Four Year Olds in School

Quality Matters

Second Edition

Sandra Brown
Shirley Cleave

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of admitting younger children to school is becoming ever more widespread in this country. Based on the NFER research project 'The Educational Needs of Four Year Olds' carried out by the authors in 1988-90, this book includes subsequent developments up to summer 1994 to take account of the findings and pronouncements of a number of important initiatives. These include:

- the Children Act (1989);
- the report of the Committee of Inquiry into Quality of the Educational Experiences offered to 3- and 4-year-olds chaired by Angela Rumbold (1990);
- a report from the office of HM Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI, 1993) on standards and quality of education in reception classes;
- a report of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation led by the National Commission on Education (1993);
- a report for the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) on the importance of early learning (1994);
- a report for the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) by Sir Ron Dearing (1994).

The original project drew on an extensive study of the literature, consultations with a wide range of early years specialists at all levels of the education service and observation of practice in schools where deliberate efforts had been made to improve provision for the under-fives. A full report of that project is published by Routledge under the title *Early to School: Four Year Olds in Infant Classes*.

The research project arose in response to concern over the growing practice of admitting four year olds to infant rather than nursery classes. A Government inquiry into the quality of educational experiences for under-fives (GB. DES 1990) warned that, unless reception classes with four year olds had better staffing ratios and a suitable curriculum, these young pupils would gain little from their early admission to school.

This book is the second edition of *Four Year Olds in School: Quality Matters*. It documents some of the many examples observed in the study and discusses how some of the principles identified might be put into practice. In addition,

it takes note of subsequent written documents and the attention being paid to early childhood education. It is evident from these more recent documents that there is a continuing focus of attention on this age group and concerns remain about funding, staffing, parental involvement, length of schooling and age at entry, the introduction of children to formal skills too early, and the low status of adults working with young children.

The wide debate about 'quality' provision for under-fives and the currently high profile on the political agenda has not eased the task of the practitioner. We are anxious to point out that, in carrying out this study, we are not advocating the placement of young children in infant rather than nursery classes. In fact, a recent NFER study suggests that 'children who started school close to the age of four did less well than others' (Sharp et al., 1994). However, we are acknowledging that many four year olds *are* in school and, given that they are, we must consider how best their needs can be provided for. This requires adequate resources, although, by their commitment to improving practice, some schools have been able to improve the planning and provision for their youngest pupils. It is the view of HMCI (1993) that 'high-quality provision in reception classes is a very worthwhile investment' and that there are strong indications that primary schools are 'steadily improving the work of reception classes'.

Schools in our study enabled us to identify ten areas in which they were committed to providing more appropriately for four year olds in infants classes. These areas are:

admission procedures;

staffing;

the organisation of time;

the organisation of space;

equipment and materials;

activities;

teaching approach;

the monitoring and recording of progress;

roles and relationships;

support.

Each of these areas is addressed in the chapters which follow. Each chapter expands on the principles by giving actual examples of children's experiences and a selection of the strategies adopted by participants in the study. The text is interspersed with questions which are intended to promote discussion and encourage readers to reflect on their own provision and practice.

GETTING STARTED

Starting school for children is not just about having a new school bag and arriving at the beginning of the new term. The process, which should start long before the term of entry, should be given a considerable amount of thought by school staff and plans should be made which accommodate the individual needs of the children being admitted to school. As Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI, 1993) points out: 'About 90 per cent of the children had attended some form of pre-school provision. Most of the schools had links with the main playgroups, nursery classes and nursery schools which children had attended, but the level and quality of this contact differed considerably.'

The report continues by saying: 'Where induction arrangements were poor, it was sometimes because the pupils began school, full-time, too abruptly with little opportunity to visit beforehand or for a short period of part-time attendance...when more gradual induction became the norm this was widely accepted as beneficial.'

Starting school is an important time for children and their parents and teachers, and an appropriate induction programme is essential. This is much more difficult to achieve when authorities do not provide additional adults to work with young children. In the example described below, a nursery nurse was employed full-time as a matter of local authority policy.

****

Ben was four. His birthday was in July. The local authority had a policy of annual admission and had offered Ben and his friends a place in the reception class at the local primary school in September. He already attended a playgroup for three mornings a week. This chapter is about his induction to school.

Before school

During the summer term a visitor came to Ben's playgroup. It was the headteacher from the local primary school. She had contacted the playgroup and had been invited to have a cup of coffee with the staff and see the kinds of activities which were being provided for the children. This also gave her a chance to talk informally with parents. Later in the term they would be invited to the school for a more formal evening when they would have an opportunity to look around the classrooms before hearing about the school philosophy and organisation. At this meeting the head planned to use slides of the previous year's intake of children to describe the purpose and variety of activities the

children could expect during their first days in school. She would have preferred to use a video which had been made in school but did not feel confident enough in the quality of her filming. Parents were provided with booklets about the school which included factual information as well as illustrative drawings by the children.

At the meeting the head explained to parents that later this term or early next term the reception team, comprising the reception teacher and the nursery nurse, would like to visit their homes to discuss their child with them. She hoped that this would provide a valuable opportunity for them to share their knowledge about their child.

There was also an invitation to 'drop in' at the school any time during the next week as it was 'book week'. New entrants as well as established pupils and their parents were invited to see a range of books and given the opportunity to make suitable purchases. They could also see the activities provided by the school in this area of the curriculum. A display of children's work and sessions where staff explained the opportunities that were provided for children's learning helped to show parents what to expect.

Ben knew the outside of the school because he walked past it every time he went to playgroup. His first visit inside the school was during book week when, accompanied by his parent, he browsed through books and talked about the display in the school hall. The following week he spent an afternoon, with his mother, in the reception class. The pair of them surveyed the scene and selected an activity together. They shared a table with a group of children who explained what the activity was all about. There were only three other new entrants with their parents visiting the established reception class that afternoon. The teacher and the nursery nurse found time to welcome them amongst the 'busyness' of the classroom and check the date that they would visit them at home.

The next week Ben visited the reception class with a small group of his friends but without their parents. His parent was invited to 'settle Ben down' and then leave. The classroom was set out for a variety of activities and Ben was soon busy in the water tray. After his parent left Ben's attention turned to the dough. He was not quite confident enough to make the initial approach to join in but the observant teacher took him by the hand, sat down with him at the dough table and encouraged him to join in making pancakes.

As Ben was only just four he would be one of the last children in his year group to join the school. The reception team would visit him at home early in September rather than in July. They were able to delay this visit because the oldest new entrants would be attending for the morning only for the first two weeks of term. The reception team used the afternoons for any outstanding home visits. The team had already received completed admission forms from

Ben's parents. They also took a puppet and a story book with them to his home. One of the adults spent time with Ben, his toys and the puppet while the other adult talked with his parents and updated information. Each visit lasted about half an hour and the team were able to meet two more of Ben's friends at home during the afternoon.

Home visits were not always without difficulty. One teacher explained that they were not only a strain on her time but she felt like 'an intruder'. She preferred to visit homes when the children had been in her class for a while. She found that daily contact with parents at the beginning and end of the day helped her to build up relationships with them first.

Have you considered alternative strategies before children start school? For example:

> Who are the best people to carry out visits to the pre-school settings attended by new entrants?
>
> What arrangements can be made to establish contact with new entrants and their parents if the children are not attending a playgroup or nursery?
>
> How can you ensure that the classroom is not overcrowded when children and their parents are visiting the school?
>
> When and how often should children be invited into school with their parents and on their own before they start?
>
> What purposes do the various visits serve?
>
> Are home visits necessary for all children; for whom are they most effective?

First days in school

◆ a staggered start

It was late September and Ben was ready for his first day at school. The children with winter birthdays were already attending school part-time. They, like Ben, had been admitted in groups of four or five children every three days over the past two weeks. There were now eighteen children in the class and Ben and four of his friends were the last group to join. Ben's parents were a little concerned

that he had missed two weeks schooling and that he might find it difficult to establish himself in an existing peer group.

◆ part-time attendance

Ben attended school for the morning only while some of his older classmates were beginning to attend full-time. Towards the middle of October the teacher approached Ben's parents and asked them about his response to school and if they felt, as she did, that Ben was ready to attend full-time. They all agreed that Ben had settled down well and was likely to enjoy a full day in school. They decided to try it and review the situation at the end of the next week.

Calendar of Ben's induction to school

May	-	headteacher visits Ben's playgroup;
June	-	formal meeting in school for parents of 'new' pupils; booklets provide information; 'drop in' at school book week.
July	-	1st week: Ben spends an afternoon in school with his mother ; 2nd and 3rd weeks: Ben spends an afternoon in school by himself; 3rd week: Ben attends playgroup for the last time; 4th week: Ben's birthday;
August	-	school closed for holidays;
September	-	reception team visit Ben at his home for about half an hour; 3rd week: Ben starts school with a small group of his friends;
October	-	Ben attends school full-time after negotiation between his parents and the reception team; Ben is becoming a pupil.

What are the signs that a child is settling in well? Might the parents have a different view?

Over how long a period should the entry date be staggered or part-time attendance be adopted?

Are parents at your school concerned about delayed schooling? What steps can be taken to reassure them that a gradual start is in the best interests of the child?

In what ways can part-time attendance help the teacher with a mixed-aged class? Do you foresee any problems?

Becoming a pupil

Ben was admitted to a year group class: all the children would be five before next September. In previous years the school had had either a summer-born class or a vertically grouped class covering more than a two-year age span. The staff had adopted a year group system this year because the pupil numbers were convenient. They preferred this system because:

* the summer-born entrants were less likely to be regarded as 'the babies';

* parents tended to make less comparison between the oldest and the youngest groups;

* there were greater opportunities for children for whom English was not their first language to practise language development.

Ben had a gradual, gentle start to school. Schools, however, have a language of their own which in the first days in school can be confusing for some children. The school hall, for example, is nothing like the more familiar 'hall' that Ben knows at home. He may be unsure what 'line up and we'll go outside to play' means when he is accustomed to going outside as and when he pleases when playing at home. As for 'Apples get your lunch boxes'...

Gradually children learn to become pupils and fulfil the expectations adults have of them. They become part of a class and realise by a few weeks into the term, if not sooner, that 'all', 'Class 8', 'everybody' includes them. It is important that adults reflect on the values and attitudes they transmit because

children very quickly learn what is acceptable and expected behaviour. An example of this was observed at the end of the summer term when the children had been in school for almost a year:

> A group of children had used blocks to mark out the plan of a house outside on the grass. A similar 'base' had been established by another group of children around the corner. Long bricks and plastic construction blocks represented 'guns' and a 'shoot-out' followed. Attracted by the noise the teacher intervened and asked 'they're not guns are they?' The children changed the angle of the offending weapons and claimed to be 'hoovering up'. As the teacher withdrew the mock battle continued until another adult approached. Before anything could be said the children volunteered the information 'We're cutting the grass now'!

What, if any, advantages are there in having four year olds in a mixed-age class i.e. with children of five or more?

What 'language' is peculiar to your classroom?

How can you help new entrants make sense of the world of the classroom?

How far do you share the classroom rules with children or expect them just to accept them?

Different routes

Staggering the starting date allows children to be admitted singly or in small groups. Schools accommodate children in a variety of ways after taking account of local pre-school provision and practical limitations. In our study there were numerous ways of organising a gradual start. For example:

* all new entrants admitted over two days;
* a third of the class admitted daily for three days;
* all the class admitted at half-hourly intervals during the morning throughout the week;
* small groups admitted on alternate days;
* no new children admitted until the established (mixed-age) class was settled.

There are of course schools that do **not** have annual entry, and LEA policies about part-time attendance vary. A few stipulate that the youngest **must** be part-time for half a term; others with a policy of annual admission recommend

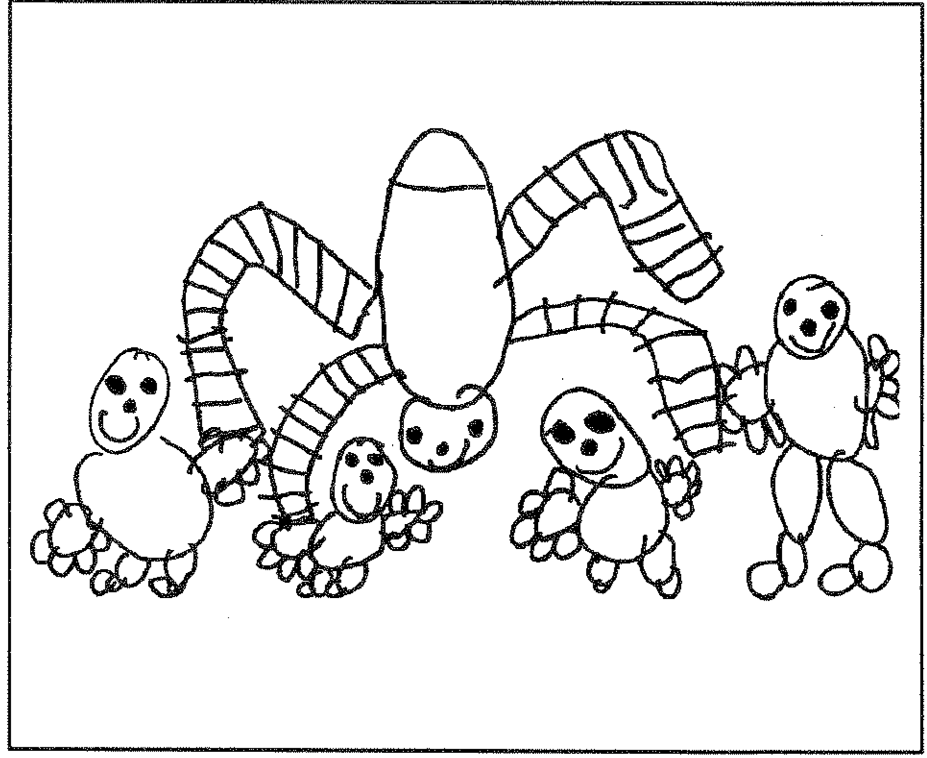
part-time for a term for the spring-born children and for two terms for the summer-born children, although there is usually flexibility for schools to respond to individual needs. Such arrangements might allow for any of the following:

* part-time until children are of statutory age;
* part-time for the first half-term;
* total flexibility based on negotiation between headteacher, teachers, nursery nurse and parents.

Which of the above strategies do you consider are the best? Would they work in your own school?

In conclusion

There are many ways in which schools can help children settle into school. A gentle start enables sound foundations to be laid for the child's future school career, and the involvement of parents from the beginning encourages the development of a partnership between adults with significant influences on young lives. Then, as HMCI (1993) found, the vast majority of the children settle in quickly.



PROVIDING ADULTS

It is difficult to implement a nursery style curriculum without nursery style resourcing. HMCI (1993) indicated that 'levels of staffing varied markedly, with adult to child ratios varying from 1:6 to 1:35'. High adult to child ratios are generally more appropriate in nursery classes than in reception classes, and guidance in the Children Act (1991) counsels against the inappropriate staffing levels in most reception classes. The 'rule of thumb' identified by Ball (1994) suggests that there should be one adult to eight children for four year olds. Teachers working with young children in infant classes are not always trained to work with this age group and, as a rule, do not have ancillary help. However, by 1993 the National Commission suggested that the ratio of adults to children was 'improving in some schools...'

