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# School Starting Age and Early Age Provision

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This paper considers the school starting age of children, and explores the form, content and funding of early years educational provision internationally. While there is no clear agreement on an optimum school starting age, there is a degree of consensus on how children aged from three years should learn: in particular, that guidelines or curricula should emphasise areas of learning, communication and responsibility; and focus on play and activity for children.

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## Key Points

- Early years education has been a key focus for many governments in recent years, particularly due to recognition of its important role in the development of children and young people;
- Northern Ireland has the lowest school starting age in Europe at four years; with the majority of other countries implementing a formal school starting age of six;
- Children in their first two years of life are primarily cared for by family or through other informal arrangements; between the age of two and the age at which children attend pre-school there is wide variation in provision internationally;
- Nursery or pre-school is provided for one or two years prior to the compulsory school starting age in most countries;
- Pre-school is not mandatory in the majority of jurisdictions, although a small number of countries stipulate compulsory attendance, usually for children from four or five years of age;
- Internationally, pre-primary education for children aged from three years tends to focus on areas of learning and development rather than particular subjects, regardless of the school starting age within the jurisdiction;
- Flexibility in form and content is another common feature of pre-school education in most countries;
- Evidence in Northern Ireland indicates differences in the quality of provision across early years sectors;
- There is no clear consensus on an optimum age for children to begin school;
- Nonetheless, there appears to be agreement on the appropriate form and content of education for children from three years: an active, play-based approach encouraging children to take responsibility for their own learning;
- While there is no clear agreement in the literature on the extent to which increasing the school starting age would alter the form and content of current provision in Northern Ireland, many sources indicate that it would involve replacing primary education with nursery school, resulting in form and content of education that is less formal and instructional;
- Governments in all OECD countries fund the major costs of public education and care from the age of three, four or five years; and
- The costs of education and care for children aged below three years are typically shared between parents and governments.



## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Early years education and care is widely recognised as having the potential to have a direct impact on educational outcomes for children. The Department of Education's *Early Years (0-6) Strategy*, published in 2010, sets out its vision 'to enable every child to develop to their full potential by giving each one the best start possible.'

One of the key actions outlined in this Strategy is a new consideration of the school starting age. The formal school starting age in Northern Ireland is lower than in most other jurisdictions, and there have been some concerns regarding whether this is in the best interests of children.

This briefing paper considers the school starting age of children and explores the form, content and funding of early years educational provision internationally.

### Overview of school starting ages and early years provision internationally

At four years, Northern Ireland's school starting age is the lowest in Europe, where the majority of countries have a formal starting age of six years. However, in some jurisdictions, many children enter school before the formal starting age.

The following table presents a broad overview of the general types of early years provision for children across a range of OECD countries. There does not appear to be a particular trend in terms of the school starting age and the type of provision available.

#### Broad overview of early years provision across a range of countries

Age range	General type of provision
0 – 2 years	Children mostly cared for by family or through other, informal arrangements
Between 2 years and pre-school	Variation between countries, with no particular trend in terms of the school starting age and services provided
Pre-school	Formal pre-school is provided by most countries for one or two years prior to the school starting age. (Sweden is an exception, offering full-time pre-school for children aged between one and six years)

Pre-school is not compulsory in the majority of countries explored in this paper, although take up rates are often high. In some countries, however, pre-school education is mandatory, for example in Luxembourg, Switzerland, Hungary and Latvia, where the school starting age is six or seven years.

## **The form and content of early years provision**

Education and care for children aged from three years to school age internationally tends to focus on areas of learning rather than particular subjects; this appears to be the case regardless of the school starting age. In addition, most countries allow a degree of flexibility regarding the form and content of early years education.

The evidence points to differences in the quality of provision across early years sectors in Northern Ireland. The Chief Inspector's Annual Report identifies a number of factors that can have an impact on the quality of outcomes for children, including high staff turnover, lower levels of staff qualifications and a lack of consistent support from an early years specialist.

A longer time at pre-school before beginning primary school is thought to have a positive impact on outcomes for children. However, research indicates that there is no additional benefit for children who attend pre-school on a full-time basis compared to those attending on a part-time basis.

