

Understanding
Teaching and **Learning**
in **Primary Education**

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CHAPTER 3

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

Mary Wingrave

Key ideas

This chapter explores:

- the expansion of pre-5 education;
- play, its role in developing learning;
- the environment for learning;
- assessment in early years.



Introduction

This chapter will consider the crucial role of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and the part it has in supporting children's early development and learning. It will look at some of the developments that have taken place in recent times,

particularly with respect to expansion of provision and policy. Play as the primary medium of delivery of experiences will be discussed in terms of its benefits to the learning process. The engagement of adults and children in constructing the learning environment and assessment in ECEC will also be explored to highlight their importance and place in the pre-5 setting.

Early years provision

ECEC takes the form of non-compulsory education and care services which provide for children from 0–5. It blends the dual importance of both care and education in the development and learning of young children. Provision of ECEC services in the UK is diverse and in some cases there can be a fragmentation as services are provided by a range of groups including local authority and private, voluntary and partnership sector providers. This chapter discusses ECEC services which provide for children in their pre-school and ante-pre-school year.

The need for ECEC

It is argued that in today's ever-changing society there is a need to prepare our youngest children to enter school ready to learn and succeed (Heckman and Masterov, 2007; OECD, 2006). Consequently ECEC has, in recent times, taken centre stage in many developed countries' educational and political agendas (Gammage, 2008: 10). It is claimed that economically, pre-school education will save money both for the compulsory schooling system and the state, not just in the short term but, as indicated by Heckman and Masterov (2007), as a long-term investment which will shape and develop the economy. From this perspective, providing children with access to the benefits from ECEC will impact positively on both social and economic infrastructures. ECEC services seek to enhance child development and to support parents (Friendly and Beach, 2004) to improve children's wellbeing, development and prospects for life-long learning (OECD, 2006). A longitudinal research project, 'The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education' (EPPE, 1997–2003) (Sylva et al., 2004), examined the impact of pre-school provision for 3–4 year-olds. The study highlights the importance and the positive benefits ECEC has for children and their families in terms of social justice, by including children from disadvantaged backgrounds in education at the earliest opportunity.

Evidence from longitudinal research demonstrates that the early years of children's lives have a profound and lasting impact on their futures and as such adequate provision for learning and development is essential to achieving social justice (Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead, 2009). ECEC attempts to diminish the detrimental developmental effects of

poverty, for example, by providing childcare to low income families, often predominantly lone female parents, thus allowing them to seek work. It also provides early intervention (New and Cochran, 2007) for children, as ECEC supports an inclusive approach for children who may require additional resources to meet their developmental and learning needs (Bennett and Tayler, 2006).

The OECD recommends that governments support and regulate ECEC programmes (OECD, 2006: 39). Successive governments in the UK have, since the 1990s, shown a commitment to improving ECEC services with commissioned reports and a plethora of policies, such as: *Starting with Quality*, the Rumbold Report (DES, 1990); *Learning to Succeed* (NCE, 1993); *Start Right* (Ball, 1994); and the *National Childcare Strategy: Sure Start* (DfEE, 1998), which have helped shape and support 'high quality early childhood education' (Calman and Tarr-Whelan, 2005: 1).

The *National Childcare Strategy, Sure Start* programme was launched in 1998 by the UK Labour government and aimed to give children the best start through a cross-departmental strategy to improve social and educational experiences. The programme has had a long-term impact on the provision of childcare availability across the UK. Statistics from the Department for Education (2012b) indicate that the number of 3 and 4 year olds benefitting from 'some free early education' in England is 96 per cent, and in Scotland free nursery education for all 3 and 4 year olds has been increased from 475 hours a year to 600 hours (SG, 2012a).

The National Child Care strategy also precipitated policies such as: *Every Child Matters: Children's Workforce Strategy* (DfES, 2005b), *The Early Years Framework I and II* (SG, 2008b), and the *Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland* (DfE(NI), 2004) which have helped change the provision of ECEC and the position of its workforce across the four countries which make up the UK. In addition, delivery of curricula has been reviewed and this has resulted in comprehensive, progressive documents being developed to guide practice.



