

THE EFFECTIVE PROVISION OF PRE-SCHOOL (EPPE) PROJECT

Background

The EPPE project undertaken by the University of London for the DfES on the effects of pre-school education for 3 and 4 year olds, began in 1997 and reported at the end of 2004.

The study set out to investigate the following main questions:

- What is the impact of the pre-school on young children's intellectual and social/behavioural development?
- Can the pre-school experience reduce social inequalities?
- Are some pre-schools more effective than others in promoting children's development?
- What are the characteristics of an effective pre-school setting?
- What is the impact of the home and childcare history (before aged 3) on children's intellectual and behavioural development?
- Do the effects of pre-school continue through Key Stage 1?

It did this by collecting a wide range of information on over 3,000 children, their parents, their home environments and the pre-school settings they attended. Settings (141) were drawn from a range of providers (local authority day nursery, integrated centres, playgroups, private day nurseries, maintained nursery schools and maintained nursery classes). A sample of 'home' children (who had no or minimal pre-school experience) was recruited to the study at entry to school for comparison with the pre-school group. In addition to investigating the effects of pre-school provision on young children's development, EPPE explored the characteristics of effective practice (and the pedagogy which underpin them) through twelve intensive case studies of settings with positive child outcomes.

The 5 key findings and the implications for early years provision in Herefordshire are set out below:

1. ATTENDANCE AT AN EARLY YEARS SETTING BENEFITS ALL CHILDREN.

- (i) From analysis of children's development during pre-school compared with 'home' children, EPPE found that pre-school attendance improves all children's cognitive development and aspects of social behaviour, such as independence, concentration, co-operation, conformity and relationships with other children (peer sociability). Moreover, individual settings vary in their effectiveness with some settings fostering better child outcomes than others.
- (ii) Children with no (or limited) pre-school experience (the 'home group') had poorer cognitive attainment, sociability and concentration when they start school. These differences show even when the study took account of differences between the pre-school and home groups in child, family and home environment characteristics.

- (iii) An early start at pre-school between 2 and 3 year olds was linked with better intellectual attainment and children having better relationships with other children (peer sociability) at age 3 years. These benefits continue when children start primary school. However, there was no evidence that full day attendance led to better development than half-day attendance.
- (iv) Pre-school can be effective intervention for the reduction of special educational needs (SEN), especially for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children. One third of the pre-school sample was considered 'at risk' of SEN at the start of the study. By the start of the primary school the proportion had reduced to one fifth.
- (v) Disadvantaged children are more likely to have adverse social profiles at age 3 and school entry. The increased risk of anti-social/worried behaviour can be reduced by high quality pre-school.
- (vi) The longitudinal follow up of EPPE of children confirms that pre-school continues to show a generally positive impact on developmental outcomes throughout Key Stage 1. Overall the analysis of Year 2 children suggests that the early cognitive boost given by pre-schools on subsequent reading and mathematics attainment has not "washed out" by the end of Key Stage 1, nor have 'home' children caught up.

Implications for Herefordshire

The EPPE report does stress the importance of early years provision and the beneficial effects both on behaviour and intellectual development for all children.

The number of known 4,3, 2,1 and <1 year olds in Herefordshire as at 31.08.04 was 1872, 1645, 1660, 1706 and 1736 respectively, a total of 8,619 children.

There are approximately 2, 400 places for 3 and 4 year olds in the 106 private and voluntary settings. There are a further 598 places in nursery classes, and 2120 places in reception classes in school. NEF was offered to 1404 3 year olds and 512 4 year olds in the Spring Term, 2005. There were also 1700 4 year olds in county primary schools in January, 2005. There are fewer places for 0-2 year olds with 37 settings offering a total of 428 places.

It is reassuring to note that there are places available for the majority of children in Herefordshire, and only 7 out of the 103 private and voluntary settings have received a 1-2 year outcome on their inspection. A part-time qualified teacher has been appointed to support these settings. It is of concern that there are vacancies in school nursery classes, which one would assume from the study would be where quality should be higher.

Resource allocations and budget setting do need to recognise the importance of these years in each child's development, and allocations should be beyond the minimum required to meet statutory duties, if the outcomes for children in Herefordshire are to be improved.

Work is needed to reduce any outstanding barriers to 3 and 4 year places in all parts of the County and in all settings. The effectiveness of early intervention should also be recognised, and the DfES target of having 1 Area SENCO for every 20 settings should be given higher priority. This would involve the appointment of 2 additional Area SENCOs.

2. SOME SETTINGS ARE MORE EFFECTIVE THAN OTHERS IN PROMOTING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

The study found that integrated centres (these are centres that fully combine education with care) and nursery schools tend to promote better intellectual outcomes for children.

Similarly integrated centres and nursery classes tend to provide better social development even after taking account of children's backgrounds and prior social behaviour.

Disadvantaged children do better in settings with a mixture of children from different social backgrounds rather than in settings containing largely disadvantaged groups. This has implications for the siting of the centres in areas of social disadvantage.

Implications for Herefordshire

There are no nursery schools in Herefordshire. There are nursery classes at 13 primary schools, 4 of which open on mornings only. There are no plans to provide nursery schools or further nursery classes, but, given the observations of the study, the question of providing a nursery school or further nursery classes should be debated.

A less radical approach would consider how the existing provision involving schools, private and voluntary settings could be improved through continued and enhanced support for the foundation stage curriculum, the development of care provision around the 13 nursery classes, and the introduction of support for the Birth to Three Matters Framework.

It is also critical that the implementation of the 9 Children's Centres in the county does create a good distribution of effective integrated centres throughout the county.