While there has been much debate on the appropriate age for children to commence formal primary school, there is no clear consensus for an ideal or optimum age.

However, there does appear to be agreement across a range of jurisdictions on the appropriate content of early years provision for children aged from three years. In particular, international provision tends to favour an active, play-based approach that encourages independence among young children. Key aspects of the form and content of appropriate early years education identified in the literature include:

- A play-based and active approach;
- Opportunities to socialise;
- Collaborative peer group learning;
- Independence and responsibility; and
- Communication and conceptual skills.

## **Increasing the school starting age and the form and content of provision**

There is no clear agreement in the literature about the extent to which increasing the school starting age would change the form and content of early years provision. However, many sources suggest that it would require provision of pre-school or nursery school services for children up to the revised school starting age in place of current primary school classes. This would be likely to involve a more informal, less instructive approach than primary school.

An evaluation of a play-based pilot curriculum in primary schools in Northern Ireland found that a combination of child-initiated and teacher-directed activity and a greater focus on play was preferable for children in their first year of primary school.

### **Funding of early years education and care**

Governments in all OECD countries fund the major costs of public education and care from the age of three, four or five years. While funding often covers all the costs of provision, in some countries a proportion of the costs may be met by parents.

For children aged below three years, the costs of education and care are generally shared between parents and governments; and in some countries (for example Belgium, France and the Netherlands) employers also meet some of the costs.

### **Conclusion**

While there is no clear agreement on an optimum school starting age, there is a degree of consensus on how children aged from three years should learn: in particular, that guidelines or curricula should emphasise areas of learning, communication and responsibility; and focus on play and activity for children.

Consideration could therefore be given to supporting the delivery of the appropriate form and content of education for children aged four and five. This could involve a review of the school starting age in line with the Department of Education's Early Years Strategy, alongside other alternatives, such as consideration of the current content of the curriculum for the Foundation Stage. The differences in outcomes identified across early years provision could also be further considered



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# 1 Introduction

Providing good quality early years education and care for children has been a key priority for many governments in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Linked to this, there has also been an interest regarding the most appropriate age for children to start primary school. In June 2010 the Department of Education released a draft Early Years Strategy public consultation, which set out as one of its key actions 'a new consideration of the school starting age'.<sup>2</sup>

In Northern Ireland, children who have reached the age of four on or before 1<sup>st</sup> July will commence primary school the following September, and therefore can begin school from the age of four years and two months. This is in comparison to a starting age of six years for the majority of countries in Europe and internationally, with children in some countries starting school at seven years of age.

There are some concerns regarding the comparatively low school starting age in Northern Ireland (and throughout the UK), with a number of commentators suggesting 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>3</sup> The high rates of educational attainment of some countries with a higher school starting age have also raised questions regarding the impact of delaying the age at which children commence primary school.

This briefing paper considers the school starting age of children and discusses the form, content and funding of early years educational provision. In particular, it explores:

- School starting ages and early years provision across a range of countries in Europe and internationally;
- Examples of countries where pre-school is compulsory;
- The form and content of early years provision; and
- Examples of how early years education is funded.

## 2 Overview of school starting ages and early years provision

### Overview of school starting ages

Northern Ireland has the lowest compulsory school age in Europe at four years. This is in comparison to the majority of countries in Europe where the compulsory school

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<sup>1</sup> Eurydice (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. Brussels: Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education (2010) *Early Years (0-6) Strategy* Bangor: DE

<sup>3</sup> Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

starting age is six.<sup>4</sup> However, it should be noted that this is often the latest age at which children must start school, and in some European and other countries (including England, the Netherlands and New Zealand), most children enter school below the compulsory school age. Table 1 presents an overview of school starting ages across a range of countries in Europe and internationally.

