

There was also the opportunity of daily oral feed back on children's progress if the parents requested it, on collection of their child.

In the staff area there was some evidence of children's progress being recorded. If a child was observed to have difficulty with an activity, the staff recorded this on a whiteboard and then ensured the child received help in this area.

At the remaining centre 3 (PDN), the manager stated that the centre has been provided with guidelines from the ELB about what each child should have learnt by the time they leave the centre. In order to assess their development, children were monitored on a daily basis from when they were babies until they leave the centre at age five years old. Staff had a checklist of things that the children should be able to do and this was completed every other week (taped interview). The checklist comprised lists of items under the following headings:

- Physical development – gross and fine motor skills
- Personal and social development
- Creative development
- Knowledge and understanding of the world
- Language and literacy
- Mathematics

For each item under a heading the teacher could tick 'rarely', 'sometimes', or 'usually'. For example, under the heading of 'personal and social development' one item was 'can take turns'.

Development was monitored every couple of months and information was then passed on to the parents. A progress report was sent home to the parents each year and this report involved the teacher describing the child's progress under the same headings as mentioned above. A child's work was also sent home at the end of each term showing the progress that the child had made throughout the term. Children did not move up to the next level until they were ready, regardless of their age.

Curriculum planning, continuity and progression
Practice regarding planning, continuity and progression varied from well planned and executed, to little planning indicating the range of practice being delivered across these 3 settings. Centre 23 (NS) delivered the curriculum via thematic topics that were planned to relate to children's current experiences of life. The themes were designed to offer balance and breadth by covering a wide range of curriculum areas and were regarded as 'springboards' to develop 'thinking, experiences, skills and concepts'. These themes changed every four weeks except for the initial theme of 'Getting to know you', which lasted for six weeks. Each theme carried with it a colour to explore e.g. white with the theme of 'Winter' in January. Other themes reflected this example with a predominant focus on the seasons and festivals.

The aims and objectives claimed by the curriculum document to be clearly recorded for each theme were not presented in detail but rather as lists of possible activities. A curriculum-planning sheet was displayed in the classroom to help assistants prepare the activities and as a reminder to staff. Long-term plans were kept in the office and could be viewed by anyone on request at any time.

Each room team was jointly responsible for short, medium and long-term curriculum plans although regular staff meetings offered opportunities for ideas to be shared and

discussed. Planning, preparation and observations were made to ensure the children progressed in all areas of the curriculum. Weekly planning was based on medium and long-term aims although these were sometimes changed to incorporate ideas and interests of the children.

Conversely practice observed at setting 21 (PG) showed, there was little evidence that planning was thought of in short, medium or long term stages. "We don't plan formally, but if we see something which needs to be covered-we do. We plan in an informal way" (Manager interview). The centre didn't have written curriculum plans and did not follow the Northern Ireland Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education.

At the remaining centre, observations showed evidence of medium and long term planning in the form of a topic planner sheet which was filled in for the term, a medium planner and a list of long-term centre targets. Officially the managers and group leaders were responsible for planning, but the group leader liked to involve other staff members in the planning process. However, if she noticed that there was not enough of a given activity taking place she would get the staff together and think of ways to improve upon that activity. The staff, however, did not get together each week to decide what was to be done to implement the medium or long-term plans.

When asked about how continuity between long-term aims and day-to-day objectives was ensured, the manager replied that staff kept on top of what each child should be able to do and completed checklists. Topics that were planned were adhered to so that at the end of each year, staff knew what the children had covered. The topic-planning sheet clearly identified the topic to be covered, the learning objectives, key concepts and language, and the main areas to be explored under the headings of personal and social development etc. By looking over past topic sheets, teachers could clearly see what the children had covered. There was also a sheet outlining each topic for parents with suggestions of how they could help their children explore the topic.

Visits and visitors
Practice varied from good to excellent with regard to selection of appropriate visitors and places to visit and relevance of visits to planning. At centre 23 (NS), it was clear that visits and visitors played an important part in the educational and entertainment experiences of the children. It was the policy of the centre to make two visits each month and a good deal of organisation and thought was given to provide a range of interesting and valuable experiences.

Staff assessed the readiness of children before their first trip in order to ensure that the aims and objectives of the visit can be fulfilled. Input from visitors was a planned part of the curriculum in order to extend the children's knowledge and understanding of the wider community. This intention was extended further by appropriate visits to the local library, park and fire station. Trips were also planned for experiences further afield with visits to a farm and the beach. Parents with particular expertise or knowledge were also invited to complement the curriculum e.g. a mother who was a nurse coming in to talk about babies or elements of hygiene.

However at centres 3 (PDN) and 21 (PG), there was little documented evidence that the school visits were connected to termly schemes of work, nor was the value of the visits or any visits to be made identified in the planning. There was no evidence provided of a policy concerning visits or visitors and it was not clear how outings were planned. The main role of visits and visitors, then, seemed to be to impart information to the children about different topics, e.g. road safety, hygiene etc.