The importance of employing adequate and qualified trained staff cannot be ignored. As HMCI (1993) found, 'standards were usually better in classes with two adults...' and 'non-teaching assistance made an important contribution to standards and quality. This was invariably better where the assistant had suitable qualifications.' One of the main conclusions of that report was that high-quality provision and good standards of work were associated with staff, well qualified by training and/or experience for work with reception-class pupils.

Adult to child ratios

To provide appropriately for young children there should be a suitable adult to child ratio so that adults can interact with individuals and can intervene at the right moment to extend the child's learning.

A few of the classes we visited had managed to improve staffing ratios and come closer to the recommended nursery class levels of one teacher and one nursery nurse to 26 children. For example:

> In an open plan unit for 72 children there were two teachers assisted by two full-time nursery nurses. This gave a teacher:child ratio of 1.36 and an adult:child ratio of 1:18. During the week an additional part-time teacher was assigned by the head to work with the team thus improving staffing ratios to 1:15 for some periods of the week. The team were very aware that their practice was more appropriate when there were extra adults working in the classroom. They involved local students, and asked parents

and retired people to come into the classroom and help with various tasks. This often generated a much improved adult:child ratio of 1:10 or 11.

The above example tended to be the exception rather than the rule in our study. It had been made possible through the LEA policy, the headteacher's commitment, and the teachers' willingness to involve professional and voluntary help.

◆ LEA policy

In this authority, unlike many others, there was a policy of employing qualified nursery nurses full-time to work alongside the teacher. When nursery nurses are deployed in classes with four year olds their expertise should be valued and used to the full. Their role should complement that of the teacher. The ways in which nursery nurses were allocated responsibility varied with the teacher they were working with. Some of the responsibilities they had in our study included planning activities, working with small groups of children, supervising whole-class activities, giving specific attention to special needs, settling children into school, meeting parents and visiting homes.

More frequently nursery nurses and ancillary helpers worked part-time or divided their time between classes. In such instances they often made comments such as:

> *'I don't feel a member of the reception team - I'm only there one morning out of eight so I'm not included in the planning. The teacher tells me what she's planned for me to do.'*

How can the LEA, headteacher and governors be persuaded that good adult:child ratios are crucial to young children's educational opportunities?

If you have nursery nurses, are they using their expertise to the full? Are there any other ways in which their training could be utilised?

◆ Headteachers' commitment

Adult to child ratios were improved when headteachers allocated part-time teachers, nursery nurses or ancillary helpers to the early entrants' class. This could involve difficult decisions for the head when all the available extra adult time was given to one year group at the expense of the older classes. Sharing adult helpers with other classes was not ideal because they were often called away to deal, for example, with children who were unwell.

How are other classes affected if the decision is made to allocate all the available adult help to the youngest class?

What problems arise if ancillary help is only part-time? Is part-time help better than no help at all?

◆ Teachers' willingness to involve voluntary helpers

Schools often tried to improve adult to child ratios by persuading parents or retired people to come into the classroom to help. These people helped in all manner of ways by, for example, doing house-keeping tasks, completing small group activities with children or sharing their own special skills.

Parental involvement in the classroom was often the result of a deliberate policy but it was not without problems. We found that at the start of the school year teachers invited parents to help in their child's class. A regular commitment enabled staff to plan the helpers' involvement in the classroom activities. However, such help tended to be short-lived when family responsibilities or a return to work removed them from the pool of voluntary helpers. Retired people were often able to give a more sustained involvement. They had much to offer and in return felt valued for the contribution they made.

Students provided another valuable source of additional adults to improve adult to child ratios. Many of the students observed in our study were training to work with children of this age as teachers or nursery nurses and, when they were nearing the end of their training, were particularly useful helpers in the classroom.

Is 'another pair of hands' enough or does it require planning and organisation on the part of the teacher and experience on the part of the voluntary helper?

Are there more systematic ways of involving students in reception classes and building a partnership between school and college?

How can parents be persuaded that their help is valuable?

Are all parents welcome in the classroom?

What are the advantages for the parent in sharing their child's classroom? Are there advantages for the child?

Are there advantages in deploying parents in classrooms other than that of their child?

Trained staff

In many infant and primary schools staffing for younger children is not only insufficient but also often consists of adults who have not been trained to work with this age group. Even in our study with its focus on appropriate practice there were teachers who, after many years of working with young children, still felt the need for in-service training to make them feel more confident.

Initial training courses should select candidates carefully and take account of personal qualities as well as academic aptitude. INSET is vital to help practitioners clarify what they believe and to support their practice; to help teachers who are uncertain about what to provide and why they should provide it. Some areas need particular attention. For example, teachers need training in observation of children, in evaluating progress, in developing links with parents and in working with other adults in the classroom. Government funding has, in the short-term, provided some opportunities to improve practice. There is a wide range of INSET available, from one-day awareness-raising conferences to substantial award-bearing courses. Teachers in our study increased their expertise by:

- working alongside more experienced colleagues;
- working with advisers and advisory teachers;
- attending courses and conferences and undertaking advanced study in early years education;
- establishing support groups and networks;
- visiting other schools.

A few nursery nurses were beginning to share INSET opportunities with teachers and recent funding should make this easier for them. One or two were considering taking an advanced nursery nursing course. Some commented that they would appreciate the opportunity to visit other establishments so that they could see how other nursery nurses were deployed.

In what ways can initial training courses specifically prepare teachers to work with under-fives in school?

What strategies should be developed to give teachers who are not trained for this age group the opportunity to gain the expertise required?

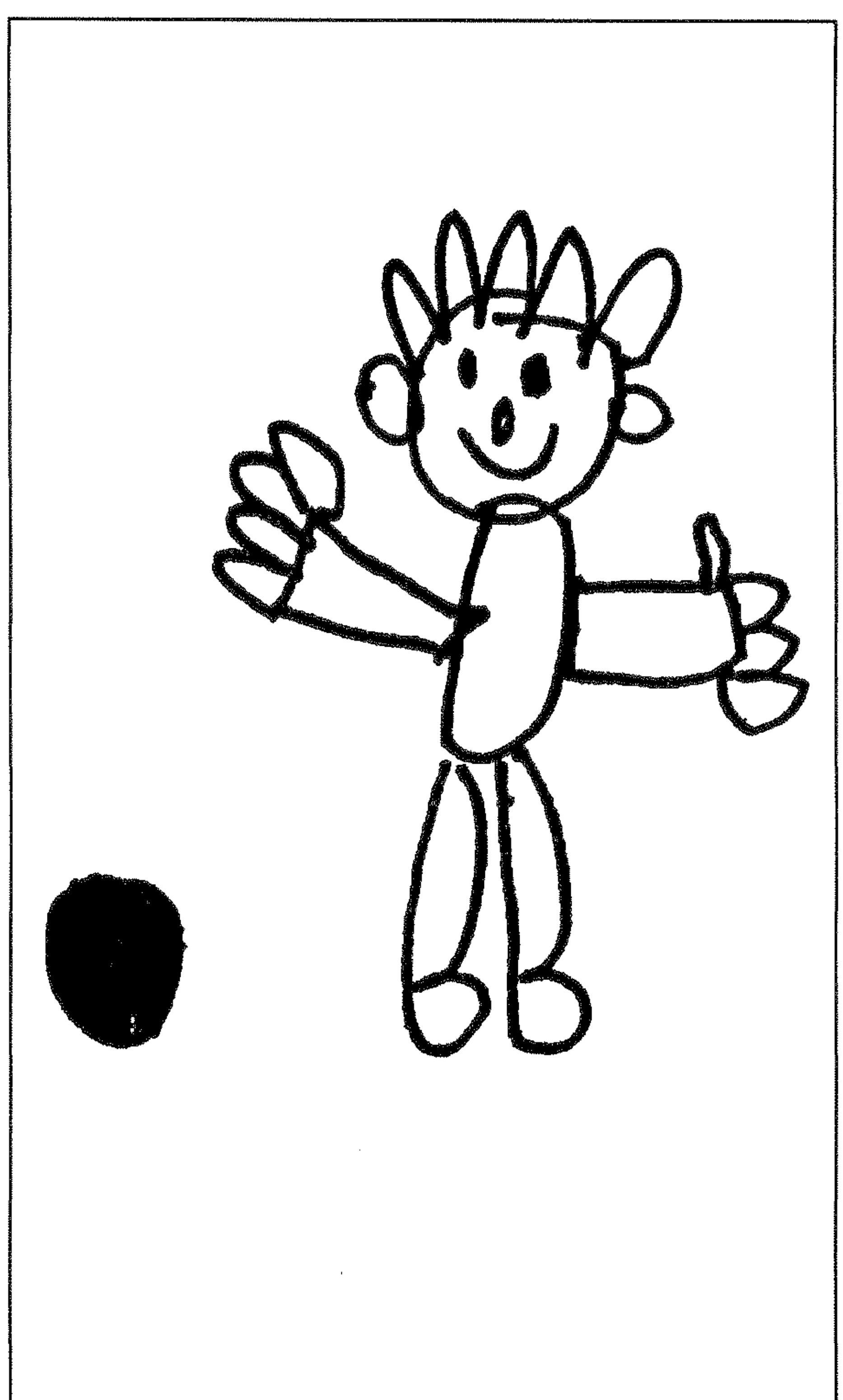
What sort of training is required by ancillary helpers working with four year olds? Who should provide it?

Are there any advantages in attending INSET as a team? Should the headteacher be included?

In conclusion

Some of the most limiting factors in providing appropriately for the youngest children in school are poor adult to child ratios and lack of teachers trained to work with this age group. The situation is still causing concern and the National Commission (1993) identified unsuitable class sizes and inappropriate ratios of adults to children in the classroom as 'serious drawbacks' in provision for four year olds in infant classes. Now that many financial and personnel decisions are being made by headteachers and governors, important questions have to be addressed. For example, could staffing problems be solved by admitting fewer children? Would it be better to employ two nursery nurses or one experienced (and therefore expensive) teacher? Decisions like these are not easy to make.

What are the issues involved in making these decisions?



MAKING TIME

Many young children find it difficult to cope with large groups. A gentle start to the school day and sensitive approaches to 'fixtures' like assembly, lunch and playtimes help children 'settle in' to school. Children need time to pursue activities at their own pace: time to get involved in an activity, develop it, reflect upon it and perhaps finish it. A flexible approach to the organisation of time helps to encourage this. Adults working with young children need time to stand back and reflect on the children's response to activities provided, and time to actually listen to them so that future provision is planned appropriately. This chapter is about Ben's experiences.

Beginning and end of the day

Ben and his mother were almost the first to arrive in the classroom in the morning. This gave his mother the chance to ask his teacher about a misplaced plimsoll and Ben's interest in a new library book. As more children arrived with accompanying adults Ben hung his name on a board to indicate that he had arrived at school and then took his mother over to the Lego where he made a model. There were no bells to mark when parents should leave, nor did the children have to sit quietly in a large group while the teacher consoled a tearful child. Today there were no tears, and parents and children were busily engaged in their activities.

At the end of the day Ben's father came into the classroom. He met some of the children Ben had been 'reading' with and they talked about the book together before Ben and his parent left for home.

What are the advantages in not having a formal registration time?

How could you get over the problem of overcrowding if all the parents arrive at once to collect their children from the classroom?

Are there any disadvantages in a staggered leaving time?

Assembly

Ben was in school for several weeks before he attended a full-school assembly. Until then there had been separate weekly assemblies for the reception year so he had visited the hall on several occasions. The first whole-school assembly

he had attended was when birthdays were celebrated. The second was led by an older class. The head invited the youngest children to attend whole-school assemblies for the first half only, so that they felt part of the school but did not find it too long to sit quietly. By the end of the year Ben was confident enough to join in his class's turn to lead assembly. Ben's mother was invited, along with other parents, to join them.

Should four year olds attend assembly? If so, how long is an appropriate assembly for this age group?

Given that many children find large group times difficult, does it make sense that one of the first experiences of school for many nursery children is attending a special assembly?

Lunch and playtimes

Ben's gradual introduction to full-time attendance at school meant that he did not stay to lunch until he felt reasonably confident in his new environment. As the youngest children ate their lunch earlier than the older children, Ben and his friends were able to have the playground to themselves for most of the dinner-time play.

Ben found it difficult filling his time in a bare playground after he had had access to play equipment all morning. The headteacher was trying to make arrangements so that the children had a choice of going out or staying in. The plan was to ask the nursery nurses or dinner ladies to supervise large toys outside and quieter activities with cushions to curl up on indoors. The staff were trying to find ways of making playtime more interesting for all children, not just the youngest.

During the morning session Ben's class had had the opportunity to choose to play indoors or outside in their own play area. Later in the year, Ben was introduced gradually to playtime in the large playground. As children became confident they joined in with the older pupils. Many of them welcomed this opportunity to play with older friends and siblings. Eventually, by the end of the year the whole class went out to play with the older children and this gave their teachers the opportunity to talk to colleagues in the staff room at playtime.

When intending new entrants visit the school, should they be expected to join in playtime?

How can the playground be made more exciting for children?

In what ways could the school timetable be arranged to make lunch and playtime more enjoyable for children and staff?

Time for an activity

Ben's daily routine was divided into a morning and afternoon session. There were set times for him to go to the hall for specific activities such as a television programme, music and P.E. or activities that were shared with other classes. Ben's teacher expected the children to pack up activities at the end of the morning and afternoon sessions. Sometimes they tidied up at the end of the morning and left activities out to be carried on in the afternoon. This gave Ben a chance to finish the model he was constructing. The only other interruption to his day was 'group time' when his teacher brought children together to plan activities with children, discuss what they had been doing, read stories or share news. This happened at roughly the same time each day to help create a pattern and give children a sense of time. There was often a large group time at the beginning of the afternoon which provided a quiet session for Ben after the hustle and bustle of the playground.

How often should the classroom be tidied up, and how often should activities be packed away?

Should large group time include all children?

What purposes do large group times serve?

His teacher's organization of time enabled Ben to develop an activity throughout the day. For example:

> During the morning Ben was busy with a set of plastic animals, matching animals to 'footprints' on a set of cards. When he had finished he joined another child who had been building with wooden bricks nearby. Together they constructed a 'zoo' on the floor into which they put the animals. Ben's teacher joined in the activity and all three discussed how the animals might move about - walking, or flying for example. Eventually the discussion was curtailed because it was lunch time.
>
> The 'zoo' was left tidily on the floor and after lunch Ben returned to it. The teacher brought him some books in which he could search for pictures of animals with flippers. He found some seals and decided to

make a book of his own. He collected some paper from the drawer and 'copied' some of the pictures into his own book. He also tried to draw the model animals, starting with an ichthyosaurus because it had 'flippers'. This task was difficult but he persisted until he had filled his book with pictures and 'writing'. By the time he had finished it was time to pack up for the end of the afternoon.

