



**Northern Ireland**  
**Assembly**  
Committee for Education

**Learning to Learn - A Framework for**  
**Early Years Education and Learning**

**Feedback on the**  
**Department of Education's**  
**Early Years Framework**

**January 2013**

# Stakeholder Event held on 16 January 2013 in Room 115, Parliament Buildings

## **Background:**

In December 2012 the Department of Education launched a public consultation on the draft Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning. This departmental policy document details the restructuring of Early Years Services. The consultation process is due to be completed on January 31<sup>st</sup> 2013.

On January 16<sup>th</sup> 2013 the Committee for Education held a stakeholder event in Room 115 of Parliament Buildings in order to hear the thoughts and opinions of stakeholders on the Early Years Framework and the consultation process.

This document contains a summary of the comments at that event.

## **Areas of Concern**

### **Consultation**

Concern was expressed that there has not been sufficient time given to the consultation process. The eight week consultation period is insufficient, especially considering that it fell over the Christmas holiday period. This may make it difficult for many Early Years providers to respond to the Department on this Framework in a thorough and timely manner.

Some stakeholders indicated that they welcomed the changes that have been made in the Learning to Learn Framework as compared to the original Early Years Strategy. There are, however, still many areas of concern which the stakeholders raised at the event.

### **The role of parents in nursery education provision**

Stakeholders indicated that the parents of young children have an essential role to play in the educational development of their child. Proactive steps ought to be taken in order to encourage parental involvement in their child's education at nursery level. Parents have a vital role to play in the creation of an Early Years framework and so their input into the consultation process needs to be considered. Enhancing parental participation leads to an

increase the sources of educational help that a child can avail of throughout their educational career, and the earlier this begins in a child's development, the better.

This Framework could do more to assist the parents of children who choose to look after their children and who don't send them to formal nursery schools. Encouragement could be given to them to actively engage in their children's educational development in the home.

Increased engagement between parents and schools would lead to the maximum possible benefit for children. There could be training given to early years providers on the importance of the role of parents and how best to engage with them in order to increase their awareness and involvement in their child's education.

There is also a need to ensure that provision is made for the parents of children with disabilities. This important issue is missing from the document and needs to be addressed. These children are among the most vulnerable there are, and so require and deserve all the support that can be given to them.

### **Provision for children under three years of age**

The Framework is focused almost entirely on children aged 3-6. This is intended as a strategy for children aged 0-6, but the clear lack of provision being made for children under three years of age is an inherent flaw in the document. With the importance of early intervention now so widely recognized, it is essential that help and assistance can be made available to children as soon as they may need it.

What is needed is a seamless and holistic "edu-care" system which manages the transition between care provision and nursery education. The two shouldn't be divided at this early stage in a child's development. The Department's approach is at odds with best practice in other jurisdictions.

### **The role of Sure Start in educational provision for disadvantaged children**

The role of and services provided by Sure Start are an important consideration in any Early Years strategy. There is a concern that Sure Start may not be able, both administratively and financially, to provide sufficient services to all those children who are most in need of their help. It is felt that the Sure Start criteria is too postcode-driven - consequently vulnerable and disadvantaged children may fail to benefit from Sure Start's services as they do not live in an area of deprivation.

A service like Sure Start should be more widely available so that those in need of it can benefit fully from it. It should take a proactive approach to intervention to ensure that it is targeting those who are most likely to need assistance from this service. In some instances, the capacity of Sure Start to intervene in certain areas may need to be widened as there are currently problems of over-subscription to Sure Start assistance.

It could be beneficial if Sure Start were to increase its linkages with other Early Years providers such as nursery schools. As well as generating more co-operation around children's development, this could also help to encourage parents to engage in the educational development of their child.

At present there is too much of a discrepancy between the services being provided to children based upon where they live. Urban band indicators used in determining locations of Sure Start assistance can exclude those experiencing rural poverty. There is a clear and unfair division between recipients and non-recipients and so there should be equal and universal assistance available to all children regardless of where they live.

The proposed review of Sure Start practices and policies by the Department is greatly welcomed by Early Years providers and there is hope that this vital service can be enhanced by certain reforms to the way in which it operates.

## **Funding and resourcing for educational provision**

Concerns were expressed at the proposals to increase the maximum number of children in a nursery level class from 26 to 30. Not all classrooms, particularly new builds, would have the capacity to physically accommodate that number of children at any given time. Although the increase in the number of nursery places is desirable, there may be a better way to implement this rather than by raising class sizes. Doing so may result in children losing out as a teacher's attention would have to be more thinly spread and there is an increased chance that certain children could get "lost in the crowd". This could decrease the value of the education that they are receiving. It is essential that sufficient resources are made available so that any increase in class sizes does not impact upon the children in the class.

Funding may become an issue for some Early Years providers. There may be a need for a Common Funding Formula for Early Years education, and it is felt that Lord Salisbury's upcoming report may have much to contribute to this.

Every school is bound to use their money differently in order to best suit their needs, and there is an argument that schools with children with special needs ought to receive

additional funds as this can be of great benefit to them. It is important to ensure that value for money is being achieved and there may be merit to seeking an audit as to how funding provided at present is currently being spent. This is particularly true in instances of private nursery schools who also receive funding, as there cannot be the case where funding intended for educational purposes is used to make a profit.