Pedagogy

Practice
At centre 23 (NS), the children in the full time class were time tabled for two outdoor sessions each day adding up to 50 minutes in total while each part time class had 30 minutes within the 2½-hour session. The staff were sensitive to using every opportunity for informal learning. Lunchtime for the full time children was seen as a particularly important time to practice social and communication skills and learn new concepts.

The researcher's field notes would suggest that the pedagogy of centre 21 (PG) was driven by the staff's views concerning the importance of play. At this centre, learning was achieved through play, and only through play (manager interview). The vast majority of play by the children was completed either individually or in pairs. The researcher's field notes suggest that children were involved in no group games and only one member of staff tried to do any work with the children in a group. This attempt failed perhaps indicating that the children were not used to working in groups. There was some evidence that work was completed with the class as a whole. However, this activity was very adult led (observation notes). On the whole, within this centre, there was not a reasonable balance between individual, small group and whole class work, with more emphasis placed on the children working individually or in pairs.

While number concept, colour, literacy etc were briefly introduced through play, there was no evidence of a real curriculum within the centre and many opportunities to extend learning through play were missed (observation notes). However, as the centre manager has stated, this centre focused more on care than the academic side and gave more attention to developing the children's personalities than their academic skills (centre manager interview). Similarly, at setting 23 (NS), researcher observations would also suggest pedagogy was driven by the staff's firm views on early years teaching and learning – with the emphasis on learning through play. At all centres, it was obvious that staff arrived and set up before the children begin to arrive.

Quality of interaction
At centre 3 (PDN), the quality of the interactions seemed generally very high with the leaders trying to maximise on opportunities to extend a learning experience into every situation.
Teacher 1: What is your news child 1?
Child 1: For my birthday I got a Barbie girl birthday cake
Teacher 1: Was that for your 3rd birthday…….1, 2, 3
Teacher 1 always seems to extend a learning experience to the situation.

The teachers always seem very attentive in initiating discussions and posing questions.
Teacher 1: Where do you see an elephant child 2?
Child 2: The zoo.
Teacher 1 continues the game with many more pictures e.g. a hat and an umbrella.

Staff and child interactions played an important role in encouraging thinking. The questioning was clearly used for a variety of purposes that included holding the children's attention and providing a context for instruction. Observations of adult leaders showed they used a number of techniques to engage the children's attention e.g. repeating what they said as confirmation of a positive or negative contribution.
Teacher 1: Do we sit on our knees when we read a story?
Child 3: No
Teacher 1: What do we sit on?

Child 3: Our bums
Teacher 1: Yes! That's right our bottoms

The staff also asked the children open-ended question about what they did at the weekend or about any other first hand experiences. These open forms of communication were balanced against a more closed style of verbal communication such as "what is that colour?" The assistants very frequently listened attentively to the children, paid positive attention to the children as individuals and talked to the children at their level e.g. by kneeling, bending or sitting so that they could understand.

At setting 23 (NS), the quality of interactions between staff and children was, at times, high with staff maximising opportunities to extend the children's knowledge and skills. For example, while putting out different colours for painting, teacher 1 took the opportunity to talk to the children about different colours and what would happen if different colours were mixed. Teacher 1 then heard one boy playing with a hammer and used the opportunity to extend number concept through song (Peter play with one hammer). Throughout such interactions, Teacher 1 took the opportunity to emphasise the importance of sharing and turn taking (observation notes).

Staff/children relations were warm and encouraging however, Teacher 1 was the only member of staff who constantly interacted with the children and engaged them in conversation. For example, while building duplo with a girl Teacher 2 made no discussion or conversation and learning opportunities about colour, size and shape were missed (observation notes). Questioning was used when appropriate and helped to lead on from activities and extend the children's learning opportunities. For example, when talking about food and pizza toppings, Teacher 1, was able to use questioning to extend learning to dental care and ideas about what kind of foods could be eaten at a party (observation notes).

Observations indicated that although the adults talked a lot they did not appear to commonly engage in conversations initiated by the child. Interactions seemed primarily concerned with introducing new vocabulary or concepts, giving instructions and closed questions to check levels of knowledge and understanding. Little time was allowed for open discussions or speculations during story times and there were few examples of language used to trigger imaginative responses. Children were however, praised and encouraged constantly.

Observations suggest that even in situations when children interrupted with comments stimulated by the task but not directly related adults tended not to take the child's lead and respond conversationally but used closed questions or instructions designed to re-focus the child back to the activity.

An assessment technique presented in the policy required adults to work with or alongside individual children to ask questions or hold a conversation in order to assess developmental levels by finding out their reasoning powers and skills in making choices and decisions. This practice lacked supportive evidence presented by the case study.

Role of play and direct instruction
At centre 23 (NS), practice appeared to be a balance between adult led activities and adult initiated and unstructured play. Evidence suggests that children were encouraged to play freely which was observed regularly to assess levels of development. Staff were comfortable about altering plans to satisfy the interests of individual children when they felt it appropriate and changed subsequent plans accordingly. Some activities were

offered which involved working with the whole class and employed higher rates of direct instruction. These could be viewed as unduly limiting the time available for the children to engage in play and interact with each other.