Should four year olds have their day divided up by whole-class activities?

How can the day be divided up and still give children time to complete their activities?

Are all children able to sustain interest in self-chosen activities for a set block of time?

How long should a block of activity time be?

Adults need time

In the above example Ben's teacher had time to intervene sensitively in the activity. She had time to listen to the childen and extend the activity. As Ben was involved in self-sustaining activity throughout much of the day she was able to interact with other groups of children and extend their activities too. She was able to observe and listen to children's needs.

She often felt that 'standing back' to observe was synonymous with 'standing back and doing nothing' when she felt she ought to be teaching. Even though she had a nursery nurse working with her she still found it difficult to find time to observe all the children.

In which activities do adults intervene? Should they intervene in all kinds of activity?

How should adults intervene in children's activity and for what purpose?

Does observation need to be done at specific times? Does it require extra time?

How does observing children help you to be reflective about your teaching?

Alternative strategies

Schools we visited addressed each of the issues discussed in this chapter in a variety of ways. In small schools or where children had already been in a nursery class there were no special arrangements at all for assembly. In other schools there were several ways of introducing children to whole-school assemblies. For example:

* children did not attend assembly until they were of statutory age;
* the youngest children did not attend assembly for the first four or five weeks;
* there were separate assemblies for reception and nursery classes;
* at the beginning of the year the youngest children attended special assemblies only;
* the reception classes attended only the first half of each school assembly.

Many different strategies were used to try and meet the needs of the youngest children at lunchtimes. For example:

* enlisting the help of parents in encouraging children to go home to lunch;
* inviting parents to eat lunch at school with their children;
* staff eating with the children;
* the youngest children lunching in a separate room;
* the reception class being served by dinner ladies while the rest of the school had a cafeteria system;
* older children helping the youngest children.

There were many ways in which playtime was introduced gradually for the reception class. These included:

* no fixed playtime but opportunities to go outside whenever it was convenient;
* no fixed playtime in the morning but the first hour was an indoor/ outdoor free play session;
* a separate playground at playtime for the youngest children;

* a choice of going out to play or staying in the classroom at playtime;

* a staggered playtime i.e. different year-groups going out at different times.

Daily patterns varied in the schools in our study. The class 'timetable' was influenced by the weekly school timetable and the frequency of tidying up, clearing away and group times.Bringing children together in groups gave them opportunities for talking and listening to others, getting to know each other and expressing themselves with confidence. It also enabled them to:

- share experiences;
- explore ideas;
- develop themes;
- plan what they were going to do;
- review what they had done;
- go over difficulties and try to solve problems;
- develop oral language and extend vocabulary;
- stimulate imagination and role play;
- build self-confidence.

Some adults working in the schools in our study managed to find time to stand back and reflect on the activities provided and children's reactions to them. This was achieved in the following ways:

* at times adopting a mainly supervisory style, engaging in briefer interactions rather than long involvements with individuals or groups of children while keeping an eye on what everyone was doing;

* setting aside a time during the week when additional help was available;

* observing children when they had a free choice of activities;

* focusing on two children only at a time and writing notes about their progress;

* setting up specific activities and observing children's response and stage of language development, and then recording the observations for use in planning future activities;

* observing individual children at specific activities.

In conclusion

Attending to details about school 'fixtures' and enabling children to have time to complete an activity can encourage a more relaxed atmosphere for staff and pupils. A flexible approach can provide opportunities to build up relationships with parents and avoid stressful large-group times for new entrants. By giving children time to develop self-sustaining activities it is possible for teachers to find more time to reflect on their teaching and use their observations to inform their future practice and provision. Perhaps this 'time' might be acquired by taking note of HMCI's (1993) comments about less satisfactory teaching being attributed to, amongst other things, 'too much time spent on basic class management such as lining up...'

CREATING SPACE

Four year olds need space in which they can feel safe, secure and relaxed, with freedom to move and express themselves. This includes the outdoor area as well as indoor space.

Outdoor areas

For children to be able to play indoors or out throughout the day there needs to be an area adjacent to the classroom which is safe and secure, has adequate storage facilities and different surfaces to play on. One example of such provision is shown in Plan 1. Supervision of children outside was not difficult because there was a nursery nurse as well as a teacher working with this class. Safety and security was an important element. New fencing provided by the LEA enclosed the area which limited the amount of space the children could use and eased their supervision. Adults were available to ensure that equipment was used safely.

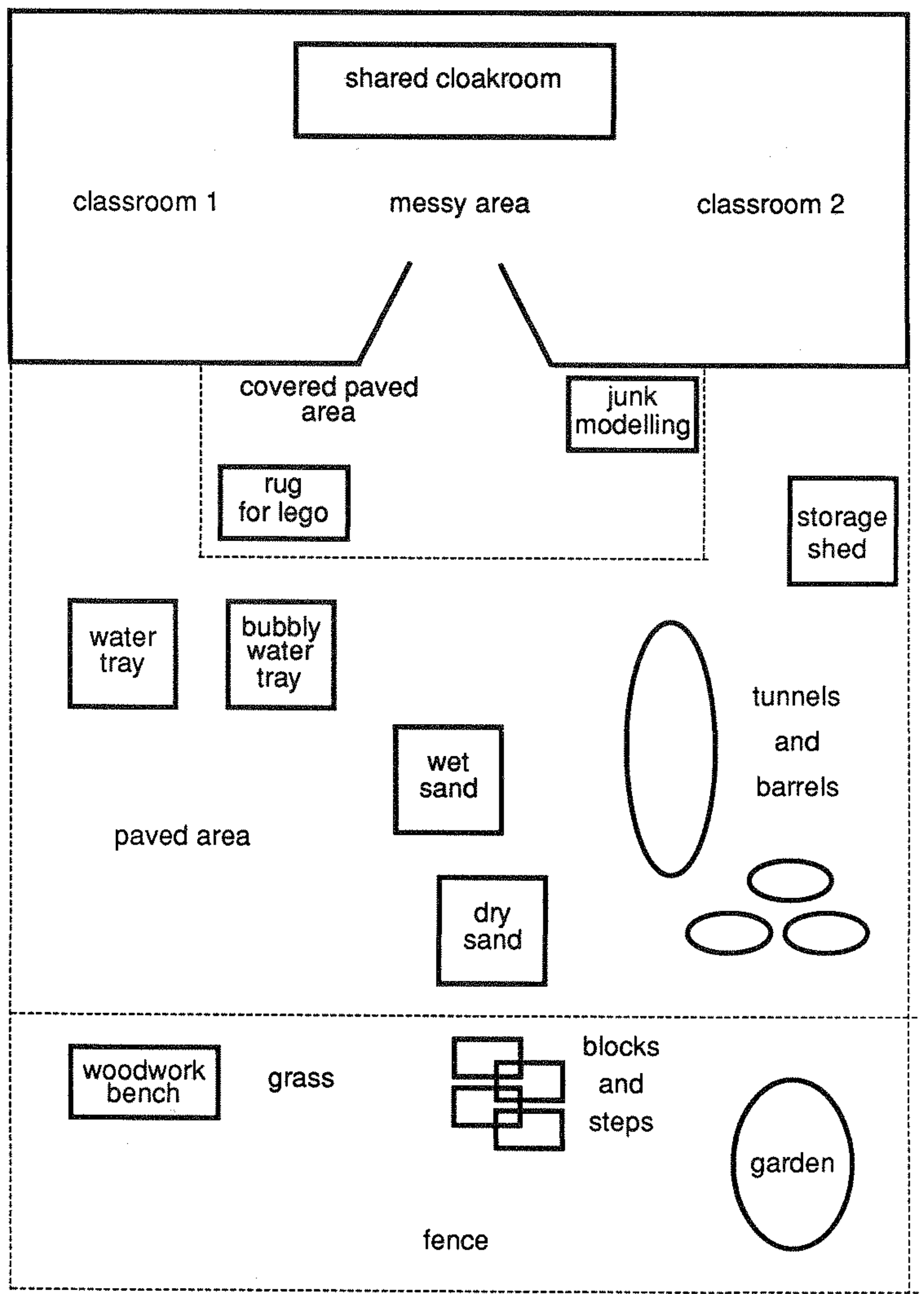
Are there any outdoor areas adjacent to your classroom that could be used for indoor/outdoor play throughout the day?

Does the outdoor area have to be fenced off? Could a courtyard serve a similar purpose?

If the outdoor area is so far away from the classroom that children cannot be seen by staff, what arrangements can be made so that children can use the area?

Equipment for use outside needs protection from the elements and from vandals. In Plan 1, storage sheds funded by the PTA provided extra facilities for play as well as storage. Different surfaces such as grassed and paved areas provided space for running and jumping as well as sitting quietly. Ideally there should be a covered area so that children are able to be outside even when the weather is cold or wet.

Plan 1: Arrangement for children's outdoor activity throughout the day



How can equipment usually stored and used indoors also be used outside?

In what ways can the storage equipment add to children's activities?

Can parents be persuaded to provide macs and wellingtons so that children are equipped to play outside or splash in puddles?

How might a covered area, a paved area, a grassy area, a wilderness area, a permanent sandpit, stepping stones and gardens, increase the learning opportunities provided outside?

How could the local environment around the school be used to provide interesting learning experiences for the children?

It is not enough just to provide outdoor space and activities. It is important that teachers accord the outdoor area equal status with indoor provision. With careful planning and use of resources, similar skills and concepts can be developed in either the indoor or outdoor space. This was an area that many schools needed to address. While outdoor play space is a feature of most nursery provision, many of the infant and primary schools in our study lacked suitable outdoor facilities for the youngest children. Similarly, HMCI (1993) found that schools were rarely able 'to make good provision for outdoor play'.

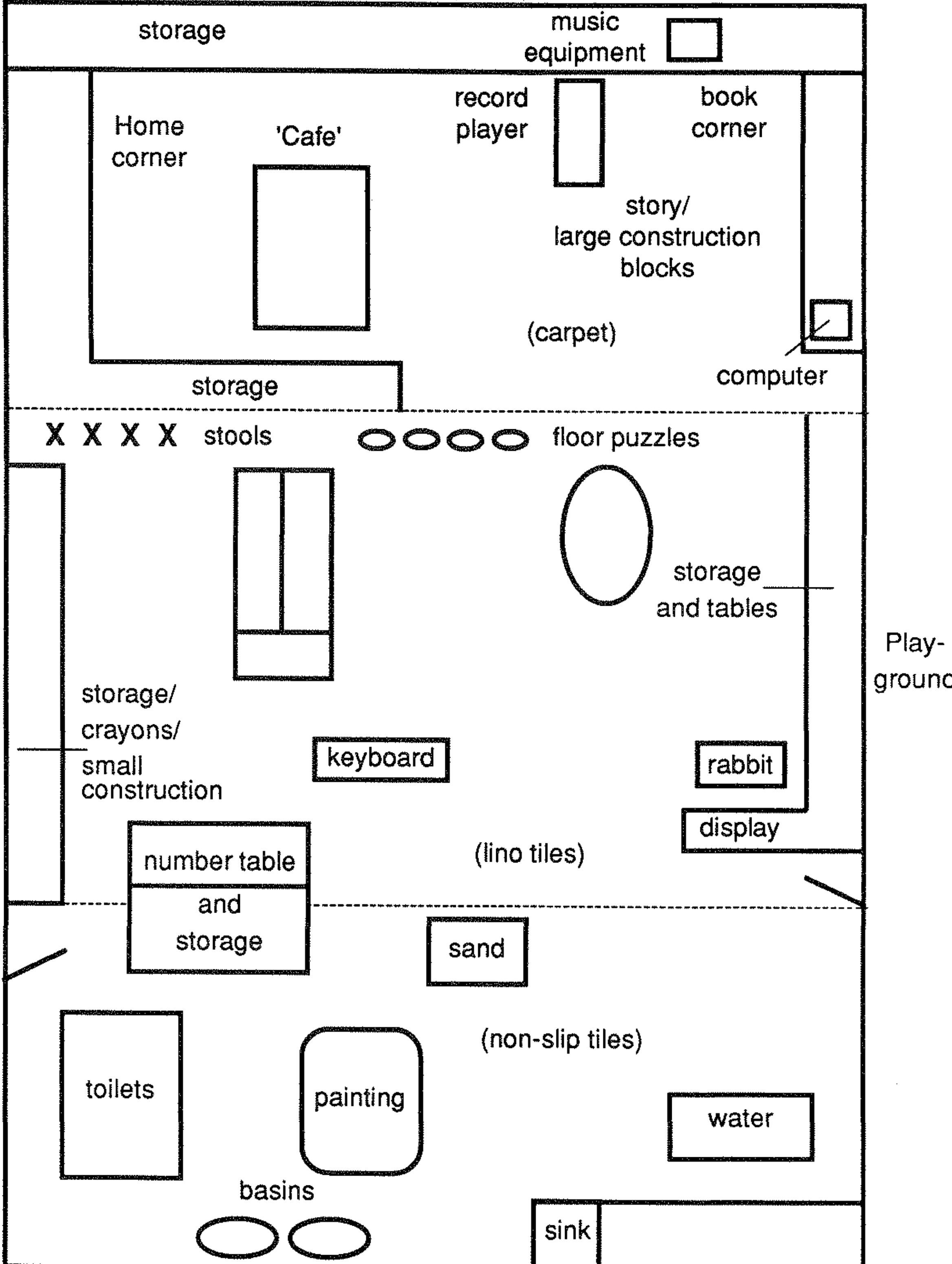
What can adults do to ensure that the outdoor provision is perceived to be as valuable as the indoor area?

Indoor area

> *'It is a fallacy that because they are small the youngest children need the least space. They need the **most** space available'* (school governor).

The design and use of the indoor area affects how adults and children work. If there is not enough space and conditions are cramped, only a limited range of equipment can be used at any one time. This is supported by HMCI (1993) who noted that in addition lack of space sometimes meant that 'access was restricted to other valuable learning activities, for example with sand and water'.

Plan 2 : A classroom for four year olds



Children were able to undertake activities in different areas of the classroom.

In the example in Plan 2 the four year olds had been given the largest room; they had enough space to 'make a mess'. Toilet facilities were close by. Classroom furniture was child-sized and although there were enough chairs for all the children to sit down at once they did not have their own special seat. The storage units were low, so they could be used for storing equipment at child height as well as creating recesses and activity areas in the classroom. Children had their own personal drawer clearly marked with their name. Other trays, boxes and so on were also clearly labelled so that children could access things themselves and return them to the same place when they had finished with them.

Given the choice, do children stand up or sit down to do an activity at table height? Is it necessary for every child to have a chair?

How can storage units be used to create recesses or activity areas in the classroom?

How should drawers be labelled so that children can use them?

In Plan 2, about one third of the floor surface was carpeted, one third had lino tiles and the rest had non-slip tiles. This enabled a range of activities to be provided all the time. In schools with fully carpeted or wooden floors, polythene had to be put down when the sand, water or any other 'messy' activity was provided in the classroom.