**Table 1: Formal school starting ages in selected countries**

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

Source: Eurydice at National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2009) [online] Available at [www.nfer.ac.uk](http://www.nfer.ac.uk); OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD; and Ministry of Education, New Zealand via [www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz)

### Overview of early years education and care provision

In a cross-section of countries<sup>5</sup>, children in their first two years of life are frequently cared for by their parents, other family member or through other, informal arrangements.<sup>6</sup>

Formal pre-school is generally offered to children for one or two years prior to the compulsory school starting age. Sweden (which has a formal school starting age of seven) is an exception to this, offering full-time pre-school for children aged between one and six.<sup>7</sup>

Between the age of two and the age at which children attend formal pre-school, provision varies across countries, and there does not appear to be a particular trend in terms of the formal school starting age and the type of provision on offer at this stage of the child's life. For example, in the Republic of Ireland (where the formal school starting age is six), the majority of education and care accessed prior to pre-school is

<sup>4</sup> Sharp, C. (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research*. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar, November 2002. NFER and Local Government Association

<sup>5</sup> Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Republic of Ireland, Sweden, United States

<sup>6</sup> Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. QCA: London

OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

<sup>7</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

provided by the family or through paid arrangements, while in Denmark, (where the formal school starting age is also six), day care facilities are available from six months.<sup>8</sup>

Approaches in other countries include provision for every child under compulsory school age in Finland, usually taking the form of family day care and day care centres; and day nurseries and pre-school playgroups in the Netherlands for children from the age of three months to four years. This is in contrast to Canada, for example, where a large proportion of provision is private, mostly through non-profit, community organisations, and take-up is low, depending on the province.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Education systems with compulsory pre-school education

In the majority of countries explored in this paper, education before primary school is not mandatory, although take up and attendance rates at non-compulsory pre-schools are often high. Nonetheless, pre-primary education is compulsory in some countries. Table 2 provides examples of countries in which pre-school is mandatory and at what age children are required to be enrolled.

**Table 2: Examples of countries with compulsory pre-school<sup>10</sup>**

Country	Enrolment age of compulsory pre-school
Luxembourg	Four years
Switzerland*	Four or five years
Hungary	Five years
Latvia	Five years
Poland	Six years

\*Pre-school is compulsory in just over half of the Cantons (federal states); starting age varies across cantons

In each of these countries, mandatory pre-school education is free of charge to parents (with the exception of private schools), and typically lasts for one or two years.

Proponents of compulsory pre-primary school argue that pre-school education is a natural entry point for children's development, allowing children an appropriate

<sup>8</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

<sup>9</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

<sup>10</sup> *Education and schooling in Luxembourg* [online] Available at: <http://luxembourg.angloinfo.com/countries/luxembourg/schooling.asp>; *The Swiss Education System. Pre-school level: overview* [online] Available at: <http://www.educa.ch/dyn/152201.asp>; *Schools in Hungary* [online] Available at: <http://www.justlanded.com/english/Hungary/Hungary-Guide/Education/Schools-in-Hungary>; *The education system in Latvia* [online] Available at: <http://izm.izm.gov.lv/education/education-system.html>; Eurydice (2010) *The System of Education in Poland*. Warsaw: Eurydice

environment in which to learn basic standards, and should, therefore, be a priority for governments.<sup>11</sup>

## 4 The form and content of early years provision

In general, pre-primary education aims to help young children develop by encouraging their cognitive and communication skills. This is carried out through a variety of models and settings, including care-based, centre and community-based approaches.<sup>12</sup>

### **Current provision internationally**

Regardless of the setting, provision for children aged from three years to school age internationally tends to focus on areas of learning and development as opposed to particular subjects.<sup>13</sup> For example, guidelines in Australia emphasise socio-emotional, physical, cultural, cognitive and linguistic areas of development, while in Finland the focus is on care, upbringing and education as an integrated whole.<sup>14</sup> This approach to early years learning appears to be in place across countries with different formal school starting ages.

Many of the countries considered for this briefing paper also allow a degree of flexibility with regard to the form and content of early years education provision within their jurisdiction. For example, in Denmark, each childcare centre must work out its own curriculum, and in Finland local curricula are drafted in each municipality for pre-school education. Frequently, curricula vary across different school settings, such as in the Netherlands, and/ or across different regions or states, such as in Australia.<sup>15</sup>

Some countries (such as England, the Republic of Ireland and Sweden) have a set curriculum or curriculum guidelines. However, there is usually flexibility for providers to evolve their own approaches in line with the principles set out in the curriculum, enabling them to tailor the education and care provided to meet most effectively the needs of each child.<sup>16</sup>

