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Assembly

## Research and Information Service Research Paper

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# Early years provision

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This research paper considers early years provision in Northern Ireland and internationally. It discusses the integration of education and care and briefly considers issues around the school starting age. It also considers *Learning to Learn*, the draft early years framework, identifying areas of potential overlap with OFMdfM's *Towards a Childcare Strategy*.

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## Key Points

- Within the Pre-School Education Programme requirements differ for statutory and private/ voluntary settings around qualifications, staff: child ratios and inspection;
- Staff qualifications and training are strongly linked to children's outcomes;
- Most European countries offer at least two years of free pre-school education;
- Research in NI suggests that attending pre-school for more than a year is no more beneficial than attending for a single year - in contrast to international findings;
- The Department's *Learning to Learn* framework states that early education is not 'day care' - however, there is strong international evidence to support the integration of education and care for this phase of provision;
- The evidence suggests that where responsibility for early education and childcare is held by different ministries, varying standards tend to be established;
- There are two broad approaches to early years provision internationally:
  - A **school readiness** approach focusing on early cognitive development;
  - A **social pedagogy** approach acting as a broad preparation for life;
- A comparison of *Learning to Learn* with OFMdfM's *Towards a Childcare Strategy* highlights a number of areas of potential overlap, particularly around quality;
- There is a well-established 'Birthdate effect' for young-for-year children; in addition NI has the lowest compulsory school starting age in Europe;
- Introducing flexibility in the starting age has been suggested to address this (there is no flexibility in NI), however evidence on this practice is not conclusive;
- A number of areas could be given further consideration, including:
  - The fragmentation of responsibility for early years provision and childcare;
  - Areas of overlap in *Learning to Learn* and *Towards a Childcare Strategy* and the extent of joint working on these policies;
  - The strong emphasis of *Learning to Learn* on education;
  - The variation in requirements around qualifications, ratios, regulation and funding for DE-funded pre-school provision;
  - Initial education and continuing professional development for staff;
  - International approaches such as the social pedagogy model in Nordic countries and the French model;
  - The evidence on flexibility in the school starting age and alternative approaches to reducing the 'Birthdate effect'.



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

There is robust evidence in Northern Ireland and internationally that access to high quality early years education and care has significant positive and lasting effects for children.

This research paper discusses early years provision here and internationally, and considers the evidence on effective pre-school provision. It considers whether education and care should be separate or integrated, and briefly considers issues around the school starting age. It also identifies some potential areas of overlap between *Learning to Learn* and OFMdfM's *Towards a Childcare Strategy*.

## Northern Ireland context

Early years provision includes Sure Start, the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) and Reception. Within the PSEP there is a mixture of statutory and private/voluntary provision, each of which has different requirements around staff qualifications, staff: child ratios, inspection and different levels of funding.

Responsibility for early years and childcare provision is spread across a number of departments and arm's-length bodies. Some stakeholders have criticised this fragmentation, suggesting that a more strategic approach is required.

## Evidence on effective pre-school provision

The quality of early years provision is strongly linked to outcomes for children. The evidence highlights the key role of staff, and there is a strong correlation between higher staff qualifications and improved outcomes.

With regard to duration of provision, a recent study based on the results of PISA 2009 found that attending pre-school in Northern Ireland for more than one year is no more beneficial than attending for a single year. This is in contrast to international evidence from PISA which finds that students enrolled for longer durations enjoy better outcomes.

A study in England has also found longer duration of attendance at pre-school to be beneficial. However a linked study here did not find similar effects, attributing this finding to less variation in duration of pre-school than is found in England.

## Should it be education and/ or care?

The Department's draft framework for early years, *Learning to Learn*, states that early education "*is not, however, day care*". However, the international evidence supports the integration of education and childcare. Indeed, early years provision is generally referred to as Early Education and Care (ECEC) by organisations including the OECD and the European Commission.

Many countries tend to consider children under three as requiring childcare – primarily the responsibility of parents, with children aged three to six needing early education. OECD notes that this two-tier system leads to fragmentation in services and a lack of coherence for families, with variations in funding, regulation and staff requirements.

In terms of governance, in countries where responsibility for early education and childcare is held by different ministries, varying standards tend to be established across different settings. The evidence points to integration of services under a ministry with a key focus on children's education. The benefits of a single ministry include:

- Greater coherence and consistency in regulation, funding and staffing;
- Enhanced continuity for children;
- Improved management leading to better quality and access.

### **Approaches to early years provision internationally**

In most European countries children receive at least two years of free pre-school education. The literature identifies two broad approaches to provision internationally:

- **School readiness approach:** found in France and English-speaking countries, this approach has a strong focus on cognitive development and early literacy and numeracy, with a structured approach to learning;
- **Social pedagogy approach:** found in Nordic and Central European countries, early years provision is viewed as a broad preparation for life with the objective that children gain a desire for learning, rather than pre-specified knowledge. The emphasis is on supporting children in their own tasks and interests.

A recent international study ranking pre-school systems in terms of availability, quality and affordability ranked Nordic countries in four of the top six positions, with the UK ranked 4<sup>th</sup> and France ranked 7<sup>th</sup>. The high status, qualifications and wages of pre-teachers in the Nordic countries are identified as an important factor in their success.

### ***Learning to Learn and Towards a Childcare Strategy***

Launched on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2012, *Learning to Learn* is the Department's draft framework for early years provision. In addition, *Towards a Childcare Strategy*, a consultation aiming to support the development of a childcare strategy, was launched by OFMdfM in December 2012.

Learning to Learn covers Sure Start, the Pre-School Education Programme; Reception and the Foundation Stage of the Curriculum. OFMdfM's strategy will deal with 'childcare', which is defined as:

*'The safe supervision of children aged 0-14 in an environment that benefits the development of the child, to enable parents to participate in employment, training or learning.'*

While it is difficult to directly compare these documents, an analysis of the actions in *Learning to Learn* and the principles of the childcare consultation highlights a number of areas of potential overlap. The main area of overlap centres on quality of provision, with both documents highlighting a series of areas for consideration or action in this regard. Other areas of overlap include the integration of services and accessibility.

### **School starting age**

Northern Ireland has the lowest compulsory school starting age in Europe, and questions have been raised around the appropriate provision for children aged four. Overall, the evidence does not advocate an ideal age for children starting school.

There is a well-known 'Birthdate effect' whereby the youngest children within a school year tend to perform less well than their older peers. This effect is most pronounced during pre-school and primary, but is thought to remain even through higher education.

A number of policies have been suggested to help address this effect, including introducing flexibility in the school starting age. In Northern Ireland the legislation does not allow any flexibility for the minimum school starting age, and there is no appeals process. Exceptions are children with a statement of Special Educational Need.

In the US it is fairly common for children to have their entry to school delayed, most often among young-for-year children, boys and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. The evidence on this practice is mixed and is not conclusive.