Thinking point

There are two main drivers for policy developments in the UK for ECEC:

1. The long lasting positive impact on child development.
2. The desire to reduce child poverty by providing opportunities for parents (primarily mothers) to return to employment.

Why do you think both drivers are important to the long-term prospects for children?

Can you identify any other reasons for developing ECEC provision?

Curriculum

The commitment shown by the UK towards ECEC has resulted in not only a reconsideration of the availability of services but also of their content. This has resulted in each country in the UK creating its own distinct curriculum.

Whilst there are many common areas of focus for children's development and learning, each curriculum has distinctive features. For example, in the *Curriculum for Excellence* (SE, 2004) the early stage includes religious and moral education and the *Foundation Phase; Framework for Children's Learning for 3 to 7-year-olds in*

Table 3.1 Curriculum organisers for early childhood education, UK

Country	What is covered
England: <i>Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage</i> (DfES, 2012b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal, social and emotional development Communication, language and literacy Problem solving, reasoning and literacy Knowledge and understanding of the world Physical development Creative development
Scotland: <i>Curriculum for Excellence</i> (Scottish Executive, 2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health and wellbeing Languages Mathematics Sciences Social studies Expressive arts Technologies Religious and moral education
Northern Ireland: <i>Curriculum Guidance For Pre-School Education</i> (Dept for Education (NI), 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The arts Language development Early mathematical experiences Personal, social and emotional development Physical development and movement The world around us
Wales: <i>Foundation Phase: Framework for Children's Learning for 3 to 7-year-olds in Wales</i> (Dept for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal and social wellbeing and cultural diversity Physical development Creative development Language, literacy and communication skills Welsh language development Mathematical development Knowledge and understanding of the world

Wales (DfCELLS, 2008) specifically includes the development of the Welsh language. These characteristics reflect the culture and social needs of the country from which they originated. However, play is the common medium for the delivery of these curricula. The use of play supports the development of both intellectual and social skills for children, and also their understanding of what it is to be part of the world. These skills are crucial for the child's independence, self-esteem and wellbeing; this requires those who work in ECEC settings to be skilled and committed to the development and learning of children.

Staff in ECEC

Traditionally, ECEC has been perceived as a separate sector from formal education, in part due to its non-compulsory nature (OECD, 2000) and the differences in staff qualifications. The relocation of ECEC into the education agenda and the introduction of coherent curricular frameworks have resulted in a focus on the qualifications of the workforce. ECEC staff are traditionally women with a wide and varied set of qualifications, from extensive practical experience without formal qualifications to qualified teachers (Menmuir and Hughes, 2004). In Scotland, in 2008, there existed 44 similar job titles for ECEC staff (Adams, 2008: 199) ranging from Early Years Worker to Child Development Officer. The variety of skills, qualifications and job titles in ECEC has not only resulted in staff being traditionally undervalued and seen as only 'looking after the weans' (Mooney and McCafferty, 2005) but has also led to a tension in terms of pay, conditions of service and recognition of professional status. The introduction and consultation for Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) Standards (CWDC, 2012) and the *Standard for Childhood Practice* (QAA Scotland, 2007) aim to establish a professional status at graduate level for those who lead and manage pre-5 centres but who are not qualified teachers. However, the Nutbrown Review (2012: 8) cautions against being too complacent and accepting that these measures will solve the tension in the pre-5 sector as she highlights that there is still a lack of parity with those who hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Nutbrown does, however, acknowledge that EYPS has contributed to the improvements in ECEC and suggests that further work is still required.