### **Views on the appropriate form and content of provision**

Many authors have commented on the form and content of appropriate education for children aged around three years. The following paragraphs consider views on appropriate education in terms of the type of setting; duration of attendance; age of attendance; and the content of provision. A pilot, play-based, curriculum previously implemented in some primary schools in Northern Ireland, the Enriched Curriculum, is

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<sup>11</sup> Diawara, R. (2007) "Making the Case for a Year of Compulsory Pre-primary Education for All Children" in *UNESCO IICBA Newsletter*, Vol. 9, No. 2 pp.5-7

<sup>12</sup> Eurydice (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. Brussels: Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency

<sup>13</sup> Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. QCA: London

<sup>14</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

<sup>15</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

<sup>16</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

also discussed to provide insight into the potential impact of altering the form and content of early years provision.

### ***Type of setting***

Two longitudinal studies<sup>17</sup> into pre-school education have been carried out in Northern Ireland and in England, investigating the development of children from the age of three through pre-school and primary school. The studies found that the quality of provision was higher in nursery schools and nursery classes than in other settings.

Specifically, in Northern Ireland, it was found that there were 'significant differences' between pre-school settings and their impact on children. Statutory nursery schools and classes had the best outcomes, with good outcomes also identified for playgroups. While other types of pre-school were found to produce benefits, these were noted to be to a lesser extent and their effects less long-lasting.<sup>18</sup>

These findings are supported by the Chief Inspector's Annual Report<sup>19</sup> in Northern Ireland, which found that the highest percentage of good to outstanding practice in early years provision was located within the statutory nursery schools inspected. Nonetheless, the report states that there was an improvement in the number of statutory nursery units, voluntary and private settings falling into this category. It identified a number of factors thought to be inhibiting continuous and systematic improvement in the voluntary and private sectors in particular, namely:

- High turn-over of staff;
- Lack of consistent and effective support from an early years specialist;
- Lower minimum level of staff qualifications; and
- Lack of opportunities for professional development.

### ***Duration of attendance***

An earlier start at pre-school (in relation to the compulsory school starting age) has been linked to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability for children.<sup>20</sup> Thus, duration of attendance at pre-school (the time between entrance to pre-school and the start of primary school) is considered to be important in preparing children for primary school.

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<sup>17</sup> Edwards, A. et al. (2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project. The EPPE Symposium at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London and Melhuish et al. (2010) *Effective Pre-school Provision Northern Ireland (EPPNI). Pre-school experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics*. Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>18</sup> Melhuish et al. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland. Summary Report*. Bangor: DE

<sup>19</sup> The Education and Training Inspectorate (2010) *The Chief Inspector's Report 2008-2010*. ETI

<sup>20</sup> Sammons, P. (2004) "The Impact of Pre-School on Young Children's Cognitive Attainments at Entry to Reception." *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 5 pp.691-712

In terms of whether children should attend pre-school on a part- or full-time basis, the longitudinal studies previously mentioned have found that children attending pre-school on a full-time basis do not gain any additional benefit in terms of cognitive development than their counterparts attending pre-school part-time.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Age of attendance***

There has been much debate about the appropriate age for children to attend formal school and pre-school. Overall, the evidence does not appear to advocate an ideal age for children starting primary school.

Research carried out on behalf of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) into school starting age in Europe<sup>22</sup> did not find evidence for an optimum age for children starting school. In particular, it found no compelling educational rationale for a statutory school age of five or for admitting children aged four years to reception class. The report also noted that a later start at school does not appear to hold back children's progress.

An article in the Australasian Journal of Early Childhood describes conflicting reports on the value of children starting school at an older age, and suggests that this mixed evidence indicates that age alone is not an ideal predictor of school success.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, there is conflicting evidence on this issue in the UK, with a report by Cambridge Assessment<sup>24</sup> highlighting concerns about children attending formal education at a young age. It cites reports on developmental psychology that suggest children between the ages of four and five may not be ready for formal education. This is somewhat contradicted by a study on children in Scotland, which suggested that there is no evidence that children aged four and a half were suffering by starting school too early. This report also indicated that there is no optimum school starting age.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, there is no consensus in the literature regarding the ideal age for children to start primary school. However, there is some agreement on the content of education for children aged below five years, explored in subsequent paragraphs.