For centres 3 (PDN) and 21 (PG), play was a central tenet. A booklet welcoming new parents to the centre described play as a vital part of the child's development. The booklet went on to state that play provided enjoyment and an outlet for feelings, helped over come fear, boosted confidence and advanced hand-eye co-ordination, muscle development and enhanced concentration and listening skills. It was through play that children's knowledge and experience regarding number concept, literacy, science etc were extended. Play was almost always child initiated with little emphasis on direct instruction. Staff decided which activities would be made available to the children, but children were then free to choose which activity they wanted to do.

The role of the staff
At centre 23 (NS), the class teacher was in charge and ultimately responsible and accountable. Her authority was balanced by the experience of the long-serving nursery assistant who had lived and worked in the immediate area for a long time. Planning was collaborative although the teacher was responsible for drawing the plans together and ensuring they were implemented. Both adults set up activities, made observations and taught groups directly. The nursery assistant was more involved in the general physical care and welfare of the children. There was some evidence to suggest that the nursery assistant took a less active role when the principal was not there and supervised the whole class rather than teaching groups or getting directly involved. However, she was also seen joining in with the children on the floor and playing with them at their own level.

At centre 21 (PG), the parent interviews would suggest that there was a strong level of satisfaction among parents with the staff at this centre, with parents feeling that the staff were warm and welcoming. The staff viewed themselves primarily as carers and as a link between the parents and school (centre manager interview). Staff at the centre were more concerned with the development of the children's personalities rather than their academic progress. Staff did, on occasion, direct the children's learning using questioning, however they did not have an instructional role with much of the children's play being child initiated. A booklet welcoming new parents to the centre stated that staff were responsible for the day to day running of the centre and they attended courses so ensuring '…a high quality of play and care is provided.'

At centre 3 (PDN), the parent interview indicated that parents were extremely satisfied with the staff in the centre. They felt the staff were able to provide a loving environment and an extension of home. The staff appeared to be loved and respected by the children themselves. Because there were no ancillary staff, and a cleaner only came in once a week the staff were expected to carry out basic cleaning duties daily and carry out general 'mopping up' duties after the children but this didn't take the emphasis away from learning through play. The staff appeared to provide what the parents were looking for, a warm loving environment where the children learned how to form relationships and friendships (parent interview). The staff also provided a supervisory role as well as carer and instructor. Observations and vignettes suggested the adults were also co-players with the children.

Transitions
At centre 23 (NS), observations supported the deduction by the inspectorate that movement between sessions was managed smoothly and with efficiency. Also at centre

3 (PDN), when a child came from the 'toddler room' to the 'pre-school room' parents were given a copy of the curriculum. Children didn't move up to the next group until they were ready, regardless of their age. The children were taken on visits to the next group and this let staff know if they were ready. For example, if the children didn't want to leave and go back to their own room this was a fair indication they were ready to move up to the next level.

Differentiation
Children generally worked and played at their own level and at their own pace. During periods of free play children could choose from the full range of experiences provided according to their interest.

As there were no SEN children at two of the centres, researcher observations noted that the staff did not differentiate between the children and all were exposed to the same activities. The staff appeared to make no differentiation between the children and interacted with each of them equally whilst treating each as individuals. However, one parent did complain that her child who was a part-timer was treated differently to the full-time children.

Ensuring continuity and progression
Centre 23 (NS) employed a detailed and comprehensive assessment system based on observations. These were both on going and taken at regular points through the year. The manager mentioned the time consuming nature of worthwhile observations and was trying to streamline the process. She supported the idea of getting to know each child so that each significant development was recognised and recorded. Unfortunately the case study took place during a time when formal observations were not made but it was clear from the records that the on-going assessments were regular and systematic. At another centre, continuity and progression appeared to be done largely by the use of 'Learning area record checklists' and 'Initial child record checklists' and also progress reports to parents which looked at personal/social development and language/literacy etc. The use of these records gave the staff a very clear idea of what the child was able to do and what they needed to go on to do next.

In contrast, at setting 21 (PG), children did not appear to be formally assessed and no record of the children's progress was maintained. Staff at the centre did not plan formally making it difficult to assess continuity and progression. However, if a member of staff felt that a child was having difficulty with colours, for example, that child's name was written on a white board in the staff room along with a brief description of the problem. All staff then knew to pay extra attention to that child's problem area.

Preparation for primary school
At centre 23 (NS), a high percentage of the children at the centre attended the nearby primary school. There appeared to be a good relationship between the two principals and thought had been given to ensuring a smooth transition between the two establishments. When the children left for their new classes the staff of the centre talked through each child's profile with the appropriate teacher. A written statement followed for each child that included their level of progress. If children moved on elsewhere written information was sent at the end of the summer term (manager interview).

At centre 21 (PG), the manager stated that she asked the primary school what they would like the staff at the centre to cover with the children. The reply was that the children should be able to hold a pencil (centre manager interview). Children at the centre were

involved in pencil work, drawing around wooden templates, in preparation for primary school.