## **SEN and the Early Years Framework**

Stakeholders felt that there needs to be real and meaningful support given to children with Special Educational Needs and that it is vitally important that early intervention can happen when necessary. The Framework needs to include actual plans for practical assistance that would be available for Early Years providers and parents once SEN are first identified. Children with SEN will require special and additional care and attention, and so the importance of early intervention cannot be underestimated. The entire process around SEN needs to move at a faster pace. It can take up to two years for a child to begin receiving help from the time when problems were first identified, and by this stage the child will probably already be in primary school by which time the problems may have become more complex. The Framework needs to be able to cope with this and there needs to be a clear recognition of the specific needs of every individual child so that this process can happen effectively and efficiently. The use of pilot programmes by the Department, while it is encouraging to see proactive steps being taken, are insufficient to properly deal with SEN issues for each individual child.

If SEN issues are not dealt with in a timely and appropriate fashion, there is a danger that the problems will increase in severity and the development and progress of that child may be put at risk. Undue delay in providing proper help to children could also lead to a fraught relationship between a child's parents and the school. Parents need to be confident that if their child has SEN then the educational system will be fully prepared and resourced to do what is necessary for their child's development from the first indication of an issue.

## **Educational attainment at 0-6**

Stakeholders felt that education and care cannot be divorced in early years – this is not acknowledged in the consultation document. It was argued that the Framework appears to focus solely on care issues for the 0-3 age group and solely on educational issues for ages 3-6.

There is an over-emphasis of educational attainment in this policy and it can be concerning to see so much focus placed on formal education for young children. While the aspiration of raising standards is commendable and natural among educators, the Framework ought not

to lose sight of the care that children need in this stage of their development. Education and care should be jointly provided through nursery provision and there shouldn't be such a strong emphasis on educational attainment at a formal level for children of such a young age.

Early Years providers are under constant pressure from Inspections and Learning Intentions etc. The increasing focus on inspection and the bureaucratic side of their work can make it more difficult for them to teach and lead effectively in the early years setting.

## **Qualifications of Early Years Providers**

Stakeholders felt that it is essential that there are qualified people in a position to educate children. That said, due regard must be given to the experienced professionals currently working in the Early Years sector without formal qualification. Their experience is an essential part to providing proper services for children, although going forward, there is much to be said for requiring minimum levels of educational qualification (for example, NVQ Level 3 and a minimum of 5 GCSEs including English and Mathematics).

The benefit of changing the recruitment criteria could be to make the nursery environment more teacher-led – this could lead to the enhancement of educational benefits of Early Years provision. As in any profession, teachers and other Early Years providers should be prepared to up-skill in order to meet specific needs and improve standards. Support ought to be given in order to help these professionals to develop their skills and qualifications.

## **Cooperation between DE and DHSSPS**

Stakeholders felt that more co-operation should take between the devolved Departments in respect of childcare and nursery education. Nursery schools are subject to inspection both by the Department of Health and by the Department of Education. Increased collaboration at this administrative level could make the delivery of Early Years provision simpler for the providers. The ongoing OFMDFM consultation into childcare presents another opportunity for different elements of children's care and education to become synchronized and streamlined. Issues such as language development could be considered very differently by a Speech Therapist and a Child Psychologist, and so it is necessary that a collaborative approach can be taken on issues such as this.

## **School Starting Age**

Some stakeholders argued that although the consultation doesn't include any plans for a new school starting age, this should be considered as it presents problems every year. While a review is required into the starting age for children overall, an element of flexibility in the current system would do a great deal to address many of the problems which arise at present. There is evidence of educational disadvantage for children born in May/June, children who were born prematurely etc.; looked-after children and multiple birth children etc. A degree of flexibility in allowing parents to keep their child from starting primary school for an extra year, while perhaps receiving an additional year of nursery education in the interim period, would allow these problems to be dealt with. There are always going to be anomalies and special cases, so flexibility could help this situation immediately.

### **Area Learning Communities/Shared Education at a nursery level**

The Shared Education Initiatives that are being seen in other education sectors ought to be extended to the Early Years sector. Area Learning Communities could be established at a nursery/primary level in order to share best practice and resources within the sector. This sort of initiative could also encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education process. This kind of engagement can and is done informally in many areas but it can be very beneficial where it is organized on a formal and ongoing basis. It would be necessary to provide appropriate training and leadership skills to Early Years providers to ensure that the maximum benefit can be derived from this. This could help generate support for a local community of learning and could enhance family support in local areas. It could also benefit sharing and education across sectors, which could be very beneficial if done at this early age.

### **Differing Provision**

There is concern that the levels of care and education that can be provided to children vary greatly depending on where they live. Children who live in rural areas are much more likely to have access only to a playgroup and not to a nursery school and would have to travel a great distance in order to attend one. Support and provision needs to be given to Early Year's providers in order to ensure that the same services are available to children regardless of where they happen to live.

There is also concern that reception classes in primary schools may not be the best environment for children to learn in. It is not widely thought that children who attend a reception year in school really achieve much benefit from it in comparison with how they may have fared in a nursery education environment. The Minister's statement that he

would be happy for schools with large reception classes to make the necessary changes to become nursery units was welcomed.

In addition stakeholders felt that Early Years education can have a different impact on children depending on the length of time that they spend in the school each day. Stakeholders cited examples of studies which showed the positive impact of longer periods of Early Years education – although this was based on months spent in education rather than hours. It was argued that there needs to be further study in order to assess the impact of children spending longer days in nursery school. Full time education for younger children can be important for their socializing skills in addition to their education, and many parents are keen that this should be available to their child.