### **Conclusion**

This paper highlights a number of areas that could be given further consideration. These include:

- The fragmentation of responsibility for early years provision and childcare across departments and arm's-length bodies;
- Areas of overlap in *Learning to Learn* and *Towards a Childcare Strategy* and the extent of joint working on these policies;
- The strong emphasis of *Learning to Learn* on education in light of the evidence on the importance of integrating education and care;
- The variation in requirements around qualifications, ratios, regulation and funding for DE-funded pre-school provision;
- Initial education and continuing professional development for early years staff;
- International approaches such as the social pedagogy model in Nordic countries and the French model;
- The evidence on flexibility in the school starting age and alternative approaches to reducing the 'Birthdate effect'.





# Contents

Key Points ..... 1

Executive Summary ..... 3

Contents

1 Introduction ..... 9

2 Northern Ireland context ..... 9

3 Evidence on effective pre-school provision ..... 11

4 Should it be education and/ or care? ..... 13

5 Approaches to early years provision internationally ..... 15

6 Learning to Learn: Early years framework ..... 21

7 School starting age..... 27

8 Conclusion ..... 30

Annex: Actions set out within Learning to Learn ..... 32



## 1 Introduction

There is clear evidence that access to high quality early years education and care has a significant impact on student outcomes. Indeed, evidence shows that internationally, students aged 15 who attended pre-school for more than one year perform better than their counterparts who did not attend at all. This difference was equivalent to more than one year of formal schooling.<sup>1</sup>

Research in Northern Ireland has produced similar findings, with children who did not attend pre-school showing poorer cognitive and behaviour outcomes than their peers who attended pre-school.<sup>2</sup>

This research paper considers the Northern Ireland context; wider evidence on effective pre-school provision; the extent to which education and care should be integrated; international approaches and issues around the school starting age. It also considers *Learning to Learn*, the draft early years framework, identifying areas of potential overlap with OFMdfM's *Towards a Childcare Strategy*.

## 2 Northern Ireland context

Pre-school education is not statutory; provision includes Sure Start, the Pre-School Education Programme and Reception. The following table provides an overview of the key features of provision under the Pre-School Education Programme.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Key features of pre-school provision in NI**

Aspect	Statutory provision	Private/ voluntary provision (DE funded)
<b>Duration of session</b>	Both part-time (2.5 - 4.5 hours) and full-time (at least 4.5 hours) places available	Only part-time funded places available (at least 2.5 hours per day)
<b>Staff qualifications</b>	Required to employ a qualified teacher in every class <sup>4</sup>	Required to arrange support from a qualified teacher or other suitably qualified early years specialist.
<b>Staff: child ratios</b>	A staff: child ratio of 1:13 <sup>5</sup>	The minimum staff: child ratio is 1:8

<sup>1</sup> OECD (2012) *Education Today 2013* OECD Publishing

<sup>2</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. et al. (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project* Oxon: Routledge

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning* Bangor: DE

<sup>4</sup> Department of Education: *Qualifications for early years specialists* [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/support-and-development-2/early-years-education/qualifications-for-early-years-specialists.htm>

Aspect	Statutory provision	Private/ voluntary provision (DE funded)
<b>Curriculum</b>	No centrally-prescribed curriculum  However, providers in receipt of public funding are expected to follow curriculum guidance issued by CCEA <sup>6</sup>	
<b>Regulation</b>	Education and Training Inspectorate	Settings within the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme regulated by ETI <b>and</b> under the health and social care framework. <sup>7</sup>  Early Years Teams from DHSSPS inspect day nurseries and playgroups at least annually <sup>8</sup>
<b>Funding</b>	Recurrent funding provided under the Common Funding Scheme  Funding per pupil for part-time provision is £1,934 (£2,941 for full-time) <sup>9</sup>	Funding is provided as a flat rate per pupil for part-time provision only. The allocation for part-time provision is £1,755 per pupil. <sup>10</sup>

The 2010-2012 Chief Inspector's Report found that in over three-quarters (76%) of provision inspected, the overall effectiveness was found to be good or better. However, the report highlighted a need to improve the quality of leadership and management in 30% of the settings inspected.<sup>11</sup>

### Governance

Currently responsibility for early years provision is spread across a number of departments and arm's-length bodies. Employers for Childcare has pointed to a fragmented policy approach, highlighting a '*lack of leadership and ownership*' in terms of no one Government Department having sole responsibility for provision.<sup>12</sup> The Equality Commission has also identified a need for a strategic approach to childcare.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Nursery Schools, Day Nurseries and Classes* [online] Available at: <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/nursery-schools-day-nurseries-and-classes>

<sup>6</sup> *Pre-school guidance* [online] Available at: [http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/curriculum/pre\\_school/index.asp](http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/curriculum/pre_school/index.asp)

<sup>7</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements* Bangor: DE

<sup>8</sup> Early years teams [online] Available at: <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/early-years-teams>

<sup>9</sup> Minister for Education answer to an Assembly Question by Mr Alex Easton MLA, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2013

<sup>10</sup> As above

<sup>11</sup> Education and Training Inspectorate (2012) *Chief Inspector's Report 2010-2012* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>12</sup> Education and Training Inspectorate (2012) *Chief Inspector's Report 2010-2012* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>13</sup> McQuaid, R., Graham, H., Shapira, M. (2013) *An expert paper on the type, extent and delivery of childcare provision necessary to maximise the economic participation of women within Northern Ireland* Equality Commission

### 3 Evidence on effective pre-school provision

The evidence is clear that the quality of early years education and care is strongly associated with student outcomes. Research shows that children who attend high-quality provision enjoy a broad range of benefits, improving their performance in school and leading to better economic and social outcomes in later life.<sup>14</sup>

#### Curriculum

The OECD advocates broad guidelines and curricular standards for early years provision. It states that such an approach can promote consistency in quality; support staff; and facilitate communication between staff and families.<sup>15</sup> A report from the European Commission advocates a play-based approach, using age-appropriate curricula.<sup>16</sup>

#### Duration – is more than one year beneficial?

Across OECD countries, on average, 72% of 15 year old pupils attended more than one year of pre-primary education.<sup>17</sup>

Recent research by NFER in Northern Ireland found that attending pre-school for more than one year is no more beneficial (and possibly less beneficial) than attending for a single year, based on results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 study (and taking background factors into account).<sup>18</sup>

However, the international evidence (including within the UK) on PISA suggests that student outcomes are better where students are enrolled in pre-school programmes of longer duration. These results took students' socio-economic background into account. In particular, international evidence from PISA indicates that extending early years provision by one year leads to an increase in scores at age 15.<sup>19</sup>

The NFER research notes the differences between the findings on duration of pre-school in NI and internationally. It suggests that the differences in outcomes between students who attend pre-school and those who do not may be largely attributable to students' background characteristics (for example, the number of books in the home). It nonetheless concludes that there is a clear advantage for pupils who have attended pre-school in comparison to those who have not (including those who attended for longer than a year).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012) *Final Report* Luxembourg: European Commission

<sup>15</sup> OECD (2012) *Education Today 2013* OECD Publishing

<sup>16</sup> EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012) *Final Report* Luxembourg: European Commission

<sup>17</sup> OECD (2012) *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators* OECD Publishing

<sup>18</sup> Benton, T., Cunningham, R., Wheeler, R. (2012) *PISA 2009: Modelling achievement and resilience in Northern Ireland* Slough: NFER

<sup>19</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* OECD Publishing

<sup>20</sup> Benton, T., Cunningham, R., Wheeler, R. (2012) *PISA 2009: Modelling achievement and resilience in Northern Ireland* Slough: NFER

The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project in England has found duration of attendance to be linked to outcomes, with every month of pre-school provision after the age of two linked to better development. However, the linked study in Northern Ireland did not find similar effects, suggesting that this was mostly due to less variation in duration of pre-school than was found in England.<sup>21</sup>

## **Staff**

OECD research highlights the key role of staff in early years provision. It highlights a number of common challenges faced by countries internationally, including:<sup>22</sup>

- Raising staff qualification levels;
- Recruiting, retaining and diversifying a qualified workforce;
- Ongoing professional development for the workforce; and
- Ensuring quality of the workforce in the private sector.