At the centre 3 (PDN), the emphasis was placed on the children being able to form a relationship, having respect for each other as well as their teachers, and caring for each other. The centre ensured the children were taught the social skills in anticipation of attending primary school. Although there was little evidence of the curriculum in action except for counting games and number booklets – there was evidence that children had good levels of numeracy and literacy. The centre manager produced an informal 'end of year report' for the pre-schoolers or as the centre manager described it 'A letter to let you know what we think of your child, it is mostly about personality'.

Developing dispositions

At all centres, staff were concerned with developing empathy by focusing on encouraging good social and communication skills. Encouragement was given through praise for taking turns and displaying good manners. At centre 23 (NS), this was attempted by capitalising on suitable opportunities e.g. lunchtimes and modelling appropriately behaviour. Strong attention was given to developing a disposition toward sharing and co-operating and being able to work and play along side each other, e.g. learning how to become part of a large group without being disruptive. Parent interviews reported on their children being able to share and mix readily.

Perseverance was developed by adults encouraging the children to stay and complete a task. The inspection report of centre 23 (NS) noted that the children displayed a good level of interest in their activities, confidence in making independent choices and with some showing sustained concentration. Many of the children's activities were child initiated and independence was encouraged with children working, at times, with little staff involvement. However, the fact that the children had so much free choice of activities could lead to children having a low attention span, simply moving from activity to activity when they chose (observation notes).

Children were told clearly when they were doing something wrong and praised for doing something right. If there was a dispute between the children the staff talk to the children, at their level, maintaining eye contact and discussing why it was wrong For example, Boy (M, 3yrs 9mths) made a sword out of paper and kept waving it at the other children. After repeatedly being asked not to, the Group leader threatened to remove it. Boy (M, 3yrs 9mths) then began to try to glue paper to the leader and assistant's t-shirts. Again after being told not to he persisted. The group leader told him again at his level. Again after disobeying, the leader took boy (M, 3yrs 9mths) out of the room and spoke to him in private. When he came back in he said "sorry" to the assistant.

A strong emphasis was placed on self-control and independence with high expectations of children clearing up their surroundings and looking after their appearance. E.g. washing their hands after break and before lunch, and also brushing their teeth after lunch.

Community Outreach or Involvement

At centre 23 (NS), involvement included local training opportunities and high levels of parental support but the centre played a limited role in terms of outreach activities. It could be assumed that as an established nursery catering for local children for the last two decades it was important to the community and had provided a stable and constant fixture during times of political unease and unrest.

The community was involved in fundraising for centre 21 (PG), although fundraising usually only took place at Christmas to cover the children's party and gifts from Santa. Fundraising was in the form of a raffle (observation notes). While parents were welcome to visit centre 21 (PG) if they wished, they were not actively encouraged to share their ideas and experience with the staff. However, there was a 'Veritas' training programme that was run for parents, if funding permitted, where they could share ideas about dealing with children.

At the centre 3 (PDN), a charity event was organised on an annual basis. Since the centre started they decided they should do something each year that involved raising money for outside organisations. This was to try and show the children that it was nice to be able to do something for others without expecting anything in return. The centre had links with the local police, who came out and discussed road safety with the children. There was also involvement with the dentist, who came to the centre and taught the children about dental hygiene and gave them toothbrushes and stickers. Recently a local farmer came and visited the centre (they were unable to go to the farm itself because of foot and mouth) and brought animals for the children.

Discussion

There is a general consensus among researchers and theorists that since the early years are 'a time when children particularly need high quality care and learning experiences' (QCA/ DfEE, 1999: 4) pre-school education is crucial to a child's overall development. However, quality is a highly ambiguous term that can mean different approaches and experiences being offered in different settings. In order to monitor and improve pre-school provision in Northern Ireland, we need to identify key elements that constitute sufficient care and encourage proficient learning experiences in young children. The EPPNI project has attempted to highlight current practices by studying a selection of pre-school environments. Several issues have arisen that lend themselves to discussion.

There has been some debate regarding the function of pre-school groups. Some practitioners focus purely on care and the personal, social and emotional development of children while other groups combine care with education of a more formal nature. DfEE claim that 'education and care are inseparable' (2000:p.xii, paragraph 33). Research does indicate that where a combination of care and education exists, a higher quality of learning occurs (BERA SIG, 2003: 9). While not all pre-school groups will follow a strict curriculum, as advised by DENI in the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education (1997), the most effective settings will provide some free play activities combined with teacher direction and interaction (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2002). Further research indicates that adult intervention is essential for 'supporting young children's emerging sociable and cooperative potential and in linking that potential with cognitive growth through the provision of an appropriate learning environment and through their own interventions with interacting peers' (Munn & Schaffer, 1993).

Within a free play environment, devoid of adult involvement, children may miss learning opportunities. Adult interaction is necessary to prompt thought processes through skilful questioning and to direct learning to ensure useful discoveries are pursued. As Claxton and Carr (2002: 95) explain, the adult role is to 'explain, orchestrate, commentate on and model learning responses'. The learning process becomes a shared experience arising either from child initiated activities where adults are actively engaged in extending the thinking involved, or from teacher initiated activities where the child is supported and prompted to respond and investigate in a joint episode of involvement (Claxton & Carr, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). In this way adults can provide intellectual stimulation through realistic challenges. The adult can act as a scaffold to support the child until he/ she has the skills to cope independently (Meadows & Cashdan, 1988).