3. THE MOST EFFECTIVE CENTRES PROVIDING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES (BOTH SOCIAL/BEHAVIOURAL AND INTELLECTUAL) WERE ABLE TO DEMONSTRATE CONSISTENTLY HIGH QUALITY AND GOOD PRACTICE.

Information from observations to assess the quality of each setting, using standardised rating scales, showed significant links between higher quality and better child outcomes.

Children in pre-school centres of high quality show reduced anti-social and upset/worried behaviour by the time they get to school.

Good quality pre-school education can be found in all kinds of settings irrespective of type of provider. However, the EPPE data indicate that integrated centres and nursery school provision have the highest scores on pre-school quality, while playgroups, private day nurseries and local authority centres have lower scores.

The quality of the interactions between children and staff were particularly important; where staff showed warmth and were responsive to the individual needs of children, children showed better social behavioural outcomes.

Positive relationships were related to greater pre-reading progress and boys in particular showed greater progress in early number concepts if they attended high quality provision. Raising the quality of pre-school may help promote boys attainment levels and possibly reduce the gender gap.

Implications for Herefordshire

The drive to continual improvement in voluntary and private settings is behind the establishment of the Quality Assurance Scheme of the 103 settings within the County 22 have achieved the Bronze Award, and 38 are in the accreditation process.

Further support should be given to this work, with consideration being given to appointing an additional member of staff to support settings with quality assurance, and to allocating additional resources to overcome barriers settings may encounter in working towards the broader silver and gold awards. Within the QA scheme greater emphasis should be given to ensure that the interactions between children and staff are 'warm and responsive to the needs of the individual child' and nurture 'sustained shared thinking'.

It would also be hoped that the new inspection regime from Ofsted could give prominence to assessing the quality of adult/child interactions.

4. THERE IS HIGH CORRELATION BETWEEN THE QUALITY OF THE SETTING AND QUALIFICATIONS OF THE STAFF

The higher the qualification of staff, particularly the manager of the centre, the more progress children made, Level 4 qualification showed increased impact, and Level 5 an even more significant impact. Having qualified trained teachers working with children in pre-school settings (for a substantial proportion of time, and most importantly as the pedagogical leader) had the greatest impact on quality, and was linked specifically with better outcomes in pre-reading and social development.

Implication for Herefordshire

At present all nursery classes in schools have qualified teachers (equating to Level 6), 21 of the 103 private and voluntary settings have staff qualified to level 4 or 5. A further 11 have staff hoping to achieve that qualification in 2005, and 25 more by 2006.

This level of commitment from individuals and settings is impressive, and if all succeed it would represent significant progress in Herefordshire. However, there will undoubtedly be staff turnover, and the need to reach groups who have shown little interest remains.

The strategy for the development of children's centres should consider the appointment at each centre of a full time qualified teacher to support the work of that centre, and surrounding voluntary and private settings. Consideration should be given to how best to support staff in voluntary and private settings to achieve level 4 and level 5 qualifications to ensure that all settings have staff with higher level qualifications.

5. THE FOLLOWING FIVE ASPECTS WERE PARTICULARLY SIGNIFICANT IN DETERMINING THE QUALITY OF OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AGED 3 TO 5.

- **Quality of adult child interactions**
- **Staff knowledge and understanding of the curriculum**
- **Knowledge of how young children learn**
- **Adults skill in supporting children in resolving conflicts**

- **Helping parents to support children's learning in the home.**
 - i. It was found that the most effective settings encourage 'sustained shared thinking' which was most likely to occur when children were interacting 1:1 with an adult or with a single peer partner. It would appear that periods of 'sustained shared thinking' are a necessary pre-requisite for the most effective early years practice.

Sustained shared thinking is where two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding.
 - ii. Pre-school workers' knowledge of the particular curriculum area that is being addressed is vital. The study shows that early years staff may need support in developing their knowledge of curriculum content and ways of introducing it to children especially in the context of the Stepping Stones and the Early Learning Goals.
 - iii. EPPE concludes that in the most effective centres, 'play' environments were used to provide the basis of instructive learning. The most effective pedagogy is both 'teaching' and providing freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities. It may be that extending child-initiated play, coupled with the provision of teacher-initiated group work, improves opportunities for learning. Qualified staff in the most effective settings provided children with more experience of curriculum related activities (especially language and mathematics) and they encouraged children to engage in activities with higher intellectual challenges. While the study found that the most highly qualified staff also provided the most direct teaching, it also found that they were the most effective in their interactions with the children, using the most sustained shared thinking.
 - iv. The most effective settings adopted discipline/behaviour policies in which staff supported children in being assertive, while simultaneously rationalising and talking through their conflicts.
 - v. The most effective settings shared child-related information between parents and staff, and parents were often involved in decision making about their child's learning programme. What parents do with their children is more important than who parents are. Young mothers, with few qualifications can improve their children's progress, and given them a better start at school by engaging in those activities at home that foster children's learning.

Implications for Herefordshire

The proposals to provide qualified teacher support in the 9 children's centres increased qualified teacher support to all settings, additional support for Q.A. and for training, especially that leading to level 4 and 5 reflects these conclusions.

Good practice guidance on engaging parents should be produced which identifies successful strategies adopted by Sure Start, schools, and private and voluntary settings in the county.

Consideration should be given to the means to ensure that the quality of child/staff interactions in all settings including reception classes in schools is of the highest standard.

Conclusion

The EPPE study is one of the most thorough systematic longitudinal studies undertaken and provides objective evidence of the benefits of pre-school experiences. Its conclusions that all children benefit both in intellectual and social development, that the benefit is lasting into Primary School, and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with SEN gain from pre-school have laid the basis for Government policies.

The EPPE study findings mirror previous studies across the world.

To ensure better outcomes for the children in Herefordshire, the suggested action listed in this report is recommended.