## **Qualifications**

There is a strong correlation between higher staff qualifications and better outcomes for children. Staff that have undergone more specialised education and training are found to be associated with stable and stimulating interactions in early years settings.<sup>23</sup> The European Commission notes that it is crucial that staff receive effective initial education as well as continuing professional development.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, it has been highlighted that higher qualifications may lead to increased expectations around salary, raising the costs of provision. OECD research has found that governments often choose not to invest in raising qualifications or training.<sup>25</sup>

There is variation in qualification requirements internationally, ranging from no formal education required to a specialised bachelor's or a master's degree. OECD indicates that not all early years staff must be highly qualified, however it recommends that those with lower levels of education should work with those with high qualification levels.<sup>26</sup>

## **Working conditions**

The early years sector internationally tends to be linked to relatively poor working conditions and remuneration, leading to high rates of staff turnover (often exceeding 40%).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Benton, T., Cunningham, R., Wheeler, R. (2012) *PISA 2009: Modelling achievement and resilience in Northern Ireland* Slough: NFER

<sup>22</sup> OECD (2012) *Education Today 2013* OECD Publishing

<sup>23</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* OECD Publishing

<sup>24</sup> EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012) *Final Report* Luxembourg: European Commission

<sup>25</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* OECD Publishing

<sup>26</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* OECD Publishing

<sup>27</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* OECD Publishing

The importance of ensuring positive working conditions for early years providers is highlighted in the literature, which notes that better conditions can lead to improved job satisfaction and retention. In turn, this can contribute to improved quality of provision.<sup>28</sup>

### **Staff: child ratios**

Internationally across OECD countries there is an average of 14 children for every teacher in pre-primary education.<sup>29</sup> OECD reports that staff: pupil ratios are important at this stage of education, and act as an important indicator of the resources devoted to pre-primary education.<sup>30</sup>

Other research notes that lower staff: child ratios allow children more opportunities to have meaningful interactions.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, analysis of PISA results suggests that the relationship between pre-primary attendance and performance is often stronger in systems with smaller pupil-to-teacher ratios in pre-school provision.<sup>32</sup>

### **Governance**

The importance of effective governance arrangements is also highlighted in the literature. OECD notes that such arrangements should include strong expert policy units; data collection and monitoring; and evaluation and inspection arrangements.<sup>33</sup>

In Finland, Norway and Sweden providers of private early years provision are required to meet the same quality standards as public provision. These requirements are set out within legislation and financing mechanisms.<sup>34</sup>

## **4 Should it be education and/ or care?**

*Learning to Learn*, the Department's Framework for early years, emphasises that early years education "is not, however, day care".<sup>35</sup>

### **Background**

Historically, policies of 'education' and 'care' for young children have evolved separately, with fragmented systems of governance. Internationally, many countries have a two-tier system of early years provision, with 'child care' for younger children and 'pre-primary education' for children aged between three and six.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>28</sup> As above

<sup>29</sup> OECD (2012) *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators* OECD Publishing

<sup>30</sup> As above

<sup>31</sup> Pianta, R.C., Barnett, W.S., Burchinal, M. and Thornburg, K.R. (2009) "The Effects of Preschool Education" *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* Vol 10, No. 2 pp. 49-88

<sup>32</sup> OECD (2012) *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators* OECD Publishing

<sup>33</sup> OECD (2012) *Education Today 2013* OECD Publishing

<sup>34</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* OECD Publishing

<sup>35</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning* Bangor: DE

<sup>36</sup> Kaga, Y., Bennett, J., Moss, P. (2010) *Caring and Learning Together: A cross-national study on the integration of early childcare and education within education* Paris: UNESCO and OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care* Paris: OECD Publishing

OECD suggests that many countries consider children aged under three to need child care rather than early education, and view this as primarily the responsibility of parents. A consequence of this fragmentation in services can be a lack of coherence for families, with variations in funding, procedures, regulation and staff requirements. In general, child care services face more challenges in this regard.<sup>37</sup>

Other commentaries note that while early education tends to be viewed as an entitlement, childcare is often treated as a commodity for parents to purchase. This dichotomy can contribute to inequalities in access to services and to levels of child poverty, as childcare can be too costly for many, and it may discourage employment.<sup>38</sup>

### **Integration or separation?**

The evidence internationally supports the integration of education and childcare. For example, the European Commission reports that high quality provision does not focus only on basic health, safety and care needs, but also offers intellectual and social simulation.<sup>39</sup>

This is in line with recommendations from the OECD which promote children's learning and well-being as central to early childhood education and care. OECD also highlights the importance of other factors such as supporting parents and in facilitating women into work.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, much of the international discourse on early years provision uses the term: Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). For example, this is used at European level and by organisations such as the OECD.

Other evidence finds that pre-school settings that consider cognitive and social development as complementary – and do not prioritise one over the other - tend to achieve the best outcomes for children.<sup>41</sup>

### **Current trends – Integration under one ministry**

OECD notes that in countries where responsibility for early education and childcare is held by different ministries, different standards tend to be established across varied settings.<sup>42</sup>

The evidence suggests that policy-making for early childhood education and care should be placed under a ministry with a strong focus on children's education and

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<sup>37</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care* Paris: OECD Publishing

<sup>38</sup> Children in Scotland (2011) *Early Childhood Education and Care: Developing a fully integrated early years system*

<sup>39</sup> EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012) *Final Report* Luxembourg: European Commission

<sup>40</sup> OECD (2012) *Education Today 2013* OECD Publishing

<sup>41</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. et al. (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project* Oxon: Routledge

<sup>42</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* OECD Publishing



development. International analysis highlights a number of benefits of provision led by a single ministry, including:<sup>43</sup>

- **Greater coherence and consistency** in regulation, funding and staffing;
- **Enhanced continuity for children:** variations in access and quality tend to be reduced under one ministry;
- **Improved management:** which can lead to improved quality and access.