In our example, the tiled areas were used mainly for 'messy' activities involving glue, water, paint, natural materials and so on, and for physical activities such as small wheeled toys or climbing blocks. The carpeted area was used for large group times, small group activities such as floor toys, puzzles, number games and small world activities at floor level rather than at table height, as well as construction blocks. The groups of tables provided an area for language and number activities or teacher-directed small group work connected with the class themes. The home corner was changed periodically to fit into different themes. The book corner had comfortable seating and there were other areas for individual or small group activities like Lego, computers, cooking and music.

In this classroom children were able to combine different activities. For example, when the home corner was a 'cafe' adjacent to the musical equipment, the following observation was made :

> In the cafe the 'diners' wait patiently for their meal. The 'waiter' decides that some music would be appropriate and enlists the help of two other children. They select their instruments, a tambourine and a triangle and join the groups in the cafe where they sing and play their instruments.

Should the same classroom arrangement be adopted all year?

What would be your reaction to sharing an area with another class? What organisational difficulties might there be?

Which activity areas in the classroom are suitable for siting next to each other?

Other considerations

Where outdoor conditions were less than ideal, several teachers in our study managed to give children a choice of indoor or outdoor activities for just part of the day or for just one group of children at a time.

Indoor provision was not always as accommodating as that in Plan 2. More space was created in some schools by :

- modifying buildings to use corridor or classroom space and changing cupboard doors so that the space was more accessible;
- adapting cupboards to make alcoves for children to use;
- using corridors or removing doors to open up classrooms;
- reducing the number of tables and chairs in the room;
- arranging furniture flexibly, for example, by creating quiet areas by using removable screens or trolleys which could be pushed back to make a larger space for spontaneous physical activity; or by changing the position of the sand tray to offer two long sides rather than two short sides;
- team teaching (where there was more than one first year class, teachers worked together to arrange activities so that children could move freely between the classrooms).

Headteachers and their early years teams often had difficult decisions to make about appropriate space for the youngest children. For example, the largest room might be furthest from the toilet facilities and children often had to walk considerable distances down long corridors or negotiate heavy doors. The greatest difficulty was observed when children were housed in mobile classrooms and no water was available for washing paint-brushes or filling water trays. Ancillary helpers carried buckets of water to and fro to help in these situations. Other schools gave the youngest children more space by allocating two classes to adjoining rooms or by enabling them to use surplus classrooms, corridors or converted cloakrooms, or the dining room for 'messy' activities,

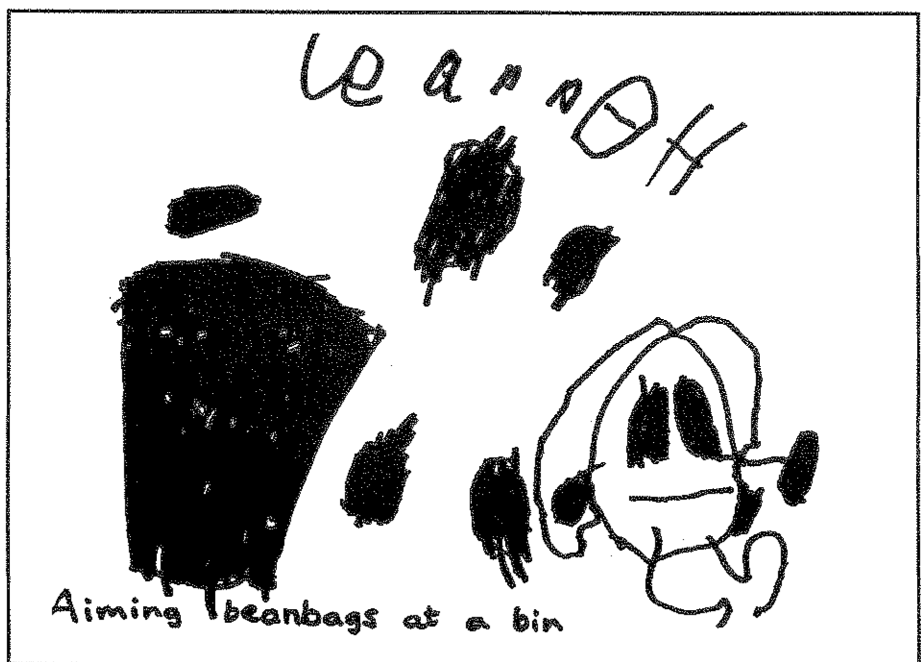
large construction blocks and wheeled toys. In many schools, particularly where there was an intake of more than one class, there were 'shared areas' where 'messy' activities like sand, water and paint could be permanently situated but shared with other classes.

All the schools in our study had furniture which was child-size and most schools had adequate trolleys, book-shelves, trays, boxes and so on for storing and displaying equipment. Curtains and paper screens were sometimes used to create recesses for quieter activities.

Placing certain activity areas next to each other enabled children to make links between them. For example, if the home corner was adjacent to the mark-making equipment, felt tips or pencils could be used to write shopping lists; Lego near the water tray enabled model boats to be tested, and books near the home corner provided opportunities for children to 'read to teddy' or to each other.

In conclusion

Improved provision is possible where staff have been given support by the headteacher and where enough adults are available to supervise the extra space. Additional funding has, in some cases, been available from the LEA and there may be more opportunities with LMS to make minor structural alterations. But ultimately the commitment of the teacher is a crucial factor in providing nursery-style space for four year olds in infant or primary classes.



Aiming beanbags at a bin

ORGANISING MATERIALS

There is a vast range of items to choose from in providing equipment and materials for the four year old in infant or primary classes. The choices should be left to individual schools and teachers, but the decisions made should offer children the opportunity to experience a range of equipment and a variety of materials. There should be sufficient good quality equipment and materials which are accessible to the children. This chapter is about how Ben's teacher tried to provide this.

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Ben's teacher set up different equipment and materials in resource areas. These were:

Natural materials

Ben's teacher provided natural materials which sometimes included clay but were most usually sand and water and a variety of equipment to use with them.

◆ Sand

She provided sand, both wet and dry, in containers of various sizes and shapes. Throughout the year she varied the texture and colour of the sand and provided different equipment to use with it; for example, sieves and colanders, buckets and spades, rakes and combs, cars or small world toys. When she felt a new stimulus was required she replaced the sand with salt, rice, leaves or peat.

◆ Water

Ben's teacher provided water in trays of different shapes, sizes and depths. The equipment guided the kind of activities she expected to take place. For example, the baby bath with supporting materials like empty shampoo bottles, talcum powder, towels, sponges and so on encouraged doll-bathing; assorted buckets, cups and beakers with and without holes, and a range of objects that would float or sink developed maths and science concepts, while watering cans in the water tray outside prompted watering plants or washing windows. Sometimes to provide variety, she coloured the water and added bubbles, or used cold tea or jelly instead of water.

In what ways are sand or water part of the planned activity in your classroom?

What other natural materials or equipment can be used to provide a stimulus when the sand or water activities are no longer a challenge?

How can the sand or water tray be equipped to explore maths or science concepts or develop language and imagination?

Creative materials

Ben's teacher provided materials to stimulate children's creative urges and offer opportunities for experimentation. Variety was provided by paper and card of different sizes, textures and colours. A variety of mark-makers such as brushes of different length, thickness, and shape were used with paint of different colours and textures. She often added paste, saw-dust or washing-up liquid to change the texture. Ben had the opportunity to use ready-mixed paints as well as mix his own. Printing materials like corks, cotton reels, sponges, hair rollers and pipe cleaners supplemented the commercial printing blocks and provided Ben with a greater choice and range of activities.

Felt-tip pens, pencils, wax, crayons, charcoal, chalk and pastels were also available at different times to offer a choice of medium. Ben's teacher firmly believed that the need for thick or thin pencils was not age-related but served different purposes. She sometimes limited the colours available so that children could concentrate on the textures.

The materials available for collages varied considerably depending on what Ben's teacher, the children and the parents had been able to collect together. Items usually included boxes, cotton wool, material, ribbon, foam, lace, pasta and pulses, scraps of metal, leaves, grasses and seeds. The children also had a choice of methods of fixing things together using different types of adhesive, Sellotape, paper clips, split pins, staples, elastic bands or string.

At intervals throughout the year Ben's teacher provided alternative activities such as salt or soap blocks for carving, washable inks, clay, plaster of Paris, papier mache or needlecraft and woodwork equipment.

Which materials do you think should be available all the time?

Is it possible to find equipment that is safe and at the same time competent to do the job (for example, scissors that really cut)?

What learning opportunities are provided by children mixing their own paint?

When/how often should equipment or materials be changed or varied?

Construction equipment

The construction equipment, even though it was limited in quantity, was positioned where it could be used undisturbed and did not have to be packed away at the end of every session. Large and small construction blocks and sets were provided in areas where they could be used undisturbed.

◆ Large blocks and construction kits

In Ben's classroom there was only a limited amount of suitable space, so for part of the term Ben's class used the large wooden blocks while another class used interlocking kits for making models. Later in the term they exchanged equipment, so Ben and his friends were able to build working models.

For a short period during the year Ben's teacher borrowed a set of large soft blocks from the advisory team so that children could build dens and houses to crawl in or tall towers and bridges to wriggle under.

◆ Small construction equipment

Ben's teacher was aware that there were many different kinds of small construction kits like Lego, Constructo-straws, Duplo, Stickle bricks, Master-builder, Mobilo, Multi-link, Meccano and Playpax. She had selected several of these for different purposes and often used them for CDT, maths or science activities as well as a free choice option for the children.

Where can large equipment be left out so that children can improve on their designs rather than having to start again from scratch?

How can construction kits and blocks aid a broad balanced curriculum? For which areas of the curriculum are they most suitable?

Does insufficient equipment provide a challenge for children or just create frustration?

Domestic and role-play

The 'home corner' in Ben's classroom was usually equipped with cooker, sink, washing machine, fridge, table and chairs. There were brooms, irons, a washing line with pegs, a range of cooking utensils, tea-sets and cutlery. Sometimes the home corner resembled a kitchen; at other times it was a lounge area with T.V., telephone, books and magazines. Dolls representing a multicultural society were always available.

Sometimes when Ben's teacher felt that the activities needed extending she re-equipped the area so that it resembled a dentist's, an optician's, a hospital or some kind of specialist shop. This was often linked with the current theme. Dressing-up clothes and appropriate real items helped create different activities in the 'home corner'.

How can provision in the home corner encourage a multicultural approach?

Do the boys spend as much time in the home corner as the girls? Could the home corner be made more attractive for the boys?

How could the home corner be adapted to represent a jungle, a fire station or a garden centre? What other situations could it be transformed into? What purposes might these serve?

How far can children be involved in decisions about changes to the home corner and other areas?

What literacy experiences could these areas provide?

Books

Ben's teacher carefully selected the books she offered to the children so that they reflected positive images of today's society. There were published books of fiction and non-fiction as well as books made by teacher and children. The whole area was arranged with carpeting and cushions so that it could be used by individuals or for small group discussions with adults. Sometimes, to provide variety and interest, Ben's teacher used a tape recorder and taped stories for the children to listen to. From time to time, she found it necessary to check that the tape recorder was still working and that children knew how to use it.

If commercial reading schemes are used, should they be part of the book corner?

In what other areas of the classroom can children be encouraged to 'read'?

How could the library service be used to extend the range and variety of books offered?

Table-top equipment

There was a great variety of jig-saw puzzles, small world toys and small construction sets that could be used at table-top level as well as language and number games. Ben's teacher often changed the activities on the tables during the day; for example, jig-saws in the morning might be replaced by a number game in the afternoon. Ben could also get out different table-top equipment if he wanted to. Sometimes there was a specific focus for the activities available on the tables. For example, the teacher had made a set of parcels for a sorting activity: small cartons of various sizes had been wrapped in four different colours of paper, and the children were asked to sort them by their wrappers and by their sizes.

How often should table-top activities be changed? How can children be enabled to make their own selection?

Should such activities always be available at table height? Do they fulfil different needs if they are provided on the floor?

Do you think table-top activities are more valuable than outdoor or floor activities?

What skills are being developed by the use of table-top equipment?

Equipment for 'special interest'

Ben's teacher often had an 'interest' table which related to the theme. Sometimes this was a collection of items such as shiny things or objects of a particular colour. At other times it would include science equipment like magnets, magnifying glasses, pulleys or batteries and bulbs.

Should children be expected to use special interest equipment without any help? Is it purely for display purposes?

Who should decide what 'interest' it is going to be?

Who could provide the items to be used?

Musical instruments

It was fortunate for Ben that his teacher had musical instruments available and accessible. Teachers in other schools often had to share equipment with other classes or book it because it was stored centrally (sometimes haphazardly on a window sill). Ben's class had frequent opportunities for singing in large groups, and the children made their own shakers and other percussion instruments to supplement the stock of manufactured tuned and untuned instruments.

In what ways can music provision be improved in your school?

How can quiet areas be provided in a classroom where musical instruments are available to children all the time?

Do children have the opportunity to look at music books?

Outdoor equipment

Ben's teacher provided a range of outdoor equipment for children to use. This included barrels, boxes, wheeled toys and climbing frames as well as bean bags, balls, ropes and ladders. In fine weather she put the sand, water and painting easels outside.

What, if anything, prevents you from using the outdoor area for activities more usually provided indoors?

What roles do adults play in outdoor activities?

Caring for equipment

In Ben's class, resource areas were equipped with good quality materials which were sufficient for the whole group to use and which were clean and attractively presented. Ben was able to service his own activities and take responsibility for getting things out and returning them to their rightful place. For example:

> At the beginning of an art and craft activity Ben and a group of his friends put on aprons and carefully covered the table with newspaper. They chose their materials to do their 'production' which was put on a drying rack on completion. The children then wiped the table-top and washed their own paint-brushes and glue-sticks in the low level sinks. They helped each other remove their aprons and moved on to their next activity. Ben found a stray top from a felt tip pen. He noticed that it was blue and matched it to a blue pen without a lid.

With limited funds is it better to provide quality or quantity? How do we define 'quality'?

How can materials be stored so that children can easily see what is on offer and make their choices?

How can 'tidying up' time be a learning experience rather than a chore?

Building up a stock

The areas of provision offered by Ben's teacher varied over a period of time. For example, provision for activities changed between the morning and afternoon sessions, and some equipment was only available for part of the week or term. It had taken time to build up equipment and materials and it was important that they were strongly made and durable. This meant that items were often expensive. Funding was usually through the LEA or capitation but Ben's teacher extended provision by making specific items herself. She was keen to find other ways of improving resources for her class.

How can funding be found for large, and often costly, nursery style equipment for four year olds in infant classes?

Who decides what equipment and materials are needed for four year olds in your school?

How could LEA bulk purchasing schemes or resource banks help?