One theme remains consistent throughout various studies: early years educators must create the conditions for learning through play (BERA SIG, 2003). We cannot merely hope children will learn by themselves without adult guidance or input. Unfortunately, this study echoed the findings of EPPE research (2003) that concluded that even pre-school centres that did promote instructive learning environments, failed to frequently implement this teaching/ learning strategy. It seems that the most effective way to ensure that shared learning does occur regularly is to consider and include it during the planning stages and not wait for random occurrences during play activities.

Pre-school settings should endeavour to offer positive learning environments that aim to develop every child in a holistic manner. Claxton and Carr (2004:91) suggest that different environments will positively or negatively affect learning. A 'prohibiting environment' will restrict learning while an 'affording environment' offers opportunities for development. Within this study, certain centres could be seen to offer this class of provision. The resources were in place but not always managed effectively to be used to

their maximum potential. Better centres created an 'inviting environment', where children were offered opportunities to ask and answer questions and where responses were valued.

Powerful learning environments are only achieved when activities challenge the children to extend their knowledge and skills. If adults neglect to encourage young minds, explicitly reinforcing values through demonstration and questioning, development is restricted. Powerful and effective learning can only take place when sufficient planning has occurred before activities are implemented. As Moyles, Adams and Musgrove (2002: 127) discovered, 'the literature confirms that one key aspect of effective pedagogy is the role of the head-teacher, senior management team and the implementation of developmental planning.' Those centres that were found to engage in formal, regular planning, considering both long and short term objectives, were consequently the centres seen to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, as advocated by Claxton & Carr (2004). When no written planning was evident, learning became haphazard since opportunities were irregular and imbalanced.

Good planning will also ensure that available resources are effectively and progressively applied and altered throughout the year. QCA (1999) state that well planned play is a key way in which young children learn. Such planning will necessarily account for resource management, spatial organisation and carefully planned activities allowing for progressive learning. While all centres studied were well resourced, the choice and rotation of resources were often limited thus restricting possible learning potential for the young children. For example, a home corner is a crucial resource for improving imaginative play and language. However, failure to change the theme of this setting or add items of interest at regular intervals denies children important development opportunities. Play areas that remain unchanged lose their appeal and fail to provide the stimulation necessary to encourage cognitive and social growth. While construction toys or tabletop games are important, they should not overshadow more imaginative types of play or those that encourage deeper social skills. Good practitioners will plan to offer a balanced range of resources. Teachers and care workers have a duty to orchestrate resources and activities in a way that creates an inviting learning environment for all children (Claxton & Carr, 2004).

Provision for play should not be confined to rooms within the pre-school building. The value of regularly engaging in outdoor play is highly recommended during the early years, not least within the Northern Ireland Pre-school Curricular Guidelines (1997), which claim that outdoor play should form an integral part of the young child's learning environment. This physical activity not only develops gross motor skills but also encourages self-confidence and an attitude conducive to exploration and experimentation. Young girls in particular need to be encouraged to engage in more 'rough and tumble' play activities to ensure a balance in their educative experiences, while boys must be encouraged to channel their energies into positive active learning. Within this current study, researchers found that the availability of and provision for outdoors play varied from place to place. At one centre while outdoor play was timetabled, reality proved that its occurrence depended largely on the weather or attitude of group leaders. Leaders should be aware of their obligation to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for the children in their care; a curriculum based on theory and varied content rather than individual preferences. Another centre did seem to understand the value of outdoor activities but was restricted by space. Their attempt to reconstruct a physical playground indoors was not ideal but did show some initiative. Of course, even when space is restricted, the 'most effective practitioners are able to develop creative ways of ensuring field trips to local parks and playgrounds or to places of local interest such as farms and

shops' (Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002: 133). The third centre in this particular study displayed good practice in accordance with curricular guidelines, using outdoor space to the optimum and extending experiences to encourage care in the environment. Children attending such centres have access to optimum learning opportunities when both outdoor and indoor activities have been carefully planned and are supervised and supported by interested, motivated staff.

Staff qualifications and attitude to further training were closely linked with record keeping and subsequent planning. As Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva (2002) claim, effective practitioners are likely to combine good curriculum knowledge with a theoretical understanding of child development and different learning styles. Indeed evidence gathered from this EPPNI study would substantiate this statement. One EPPNI case study centre in particular was seen to encourage ongoing staff development to ensure current theoretical knowledge would underpin planning and practice (Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002). Activities were regularly and formally assessed so that accurate evaluations could inform further planning, as advocated by members of the British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group (2003). When no formal records of progress are maintained, teachers cannot reflect upon events in a critically evaluative manner and learning opportunities will undoubtedly be missed. Parents will also remain unclear with regards to progress or problems and any measures being taken to promote the development of their individual child.