### ***Views on the appropriate content of provision***

The literature indicates that there is a degree of consensus across many countries regarding what early years provision is appropriate for children aged from three years.

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<sup>21</sup> Edwards, A. et al. (2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project. The EPPE Symposium at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London and Melhuish et al. (2010) *Effective Pre-school Provision Northern Ireland (EPPNI). Pre-school experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics*. Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>22</sup> Sharp, C. (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar, November 2002*. NFER and Local Government Association

<sup>23</sup> Dockett, S., Perry, B. (2009) "Readiness for school: A relational construct". *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 33, No. 1 pp. 20-26

<sup>24</sup> Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

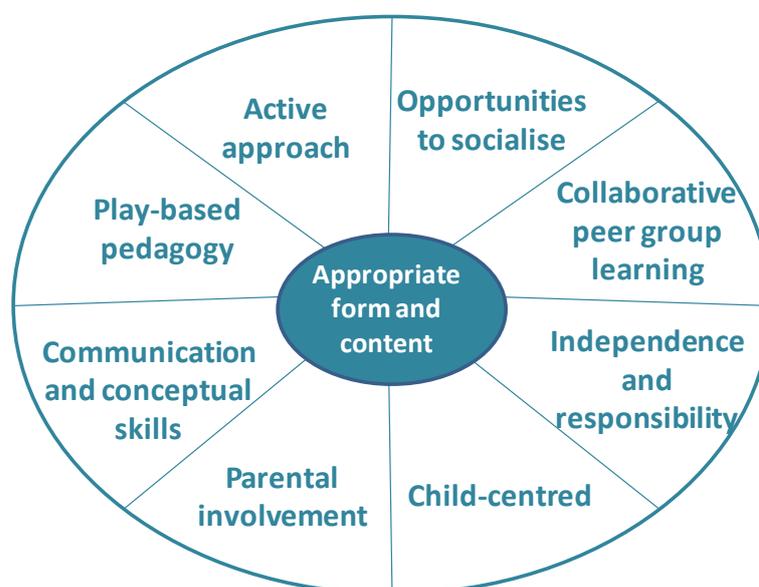
<sup>25</sup> Tymms, P. et al. (2005) *Children starting school in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Education Department

A report into early childhood provision in Europe<sup>26</sup> notes that all countries agree that the various settings for children aged three and over should 'provide the first steps on the educational ladder'. In an international study, Bertram and Pascal state that provision internationally for this age group tends to involve an active, play-based pedagogy, encouraging self-management and independence among young children.<sup>27</sup>

In particular, many authors assert that the curriculum for children aged below five should not involve 'formal' academic teaching or focus on particular subjects; rather it should emphasise play and development and provide children with opportunities to socialise and take responsibility for their own learning.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Sharp<sup>29</sup> notes suggestions that an early introduction to a formal curriculum may have a negative impact on children's self-esteem and motivation to learn, and notes that arguments in favour of children being taught academic skills earlier do not appear to be borne out by the evidence.

Key themes identified internationally regarding the appropriate form and content of early years education for children from the age of three identified in the literature are illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Key aspects of the form and content of appropriate early years education for children aged three and above**



Source: Adapted from Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. London: QCA; Eurydice (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. Brussels: EACEA; and Sharp, C. (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research*. NFER and Local Government Association

<sup>26</sup> Eurydice (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. Brussels: Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency

<sup>27</sup> Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. London: QCA

<sup>28</sup> Sharp, C. (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research*. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar, November 2002. NFER and Local Government Association

<sup>29</sup> Sharp, C. (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research*. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar, November 2002. NFER and Local Government Association

With regard to the role of adults in settings for children in this age range, Bertram and Pascal emphasise that it should involve facilitating and supporting learning through guided interaction, rather than taking a heavily didactic or directive approach.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, many authors highlight the crucial link between staff and outcomes for children, and assert the importance of having appropriately qualified and trained staff in early years settings.<sup>31</sup>

### **Increasing the school starting age and the form and content of provision**

If the school starting age in Northern Ireland was to be raised to six years, there would of course be implications for the form and content of current provision, particularly for children aged below six years. However, there is no clear agreement on what the exact impact of raising the starting age would be on the form and content of education now provided, although many sources suggest it would involve increased provision of pre-school or nursery school services.