Further suggestions

Most schools in our study provided resource areas similar to those described above, although musical and outdoor provision was rather more limited. Schools enhanced their provision in various ways. For example by:

* providing a limited amount of quality materials rather than a large quantity of bits and pieces;
* supplementing materials like scrap paper, card, off-cuts of wood, oddments of wool and fabric with contributions from teachers or parents;
* using real items to develop a theme; for example wigs, hair-dryers, empty shampoo bottles and so on for a hairdresser's, and real kettles and irons (not plugged into the mains!) and empty household containers in the home corner;
* pooling and sharing equipment between classes so that there was sufficient for a group of children to use for at least part of the day or week;
* using specialist equipment organised by curriculum coordinators;
* using LEA funding to buy top quality equipment;
* involving other agencies and businesses who might have useful products or materials surplus to requirements: for example, computer print-out, boxes, card off-cuts and packaging of various kinds for collages.

In conclusion

In schools in our study funding was a cause for concern. Although some LEAs had provided extra money for four year olds, LMS was likely to bring about changes. Some three years later, HMCI (1993) also noted that heads were pointing out that 'LMS had made them and their staff more cost-conscious. In many cases LMS had enabled improvements to be made to reception-class provision.' Fours are not always included in capitation allowances and teachers do not always have the time or skill to make their own materials. It is important that governors, who now hold the purse strings, understand the needs of the youngest children so that they can make suitable provision for them.

Appropriate provision and an understanding of young children's needs are starting points from which appropriate practice can develop.

THINKING ABOUT THE CURRICULUM

There was general agreement between our interviewees that a broad balanced curriculum should be provided for young children. There was, however, little unanimity on how such a curriculum should be articulated beyond the fact that it must cover certain areas and relate to the National Curriculum. Since this study was completed, others (Rumbold 1990, HMCI 1993, National Commission 1993, Dearing 1993 and Ball 1994) have reinforced the need for a broad, balanced curriculum to be provided for this age group.

In 'Starting with Quality' (1990) 'areas of learning experience' are identified and teachers are warned against succumbing to pressures which might lead them to over-concentrate on 'formal teaching and upon attainment of a specific set of targets'. It continues by emphasizing the importance of play and the conditions which play must fulfil for its potential to be realized. HMCI (1993) reminds us that high-quality provision and good standards of work are attributed to 'a rich and varied but manageable programme of work...' Similarly, 'reception teachers recognized the need to keep the National Curriculum in mind when planning' and 'most teachers...found the statutory orders and aspects of non-statutory guidance a valuable backcloth to their work.'

At the time of writing there is no way of knowing what effects another, albeit slimmed down, version of the National Curriculum will have on these teachers. However, our interviewees recognized that subject areas should be integrated and a balance of activities should be provided. Activity areas should be clearly defined, include the wider environment beyond the classroom and provide experiences which challenge and extend children's learning. They should be relevant and meaningful for the individual child and provide opportunities for children to talk about what they are doing while they are doing it. This chapter is about some of the curricular activities Ben encountered in his classroom.

Curriculum areas

Ben had designed a working model using Lego. With a group of his friends he organised races and discussed which model was the 'fastest' or the 'slowest'. His teacher introduced a sand timer so that the group could see how far the models could go in a set time. The distance covered was measured in hand spans. Slopes and ramps were constructed to see what would happen and the whole activity sequence was recorded in words and pictures.

Although Ben was not aware of the various subject areas, his teacher realised that this activity had included technology (designing and constructing models, slopes and ramps), science (seeing what happened when slopes and ramps were introduced), maths (timing the vehicles and measuring the distances covered), language (discussing and recording the activity) and art (illustrating the activity). She had a weekly forecast of activities organised under such headings for planning purposes. All curriculum areas would be covered during the course of a term when the theme had been fully developed. She was still worried that national assessment at seven would tempt her to emphasise language and numeracy skills to the detriment of other curriculum areas.

Do all activities cover different areas of the curriculum?

In what way can activity areas provide for an integrated approach to the curriculum?

Who takes the initiative in planning the curriculum?
How important are teachers' plans for providing appropriate activities?

In what circumstances should teachers' plans be suspended?

Breadth and balance

Many different opportunities were available throughout the week which provided Ben with a balance between group and individual activity. During the week he listened to stories and joined in music-making with other children. He also made junk models and played board games under the teacher's guidance. With a small group of his friends he spent time in the home-corner and, with a special friend, he built an elaborate construction with the building blocks. On several occasions he wrote, painted, read or drew on his own.

Ben was still very young and his energy occurred in bursts throughout the day. His teacher tried to provide a range of activities which allowed for this. When Ben felt like moving around he was able to engage in dramatic play, outdoor activities or searching for mini-beasts but when he wanted to be calm he could concentrate on computer games, develop activities in the water and sand, or 'read'. A range of activities enabled him to be noisy or quiet. Some activities were always available, giving him a sense of security and familiarity. Changes in the daily pattern, and the introduction of new equipment or new ideas provided him with novelty and fresh stimulus.

Ben's teacher was careful about which activities were adjacent to each other and often arranged the construction area next to the home corner so that these activities could extend each other. Later in the term, because of the children's interest, she intended to use the home-corner differently by developing it into a garden centre. A cash till and real plants and packets of seeds would provide the stimulus for children to grow and 'sell' seedlings. Different mathematical and scientific activities were planned, such as plant care and propagation, and weighing soil and measuring the amount of water needed. Charts would record growth, stock and colour. Ben's teacher thought a florist section might develop where children could make and order bouquets, attach 'messages' to them and arrange for them to be delivered. The environment beyond the classroom could be used to grow plants outside or tend the school gardens, and the local park or allotments could be visited to look at plants growing there.

The teacher recognised that the activities she offered should meet the needs of individual children and frequently asked herself:

- is this activity relevant to a child of this age?
- is the activity meaningful to the individual child?

For example, before developing the idea of a florist delivering bouquets she needed to establish whether Ben knew what a bouquet was and whether he was aware that flowers were sometimes delivered to people by Interflora. She also needed to assure herself that the activity would provide Ben with the chance to practise and develop his newly acquired interest and ability to write short messages.

Which activities provide a balance between movement and calm?

Do all young children need to be quiet at some time during the day?

Which activity areas are good neighbours? Are there any areas which are incompatible?

How can you 'tune in' to what is meaningful and relevant for individual children in, for example, doing a puzzle or making a collage?

In what ways can the wider environment be used to enhance learning?

Talking and doing

Ben had been busy in the water tray and he went to the classroom sink to wash the bubbles out of a funnel. The tap was stiff and as he turned it full on the water suddenly gushed into the funnel, causing a fountain to shoot up into the air.

Surprised and excited by this miracle, Ben shouted to his teacher, 'Mrs B., Mrs B., come and have a look at this!' Unfortunately for Ben, the teacher was busy with a group at the other end of the room and could give no more than a cursory glance to his discovery.

Usually Ben was given ample opportunity throughout the week to talk about what he was doing as he was doing it. This helped him to increase his knowledge, understanding and skills and explore his own and other people's experiences. On this occasion his teacher had no ancillary help and one can only speculate as to what learning opportunities had been lost because no adult was around to share his excitement.

Ben's teacher tried to provide activities which gave children opportunities to interact with other children as well as with adults. Almost all the activities were sources of child to child talk. For example, in large group discussions children were encouraged to tell the others about their experiences and the things they had made or brought into school. In small group activities Ben and his friends were heard discussing the colours they were going to choose, the size of the paper they needed, which way up it should go, why the water in the water tray was bubbly, how they should control the water that was overflowing, whether more water was needed in the wet sand tray........ The list is endless.

But young children do not talk all the time so they need time to be quiet. Ben's teacher believed that it was the adult's responsibility to help adult-child interaction by:

- providing him with a suitable environment;
- giving him something to talk about;
- helping him to express himself in words;
- knowing when to support and extend his learning.

What kind of activities provide opportunities for children to progress at their own level?

What purpose does 'doing and talking about' an activity serve?

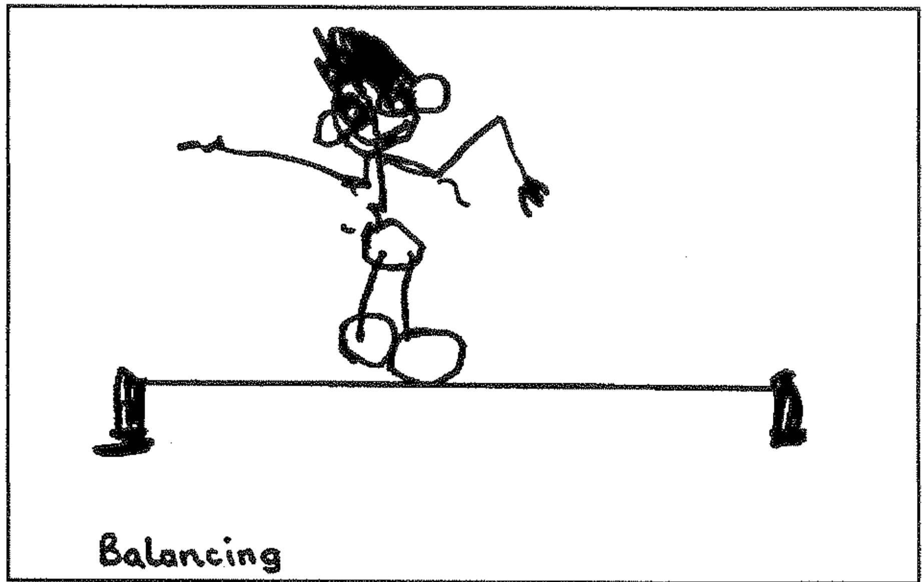
What kinds of activities promote dialogue and discussion? Can dialogue between children be as valuable as that between adults and children?

In conclusion

The activities are very much bound up with the curriculum and are in a sense the vehicle through which much of the curriculum is transmitted. They are closely related to provision and practice and consequently a great range and variety are available. They are likely to reflect the individual teacher's interests and expertise, the school's resources and the children's needs. There are so many variables that, when teachers are thinking about what the activities offer young children, it might be helpful to consider:

* whether the activities cover a broad and balanced curriculum;
* whether there is continuity with the National Curriculum;
* how the various subject areas can be integrated;
* whether there is a balance between different kinds of activity;
* how different activity areas are defined and linked;
* what use can be made of the wider environment;
* whether the activities offer challenge and extension;
* whether they meet the needs of individual children;
* whether they offer opportunities for talking as well as doing.

There are many different activities that can be provided and only a few have been described here. The importance of adequate resources, both human and material, cannot be over-estimated. Adults who are available to listen to children and extend their learning at the right moment are essential to an appropriate early years curriculum.



LOOKING AT PRACTICE

An appropriate teaching approach for four year olds in infant classes is based on good nursery practice. In 1991, our interviewees identified this as children having first-hand experiences, opportunities to explore materials, investigate, experiment and try things as well as a chance to practise, consolidate and extend their understanding.

More recently, both HMCI (1993) and Ball (1994) have stressed that high-quality provision requires 'an appropriate curriculum encouraging active learning and purposeful play' (Ball 1994). The best lessons identified by HMCI (1993) 'achieved a good balance between teacher direction and pupils' selection of activities' but there were concerns about 'the quality of learning through play'. Play presented a 'dismal picture' where, in many cases, it was only recreational or was undertaken after the 'work' was completed. However, in effective classrooms play was used 'positively to develop children's abilities across a wide range of activities'. This was often where play activities were 'planned into the programme with a sound educational purpose' rather than time-fillers. HMCI found an 'over-emphasis on sedentary tasks' which then left 'insufficient time for practical activity'. He also pointed out that 'premature use and over-dependence on worksheets...impoverished the pupils' experience of language' while 'unsuitably used maths schemes' resulted in 'little worthwhile learning'.

This chapter describes what happened in Ben's class.

First-hand experiences

◆ Explore, experiment, investigate

Ben had many opportunities to explore, experiment and investigate. For example, he and a friend were exploring the properties of sand. They had dry sand in a tray and decided that they needed some wet sand to make a model of a story they had heard. They added water to the sand to create 'ponds' and 'rivers' and fetched small-world figures of people and animals to complete the model. They used the scene to re-tell the story to other children who had come to watch. Later in the week they re-created a similar situation but made waves with the water and made up their own story, explaining to onlookers that 'this is the beach and the sea comes up and makes it all wet'.

There were also opportunities for trial and error in Ben's classroom. Ben had the freedom to experience failure without blame and therefore felt confident to 'have a go'. Making mistakes was part of the learning process and often led to positive experiences. For example, tall edifices were built out of bricks, magnets were tried out around the room and ramps and bridges which collapsed under the weight of toys provided the chance not just to experiment but also to solve problems.

The experiential classroom gave Ben opportunities to develop his observation and language skills. The classroom had attractive displays which included words and phrases to familiarise him with written language and provide him with opportunities to use it. For example:

> a small group of children had conducted an experiment to find out which sticking agents were most suitable for junk-modelling. Models were held together by different agents: blue glue, white glue, lumpy glue, masking tape and so on. They were assessed by the children for their strength and durability, discussed and displayed on a table. The statements about the children's findings were written down by the teacher and displayed alongside.

There were, of course, numerous other opportunities throughout the term to use children's comments and products to enhance classroom displays. Ben was encouraged to be observant by looking at the everyday world about him. He was capable of keen observation of detail and this often prompted discussions, drawings and 'writing'.

> In what way does your classroom provide opportunities for children to investigate what the equipment can do?
>
> What can children learn from their 'mistakes'?
>
> What should be included in displays in the school or classroom? Should some displays be set up purely to make the place look good?
>
> How far can children be given a sense of 'ownership' with regard to displays?

Process or product

Ben's teacher tried to emphasise the processes rather than the products of learning. For example, in construction activities she tried to ask 'Does this brick fit here?', 'How can I make this slope?' or 'Which barrel rolls down fastest?' rather than asking the children what they had made. Even in areas where more

traditionally there was a product at the end, the process was emphasised. For example, in a painting activity the nursery nurse was talking with a small group of children about the colours they had chosen, the size of brush they had used and what their paintings were about. When cards were being made the focus was on using scissors, selecting different materials, sticking them on a collage card and talking about what was happening. It was of little importance that Ben's card was so overloaded that it was impossible to make it stand up!

Ben's teacher realised that when there were no tangible end-results it was difficult to record his progress. However, she felt that by encouraging him to draw and write about his model, talk about it or even take photographs of it, she not only had a record of what had been done, but also showed that she valued the activity. She was concerned that the National Curriculum and assessment at seven might limit the curriculum that could be drawn out of children's experiences and she might be pressurised to use commercial schemes. She was aware that if she used commercially produced work schemes she would be spending a lot of time on 'task related organisation' like giving out tools, marking and explaining what the children had to do when they could not read it for themselves. She preferred to develop her own booklets and materials for children to use.

In what ways are the processes rather than the products of learning valued in your classroom?

What place, if any, do commercially produced schemes have in activities for four year olds?

Play

The teaching approach adopted by Ben's teacher had its roots in play because she believed that play is an experiential approach to teaching and learning and can form the basis for all other activities. She believed that play can help problem solving, generate social skills and reduce the stress of anticipating success and failure. For some children play had a compensatory role because it offered them a freedom and contact with resources that they did not have at home.