Implementation follows quickly after planning. Feeling safe and secure is an indisputable prerequisite to development (Goleman, 1995). This is true not only from the point of view of physical safety, but because staff who are preoccupied with safety issues will not be able to provide a fully-involved interactional experience for children. The learning environment should also be motivating and stimulating for each child. Parents and children will absorb the ethos of any centre on entry, and the materials on display in the entrance hall and work/ playrooms will help create this atmosphere. The quality of displays in the centres under study, varied quite dramatically. Certain displays remained unchanged for long periods of times while others displayed more adult productivity than child participation. In order to comment on the efficacy of displays, we need to be clear as to their purpose. Displaying a child's work can reinforce learning, extend learning through discussion and conversation and teach the child that his/ her efforts are valued by significant adults. The demonstration and positive reinforcement of good practice will encourage young children to continue to learn. Having their work viewed by others and receiving associated praise, will foster a sense of self-esteem and the self-motivation that leads to future learning.

Children exist within a social structure and must be offered opportunities to explore this cultural context in order to function effectively and make informed decisions. Early years centres are part and parcel of the wider community and steps should be taken to integrate young children into their society whenever possible. The leaders' attitudes to visits and visitors can positively enhance development and learning. One case study centre was found to place particular emphasis on inviting members of the community to share expertise and knowledge with the children. Beverton (1995) advocates such inclusion insisting that a child's development is the combined responsibility of the school, family and the wider community. The child benefits greatly when all agencies work together cooperatively.

Possibly the most influential figures in a young child's life will be his/ her parents or guardians. Research has shown that parental involvement during the early years has a

profound effect on a child's development (NLT, 2001). It is for this very reason that pre-school environments must actively encourage parents to take a real interest in their child's learning and developmental activities. Moyles, Adams and Musgrove insist that effective pedagogy involves 'good relationships between staff and high levels of involvement of parents' (2002: 130). It logically follows that such family involvement is maximised when educators give parents specific information that help them reinforce learning at home. Similarly, parents should be encouraged to share knowledge with the pre-school leaders. In this way the school becomes an extension of the home and vice versa, allowing each child to feel comfortable and confident enough to reach his/ her optimum potential. Several studies indicate that when parents are given clear instructions about how to help their children it has a positive impact on achievement (Hannon, Weinberger & Nutbrown, 1999).

Fostering a partnership during the early years ensures good practices are shared and relationships are established before the child begins formal education. Such mutual bonds between home and school can then continue to be strengthened throughout the child's academic career. The NLT Consultation Paper (2001: 27) claims that 'research evidence on parental involvement and literacy attainment favours early intervention over later remediation. To date the most effective age for intervention is between 3-5. Lately, however, researchers are suggesting that literacy intervention should begin at 0-3.' The impact of such research on pre-school initiatives is abundantly clear. However, some centres remain wary of giving power to the parents.

Partnership demands mutual acceptance of values and two-way communication on a formal and informal basis (Goodall, 1998). Two of the centres in this EPPNI study adopted a partnership approach similar to that advocated above. However, this type of communication via notice boards and letters can gradually decline into an imbalance of authority, where all power for decision-making remains at the sole discretion of staff. Parents soon become the passive recipients of information instead of active participants in the learning and development of their children. Keating (1996: 32) quotes Wilcox (1985) to remind us that a lack of regular communication denies families the right to be involved in shaping and supporting educational development. Neglecting to regularly inform and update parents of progress, or indeed problems, robs children of extended learning experiences at home.

Lip service to parental partnership is not only insulting to parents but debilitates children's development. Just as adult-child interaction produces the most effective results in the pre-school, so staff-parent interaction benefits all involved parties. Parents who are actively involved in pre-school activities can not only reinforce topics at home, but can also add to the more formal learning environment by contributing of their personal skills and talents in the pre-school itself. By inviting parents to share in their child's education, we are broadening the spectrum for learning (Auerbach, 1989). Such good practice is illustrated in this study by one centre's initiative to hold a 'back to play night' when parents were exposed to the value of play as a foundation for learning and a tool for teaching. It is also worth noting that when young children see their parents coming into the pre-school setting to participate in activities, they come to believe that the activities are valuable and valued by the adults in their lives. We must never forget that young children will mimic the attitudes and behaviours of adult role models. An adult who displays a positive attitude to learning will influence a young child to pursue similar goals. Unfortunately, children who lack a positive role model rarely display a sustained ambition to learn. Pre-school centres should encourage all parents to become actively involved in their child's development. Such involvement is not based on

parental IQ, status or education. It simply requires some interest and enthusiasm (Barton, 1995).

The burden of encouraging and motivating such parental partnerships rests heavily on the shoulders of the pre-school. Since parents will often react to the centre's ethos, with minimal expectations receiving minimal parental response, leaders must openly encourage and welcome parental contributions on all levels, not merely via financial input. One centre in this study did show evidence of pursuing such a partnership on a practical and educational level. Communication became more than a progress report between the adults. Instead, parents and staff worked together for the benefit of all the children under their care.

Instigating parenting programmes within the pre-school building has been seen to improve home-school links and staff-parent relationships. Of course, the children ultimately benefit from such collaboration. Within the three centres under scrutiny in this project, practice varied from the provision of regular workshops and courses in one centre, to a complete void of options for parental involvement. Parenting programmes can be beneficial to both adult and child. Many parents will welcome some advice on how to play with, talk to and discipline their children. Adults can enjoy the social aspect of these programmes, making friends with people who are in a similar position to them, facing similar difficulties and having to make similar choices. To be able to discuss issues openly without fear of judgement can ease pressure and make parenting a more relaxed and enjoyable experience. Encouraging parents to enjoy their children and spend quality time with them at home has a significant impact on early development (Weinberger, 1996).