The Nordic countries pioneered the single ministry approach in the 1960s and 1970s, bringing early years provision under social welfare. Since the 1980s there has been a movement towards integration under the education ministry (including England, Scotland and New Zealand).<sup>44</sup>

## 5 Approaches to early years provision internationally

Most European countries provide children with at least two years of pre-school education free of charge to parents prior to their admission to primary school. This is a statutory right from the age of three in most jurisdictions (except for the Republic of Ireland and the Netherlands).<sup>45</sup>

OECD identifies two broad approaches to early years provision internationally: a school readiness approach and a social pedagogy approach.<sup>46</sup>

### School readiness approach

- Found in France and English-speaking countries (including the UK, the US, Australia and Canada)
- Focus is on readiness for school, emphasising cognitive development and the acquisition of knowledge
- The contents and approaches of primary education are introduced
- OECD suggests that some such programmes may not be well suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children

<sup>43</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care* Paris: OECD Publishing

<sup>44</sup> Kaga, Y., Bennett, J., Moss, P. (2010) *Caring and Learning Together: A cross-national study on the integration of early childcare and education within education* Paris: UNESCO

<sup>45</sup> OECD (2012) *Education Today 2013* OECD Publishing

<sup>46</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care* Paris: OECD Publishing

### Social pedagogy approach

- Found in Nordic and Central European countries
- Emphasis is on supporting families and children's broad developmental needs
- Combines care, upbringing and learning, without prioritising any of these
- OECD comments that this approach gives "excellent results" in terms of school readiness, helping children to acquire knowledge including reading and writing

Source: OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care*

The following table provides a comparison of these two approaches.

**Table 2: Comparison of the social pedagogy and readiness for school approaches**

	Social pedagogy approach	School readiness approach
<b>Emphasis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewed as a broad preparation for life</li> <li>• Objective is that children gain a desire for and confidence in learning, rather than achieving a pre-specified level of knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readiness for school is key</li> <li>• Strong focus on cognitive development and early literacy and numeracy</li> </ul>
<b>Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on supporting children in their own interests and tasks</li> <li>• Focus on play, interaction, activity and personal investigation</li> <li>• Parental role important</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structured approach to learning</li> <li>• Mainly teacher-directed</li> <li>• Teacher manages a mix of instruction, child-initiated activities and thematic work</li> </ul>
<b>Curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frameworks are broad national guidelines</li> <li>• Each centre has autonomy to develop its own curriculum guided by the framework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tends to be a prescribed curriculum detailing goals and outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>Quality control</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participatory approach based on educator and team responsibility, with external inspection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspection aims to ensure quality, often based on pre-determined learning outcomes</li> </ul>

Research points to the long-term benefits of a curriculum with a high level of child-initiated activities, as well as the advantages of teacher-initiated learning. The evidence therefore indicates that a mixture of child- and teacher-initiated activities are most effective.<sup>47</sup>

### **Best performing systems**

The Economist Intelligence Unit has compiled an Index ranking the pre-school systems of 45 countries. It assesses the extent to which systems are available to all children, affordable for all families, and of high quality. In this Index the Nordic countries take four of the six top positions, with the UK ranked 4<sup>th</sup> and France ranked 7<sup>th</sup>.<sup>48</sup>

The report notes that while the contexts of Nordic countries are conducive to good performance (relatively high incomes, mostly homogenous populations and a well-defined state's role), their actions also play a role. An example is the status given to teachers, which tends to match other professions, as well as similar qualifications and wages.<sup>49</sup>

The following paragraphs consider provision within France, England, the Republic of Ireland and Finland, giving examples of the different approaches in use.

### **France**

In France children aged under three can avail of a range of provision, including crèches, playgroups and childminders (not controlled by Department of Education). Two year olds may be admitted to pre-school, although priority is given to three year-olds.<sup>50</sup>

At least 40% of staff within a setting must hold a diploma, gained after taking a year-long, post-18 course.<sup>51</sup> Key features of provision for children aged three and over include:<sup>52</sup>

- Children spend three years at nursery school;
- Children are grouped into age groups in three sections, 'reception', 'middle', and 'final' year;

<sup>47</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* OECD Publishing and Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. et al. (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project* Oxon: Routledge

<sup>48</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) *Starting Well: Benchmarking early education across the world* London and New York

<sup>49</sup> As above

<sup>50</sup> European Commission (2012) *Organisation of Programmes for Children under 2-3 years* [online] Available at: [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/France:Organisation\\_of\\_Programmes\\_for\\_Children\\_under\\_2-3\\_years](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/France:Organisation_of_Programmes_for_Children_under_2-3_years)

<sup>51</sup> Department for Education (2013) *More great childcare: Raising quality and giving parents more choice*

<sup>52</sup> European Commission (2012) *Organisation of Programmes for Children over 2-3 years* [online] Available at: [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/France:Organisation\\_of\\_Programmes\\_for\\_Children\\_over\\_2-3\\_years](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/France:Organisation_of_Programmes_for_Children_over_2-3_years)

- The final year is part of a learning cycle that corresponds to the first two years of primary school, to provide continuity;
- There is flexibility for teaching staff (in agreement with parents) to allocate children to the stage that best suits their needs, regardless of age;
- There are no national rules on staff: child ratios.

Classes for the final year of pre-school tend to share a building with the primary. Teachers teaching in the pre-school and primary schools undertake common training and may move freely between the sections.<sup>53</sup>

Pre-school involves 24 hours of provision per week. Curricula are defined nationally, with teachers free to choose teaching methods. Curriculum topics include appropriation of language, discovering writing and 'becoming a pupil'.<sup>54</sup>

### Republic of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland differs to other European countries in that it does not have a long-standing tradition of young children attending pre-school. However, in recent years 'significant progress' has been made in providing high quality services.<sup>55</sup>

In 2004 the OECD criticised the lack of a clear departmental lead in relation to early years provision in the Republic of Ireland. As a result, in 2006 a new department was established, now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs bringing together a range of policy issues including childcare and early education.<sup>56</sup>

However, the Department includes separate units for childcare and early education, which one author notes is "*evidence of the continued conceptual and structural separation of care and education in Irish policy*".<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care* Paris: OECD Publishing

<sup>54</sup> European Commission (2012) Teaching and Learning in Programmes for Children over 2-3 years [online] Available at: [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/France:Teaching\\_and\\_Learning\\_in\\_Programmes\\_for\\_Children\\_over\\_2-3\\_years](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/France:Teaching_and_Learning_in_Programmes_for_Children_over_2-3_years)

<sup>55</sup> European Commission (2011) Ireland: *Early Childhood Education and Care* [online] Available at: [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Early\\_Childhood\\_Education\\_and\\_Care](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care)

<sup>56</sup> Hayes, N. (2010) Childcare? Early childhood education and care? "Towards an integrated early years policy for young children in Ireland" *Early Years* Vol. 30, No. 1, March 2010 pp.67-78

<sup>57</sup> As above

**Table 3: Overview of early years provision in the Republic of Ireland<sup>58</sup>**

Type	Provision
<b>Universal</b>	<b>Early school enrolment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compulsory school age is six, however almost all five-year-olds and about half of four-year-olds attend primary</li> </ul>
	<b>Free Pre-School Year (FPSY)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduced in 2010, the FPSY provides one year's free part-time care and education (3 hours per day, 5 days a week)</li> <li>• High levels of take-up (94%) of target population</li> <li>• Higher capitation rate available to settings with better-qualified staff</li> </ul>
<b>Targeted</b>	<b>Early Start pre-school project</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational programme provided in 40 disadvantaged urban areas</li> </ul>
	<b>Traveller pre-schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• However long-term policy involves phasing out such pre-schools</li> </ul>