Mark Langhammer, director of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers in Northern Ireland, has commented that if the school starting age is raised, systematic investment would be required in pre-school, early years provision.<sup>32</sup> This view is supported to some extent by a report published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies which discussed the implications of children's date of birth on cognitive outcomes. It recommended that if flexibility around the school starting age was to be implemented, full-time nursery provision would need to be offered as an alternative to full-time schooling.<sup>33</sup> Further, some stakeholders consulted for the Department of Education's Early Years Strategy advocated raising the school starting age and accordingly providing two years of quality pre-school for children.<sup>34</sup>

If the school starting age was to be increased; and current provision for children aged four and/ or five to be replaced with full-time nursery schooling, this would be likely to have significant implications for the form and content of education provided. For example, nursery school tends to take a more informal, less didactic approach than primary school, with a focus on play and flexibility for children. Nursery schools also have a higher adult to child ratio than schools in the primary sector.

### ***Play-based curriculum pilot in Northern Ireland***

A pilot curriculum implemented in over 100 primary schools in Northern Ireland between 2000 and 2007 provides useful information with regard to the potential impact of altering the form and content of education for children in their first year of primary

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<sup>30</sup> Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. London: QCA

<sup>31</sup> For example: Edwards, A. et al. (2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project. The EPPE Symposium at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>32</sup> Belfast Telegraph (2008) *Debate call into school starting age*. December 9, 2008

<sup>33</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>34</sup> DE (2010) *Early Years (0-6) Strategy. Evidence-Based Paper*. Bangor: DE

school, particularly to a more informal, play-based approach.<sup>35</sup> Introduced in response to international research evidence, the Enriched Curriculum (EC) aimed to facilitate the transition of four and five year old children to compulsory schooling, emphasising play and activity rather than desk-based work for children in their first year of primary school.

An evaluation of this curriculum found that children did settle more easily into school and were enthusiastic about the learning process in general when undertaking this curriculum. It found that the overall quality of the learning experience was higher with regard to children's dispositions, social development and well-being. Although the findings regarding the level of cognitive challenge were less positive, the evaluation states that the cognitive challenge for children was nonetheless more demanding than that experienced by their counterparts in traditional (formal primary school) settings.<sup>36</sup>

The study advocates a more complex, balanced and integrated pedagogy in the first year of primary school, valuing a combination of child-initiated and teacher-directed activity. It also suggests that if this less formal approach is to be adopted, current education and continuing professional development for teachers would need to be revised, as well as training for early years practitioners.<sup>37</sup>

### **Key success factors for effective early years provision**

The widely cited longitudinal study into pre-school education in England<sup>38</sup> found that the quality of pre-school centres is directly related to better cognitive and social development of children. Regardless of the type of early years services provided, the literature highlights a number of key success factors for effective, high quality provision that leads to improved outcomes for children. Key success factors highlighted in the literature<sup>39</sup> include:

- **Staff training and qualifications:** Settings where staff have higher qualifications show higher quality and children make more progress;
- **Viewing educational and social development as equal:** Children make better progress in settings where both aspects of development are considered to be complementary;
- **A mixture of social backgrounds:** Disadvantaged children were found to do better in settings with a mixture of children from different social backgrounds; and

<sup>35</sup> Walsh, G. M. et al. (2010) "Implementing a play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum in Northern Ireland primary schools: what lessons have we learned?" *Early Years*, Vol. 30 No. 1 pp. 53-66

<sup>36</sup> Walsh, G. M. et al. (2010) "Implementing a play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum in Northern Ireland primary schools: what lessons have we learned?" *Early Years*, Vol. 30 No. 1 pp. 53-66

<sup>37</sup> Walsh, G. M. et al. (2010) "Implementing a play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum in Northern Ireland primary schools: what lessons have we learned?" *Early Years*, Vol. 30 No. 1 pp. 53-66

<sup>38</sup> Edwards, A. et al. (2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project. The EPPE Symposium at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>39</sup> Edwards, A. et al. (2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project. The EPPE Symposium at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London and Melhuish et al. (2010) *Effective Pre-school Provision Northern Ireland (EPPNI). Pre-school experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics*. Bangor: Department of Education

- **Home learning:** This is a more important factor for a child's progress than parental occupation, education or income.