In spite of several noticeable differences in the principles and practices amongst this cross section of pre-school environments, one factor that remains common to all three groups is the philosophy that young children learn through play and must have the opportunity to develop through playful experiences within a safe and stimulating environment. They each claim, to a greater or lesser degree, the significance of play in personal, social, emotional and intellectual development.

Research clearly indicates that such development can be improved by collaboration between parents and teachers so that all parties with a genuine interest in the children can contribute to and enhance their overall development. In a study seeking to monitor quality pre-school education in Northern Ireland, we can summarise our findings with the words of Bowman *et al.* 2001 (cited in Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002: 128) who conclude, 'If there is a single critical component to quality, it rests in the relationship between the child and the teacher/ caregiver, and in the ability of the adult to be responsive to the child'

REFERENCES

Arnett, J. (1989) Caregivers in Day-Care Centres: Does training matter? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology,* 10, 541-552.

Auerbach, E (1989) 'Approach to family literacy', *Harvard EducationalReview,* 59: 165-181.

Ball, C. (1994) *Startright: The Importance of Early Learning,* London: RSA.

Barton, D (1995) 'Exploring Family Literacy', *Reading* 29(3): 2-4.

BERA Early Years Special Interest Group (2003), *Early Years Pedagogy, curriculum and adult roles, training and professionalism.* London: BERA.

Beverton, S (1995) 'Whose Literacy? School, Community or Family?', *Reading* 29(3): 14-21.

Borge, A., & Melhuish, E., (1995) A Longitudinal Study of Childhood Behaviour Problems, Maternal Employment and Day-care in Rural Norwegian Community, *International Journal of Behavioural Development,* 18, 23-42.

Claxton, G and Carr, M (2004) 'A framework for teaching learning: the dynamics of disposition', *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development* 24(1): 87-97.

Davies, J. & Brember, I. (1992). The Effects of Gender, Attendance Period and Age on Children's Adjustment to Nursery Classes. *Research in Education.*

DENI (1997) *Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education.* Belfast: NICCEA.

DfEE (2000) *Consultation Document SEN Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Pupils with Special Educational Needs and SEN Thresholds: Good Practice Guidance on Identification and Provision for Pupils with Special Educational Needs.* London: DfEE.

Elliott,C.D., Smith, P. & McCulloch, K. (1996). *British Ability Scales II.* Berkshire: NFER-NELSON.

Feinstein, L., Robertson, D. & Symons, J. (1998) *Pre-school Education and Attainment in the NCDS and BCSI Centre for Economic Performance,* London

Geertz, C. (1973) Thick Description: Towards an interpretative theory of culture. In Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (pp. 3-30) New York: Basic Books

Goldstein, H. (1987). *Multilevel Models in Education and Social Research.* London: Charles Griffin and Co.

Goleman, D (1995) *Emotional Intelligence,*

Goodall, J (1998) 'Parental partnership with school', *Early Education,* 26(Autumn): 7.

Hannon, P, Weinberger, J and Nutbrown, C (1991) 'A study of work with parents to promote early literacy development', *Research Papers Education*, 6(2): 77-97.
Hogan, A.E., Scott, K.G and Bauer, C.R. (1992) The Adaptive Social Behaviour Inventory (ASBI): A new assessment of social competence in high risk three olds. *Journal of Psycho-educational Assessment,* 10, 3, 230-9.

Keating, I (1996) 'The Other Mum's Army: Issues of Parental Involvement in Early Education', *Early Years*, 17(1): 32-35.

Meadows, S and Cashdan, A (1988) *Helping Children Learn: Contributions to a Cognitive Curriculum.* London: David Fulton.

Melhuish, E.C. (1993) Pre-school care and education: Lessons from the 20th and the 21st century, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 1, 19-32.

Melhuish, E.C., Lloyd, E., Martin, S. & Mooney, A. (1990) Type of day-care at 18 months: Relations with Cognitive and Language Development, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry,* 31, 861-870.

Miles, M. and Huberman, A.M (1994) *An Expanded Sourcebook: Qualitative Data Analysis (2nd Ed.)* London: Sage Publications

Moyles, J, Adams, S and Musgrove, A (2002) 'A Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning', DfES Research Report 363. London: DfES.

Munn, P and Schaffer, HR (1993) 'Literacy and numeracy in social interactive contexts', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 1(3): 61-79.

Nabuco, M. and Sylva, K. (1996) Research on Quality in the Curriculum, International Journal of Early Childhood National Institute of Child Health & Development (1997) The effects of infant child care on infant-mother attachment security: Results of the NICHD study of early child care*, Child Development,* 68, 5, 860-879.

National Literacy Trust (2001) 'Parental involvement and literacy achievement: The research evidence and the way forward', *Consultation Paper.* London: NLT.