Hayes comments that it is not yet known whether the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year will close or widen the gap between education and care, although there are some indications that it may widen the divide.<sup>59</sup>

### **Finland**

All children in Finland have a legal right to childcare and to local pre-schools. The school starting age is seven years, and almost all Finnish children attend one year of free pre-school from the age of six. This involves half-day classes with day care for the remainder of the day. Prior to this – from birth to the age of six – parents have access to full-day childcare at a capped cost (often in daycare centres).<sup>60</sup>

The model of provision in place in Finland is described as 'educare', due to the combination of care, education and teaching. National curriculum guidelines are set with the aim of guiding content and activities, although settings have the freedom to design their own curriculum within the parameters. Areas of learning include the

<sup>58</sup> Oireachtas Library & Research Service (2012) *Early Childhood Education and Care*

<sup>59</sup> Hayes, N. (2010) Childcare? Early childhood education and care? "Towards an integrated early years policy for young children in Ireland" *Early Years* Vol. 30, No. 1, March 2010 pp.67-78

<sup>60</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) *Starting Well: Benchmarking early education across the world* London and New York

difference between right and wrong, how to cope in everyday situations and familiarisation with culture and nature.<sup>61</sup>

Finland's successful efforts in ensuring quality include the systematic development of teaching as a professional career. The key features include:<sup>62</sup>

- Teachers must have a bachelor's degree in education, and many have a master's degree;
- Studies tend to be academic-based courses at top universities;
- Teachers are afforded the same respect and similar working conditions as other professionals, such as lawyers.

## England

In England three and four year olds are entitled to 15 hours of pre-school each week, generally offered as three-hour slots, five days a week. This is offered by the maintained (nursery schools and classes), private and voluntary sectors. Most four-year olds are in free full day educational provision, which is usually provided in the reception class of a primary school.<sup>63</sup>

There is no general entitlement for children aged under three, although parents may choose to pay for childcare through privately-run day nurseries, childminders or nannies. Some disadvantaged two-year olds can avail of free part-time places.<sup>64</sup>

The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework in place from September 2012 provides learning goals, with teachers free to choose teaching methods. Key areas include communication and language, personal, social and emotional development and mathematics.<sup>65</sup>

## Reforms

A recent independent review of early education and childcare qualifications in England highlighted a number of issues, including a lack of rigour and depth across some qualifications, and a lack of consistency in terms of quality. It recommended implementation of a rigorous set of qualifications for early years professionals.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>61</sup> European Commission (2011) Finland: *Early Childhood Education and Care* [online] Available at: [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Finland:Early\\_Childhood\\_Education\\_and\\_Care](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Finland:Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care)

<sup>62</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) *Starting Well: Benchmarking early education across the world* London and New York

<sup>63</sup> As above

<sup>64</sup> European Commission (2012) England: *Early Childhood Education and Care* [online] Available at: [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-England:Early\\_Childhood\\_Education\\_and\\_Care](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-England:Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care)

<sup>65</sup> European Commission (2012) England: Teaching and Learning in Programmes for Children over 2-3 years [online] Available at: [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-England:Teaching\\_and\\_Learning\\_in\\_Programmes\\_for\\_Children\\_over\\_2-3\\_years](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-England:Teaching_and_Learning_in_Programmes_for_Children_over_2-3_years)

<sup>66</sup> Nutbrown, C. (2012) *Foundations for Quality: The independent review of early education and childcare qualifications*

Subsequently, the Department for Education published proposals to improve professionalism and quality within the early years workforce.<sup>67</sup>

**Table 4: Key proposals for childcare reform in England**

Area	Proposals
Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving early years qualifications</li> <li>• Imposing tougher entry requirements for entrants to the profession</li> <li>• Introduction of Early Years Teachers to meet the same entry requirements and pass the same tests as trainee school teachers</li> </ul>
Staff: child ratios	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providers with high quality staff given greater flexibility on staff: child ratios (qualification requirements to be consulted on)</li> <li>• Proposed ratios vary, including 1:8 or 1:13 three-year olds, or 1:4 under one-year-olds</li> </ul>
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Removing current duplication (Ofsted and some local authorities inspect services for three-four year olds)</li> <li>• Proposals include making Ofsted the sole inspector of services for two-four year-olds (including childminder agencies)</li> <li>• Weaker providers to be inspected more frequently</li> </ul>

## 6 Learning to Learn: Early years framework

### Background

In June 2010 the former Minister for Education, Caitríona Ruane, launched a consultation on a draft *Early Years (0-6) Strategy*. The summary of responses was published in July 2012, highlighting largely negative views. For example, 90% of respondents did not think the strategy was appropriate and 95% disagreed with the actions proposed. Examples of the issues identified include.<sup>68</sup>

- Insufficient actions for children aged 0-2 and 4-6;
- Inadequate attention within the strategy for children with special educational needs, disabilities and Travellers;
- Lack of reference to pregnancy and to the role of health professionals;

<sup>67</sup> Department for Education (2013) *More great childcare: raising quality and giving parents more choice* DfE

<sup>68</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation on the Early Years (0-6) Strategy*

- No attempt to address the dual systems of ratios, qualifications, session times and salaries in pre-school provision.

### **Revised strategy: Learning to Learn**

*Learning to Learn*, launched on the 4<sup>th</sup> December 2012, aims to provide a way forward for early years education and to complement the Department's other key policies.<sup>69</sup> The document sets out an overall policy aim for Early Years Education and Learning:<sup>70</sup>

*"All children have opportunities to achieve their potential through high quality early years education and learning experiences."*

The Annex to this paper sets out the actions detailed within the strategy, together with their aims and proposed timescales.

#### **Policy Objectives of *Learning to Learn***

- Provide equitable access to high quality early years education and learning services
- Support personal, social and emotional development, promote positive learning dispositions and enhance language, cognitive and physical development in young children
- Provide a positive and nurturing early learning experience, as well as a foundation for improved educational attainment and life-long learning
- Identify and help address barriers to learning, and reduce the risk and impact of social exclusion and the need for later interventions
- Encourage and support parents in their role as first and ongoing educators

The consultation on the strategy ended on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2013, and the Department states that it hopes to achieve full implementation by 2014/15 (many individual actions are to begin in 2013).