The role staff play

The role of all those involved in delivering pre-5 education is to ensure that the physical environment and daily practices of education and care promote the health, safety and wellbeing of children. Staff aim to create a reciprocal partnership with parents to support the children in their care and readily consult them in relation to the experiences, likes/dislikes, cultural and social background which is particular to

each child. Staff demonstrate the values of equality, justice and diversity in supporting the learning and development of each individual child, in the context of family and society. Umbrella social policies such as: *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIR-FEC) (SG, 2008c), *Every Child Matters: Change for Children; Multi-agency Working Fact Sheet* (CWDC, 2007) and *Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland* (DHSSPS, 2011) guide and support those who work in the pre-5 sector by promoting communication with multi-agency partners and other professionals in the community who support children and families.

Through consultation, observations and interactions with the children, staff are able to build and develop supportive, trusting relationships with children. All staff have the responsibility to design and plan learning opportunities in consultation with the children, families and other staff. The activities and routines are stimulating and encourage positive child development and social interactions which are required to promote effective learning. The primary mode of curricular delivery is through play, which is enjoyable, stimulating and motivating to the child.

Play and the learning environment

Play is of paramount importance in ECEC and it is through play that learning and development are fostered and nurtured. Froebel was one of the first advocates of the kindergarten and he promoted play as 'the serious business of childhood' (Dunne, 2008: 263). Play supports social skill building which allows children to derive pleasure and develop their imagination and creativity and influences self-expression when language skills are still developing. Through play children learn 'their capacity to act and to recognise that actions have consequences' (James and James, 2004: 24). Play can enhance children's ability to: role-play, think before acting, develop their capabilities to show empathy and self-regulate their emotional understanding of the society in which they reside. This allows them to develop their understanding and become 'social actors' (James and James, 2004: 27). Children are able to develop some concept of what works and they 'try on' emotions through play (Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow 1990: 117). Also, 'trying out' situations allows children to develop a concept of the rules of the society in which they exist (Miller, 2009).

However, a tension exists with the use of play in ECEC settings, as many forms of play are 'chosen but not freely, directed but not personally, motivated but not intrinsically' (Brown, 2008: 124). Some play experiences in ECEC can be over planned and used to conform to learning outcomes outlined in curriculum documents, rather than to meet the development needs of the child. In addition, according to Markstrom and Hallden (2009), there is often an over structuring of the day by the timetabling of events and activities and the need for evidence of learning for regulatory bodies such as HMIE, Care Inspectorate (Scotland)¹ and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). This tension can result in the benefits of play for

children's development being undermined and restricted. Therefore the role of the adult in children's play is crucial if children are to benefit from the positive opportunities and experiences play can provide.

The adult's role in play

As in all educational settings, the nursery needs to support children by creating an environment which allows them to feel safe, cared for and supported. Play is a fundamental part of children's holistic development and should be guided by children and supported by adults. ECEC encourages children's engagement in meaningful play by providing opportunities which allow children to experience positive interactions with both adults and peers. Ideally a balance is sought so that children benefit from both free play and adult-initiated play in order to develop social and cognitive skills (Sylva et al., 2004). Staff expect children to think critically and act with autonomy (Dunne, 2008) by seeking their opinions and involving the children in decision making, thus supporting and empowering children to develop and shape their world.

To effectively utilise play the child has to be at the centre of the learning experiences offered. If autonomy and choice are to be promoted in ECEC, children should be encouraged to contribute and engage with the planning of adult-led play. Staff can use floorbooks,² mind-mapping, picture/photo walls and discussions with children to plan and to identify children's interests. Planning also needs to make effective use of resources, including staff, and space to facilitate the learning experiences. Cohen and Uhry (2007) alert those who plan play to avoid solely using toys with specific purposes as they do not cultivate creative, imaginative, or collaborative learning. Opportunities for both free and adult-led play encourage problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration, negotiation and friendships whilst ensuring that the child's learning and developmental needs are supported.

In the two examples below, you are introduced to Seth and Ayesha who are happy in the nursery environment. The children's personal interests are used as the starting point for the planning of their learning and development. Interventions should not be overly prescriptive or imposed as these are more likely to fail.