## 5 Funding of early years education and care

### ***Funding of education and care for children aged three years and over***

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that governments in all countries fund the major costs of public early education from the age of three, four or five years. Typically, these services are centre-based and staffed by qualified personnel, and funding is provided directly by central government, State, local authorities or voluntary or private organisations receiving more than 50% of their funding from government. Some countries fund educational provision for children at these ages entirely, while others require a contribution from parents.<sup>40</sup>

A report by Eurydice confirms that all countries in Europe offer some form of early years services for children before the start of compulsory schooling which are at least partly publicly financed, with free education for older children (usually from the age of three) guaranteed in school settings in a majority of countries.<sup>41</sup> Table 3 provides an overview of how early years education and care services for children over three years of age are funded.

**Table 3: Funding for early education services**

Countries	Type of funding
Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden	Public funding is dominant; parental fees also charged. Services generally available from the age of one year
Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, United Kingdom	Full public funding from the age of three years
Australia, Canada, Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands and the US	Full public funding from the age of four or five years

Source: OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

The arrangements generally involve providing funding directly to providers, linked to the number of children accessing services. This usually takes the form of operational subsidies, staff wages, grants for equipment and supplies, grants for supporting

<sup>40</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

<sup>41</sup> Eurydice (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. Brussels: Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency

children with special educational needs and grants made for the enhancement of quality or in line with policy goals.<sup>42</sup>

OECD has set out the investment in each student by educational institutions across participating countries, detailing the annual spend per student for each phase of education. Table 3 presents the annual expenditure for pre-school education on a per student basis across a range of countries.<sup>43</sup> The table indicates that the UK has one of the highest levels of per student expenditure for pre-primary education among OECD countries.

**Table 3: Annual expenditure by for pre-primary education (for children aged three years and over) per student by country**

Country	Denmark	Finland	Netherlands	New Zealand	UK	OECD average
Annual expenditure per student (US\$)	\$5,594	\$4,789	\$6,130	\$5,185	\$7,598	\$5,447

Source: Adapted from OCED (2010) *Education at a Glance 2010*. OECD Indicators France: OECD

### ***Funding of education and care for younger children (aged below three years)***

The costs of education and care for children under the age of three are generally shared between parents and governments in all countries. In some countries, namely Belgium, France, Italy and the Netherlands, childcare costs (prior to the age at which free services are provided in each country) are shared between employers as well as between parents and government. In only three countries: Denmark, Finland and Sweden, the public provision of early years education and care is considered to be an entitlement for children from the age of one year, with parental fees charged to help meet the costs.<sup>44</sup>

With regard to methods of funding, countries such as Australia, Canada, Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK mainly use child care subsidies to parents such as cash benefits, vouchers or tax reductions. The European continental countries use supply-side subsidies paid directly to services as their primary method of funding, with some countries (such as Belgium and France) also using tax credits to help parents meet the costs of childcare.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

<sup>43</sup> OCED (2010) *Education at a Glance 2010*. OECD Indicators France: OECD

<sup>44</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

<sup>45</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD

## Conclusion

Northern Ireland has the lowest compulsory school starting age in Europe at four years. While there has been much debate about the age at which children should begin primary school, there is no clear agreement regarding an optimum starting age. Nonetheless, there is a degree of consensus on the appropriate content of early years education for children from the age of three years, namely that it should emphasise areas of learning rather than particular subjects, with a focus on play and activity, allowing children to take responsibility for their own learning.

The evidence therefore suggests that further consideration could be given to the supporting the appropriate form and content of early years education for children aged four and five years in Northern Ireland. This could involve consideration of the school starting age in line with the Department of Education's *Early Years Strategy*, alongside other alternatives, such as reviewing the current content of the curriculum for the Foundation Stage. The differences between statutory and non-statutory provision in the early years sector could also be given further consideration, with a particular view to addressing the factors inhibiting systematic improvement identified in the Chief Inspector's Annual Report.