### **OFMdFM Childcare Strategy**

NI's childcare strategy, *Children First*, was published in 1999. Although it was reviewed in 2005, the review's recommendations have not been implemented.<sup>71</sup> The recommendations included assigning lead responsibility for the strategy to one department and minister.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Statement to the Assembly: Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning 4<sup>th</sup> December 2012* [online] Available at: [http://www.deni.gov.uk/minister\\_s\\_statement\\_pdf\\_148kb.pdf](http://www.deni.gov.uk/minister_s_statement_pdf_148kb.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning* Bangor: DE

<sup>71</sup> Employers for Childcare (2010) *Sizing up: A comparative study of childcare policies within the four regions of the UK*

<sup>72</sup> Capita (2005) *Review of Children First: Final Report* Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety



The *Programme for Government 2011-15* included a commitment to “publish and implement a *Childcare Strategy with key actions to provide integrated and affordable childcare.*”

The Office for the First Minister and deputy First Minister is leading the development of the childcare strategy. The Executive has set aside £12m (on top of departmental funding) for its development.<sup>73</sup>

*Towards a Childcare Strategy*, a consultation document setting out a vision and principles for a future childcare strategy, was published in December 2012. Consultation on the document closed on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2013, and OFMdFM planned to analyse the responses and develop a final report and high level actions.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Vision and aims***

The Strategy highlights the role of childcare in helping parents into work, reducing poverty and breaking the cycle of inter-generational deprivation. It also recognises the importance of a ‘good quality childcare sector’. The stated aim is to “*promote the availability of good quality, accessible, integrated and affordable childcare provision that is sustainable in the long-term.*”<sup>75</sup>

#### **Aims of the Childcare Strategy**

- Support the development of children and young people and enable children and young people from the most deprived backgrounds to avail of life opportunities
- Support increased parental participation in the workforce, thereby making a significant impact on the economy, families and communities
- Support learning and development activity which will improve opportunities for employment

The Strategy is to be underpinned by six key principles: an integrated approach; informed parental choice; quality; accessibility; affordability; and sustainability.

### ***Learning to Learn and Towards a Childcare Strategy***

In an answer to an Assembly Question on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2013, the Minister for Education stated that departmental officials had ‘engaged’ with OFMdFM officials on the development of the childcare strategy.<sup>76</sup> The Minister has noted that the Department’s work on early years will ‘feed into’ the Childcare Strategy, while

<sup>73</sup> OFMdFM (2012) *Towards a Childcare Strategy* OFMdFM

<sup>74</sup> As above

<sup>75</sup> OFMdFM (2012) *Towards a Childcare Strategy* OFMdFM

<sup>76</sup> Minister for Education response to an Assembly Question by Mr Danny Kinahan MLA, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2013

emphasising that the focus of the Department's pre-school provision is on education and not childcare.<sup>77</sup>

#### **Areas covered by the strategies**

*Learning to Learn* covers Sure Start, the Pre-School Education Programme; Reception and the Foundation Stage of the Curriculum.

OFMdfM's strategy will deal with 'childcare', which is defined as '*the safe supervision of children aged 0-14 in an environment that benefits the development of the child, to enable parents to participate in employment, training or learning.*'

It is difficult to directly compare the Department of Education's 'Learning to Learn' framework with OFMdfM's consultation document 'Towards a Childcare Strategy', as no clear actions are set out within OFMdfM's consultation, and due to the differing emphases of the documents. However, the consultation document anticipates that a number of actions will be required to deal with:

- Increasing the flexibility and accessibility of childcare provision;
- Encouraging sustainable affordable models of childcare provision to be rolled out across NI;
- Identifying a range of potential support mechanisms to aid parents to afford and access childcare;
- Examining the potential to introduce options from an educare and child development approach, allowing for enhanced integration in targeting of childcare interventions for some of our most deprived and vulnerable children as well as wider integrated options such as wraparound childcare in schools;
- Raise awareness of help available towards the cost of childcare such as childcare vouchers and benefit uptake schemes.

Comparing the actions set out in *Learning to Learn* with these areas and the strategy's principles, areas of potential overlap can be identified. These are outlined in Table 5.

<sup>77</sup> NI Assembly Official Report (2013) *Committee for Education. Early years policy: Ministerial briefing* [online] Available at: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Committee-Minutes-of-Evidence/Session-2012-2013/January-2013/Early-Years-Policy-Ministerial-Briefing/>

**Table 5: Areas of potential overlap between Learning to Learn and Towards a Childcare Strategy**

Area of overlap	Actions within Learning to Learn	Areas within Towards a Childcare Strategy
<b>Flexibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce flexibility in enrolment for nursery schools and units</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase flexibility and accessibility of provision</li> </ul>
<b>Integration of services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commission review of Sure Start to assess effectiveness</li> <li>• Refocus use of nursery extended schools (ES) funding to help identify and address underdeveloped skills of young children</li> <li>• Establish criteria (similar to ES) for voluntary and private settings to access additional resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine potential for educare options, allowing for enhanced integration in targeting interventions for deprived children</li> <li>• Wider options such as wraparound childcare in schools to be considered</li> </ul>
<b>Joint working</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify opportunities for joint investment under DSC Framework</li> <li>• Improve coordination of service delivery to families</li> <li>• Work with DHSSPS to develop protocols for delivery bodies to enhance services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy to be aligned with other PfG commitments and build on work of other departments and agencies</li> </ul>
<b>Quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legislate to define the age range</li> <li>• Ensure all DE services 0-6 are subject to area-based inspection</li> <li>• Develop protocols for support and intervention</li> <li>• Review adequacy of governance and accountability arrangements</li> <li>• Review Sure Start</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff qualifications, age range, group sizes, environment, quality standards and mechanisms for regulation and inspection to be considered</li> </ul>

Area of overlap	Actions within Learning to Learn	Areas within Towards a Childcare Strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liaise with DHSSPS on qualifications</li> <li>• Develop programme of continuous professional development for staff</li> <li>• Create 11 pilot Education Support Clusters to raise standards</li> <li>• Develop an ‘Excellence in Early Education Fund’ to provide additional funding to the Clusters to incentivise collaboration</li> <li>• Introduce flexibility in enrolment for nursery schools and units</li> <li>• Pilot deployment of additional nursery assistants to increase staff: child ratios</li> <li>• Review Building Handbook for Nursery Schools</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Accessibility</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retain a power for nursery schools and units to provide for 2 year olds</li> <li>• Develop potential options for expansion of a 2 year old programme</li> <li>• Monitor uptake and completion of education and learning opportunities by children at risk of exclusion, including children with SEN</li> <li>• Extend pilots in early years settings initiated by the review of SEN and Inclusion to help improve access to specialist support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider developing providers to address childcare needs of children with a disability and the need for improving provision across all age ranges</li> </ul>

## 7 School starting age

Northern Ireland has the lowest compulsory school starting age in Europe and there are some concerns regarding this here and throughout the UK. For example, a number of commentators suggest that children aged four and five may not be ready for formal primary school or reception class, and that attending school at an early age may cause stress among young pupils.<sup>78</sup>

The literature indicates that there is general consensus across many countries in terms of appropriate provision for children aged from three years. This tends to involve an active, play-based approach, encouraging independence among young children.<sup>79</sup> However, overall, the evidence does not advocate an ideal age for children starting school. For further information please see [Paper 97/11: Arguments on the school starting age](#).

### International approaches

In Europe and internationally age six is the most common school starting age. Table 6 illustrates compulsory school starting ages in Europe. However, it should be noted that this is often the latest age at which children must start school, and in some European countries (including England and the Republic of Ireland), most children enter school below the compulsory age.