View from practice: Seth

Seth is a quiet, happy 4-year-old. He has two older brothers. Mum and dad confirm that Seth is content to come to nursery and that at home he enjoys listening to stories and playing with toy cars and motorbikes.

Seth has been in the pre-school room for 2 months but has been in the nursery environment since the age of 2. He has settled well and enjoys playing on the climbing equipment and riding the bikes outside. He is sociable and has many friends in the nursery. He also enjoys story time, singing and playing with water and sand: However, staff have noticed that Seth's fine motor skills are still relatively immature.

Staff are considering Seth's development needs and wish to explore possible avenues to encourage play which will promote and develop Seth's fine motor skills.

Seth has been identified as requiring the development of his fine motor skills. These are the small fine movements that are made using the fine muscles in the hands which allow the use and control of different equipment, for example, pencils and scissors. The development of fine motor skills also requires the refinement of hand-eye coordination. This involves vision and hand movements working together. In early years there are substantial differences in the development of fine motor development among children; therefore the difficulties Seth is experiencing

Table 3.2 Matching activities to skills development (a)

Interest	Activity	Skill
Sand/water	Hiding objects in the sand/water and asking Seth to retrieve them.	Hand-eye co-ordination. Pincer grasp – finger and thumb working together to pick up small objects.
Stories	Turning pages of books. Finger puppets of the story characters. Placing objects relating to the story in play dough to be retrieved.	Hand-eye co-ordination. Isolation of finger movements, using one finger at a time. Hand-eye co-ordination and development of pincer grasp.
Singing songs	Playing instruments.	Holding instruments correctly and operating them; movements will depend on the instruments.
Playing with others	Pop the bubbles on large or small bubble pack with friends, pinching the bubbles with thumb and index finger. Playing with play dough. Collages, encouraging the use of scissors.	Hand-eye co-ordination. Pincer grasp. Rolling, pressing, cutting, etc. will help develop all muscles in the hands and all of the above skills. Hand-eye co-ordination. Pincer grasp.

are not uncommon. Most children develop their fine motor skills on their own; however, activities and adult support will also help with their development. Table 3.2 suggests a few activities relating to Seth's interests which can be used to develop his skills.



View from practice: Ayesha

Ayesha is 4, and she and her dad were born in the UK. Her mum is from India and does not speak English. The language spoken at home is Urdu and Ayesha, whilst having no developmental problems in her first language, has not had sufficient exposure to English to have developed confidence and proficiency. Dad says Ayesha enjoys singing and playing games at home.

Ayesha is in her pre-school year and has been in nursery for 2 months. She is a happy child who is content to play alongside others and will readily communicate with children who speak Urdu. She is also able to use non-verbal communication with children whose first language is English. However, she is not inclined to use any form of spoken language communication with staff, preferring to point or take staff to whatever she desires. Ayesha enjoys doing jigsaws, playing in the home corner, construction toys, singing songs and playing outside.

Staff are now reviewing Ayesha's development needs and they wish to explore possible avenues and activities to support her development of English.

The nursery staff have already established that the other children know how to pronounce Ayesha's name and whilst they encourage her to be involved in the life of the nursery they know it can be counterproductive to insist on speech too early. Ayesha needs to have time to 'tune in' to English. Key staff who work directly with Ayesha have learned some simple phrases, numbers, colours and greetings in Urdu. This demonstrates to Ayesha that her first language is valued and that she can still use it, which will allow her to feel more secure. Ayesha has already started to make friends with other children although she does not verbally communicate with all of them. The staff therefore wish to help support Ayesha's development of English. Like learning a first language, this needs to be supported and learned in a context, where practical meaningful experiences and interaction occur with others. Ayesha will need to spend time listening before she will start to speak English and it is likely that she will be able to understand much more of what is going on than she can express. Ayesha's English will develop through interaction with others but supporting this development through play opportunities which are planned will help

Table 3.3 Matching activities to skills development (b)