QCA (1999) *The Review of the Desirable Outcomes.* London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

QCA/ DfEE (1999) *Early Learning Goals.* London: DfEE.

Quinn, L., Colhoun, J., Taggart, B., Melhuish, E., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., & McSherry, K (2002). *Technical paper 3, Pre-School Centre Characteristics, 'An Analysis of Centre Management Interviews.* Stranmillis University Press

Schweinhart, L.J. & Weikart, D.P. (1997). 'The High/Scope Pre-school Curriculum Comparison through Age 23' in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, pp. 117-143.

Schweinhart, L.J. & Weikart, D.P., (1997) *Lasting Differences, The High/Scope pre-school curriculum comparison through age 23* Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope Press.

Siraj-Blatchford, I. (1995) Expanding Combined Centre Provision: Bridging the gap between care and education, in P Gammage and J Meighan *The Early Years: The Way Forward,* Nottingham: Education New Books.

Siraj-Blatchford, I, Sylva, K, Muttock, S, Gilden, R and Bell, D (2002) 'Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years', Brief No 356. London: DfES.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B., Sammons, P. & Melhuish, E. (2003) *Technical Paper 10 Intensive Case Studies of Practice across the Foundation Stage* UK: Institute of London.

Siraj-Blatchford, I and Sylva, K (2004) 'Researching pedagogy in English pre-schools', *British Education Research Journal,* 30(5): 713-730.

Sylva, K. (1994). A Curriculum for Early Learning. In Ball, C. (Ed.) Startright*: The Importance of Early Learning, London: RSA.*

Sylva, K., Siraj-Blatchford I. & Taggart B. (2003) *Assessing Quality in the Early Years, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Extension (ECERS-E): Four Curricular Subscales.* Trentham Books. Stoke on Trent UK

Sylva, K , & Wiltshire, J. (1993). The Impact of Early Years Learning on Children's Later development. A review prepared for the RSA enquiry 'Start Right'. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal,* 1, 17-40.

Weinberger, J (1996) 'A longitudinal study of children's early literacy experiences at home and later literacy development at home and school', *Journal of Research in Reading,* 19(1): 14-24.

Winstanley, C (2001) 'Family learning and "edutainment"', *TES Primary,* July/ August.

Wolfendale, S. (1992) *Empowering Parents and Teachers.* London: Cassell

Appendix 1

Head of Centre Interview Schedule

What is the ethos of the centre

What are the aims of the Centre?

♦ **For the children**

What are your views on the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education?
Is there anything you think is important which is missing from them?
How would you prioritise the seven areas of learning?
Do you get any help from either the inspectorate or health & social services regarding implementation of the pre-school curriculum?

♦ **For the staff**

Exactly what initial training does each member of staff have?
And what in-service training does your staff get?
How is the staff organised in terms of responsibilities? E.g. for curriculum, reporting to parents, meetings etc.
What is the system of appraisal/supervision?
What do you think about the way in which early years education has changed in recent years?
Has this made a difference to the role of manager or staff?
What impact does this have on the children and parents?

♦ **For the parents**

How do you involve parents in relation to:
Expectations of them?
What do you send them e.g. news sheets, reports?
Do you offer any form of support?
Training?
Education? E.g. courses

Do you have any views on recent government policy? E.g. children from disadvantaged families having priority?

Do you think a qualified teacher should be introduced into every area of pre-school?

Integrating care and education? How do you do this?

Are you involved in any other Early Years Partnership programmes in any way? How?

Has the centre been involved in any other research or developmental projects?

Can you tell me what you consider 'effectiveness' to mean in terms of early childhood education?

Is there anything else you would like to add or talk about?

Appendix 2

Parent Interview Schedule

How long has your child been at the centre?
Any brothers/sisters been before?
When – noticed any change?
What did you know about the centre before you admitted your child?

What information were you given and how? E.g. home visit, information booklet.

Was there anything expected of you by the centre? E.g. ensure your child is toilet trained, visits to the centre, parent interview for records etc.

How does the centre communicate with you and how often?
How is the child's progress and development reported to you?

How often do you visit the centre and why?

What kinds of involvement does the centre encourage? E.g.
- As helper/volunteer, assistant to a trained adult, centre visits, fund raising
- To attend workshops or other training
- Other forms of parent education   - How regular
- Parent support for families under stress

What kind of involvement do you have in your child's learning at home? How much of this is adult/child initiated? How much of this is supported by the centre?

Has sending your child to this centre made any difference to your participation in other activities? E.g. study, change work pattern, time for hobbies.

What opportunities do you have to get involved in the decision making process in the centre? E.g. through a PTA. Management/governing committee etc.

What about the setting of policies – are parents involved generally?

Are you ever asked to comment on the curriculum, assessment or other policies of the centre, is so, how?

What do you think your child gets out of attending this centre?

How important is it for the children to begin learning to read/write/number.

What's the best thing about the centre?

If there was one or two things you could change what would they be?

What makes a centre effective? Hard question, want to know – makes a centre run well (good organisation, caring staff, staff knowledgeable about children's development, good resources.

What did you get out of it? Any other comments? Thank you.