**Table 6: Compulsory school starting ages internationally**

Age	Country
Four	Northern Ireland
Five	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales
Six	Australia, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey
Seven	Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden

Source: *Compulsory age of starting school in European countries* [online] Available at <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/index.cfm?9B1C0068-C29E-AD4D-0AEC-8B4F43F54A28>

<sup>78</sup> Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

<sup>79</sup> Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. London: QCA

The evidence highlights a trend in Europe towards requiring children to start education younger. Indeed, a number of countries have lowered their school starting ages, for example, Poland and Denmark have lowered their starting age from seven to six.<sup>80</sup>

### **The “Birthdate effect”**

It is well established in educational research that the youngest children within a school year group tend to perform less well than their older peers. This ‘birthdate effect’ is most pronounced during pre-school and primary school, gradually decreasing throughout post-primary school.<sup>81</sup>

However, the effect remains significant at GCSE, A level and possibly during higher education. Indeed, recent evidence found that autumn-born children were 25% more likely to gain a place at Oxford or Cambridge than those born in the summer.<sup>82</sup>

The evidence also suggests that a disproportionately high percentage of relatively young children in the school year are referred for special educational needs, and many of them appear to be misdiagnosed. A suggested reason for this is that teachers may have unrealistic expectations of younger pupils, and, as such, may not make sufficient allowances for their level of attainment.<sup>83</sup>

### **Causes**

The relative age differences of pupils are thought to account for these differences, with the gap between the youngest and oldest pupils in a class being almost a year in some cases. The evidence indicates that the youngest in the year group tend to be less mature cognitively, socially and emotionally than their older classmates.<sup>84</sup>

Age-related disadvantages may lead to lower self-esteem, which may in turn have further impacts on behaviour and achievement.<sup>85</sup> For example, younger children may compare themselves with older classmates, leading to feelings of inadequacy, whereas older pupils may receive more positive feedback and assume a ‘leadership position’.<sup>86</sup>

A recently published study has found that streaming pupils by ability in primary school can reinforce the disadvantage faced by summer-born children. It found that by the age of seven, September-born children in England were almost three times more likely to

<sup>80</sup> *Compulsory age of starting school in European countries* [online] Available at <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/index.cfm?9B1C0068-C29E-AD4D-0AEC-8B4F43F54A28>

<sup>81</sup> Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

<sup>82</sup> BBC News (2013) *Month of birth affects chance of attending Oxbridge* [online] Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21579484> and Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

<sup>83</sup> Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

<sup>84</sup> Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

<sup>85</sup> Polizzi, N. et al. (2007) “Season of birth of students receiving education services under a diagnosis of emotional and behavioural disorder” *School Psychology Quarterly* Vol. 22 (1) pp.44-57

<sup>86</sup> Sharp, C. (2009) *International thematic probe: The influence of relative age on learner attainment and development* NFER

be in the top stream as those born in the following August. It is thought that ability grouping can affect children's self-perceptions and limit their opportunities.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Flexibility in the school starting age***

A number of policy options are suggested in the literature to address the gap in attainment between summer-born and other children. These include testing children when they are ready; monitoring SEN referral rates to explore relative age effects; and including the issue in teacher training.<sup>88</sup>

Flexibility over school starting age has also been suggested as a possible means of addressing the 'birthdate effect'. However, the evidence on this approach is not conclusive, with an international literature review stating that the evidence does not support the effectiveness of deferred entry to school.<sup>89</sup>

In the US delayed entry to school is fairly common. US children whose entry to school is delayed tend to be younger in the year-group, boys and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. Research on the effectiveness of this approach is not conclusive.<sup>90</sup>

**Table 7: Findings around flexibility in school starting age in the US**

Area	Findings
Impact on wider class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holding back creates a class with an age span of more than a year - older children may have an unfair advantage and may feel alienated</li> <li>• The class may be too diverse for a teacher to manage well</li> </ul>
Advantages for held-back children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some evidence that children gain a social and academic advantage by being the oldest in the class</li> </ul>
Disadvantages for held-back children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Held-back children showed more behavioural problems and more frequently used special education services</li> </ul>
Special Educational Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some held back children may have special needs initially misdiagnosed as immaturity</li> <li>• Such children may be better served by direct intervention than by deferred entry to school</li> </ul>

<sup>87</sup> Hallam, S., Parsons, S. (2013) "Prevalence of streaming in UK primary schools: evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study" *British Educational Research Journal*

<sup>88</sup> Crawford, C. et al. (2007) *When You Are Born Matters: The Impact of Date of Birth on Child Cognitive Outcomes in England*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies and Sharp, C. (2009) *International thematic probe: The influence of relative age on learner attainment and development* NFER

<sup>89</sup> Sharp, C. (2009) *International thematic probe: The influence of relative age on learner attainment and development* NFER

<sup>90</sup> Katz, L.G. (2000) *Academic Redshirting and Young Children* Eric Digest

The US research also highlights concerns around who should decide whether children should have their entry to school deferred. If parents have a key role, it is more likely that better-off families would avail of the flexibility, as less well-off families may rely more on the extra hours of childcare that school provides in order to make work affordable.<sup>91</sup>

### **Deferring entry to primary school in NI**

There is no flexibility within the legislation for the minimum school starting age. Children of compulsory school age must attend primary unless there is a statement of Special Educational Need, or where children are to be educated at home. There is no appeals process.<sup>92</sup>

Article 46 of the 1986 Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order, substituted by Article 156 of the Education Reform (NI) 1989 Order, sets out the requirements around the school starting age:<sup>93</sup>

- Where a child reaches the age of four on or between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 1<sup>st</sup> July in the same school year, the child must start school at the beginning of the following school year (when the child is four but not yet five);
- Where a child reaches the age of four between 2<sup>nd</sup> July and 31<sup>st</sup> August in the same calendar year, the child must start school in September of the next calendar year (when the child is five).

### **Statement of Special Educational Need**

Entry to primary school may only be deferred if the child has a Statement of Special Educational Need. Under Article 16 of the Education (NI) Order 1996 a Board may name a nursery school in a statement when determining provision for a child with SEN, even if the child is of primary school age.<sup>94</sup>

Information provided by the ELBs show that between 2008 and 2012 a total of 73 boys and 30 girls had their entry to primary school deferred as a result of a pre-school setting being named in a statement.<sup>95</sup>

## **8 Conclusion**

This paper highlights a number of areas that could be given further consideration. These include:

<sup>91</sup> Crawford, C. et al. (2007) *When You Are Born Matters: The Impact of Date of Birth on Child Cognitive Outcomes in England*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies

<sup>92</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, March 2013

<sup>93</sup> Legislation.gov.uk *Education Reform (NI) 1989 Order* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1989/2406/article/156>

<sup>94</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, March 2013

<sup>95</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, March 2013



- The fragmentation of responsibility for early years provision and childcare across departments and arm's-length bodies;
- Areas of overlap in *Learning to Learn* and *Towards a Childcare Strategy* and the extent of joint working on these policies;
- The strong emphasis of Learning to Learn on education in light of the evidence on the importance of integrating education and care;
- The variation in requirements around qualifications, ratios, regulation and funding for DE-funded pre-school provision;
- Initial education and continuing professional development for early years staff;
- International approaches such as the social pedagogy model in Nordic countries and the French model;
- The evidence on flexibility in the school starting age and alternative approaches to reducing the 'Birthdate effect'.

## Annex: Actions set out within Learning to Learn

The Strategy sets out a number of actions. The following tables outline these actions and the timescales provided.