Interest	Activity	Skill
Games	Games which involve taking turns, e.g., picture lotto, picture snap.	Social interaction. Introduce new vocabulary.
	Sorting activities, by colour, shape or size.	Social vocabulary, e.g., please, thank you. Motivation to communicate.
	Matching activities.	Language is modelled by others.
Stories	Story tag lines which are repeated throughout the narrative.	Repetition helps with word recognition/meaning/context. Vocabulary development. Vocabulary development – learning to label objects.
	Picture books.	Language is modelled by staff/children. Social interaction.
Singing songs	Use repetitive choruses, rhymes and songs.	Repetition helps with word recognition/meaning/context. Vocabulary development. Social interaction.
Playing with others	Puppets.	Social interaction.
	Soft toys.	Using/experimenting with new vocabulary.
	Dressing up clothes.	Social language – please, thank you, etc.
	Construction toys.	Vocabulary development.
	Garden activities.	Vocabulary modelling.

this process and ensure that Ayesha does not feel isolated. Table 3.3 suggests some activities which can support Ayesha's development of English.



Thinking point

The activities listed in Tables 3.2 and 3.3 are not exhaustive and many more activities can be used to engage and develop the needs of both these children. What other play activities can you think of, using the children's interests and development needs, which will support each of these children?

Effective assessment in ECEC

It is also necessary to assess progress and identify next steps to ensure that the child is developing and learning. Assessment is a shared activity and is part of an ongoing process. Curricula have 'moved away from foregrounding developmental

outcomes and deficit-based assessment to much broader-based learning goals and narrative assessment' (Whitty, 2010: 43). As such, assessment information gathered can be used for early intervention and prevention, as well as enrichment and development to support the child. Assessment generally serves four purposes:

- to identify children's needs;
- to discern the next steps in development and learning;
- to evaluate programmes and impact;
- to monitor and evaluate the quality of the setting's service.

Effective assessments should happen in the child's natural learning environment and the tasks should be familiar and appropriate. Assessments are not just the purview of the staff, but rather all those involved with the child, and including the child, should have a part in the process and consideration needs to be given to the family care setting and cultural environment in which the child is developing. Policy recognises the importance of engaging parents and carers in the process:

Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning. (EYFS, 2007, comment 2:2)

The process of assessment ensures that the child's progress is supported, and guides any interventions, choices and activities planned. Assessment is critical and includes observing and assessing behaviour and development. Genuine assessment is done when children are in their natural setting and performing real tasks. Observations should take place when the child has chosen the play activity; if the activity is imposed the observer is unlikely to get an accurate picture of the child's engagement or response to the activity. Observations of the child at self-initiated play allow the skills and knowledge developed during planned adult-led sessions or through self-discovery to be assessed. Observations should be kept short and positive and should be of something which the child has had previous experience. Assessments can be made by observing and documenting children's activities and interactions, as observations are in themselves tools for learning (Smidt, 2005). Observations can be:

- spontaneous: things observed about the children during the course of play activities;
- informal: an observation relating to a particular skill/development (observation is over a period of time (for example a week or a term) and is recorded when the focus occurs).

Knowing what and why observations are being done is important; however, it is also necessary to record the information collected. Organised systems to record

observations help to ensure that progress or concerns are documented and should be built into the daily routine of the playroom. Recording information does not need to be complicated, for example, it might include the use of:

- a pencil and Post-it notes being readily available to allow short notes to be made; these are easily stored in a poly-pocket or a notebook and can be examined, considered or discussed later;
- a digital camera to record events, interactions, development of skills, such as riding a bike, climbing stairs;
- a video camera to record children in interactive situations, such as role play, cooperative play;
- a success-box, in which children place pictures or other creations that they are pleased with, thus allowing the child to self-assess and providing opportunities for peer assessment;
- floorbooks to record children's choices, ideas and involvement.

Assessments also ensure that the planned programmes are effective and that they are having a positive impact on the children. In addition, assessments may help to identify areas of development for staff, allowing staff to recognise and plan their own engagement with professional development opportunities. This helps to guarantee that the learning and developmental activities offered to the children are appropriately planned and supported by well-trained staff.