Children often accept or like the notion of 'work' and can give the appearance of settling down to more formal tasks without too much difficulty. Ben's teacher tried to avoid the work-play dichotomy by making deliberate attempts to accord all types of activity equal status. She made a point of spending some time in each activity area and recording non-tangible products through photography or tape-recorded conversations. Even though she never saw 'play' as the alternative to

'work' the children in her class had different ideas as the following conversation with the researcher showed.

> 'We've made a fire engine with Lego and now we're going to make a flying car'.
>
> (Have you been doing this all the morning?)
>
> 'No, we did our work first'.
>
> (What was that?)
>
> 'Well, we had to do our writing and finish our books'.
>
> (Are you working at the moment?)
>
> 'No, we're playing Lego'.
>
> (Do your teachers come and play?)
>
> 'No, teachers don't play. They just watch and help you with what you're doing with work'.

It was important for Ben's teacher to communicate the value of play to colleagues, governors and parents. To the uninitiated play could look chaotic and for it to be more than just an occupational activity it should be purposeful.

> What view of 'work' and 'play' do the children in your class have? Who and where does this view come from?
>
> In what ways can play be purposeful and developed throughout the year?
>
> How can the value of play be communicated to others?

Planning

Purposeful play entails careful planning. Although Ben may be playing freely and spontaneously, his teacher had to be aware of the potential of the activities. By involving the nursery nurse in the introduction and development of themes and activities she tried not only to meet Ben's needs but also to relate her plans to the overall scheme for the school.

A theme was often planned throughout the school with each class developing the details according to their own expertise, interests and ability. Ben's teacher fitted in with the overall plan but also produced a half-termly chart which took account of children's development, as well as a weekly forecast of activities covering all curriculum areas. She found that a realistic forecast could act as both a plan and a record of content covered.

Plans had to be flexible to allow for a range of needs and activities. For example, because the children in Ben's class were at different stages of development, the same writing task could serve to develop one child's understanding of language and another child's letter-forming skills.

Not only can the same activity serve a different purpose but different activities can be used to serve a similar purpose. For example, Ben used the computer for a matching activity because the technology appealed to him, whereas he was less interested in a matching activity at the table.

What other activities could serve different purposes for different children? Can you list several different tasks which would serve a similar purpose?

How can adults working with this age-group achieve their aims and intentions without inhibiting children's spontaneity?

Starting from where the child is

Building on what children can do rather than on what they cannot do was often the starting point for Ben's teacher. She tried to provide opportunities for them to proceed at their own level of competence. To do this she needed to know what stage each child had reached. She knew that it was important that Ben should not feel stressed by new situations but confident to 'have a try'. An important aspect of her job was therefore to intervene in an activity so that it was stimulating. Here is an example:

A small group of children are using magnifying glasses to examine the caterpillars which they found in the school garden.

Teacher: Aren't they growing! Let's see how long the caterpillars are. How long is this one?

A small black caterpillar is put on the table and Ben holds a ruler to it.

Ben: One on the ruler (i.e. one centimetre).

Another child: Let's measure another.

Teacher: How long is that one?

Children: One.

Teacher: Oh, where's the big caterpillar gone?

They search the plant for a larger green caterpillar. Eventually they find it and use a paintbrush to coax it gently on to a sheet of paper.

Teacher: Get your magnifying glass and see if you can see its head. Does it look different from the others?

Child:	It's going to put its tentacles out.
Teacher:	Has it got tentacles?
Child: (looking through magnifying glass):	No.
Ben:	Butterflies have tentacles.
Teacher:	Do they? Perhaps we'll read the story 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar' and see what happened to him.

Ben's teacher believed that an essential part of her teaching approach was concerned with the balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated activity. The children's interest in caterpillars developed into a project on the outdoor environment which lasted for several weeks.

> Are there situations when adult intervention is likely to be counter-productive?
>
> In what ways does your style of intervention or direction change throughout the year?
>
> During large group times, do you pick up on certain children's interests and reject others?

Choice

Even though Ben's teacher planned activities within a framework there was enough flexibility for Ben to have some control over his activity and to operate as an 'independent learner'. He was encouraged to make choices, both in selecting an activity and in making decisions about how to carry it out. Free choice helped to create much needed time for his teacher to observe and evaluate.

There is a delicate balance between giving children complete freedom and directing their choices. Ben's teacher used various strategies for getting activity sessions under way, sometimes guiding children to avoid overcrowding or encouraging them to try something new. Children could often make choices about where to carry out the activity, who to do it with, which materials to use and how to use them as well as which methods to adopt.

> How much choice should children have? Should they have a degree of choice in all their activities?
>
> Are there occasions when relinquishing control to the child makes you feel uncomfortable?

In other classrooms

Although the strategies adopted by different teachers varied in detail, their teaching approach was similar in principle to the approach described above.

For example, teachers in our study shared the belief that play:

- stimulates exploration and discovery;
- enables children to be involved in organisation and decision-making;
- facilitates the development of a range of skills and concepts;
- encourages children to practice and consolidate, choose and discriminate, concentrate and persevere;
- permits children to take risks and make 'mistakes';
- extends language and communication;
- offers a multi-disciplinary approach to the curriculum;
- provides opportunities to develop early reading and number skills;
- allows children to express their feelings.

There were different styles of intervention in children's play and our observations showed that adults intervened ostensibly to:

- help with difficult tasks;
- check and extend understanding;
- stimulate observation;
- encourage the development of particular skills;
- stimulate reasoning, hypothesising and problem-solving.

Once an activity had been chosen teachers handed over a certain amount of responsibility to the children for carrying it out. However, teachers tended to exercise a degree of control through:

- limiting the range of materials and equipment to be used;
- prescribing ways in which an activity was to be carried out;
- prescribing an end product.

Attention was also given to providing activities which could be completed individually, in pairs or spontaneous groups, small groups and large groups. Group work generally enabled teachers to give attention to more than one child at a time and offered social, emotional and intellectual benefits for the children

(also see **'Making Time'** p. 16). Most activities offered opportunities for individual, paired or group activity but the children clearly welcomed the flexibility the activities afforded to work together or alone as they wished.

Small group and paired activities provided opportunities for children to:

- develop a sense of self and self esteem;
- cooperate and share with others;
- feel empathy;
- extend language and communication skills;
- negotiate shared meanings.
- move beyond their own level of competence.

Most activity areas provided opportunities for collaboration between children, and real collaborative play was most likely to occur in groups of two or three, although there were examples of groups of eight or more where strong relationships had developed towards the end of the year.

Our observations of 15 of the youngest children in five schools showed that, given the opportunity, their favourite first choices were:

- the home corner for pretend play;
- large blocks for pretend play;
- small construction for model making;
- water and wet sand trays;
- painting.

Outdoor activities, where provided, were also a popular choice.

In conclusion

An appropriate teaching approach is implicit throughout the chapters of this book. Attention to the organisation of time and space, choices of materials and equipment, the roles and relationships of the adults working with under fives in infant classes all influence the kind of teaching approach that is adopted. When there are insufficient adults or inadequate resources the teachers find it far more difficult. A nursery style teaching approach is most genuinely obtained when there are appropriate resources and when there is a belief in and a commitment to working in this way.

CHECKING PROGRESS

There are important questions to be asked about evaluating the curriculum and monitoring children's progress. In this chapter Ben's experiences are used to try and show who was involved, what was monitored, how it was recorded and for what purpose the records were used.

****

When Ben started school his parents were asked to complete a form giving details about his name, address, emergency contact number and any major illness. They were also asked about his interests and abilities, for example: Does your child like looking at books, enjoy drawing, speak confidently, attempt to write?

As new entrants became accustomed to school and settled down, observations made by Ben's teacher played an important part. She monitored his likes and dislikes, noted what he chose to do and how his activities might be extended. It was not easy for her to find the time to reflect on his responses to the curriculum but she felt it was important to 'stand back and observe'. She did this by setting aside specific times to concentrate on individual children while adopting a mainly supervisory style with the rest of the class. She felt confident in her observations because she had recently attended INSET which included videos of children and opportunities to practise observation skills.

The nursery nurse working in Ben's class also contributed to monitoring Ben's progress. She often discussed Ben's activities and interests with his teacher and together they completed a profile of him.

Ben's parents contributed by noting on his 'book card' the books he had found interesting and which had promoted discussions. In school, Ben marked off the activities he had completed during the week on an 'activities chart' drawn by his teacher (see Example 1).

Towards the end of the year his parents received a brief 'profile' from his teacher with comments on his progress in the various curriculum areas. The following week they were invited into his classroom during the day so that he could share his work with them. By looking at his early and later work, and the photographs and displays on the wall, they were able to see clearly the activities he had undertaken and the progress he had made during the year. While the class teacher talked to individual parents with their children in the staff room, the headteacher and nursery nurse were on hand in the classroom to supervise the

Example 1 Ben's activity sheet in his first term at school.

Area	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
wet					
house					
blocks					
music					
quiet etc.					

children and answer any questions parents might have. When Ben had finished showing his parents his work he took them to the relative peace and quiet of the staff room where Ben, his parents and his teacher had a discussion. Ben's parents were amazed at how much he had remembered about things that he had completed months ago. The discussion focused on records kept by Ben, his teacher and other adults working with him as well as samples of his work.

In Ben's school records were used not only to assess his progress but also to aid curriculum planning and evaluation. Ben's headteacher was concerned about national assessment at seven and, because children came to school with a wide range of experiences and abilities, was anxious about whether she should establish records of each child's aptitudes, abilities and difficulties right from the start.

Why are checklists by themselves not a sufficient record of progress? What information about the child is useful evidence of their progress?

What part can parents play in monitoring children and recording their child's progress?

How far can the children themselves be involved in recording and evaluating their own progress?

What do you find is the best way to record information?

In what ways can monitoring procedures be part of an on-going process?

What account is taken of previous records and information from parents in your school?

Further Views

At the time of our study monitoring procedures were in a state of flux. Since then attention seems to have been focusing on baseline assessment and entry profiles. There appears to be little, if any, consensus about appropriate procedures (in spite of recent publications, such as those by Drummond 1993 and Bartholomew and Bruce 1993). It would seem to be the case that even where LEAs provide written guidance, it is often up to individual schools to devise their own procedures.

However, we found there were various forms of LEA support, for example:

* a system of LEA pupil record forms for children of five;
* screening 'mainly for diagnostic purposes' at seven in some LEAs and at five in others;
* piloting of early years profiles for use throughout the nursery and infant stages;
* early years INSET with a specific focus on monitoring, assessment and record-keeping for children under five;
* checklists with space for structured comments under a series of headings.

A variety of systems and procedures were found in schools. Many schools were in the process of reviewing their procedures. Most heads and teachers in the study firmly believed that:

* records should start at the beginning of a child's school career;
* records should share a common language so that misunderstandings between colleagues and with parents are kept to a minimum;
* pupil profiles and pupil record forms in specific curriculum areas are valuable.

Nursery nurses and sometimes other members of the team were involved in:

* discussions about individual children;
* written comments about pieces of children's work in record files;
* contributions to reading records.

We observed teachers evaluating the experiences and reflecting on their practice by:

* observing individual and groups of children;
* asking children questions;
* listening to groups of children talking together;
* looking at children's products;
* holding staff discussions and team meetings.

Information gathered in these ways was not always formally recorded but often stored mentally or in note form and incorporated into further curriculum

planning or records of individual children's progress.

Most teachers kept three kinds of records: records completed by the adult(s), records completed by or with the children and examples of children's work.

Records completed by the adult(s)

These included records of progress in a specific curriculum area (usually maths, English and science), reading records, checklists, all round profiles. Subject areas were usually broken down into skills and concepts. Records were often marked according to whether the concept had been introduced, partially understood or fully understood. Such records varied in detail from school to school, but were sometimes supplemented by LEA standardised record forms or occasionally by commercial checklists. A more flexible method of recording would be a 'diary' which allows interesting comments to be made about the children whenever appropriate.

Records completed by (or with) the children

These records usually consisted of sheets on which children planned and recorded their activity choices. Exceptionally in one school we visited, all the children had a large book which accompanied them through the primary stage. During their first week at school they drew a picture of themselves and 'wrote' their name. Additions were made termly or when significant progress had been demonstrated. When the children left the school they took the book with them.

Examples of children's work

These provided a useful means of conveying children's achievements to others. Although it is relatively easy to collect samples of work done on paper, it is difficult to store three dimensional creations and non-expendable materials or record abstract ideas. Photographs, tapes and transcripts are useful alternatives. Folders of children's work can be made, through which the child is encouraged to look and comment critically from time to time.

Once information has been collected and recorded it is important that appropriate use is made of it. For example, it can be used to:

* monitor effectiveness of curriculum provision;
* plan, develop and extend experience provided;
* pin-point individual children's strengths and weaknesses;
* ensure a range and balance of activities for each child;

* provide a base of information for early years professionals and parents;
* ensure continuity.

In conclusion

Monitoring and record-keeping should take account of the whole child: physical, social and emotional as well as cognitive aspects of development must be considered because all aspects are interrelated. Records should be based on observational evidence and not on testing.

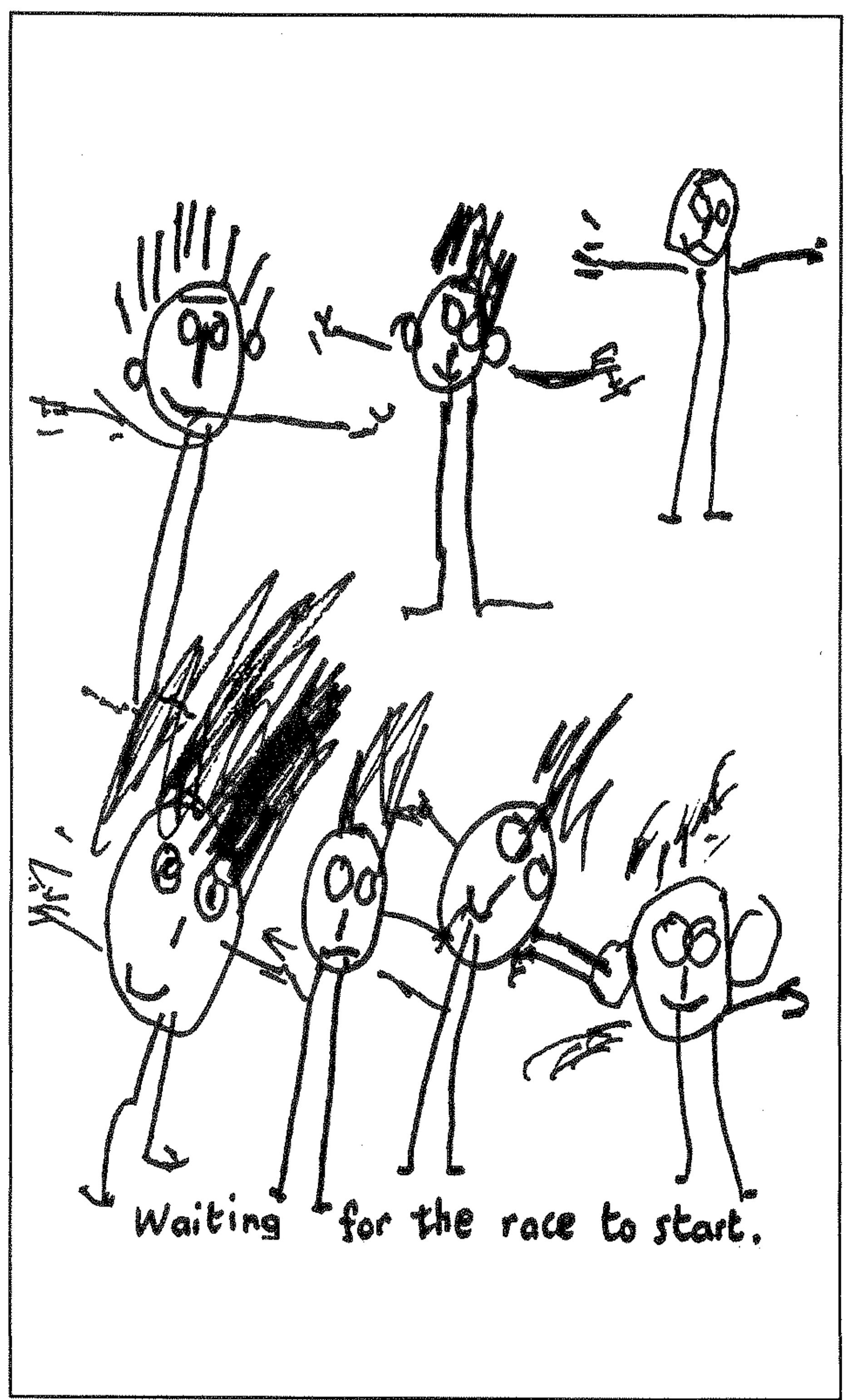
Monitoring should focus on

* each child's stage of development;
* each child's progress;
* curriculum evaluation.