**Table 8: Actions around scope of provision**

Detailed action	Timescale	Aim
<b>Legislating to define the age range</b> for pre-school programme to children over 3 years 2 months	Begin early 2013	Redefine pre-school programme to focus on children in their pre-school year
<b>Retaining a power for nursery schools and units to provide for 2 year olds</b> if needed (outside the pre-school programme)		
Legislating to <b>prevent schools establishing new or maintaining existing reception classes</b>		
<b>Extending the Foundation Stage to include a non-compulsory year (pre-school)</b> and two compulsory years (primary) with one foundation curriculum to incorporate pre-school	Begin early 2013	Ensure that experiences in primary school build more effectively on previous education and learning
<b>Developing potential options</b> for the expansion of a two-year old programme	Following review	Review how early years services are targeted to address barriers to learning and enhance access and equity

**Table 9: Actions around inspection and intervention**

Action	Timescale	Aim
<b>Ensuring all DE funded services for 0-6 are subject to a thorough area-based inspection process</b> , including the Sure Start Developmental Programme and Foundation Stage (not separating foundation from the overall primary stage)	Begin early 2013	Apply the principles of ESaGS to all DE funded early years provision
<b>Developing protocols for support and intervention</b> , outside ESaGS, where provision is below standard		

**Table 10: Actions around supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with SEN**

Action	Timescale	Aim
<b>Refocusing the use of extended schools (ES) funding</b> for nursery schools and units to help identify and address underdeveloped social, emotional and communication skills of young children	Begin early 2013	Review how early years education and learning services are effectively targeted to address barriers to learning and enhance access and equity
<b>Establishing criteria, similar to that used for ES, for voluntary and private settings</b> in the Pre-School Programme to access additional resources proportionate to the amount they receive per place		
<b>Commissioning a review of Sure Start</b> (with DHSSPS) to assess the extent to which it is helping secure improved well-being and development outcomes for those in the most disadvantaged areas  Also to assess the need for admissions criteria to ensure that those most in need avail of Sure Start	Begin 2013	
<b>Monitoring the uptake and completion of early years education and learning opportunities by children at risk of exclusion</b> , including children with SEN, looked after children, traveller children and newcomer families	2013/14	
<b>Extending the pilots in early years settings initiated by the Review of SEN and Inclusion</b> (subject to evaluation findings) to help improve access to specialist support and build capacity across pre-school settings		

**Table 11: Actions around Irish-medium provision**

Action	Timescale	Aim
Commissioning research on the outcomes of pre-school Irish-medium Education as outlined in the Review of Irish-Medium Education	Begin early 2013	Ensure that experiences in primary school build more effectively on previous education and learning experiences

**Table 12: Actions around joint working**

Action	Timescale	Aim
<b>Identifying opportunities for investing jointly with DHSSPS, DSD, DoJ and OFMdfM under the DSC framework</b> in evidence-based family intervention/parenting programmes planned, commissioned and evaluated through the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership	Begin early 2013	Collaborate with other departments to work towards a common goal of improving outcomes for children
<b>Improving the coordination of service delivery to individual families</b> by ensuring that early years services/workforce are integrated into the DHSSPS Family Support Hubs and the HSCT Early Years teams' family support structures		
<b>Working with DHSSPS to develop protocols for delivery bodies to enhance information sharing, early identification and intervention services</b> for children and families at risk, and review joint training requirements across disciplines as well as improving inter-personal communication		Over-arching goal is 'developing the education workforce'

**Table 13: Actions around early years workforce**

Action	Timescale	Aim
<b>Creating 11 pilot Early Years Education Support Clusters</b> (two in each board area and one other which may be Irish-medium specific) to raise standards by making greater use of the teaching expertise in nursery schools, units, playgroups and across other relevant providers and early years specialists	In place for 2013/14 academic year	Establish appropriate support mechanisms to drive up standards in pre-school provision and disseminate best practice
<b>Developing an 'Excellence in Early Education Fund'</b> to provide seed/additional funding to the clusters to incentivise greater collaboration, and support the additional requirements on the lead cluster which must have an 'outstanding' inspection report		
<b>Liaising with DHSSPS around the current qualifications</b>	In place for	

Action	Timescale	Aim
relevant to early years education and learning particularly around literacy and numeracy	2014/15 academic year	
<b>Developing a programme of continuous professional development</b> for staff and management committees in funded settings with a focus on leadership and management		
<b>Standardising the closure days</b> for pre-school settings to maximise available time for staff development	In place for 2013/14 academic year	

**Table 14: Actions around early years learning environment**

Action	Timescale	Aim
<b>Introducing flexibility in overall enrolment for nursery schools and units up to a maximum class size of 30</b> – where the school is over-subscribed with target age children, additional children are target age and the Board of Governors and ELB/ESA are satisfied that the premises and staffing structure can support the increase	Begin work in 2013	Revise the pre-school programme to ensure that all target age children benefit from an equitable pre-school experience
<b>Piloting the deployment of additional assistants in nursery schools and nursery units</b> to increase the staff to child ratios across statutory settings. To develop the pilot the Department will work directly with nursery school and primary school principals		
<b>Issuing guidance on reducing the length of settling in time</b> for pre-school and Year 1 (Foundation) to take account of the child's previous experience		
<b>Placing a moratorium on any new or additional full-time provision</b> or conversion from part-time to full-time (over 4.5 hours) in advance of reviewing the current levels of full-time provision and the needs of children being served by it	Begin early 2013	Over time standardise patterns of attendance as part of the pre-school
<b>Considering potential options for standardised patterns of attendance</b> as part of wider consideration or area-based		

Action	Timescale	Aim
planning for pre-school provision		programme
<b>Reviewing the Building Handbook for Nursery Schools</b> to reflect the additional need for parental and community engagement	Begin work in 2013	Adopt an area-based approach to managing the early years estate and consider the optimum use of premises
<b>Assessing the ICT infrastructure requirements</b> of nursery schools and any associated needs of DE funded pre-school settings		
<b>Developing guidance, information and support materials</b> for parents and practitioners on preparing for and managing transitions to Foundation Stage and on to Key Stage 1	Begin early 2013	Ensure experiences in primary school build more effectively on previous education

**Table 15: Actions around governance and management**

Action	Timescale	Aim
<b>Clarifying and communicating early years policy and priorities</b> to enable ESA to deliver the pre-school admissions system and provide advice on future development proposals in line with DE policy	Begin 2013 for PEAGS and immediately following establishment of ESA	Ensure the effective planning, management and coordinated delivery of early years education and learning services
<b>Reviewing the adequacy of current governance and accountability arrangements</b> in place across the range of existing programmes	Begin 2013	
<b>Requiring ESA to review current arrangements for the delivery of all funded pre-school services</b> to achieve maximum benefit from a single employing authority, including reviewing the role of PEAG generally and in	Begin immediately following establishment	

Action	Timescale	Aim
relation to the Child Care Partnerships	of ESA	
<b>Requiring ESA to create a comprehensive Management Information System</b> for pre-school admissions and DE funded early years services for children up to school age		
<b>Implementing all remaining actions in the Review of Pre-School Admissions Arrangements</b> aimed at streamlining and simplifying the system for accessing pre-school places	Some actions dependent on legislative changes, others are in progress	Over-arching goal is 'transforming the governance and management of education'