Identification and development of children's needs is a benefit of good ECEC provision; however, there is a danger that current policies have 'an increasing emphasis on children's academic outcomes ... and its "schoolification"' (OECD, 2006: 138). This places a focus on assessment which assumes standards about the 'normal' child (see, for example, James et al., 1998: 18–19) and has created an academic agenda for ECEC (Alasuutari and Karila, 2010). The emphasis on outcomes and 'schoolification' could arguably be to justify government investment and a desire to see a return for the financial support to provide places for pre-school children. It is argued that ECEC will improve children's school readiness, resulting in higher achievements in school, and a future increase of skills and employability, thereby generating productive and economically contributing future citizens (Heckman and Masterov, 2007). The danger that the agenda for ECEC becomes too focused on outcomes and school readiness requires that the fundamental principle of ECEC should be preserved, where children benefit from the opportunities to develop in a supportive, creative environment at their own stage and pace without fear of failure. ECEC should not be seen as just a preparation for school, rather it is a distinct and valuable experience, and is a source of enrichment, enjoyment and development for our youngest children.



Thinking point

- What are the benefits of assessment for children?
- Can you identify any drawbacks relating to assessment?
- What can be done to minimise these drawbacks?

Summary

In today's society, engaging children with learning at the earliest possible opportunity will help support the development of social, emotional and cognitive skills. ECEC has more recently been recognised as benefiting children's wellbeing, learning and social inclusion, and has both immediate and long-term economic benefits for children and their families. However, a child's time in ECEC should not be seen simply as a preparation for the next stage, school; it should be valued and appreciated for what it offers each individual child in the here and now.

ECEC is a non-compulsory provision where pre-school children are able to develop both cognitive and social skills. Staff plan learning through play using the child's individual experiences, allowing the child to build on their strengths and interests in order to learn and develop. All children can benefit from ECEC as it provides opportunities for every child to learn and develop in a safe and secure environment. Staff are committed and willing to involve families in the children's development and assessment. Assessments need to take place in relaxed natural situations and should be recorded so that next steps can be planned. Staff need to ensure that assessment does not become perfunctory, to meet regulatory standards, but rather ensure that assessments inform next steps in learning and development.



Reflective questions

- Can you identify the benefits of ECEC?
- What are the benefits of adult-led play and free play?
- What is the role of the adult in an ECEC setting?
- What is the purpose of assessment in ECEC? What can we learn from ECEC assessment strategies in primary school contexts?
- In what ways might we try to keep the child at the centre of the learning process in primary classrooms?

Further reading

- Gammage, P. (2008) The social agenda and early childhood care and education: can we really help create a better world? *Online outreach paper 4. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation*, at: http://www.bernardvanleer.org/The_social_agenda_and_early_childhood_care_and_education_Can_we_really_help_create_a_better_world
- James, A. and James, A. (2004) *Constructing Childhood. Theory, Policy and Social Practice*. London: Palgrave. (This book examines how society's views about children have changed in terms of their place in society. It shows that children are social actors with a right to be consulted in relation to decisions which affect them.)
- Smidt, S. (2005) *Observing, Assessing and Planning for Children in the Early Years*. Abingdon: Routledge. (This book will support practitioners in their daily practice to observe and plan further learning experiences for all children in the setting. It provides a variety of vignettes which demonstrate how children's interests and needs can be used to support children's learning.)
- Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. and Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2004) *Effective pre-school education*. London: DfES <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/5309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf> (accessed 24 June 2013).
- Nursery World: Online resource for all those working in Nurseries. <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/>

Notes

1. Formally known as Care Commission, which was set up in Scotland in April 2002 under the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 to regulate all adult, child and independent healthcare services in Scotland.
2. Floorbooks are a record of children's ideas and thoughts. They are used for planning and recording, through pictures, photographs or adult notation of children's involvement in the process. Adults do not re-frame or re-interpret the children's thinking.