Many of the ideas discussed in this chapter have been endorsed by HMCI (1993) who sees assessment of children's progress and attainment as 'an integral part of the programme of work'. Much of this was achieved by close observation of children's responses, but some schools also used diagnostic tests successfully. This builds on issues raised by the Rumbold Committee (1990) who identify 'a continuous cycle of planning, observing, recording, assessing and returning to planning in the light of intermediate stages', while Sylva writing in the *Start Right* report (1994) claims effective assessment and record-keeping systems are 'keys' to continuity between home and school and between phases.

Teachers are being asked to involve parents much more in the assessment of their child. HMCI (1993) notes that, of the schools inspected, most 'invest' a considerable amount of time and effort in assessing children. Many schools did not 'exploit the information gained from assessment to inform curriculum planning'. Teachers in one in 10 schools visited the child at home and completed an entry assessment with the parents. It was more usual for this information to be used for screening to identify children with special needs or learning difficulties.

In our study we found that teachers had always kept their own records for planning and evaluating purposes. Now they are being asked to be more systematic in their procedures. The process of monitoring, recording and evaluating should be regarded as an **aid** to teaching, not as a directive to teach towards.


Waiting for the race to start.

WORKING AS A TEAM

The roles and relationships of adults working with the youngest children focus on teamwork, cooperation and collaboration. It is important that teachers of the youngest children in the school do not feel isolated. They need the support and understanding of colleagues, headteachers and ancillary helpers.

Adults working with this age group are often held in low esteem. HMCI agrees and indicates that 'difficulties arose when the head undervalued the work of reception classes and did not appreciate the demands upon teachers'. He recognizes the improvement in practice when 'the reception class was the responsibility of a co-ordinator or deputy head...this gave status to the reception class and helped to realize the potential of early years' work. There can be pressure on staff from the outside world and from unsympathetic colleagues to get the children on to more formal skills. The team need to be articulate about their beliefs and to have shared aims so that they can defend their practice.

The headteacher, class teacher, ancillary helpers, parents and other adults involved all have a vital role to play in providing appropriate experiences for these children. HMCI (1993) reiterates the importance of the role of headteachers. They should be well informed and their commitment is 'critical' in developing quality early years provision. In addition, the reception-class teacher has a role of 'ambassador to parents' and Ball (1994) concludes that 'early years teachers require a double competence: the ability to interpret the complexities of (for example) science or language in a form accessible to young children, and the mastery of a theory of learning development which they can apply to the diversity of children in their care'.

Ben's headteacher's role

By giving the youngest children special concessions, a narrow path must be walked between treating the children appropriately and not isolating them as 'the baby class'. In Ben's school, the headteacher tried to ensure that the youngest classes were part of the whole school community by including them in corporate events. She tried to achieve this by involving the reception team in discussions and decision-making on issues concerning the whole school, inviting the children to contribute to displays and school projects, and introducing them gradually to school assemblies.

The headteacher was also aware that she was a vital source of support for Ben's teacher, especially in making practical arrangements for providing an appropriate

curriculum. She not only encouraged both the teacher and the nursery nurse to attend INSET, but also attempted to keep the best adult:child ratio possible by pressing for extra help in the form of ancillary and voluntary helpers.

Most of the support she hoped to offer was in terms of resources, but Ben's teacher wanted to remind her that the moral support of a 'pat on the back' or 'note of appreciation' was particularly welcome because it gave her the confidence to go ahead and try new things. She realised that she was fortunate compared with some colleagues working in other schools where the headteacher had little sympathy with the needs of younger pupils.

There were other issues that Ben's headteacher concerned herself with. The sensitive arrangements for his induction to school had her full support and she was keen that his parents were made aware of appropriate policy and practice. She and Ben's teacher were committed to similar principles, and this enabled her to defend what was going on rather than give in to fears of losing pupils to schools with a more formal approach. More recently, as national assessment gets underway, her concern is deepening. However, she believes that by listening to what parents have to say and ensuring that communication is a two-way process, she will overcome some of the difficulties in keeping open channels of communication between home and school. She realises that there can be huge differences between school and home attitudes, expectations and language.

In what ways is it possible for the head of your school to be involved in working with this age-group?

Is it possible to respond to parental pressure and the demands of national assessment, and at the same time support appropriate practice for four year olds in school?

How can lines of communication be kept open between parents and school in socially deprived or multicultural areas?

The class teacher's role

Ben's teacher is a specialist in early years education and the leader of a team. She was trained to work with the age-group and has attended INSET to keep up to date with developments in the rapidly changing world of education. She has to be expert in enabling suitable activities to be developed for this age-group and needs to communicate effectively with a range of people.

Her team comprised the full-time nursery nurse, a band of voluntary helpers and (indirectly) the headteacher. A student increased the team for a term. The whole team tried to meet every half term, with other team meetings between the nursery nurse and teacher every week. Team members were given the opportunity to suggest how they thought their own skills and interests could be used to the best advantage. Very occasionally, if there was a particular problem with an individual child, the dinner ladies were asked to contribute their observations. On another occasion the cleaners were given a chance to explain the difficulty of removing wax crayons from the classroom floor. Giving these people the opportunity to air their views enhanced working relationships in the common cause of providing for young children.

To help explain to visitors and parents what she and the children were trying to do, Ben's teacher wrote out the daily timetable and a description of the current theme on posters displayed outside the classroom door. Inside the classroom each activity area had an explanatory note nearby so that interested adults could see what the intentions were. Open days gave her a chance to answer questions and explain the different stages that children work through.

What opportunities are there in your school for letting people know what is happening in your classroom?

Do the parents who help in your classroom have an understanding of what is going on? How can parents who do not assist in the classroom be helped to understand what is happening?

Do you listen to and value the contributions of other team members?

Who else could/should be included in your team?

The nursery nurse's role

Ben's nursery nurse had been trained for two years and worked in his classroom full-time. She tended to complement the role of his teacher by drawing on her own particular strengths such as medical awareness and observational skills. She helped in planning and organising activities as well as providing special activities for individual children based on her own observations. She particularly enjoyed practical maths activities with children although, unlike some of her colleagues in other schools, she did not regularly lead a whole class activity.

At one stage early in the term she was concerned about Ben. She was not sure whether he was having difficulty in 'seeing' or 'naming' some colours. When

a tray of beads was spilt on the floor and she asked him to pick up all the yellow ones, he did this accurately with great concentration. Yet he was unable to tell her what colour the beads were. She was glad that she would be with his class for the rest of the year so that she could continue to share in his progress.

Are ancillary helpers able to offer the same support as nursery nurses?

In what ways are nursery nurses able to contribute to planning the curriculum?

How can nursery nurses make the best use of their skills and training in child development in the four year olds' classroom?

Voluntary helpers in Ben's classroom

There was a band of voluntary helpers in Ben's classroom, consisting mainly of parents but also including a pensioner.

Ben's teacher felt that in many ways it was enough for voluntary helpers just to be there because they not only increased the adult:child ratios but added to the atmosphere of warmth and informality in the classroom. She planned the use of their time if they were helping regularly. Regular helpers tended to read stories, assist with displays, wash paint pots, sharpen pencils, sort jigsaws and generally tidy up. One or two of this group were especially helpful with cooking and sewing activities or number games.

Another group of parents were unable to commit themselves on a regular basis because of family or work ties. Their time, therefore, could not be planned and was not always used in the most effective way. There had been suggestions from some of the parents that if creche facilities were provided they would be more able to help, but Ben's teacher did not feel that she had time for the extra organisation this needed.

Do all parents make good helpers?

Should parents help with maths or science activities in the classroom? Do they require 'training' to do so?

Are there any areas parents should not be involved with, for example, planning or evaluating the curriculum or discussing individual children?

Other adults in Ben's classroom

During the course of the year different adults visited Ben's classroom. These included colleagues, parents and governors as well as people from outside the school.

Colleagues did not always seem to understand why this group should be allocated extra staffing and resources and often complained that they wondered what the children had been doing for a year before they reached the next class. Ben's teacher, however, defended the apparent chaos and explained how activities actually led into the national curriculum and that the children were not just messing about. To help colleagues understand the youngest children, the headteacher suggested that, from time to time, they worked with the reception or nursery class. She also gave the reception team a chance to lead discussions at staff meetings. Most of the curriculum coordinators in the school included the under-fives in their overall scheme and, because they were not always conversant with early childhood development, relied on the reception team to suggest appropriate resources.

Not all the governors understood the needs of the youngest children in Ben's school. Keeping them informed helped to keep them supportive. The new demands of their role took up a great deal of time and created tension in relationships. Ben's teacher expected the governors to be interested and committed to early years education. She felt that if governors came into school regularly and participated in activities they would be more likely to take positive action to secure the best possible provision for this age group.

Do your colleagues think the children are 'just playing' or are they sympathetic to the activities provided?

Have you exchanged classes for an afternoon to give critical colleagues a taste of 'life at the bottom'?

Are you able to offer constructive comments to the curriculum coordinators so that they are aware of the resources needed for the youngest children?

In what ways can already overloaded governors be helped to appreciate the needs of four year olds?

Should all school policy documents begin with the youngest children?

Various approaches

Just as teams varied in our study, so did the ways in which they worked. For example, in very small schools the head, class teacher and nursery nurse tended to discuss everything as a team, while the largest schools might have six or more class teachers and nursery nurses led by an early years coordinator. Elsewhere, some reception teachers worked single-handedly or with very little support. Each team had to work within its own constraints and draw upon the unique combination of its particular skills and expertise.

Team leaders were expected to plan, discuss and evaluate the work of the class, share ideas, talk over any problems and difficulties, discuss the needs and progress of individual children and communicate information to the rest of the school.

Nursery nurses were deployed in a variety of ways, some being more involved in planning and record keeping than others. In some classes the nursery nurses regularly led whole class story time while the teacher cleared up, worked with small groups of children, or talked to parents. Others had been appointed for children with special educational needs and therefore had responsibility for an individual child, but often shared activities with other children. As well as their 'housekeeping' duties, we observed nursery nurses:

* supervising small groups of children on a regular basis;
* being responsible for individual children for pastoral care or settling in;
* identifying and maintaining children giving cause for concern;
* having frequent and informal contact with parents;
* undertaking home visits;
* participating in parents evenings and open days;
* supervising student nursery nurses;
* assisting in administrative tasks, for example, details for admission to school.

In conclusion

It must be emphasized that these children do not have to be in school yet and can easily be put off by inappropriate experiences. Everyone involved with the youngest children should have an understanding of early years education and be able to articulate and justify appropriate practice to others. As Ball (1994) points out, we all learn best from 'warm-demanders' and 'good practice requires a consistent and (ideally) shared understanding... in the home or group setting'. Four year olds, and the adults who work with them, are in a vulnerable position. Members of the team should support each other, with parents, teachers and governors understanding that they each have a valued and valuable contribution to make to the child's learning. However, early years teachers should take heart because HMCI (1993) comments on the quality of the relationships between the children, and between the adults and the children in reception classes, as being 'almost always good'.

ENROLLING SUPPORT

During our study, the view was frequently expressed by early years professionals that there seemed to be a lack of support for the under-fives from society at large and, because the early years tended to be held in low esteem, they failed to attract the necessary commitment and funding. Schools are especially in need of support if they are to make and sustain appropriate provision for under-fives in the infant classroom. Support for teachers with four year olds in their classes can be offered not only within the school through the headteacher and sympathetic colleagues (see 'Working as a Team'), but also from outside the school through the LEA, INSET and other agencies.

Since our study was completed, these sentiments may have remained the same. There have, however, been some positive developments, with the formation of groups such as the Early Childhood Education Forum, representing all adults working with young children. In some authorities, the Children Act has encouraged a closer linkage between health, care and education with improvements in the coordination of services offered for the under-fives and a greater willingness to incorporate the 'triangle of care' identified by Ball (1994).

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Ben's teacher found the LEA supportive because they were clear about their views and the position of the four year olds in the authority's plans. There were policy statements that stipulated the age at which children may be admitted and described special arrangements such as part-time admission and details of extra resourcing. Written guidelines were also provided to help teachers who were not experienced in working with this age group. The advisory team had produced the guidelines after consultation with those working with four year olds. Ben's teacher appreciated the support the advisory team had given her through setting up a resource bank and organising a range of early years INSET initiatives. Although there was some concern that the advisory role was changing, she hoped that support for provision and practice would continue.

Ben's teacher felt that the support offered by other schools was valuable and that nursery nurses should be given the opportunity to visit other schools too, so that they could see how their colleagues were deployed. She considered opportunities to visit other schools to be a powerful resource for staff development. The self-help group which had been established over the past two or three years afforded her the opportunity to meet informally with other early years teachers. To begin with, they met after school and discussed common concerns. Gradu-

ally the group extended and became more structured. A planned programme for headteachers, early years teachers, nursery nurses and ancillary helpers was established. Discussions engendered by this group supplemented the INSET programme and Ben's teacher found that attendance on various courses had given her greater confidence and stimulated new ideas.

Other agencies, such as speech therapists, health visitors and educational psychologists, were further sources of advice and specialist expertise. People who regularly visited the school, such as the doctor, nurse and educational psychologist, were invited to share the staff room so that informal relationships were more easily established.

What kind of support and guidance is available in your LEA?

In what ways could written guidance help you to provide suitably for the youngest children?

How can other schools and practitioners help your professional development?

In your view, what areas should be given more attention in initial training for early years teachers?

Whose responsibility is it to promote INSET? What forms of INSET are most effective for you?

What difficulties might prevent you from working more collaboratively with other agencies?

Alternative measures

◆ LEA Support

1. Policy

In our study we found that changes in age of admission to school were often a matter of political expediency rather than educational priority. However, some LEAs had policy statements which set out clear criteria for schools. The more detailed statements stipulated, for example, that a school could admit children provided that:

* the physical conditions and 'teaching programme' were appropriate;

* early admission did not create over-large classes;

* places were available for children of statutory age moving into the area during the school year;

* children younger than rising-five attended part-time;

* four year olds were not placed in vertically grouped classes with children aged six or seven (except where there was no alternative, such as in a small village school);

* a generous share of available ancillary help was allocated to classes containing four year olds;

* children in nursery classes had at least one complete year in the nursery before being moved to an infant class.

2. *Guidelines*

To help teachers who had four year olds in their classes, our interviewees recommended that there should be some kind of written guidance to help bridge the gap between extended nursery provision and an early introduction to infant education. However, relatively few LEAs gave guidelines. Among those that did, there was considerable agreement about appropriate provision for four year olds in infant classes, i.e. the need for special attention to staffing ratios, facilities, admission procedures and a practical activity-based curriculum. There were differences in the way the content of the curriculum was expressed. For some, content was firmly rooted in the nine areas of experience described in *The Curriculum from 5 to 16* (DES, 1985). Others interpreted the content in terms of their own list of developmental skills and experiences, or in terms of actual activities such as 'sand play' or 'water play'. Most documents paid some attention to record keeping and assessment. The variety of the documents, both in content and presentation, reflected the need for each LEA to produce guidance which suited its own policies and schools.

It is important that guidelines reach the people for whom they are intended. Staff in schools where early entry was a recent policy rather than a tradition were most likely to be receptive to written guidance. There was a danger that in well-established early entry classes teachers were tempted to say, 'What's so special about four year olds? We've always done it this way'.

◆ Advisory Teams

Where children are admitted early to school, LEA advisory services can play a vital role by supporting practice and providing in-service opportunities for those working with younger pupils. In our study, the kinds of support offered and their influence on practitioners were found to be very variable. Some advisory teams had made strenuous efforts on behalf of four year olds and their teachers. These included:

- organising a range of early years INSET initiatives;
- establishing an early childhood centre;
- setting up resource banks;
- convening working groups for a specific purpose, for example, to draft guidelines for teachers of young children or to produce booklets for guidance on specific topics;
- monitoring and evaluating a pilot scheme for early admission;
- liaising with LEA officers over the resourcing and implementation of policy;
- presenting papers to the Education Committee on, for example, the need for better provision for children admitted early to school;
- appointing additional support in the form of advisory teachers.

Professionals in our study suggested that the advisory service could take a more active role in publicising good practice, not only within their own LEA but to other authorities, so that ideas and expertise could be more widely shared.

The appointment of early years advisory teachers was recommended. In one LEA, for example:

> a team of six advisory teachers was appointed to support the introduction of early admission. Working closely with the primary advisers, the team provided short 'twilight' courses to raise awareness and boost confidence. Later courses addressed curriculum, teaching approach and assessment. The team visited teachers in their classrooms and arranged for them to watch other teachers in action. Originally seconded for one year, the scheme was so successful that the team was retained for a second year.

Unfortunately, this did not always happen and with the withdrawal of GEST funding and changes in LEA structures many advisory teams are no longer

available and schools are having to look elsewhere for support.

◆ Other Schools

The use of other schools as resource centres, examples of good practice or sources of mutual support was recommended to ease teachers' feelings of isolation. Those responsible for organising visits to other schools should attempt to match the needs of the individual teachers by ensuring that visiting staff are clear about what they are looking for and providing follow-up support with opportunities to discuss, try out and evaluate ideas.

◆ Training

Training, both initial and in-service, was an issue that interviewees had strong feelings about. They felt that initial training should pay particular attention to:

- understanding early childhood development;
- explaining good practice to others;
- leading a team;
- observing children and evaluating their progress.

The precise focus of INSET initiatives needs to be tailored to suit the users. Staff vary in their requirements, depending not only on their own experience and training but also on the policy and provision in their area. Responsibility for the INSET programme falls mainly on the advisory team, but the situation is not helped by a lack of early years specialists and the tendency for advisers now to have a more generalist role. Teacher training institutions play a valuable part in providing award-bearing courses in early years education which not only lead to further professional qualifications but can also enhance status, boost confidence and offer support. In our study, professionals and practitioners emphasised that courses should be accessible in time and place, involve headteachers and include nursery nurses.

Teachers who had participated in INSET activities described the benefits as follows:

- working with teachers from other schools (and sometimes from other LEAs) had given them a 'great boost' because it was

interesting to see how others worked and hear about their experiences; sharing problems and ideas was very valuable because 'it helps you to realise you are not as isolated as you feel';

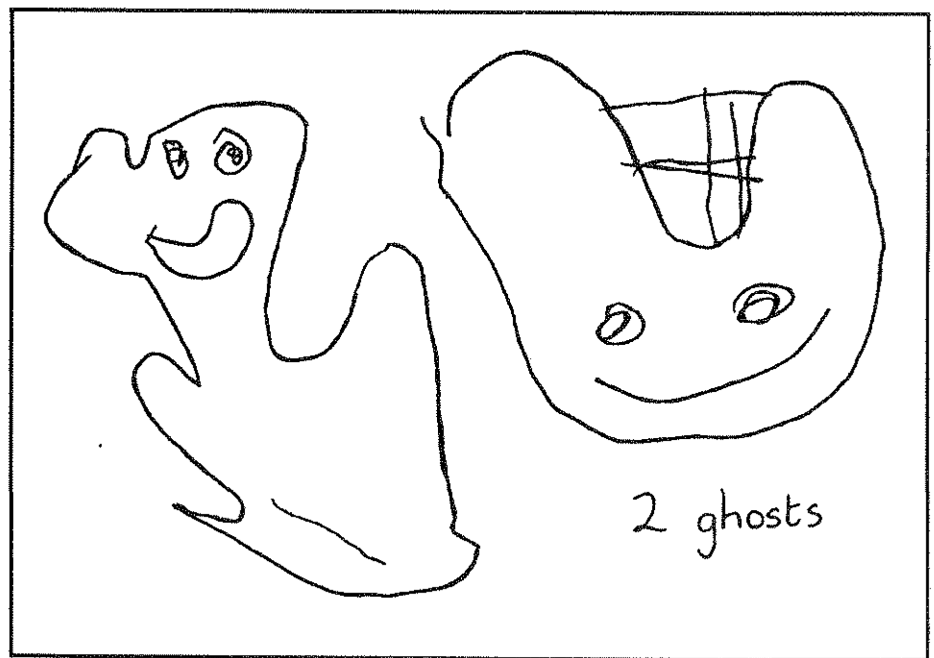
* their confidence in themselves had been strengthened when INSET reinforced some of the things they were already doing; it had also helped them to realise that in the course of their normal classroom practice they were already covering some aspects of the National Curriculum which had been worrying them;

* they were now more inclined to stand back and think about their own practice; INSET had also made them stop and look more carefully at what individual children were doing;

* they were more able to explain or defend their practice and articulate it to others (special mention was made of critical parents, and unsympathetic colleagues 'in the junior department');

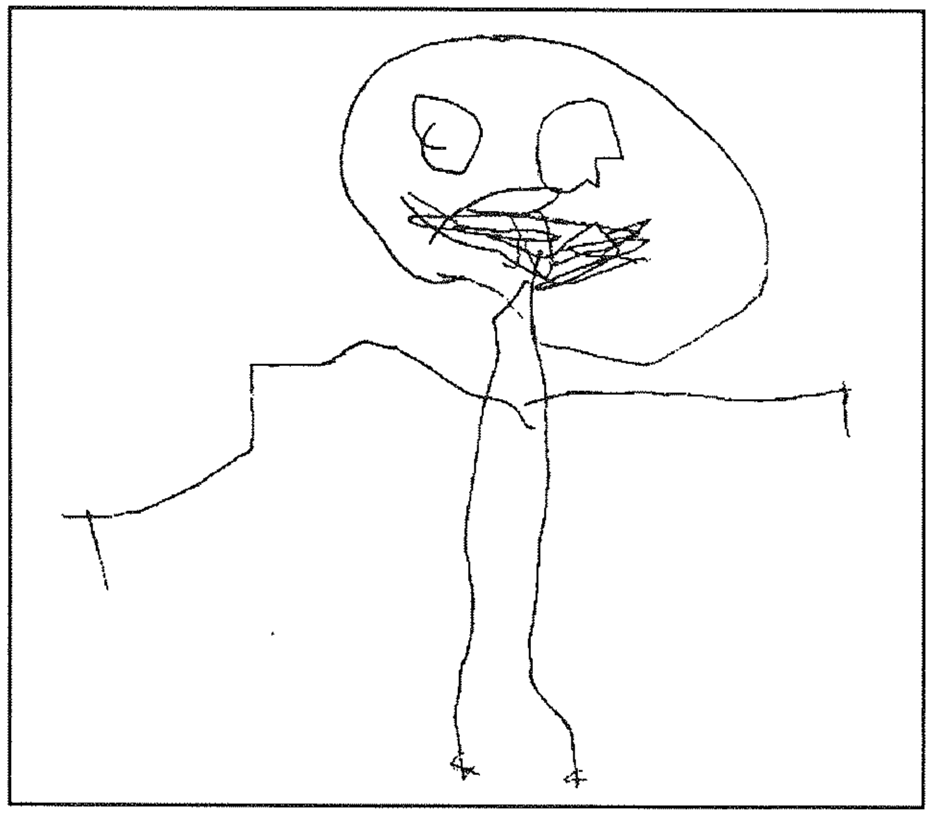
* their appetites had been whetted for further INSET courses devoted to studying issues in more detail or at a higher level;

* in future they were likely to take a more active role in INSET (for example, one member now chaired the support group in her own area).



In conclusion

If provision is to go some way towards being more appropriate for the youngest children, support from outside the school is essential. This includes the Education Committee who can demonstrate their support by allocating suitable funds and resources. Committee members and officers who are well-informed and understanding of the needs of these younger pupils are invaluable in giving early years educators a 'voice' and in helping to put a sound policy into practice.



A FINAL WORD

Since our study was completed, early admission has been caught between pressure for more places and financial cut-backs. Demands for more daytime provision for under-fives have persisted. The debate at all levels of involvement with young children continues, not only with the initiatives now included in this updated edition, but also with statements from the three main political parties all advocating the expansion of nursery education. At the time of writing, there has been much deliberation without accompanying action, and decisions often remain a dilemma for individual schools. They are the ones who are having to consider whether they can afford to admit children below the statutory age, whether they can find the staff and resources to enable appropriate provision to be offered to this age group.

Most of our interviewees believed that ideally four year olds should be in nursery rather than infant classes. Yet while the number of nursery places falls far short of demand and children continue to be admitted early to infant classes, every effort must be made to ensure that their needs are suitably catered for. This is a tremendously difficult task requiring a willingness on the part of everyone involved to make changes.

Interviewees said that large classes and insufficient space, time, equipment and trained help, as well as entrenched attitudes and a lack of self-confidence, were obstacles that had to be overcome in implementing changes. When changes were made, they tended to be in staffing arrangements, in the physical environment and in teaching approach.

Changes are needed at all levels: schools **cannot** be appropriate places for four year olds **unless** they are appropriately staffed and resourced; teachers cannot offer suitable experiences if the physical provision is unsuitable. On the other hand, no amount of resourcing is sufficient unless the adults involved are trained, experienced and committed to their task. Good practice must ultimately depend on the expertise and dedication of individuals. If changes are to be made and commitment sustained, it is essential that these individuals receive as much support as possible.

We hope that the ideas discussed in this book and the principles on which they are based will provide a framework for everyone wanting to improve provision for four year olds. In the end, arguments about the merits of nursery or infant schooling are less important than the quality of experiences being offered to the child.

*Wherever young children are educated, it is **quality** that matters.*

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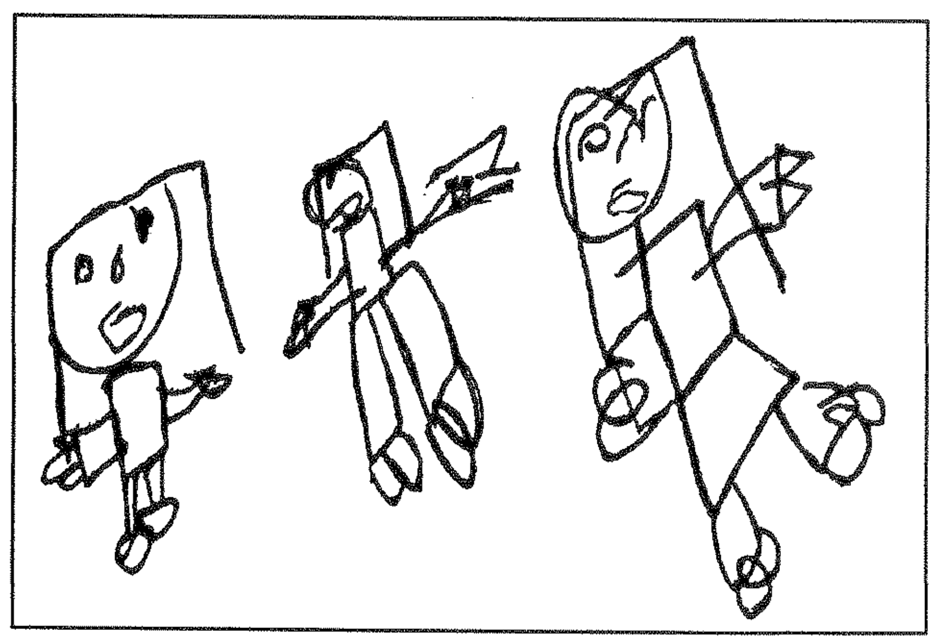

Four Year Olds in School: Quality Matters

Second Edition

In this the second edition of Four Year Olds in School: Quality Matters the authors develop the original text in the light of recent reports.

The practice of admitting younger children to school is becoming ever more widespread in this country. This book draws on the NFER research project 'The Educational Needs of Four Year Olds' carried out by the authors in 1988-1990 and reflects the findings of reports which have appeared between that time and summer 1994. It gives examples of the kind of provision which has been identified as being appropriate for this age group and describes the arrangements made by some schools for admitting four year olds to their reception classes. The reader is invited to consider suitable provision for children of this age and to reflect on practice in their own classroom, school and local education authority.

The book will appeal to infant and primary headteachers, governors, LEA advisers and INSET providers as well as early years co-ordinators, teachers and nursery nurses.

The authors had considerable teaching experience before becoming research officers at the NFER. Sandra Brown is currently a part-time lecturer with Anglia Polytechnic University teaching on initial teacher training, in-service and post-graduate courses. She is also a part-time field officer for the British Association of Early Childhood Education.

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