

Practitioners' Experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage

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This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education

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Executive summary

This research report describes the context, design, conduct and findings of an inquiry into practitioners' experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The study posed three broad questions within its overarching theme of describing practitioners' experiences of the EYFS:

- How does the EYFS influence day-to-day practice with children and families?
- How, if at all, has the EYFS supported improvements in the care and education offered by practitioners?
- What, if any obstacles and difficulties do practitioners face in the effective use of the EYFS?

These questions in turn generated another fifteen more detailed topics for discussion by the focus groups, while the analysis of focus group data prompted a new set of nine interview questions (see Appendices 1 and 2).

The principal findings were as follows:

1. **The EYFS is a major influence on practice:** The EYFS framework received high levels of support from all practitioner groups, and there is a broad consensus that it influences many aspects of daily practice, and improves the quality of experience for young children and their parents. However, a small number of respondents (from childminder and playworker groups) argue that the strong emphasis on learning and assessment which they find in the framework is contrary to the ethos of their work.
2. **The EYFS is a play-based and child-led framework:** All practitioner groups welcome the play-based and child-led nature of the guidance and view it as a validation of early years principles, or as a return to early years approaches after a period in which pre-school was conceptualised as preparation for school: many participants are relieved that the period from birth to five is now recognised as an important phase of development *per se*.

3. **The EYFS areas of learning are generally appropriate although not all goals are felt to be well-judged:** All practitioner groups report that the areas of learning are appropriate and closely matched the interests of the children in their settings. Many participants described how the guidance, including the outdoor provision, enabled children from different groups to succeed. However, there is some disagreement over the appropriateness of the later statements and goals (in the EYFSP), and criticism of the levels required by the Communication, Language and Literacy, and Problem-Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy goals. For reception teachers, assessing children against these statements in preparation for year one is often a cause of tension and frustration.

4. **The 'Development Matters' statements are criticised by some practitioners:** The developmental guidance (Development Matters) within the EYFS was not liked universally by practitioners. Although some practitioners felt it was helpful to be able to assess children against the descriptors and identify their developmental level, a greater number expressed disagreement with the decision to attach age-phases, and photographs, to the descriptors, feeling that the 'labelling' of young children is contrary to the principle of the Unique Child which is for many the most important theme of the EYFS.

5. **Assessment practices within the EYFS are variable:** Practitioners report that achieving continuity in the assessment of children is challenging. Children are evaluated differently by different practitioners, with the main differences located between private and maintained providers, and between pre-school and school practitioners. The effects of assessment are felt to change from positive to negative, and from formative to summative, as children move closer to year one, and are assessed against criteria associated with the school curriculum.

6. **The EYFS has improved continuity of provision although some transition points remain problematic:** Practitioners broadly welcome improvements to continuity in the guidance, care requirements and areas of learning throughout the five years of the early years phase, although certain transition points remain problematic. For many children, the move from nursery into reception class and from reception to year one, involve significantly different experiences of ratios, routines, environments and pedagogy.

7. **The EYFS promotes partnership with parents but parents need more information:** Practitioners welcome the commitment to working in close partnership with parents in all aspects of children's development. However, they also report that in order to work collaboratively most parents require more information on, and a deeper understanding of, the EYFS. Parents' engagement with key workers in assessing their children's learning has been very successful in some settings, but not universally.

8. **Practitioners welcome the overall design, content and format of the EYFS but describe significant variations in training and confidence:** Practitioners' responses to the documentation and training which accompanied the introduction of the EYFS are very mixed, with some groups receiving excellent and ongoing training, and others left confused and dispirited by the guidance they received. The written framework, posters, cards and CD-Rom were all described very positively although they had initially seemed complex to some groups. Overall, practitioners report that the EYFS has contributed to the professionalism of the workforce. Many practitioners were enthusiastic about the ways in which they had adapted their planning, provision and assessment to meet the EYFS requirements, and are insistent that they wish the framework to continue with as little revision as possible.

Design and methods

The study took the form of a small-scale exploratory survey undertaken in two phases in six regions of England. Unlike other recent inquiries into the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage, it was qualitative rather than quantitative, offering practitioners the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences of applying the new framework in their daily work with children and families. The first phase consisted of focus group discussions with seven different practitioner groups in each region. The second phase, undertaken after the preliminary analysis of transcripts, consisted of individual interviews with 42 practitioners. The majority of the individual interviews were conducted with volunteers from the focus groups, who were invited to expand on and clarify the issues discussed in the groups, but a small proportion were new participants who had not been able to attend group discussions. Over 190 practitioners contributed their views to the study.

1. Introduction

Aims of the study

The main aim of the study reported here was to elicit practitioners' views and understand their experiences in using the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), to inform a planned review of the framework to take place in 2010.

The three main research questions were:

- How does the EYFS influence day-to-day practice with children and families?
- How, if at all, has the EYFS supported improvements in the care and education offered by practitioners?
- What, if any, obstacles and difficulties do practitioners face in the effective use of the EYFS?

The EYFS is a framework for all registered providers of services for children under 5, which became statutory in September 2008. It marks the first time that practitioners from all sectors of the early childhood workforce, from the head teachers of primary schools to registered childminders and after-school play-workers, have been required to observe the same guidelines relating to the education and care of young children. The framework provides statutory guidance, not only on the ways in which development and learning are to be supported within schools and settings, but on the ways in which relationships with families are to be established in support of these goals.

Focus

The study focuses on two main areas:

1. the broad themes and principles which underpin the EYFS; and
2. the detailed requirements for care, welfare, development, learning and wellbeing specified in the EYFS.

The EYFS framework is firmly rooted in four principles, to which many of the research participants referred at different times. These principles are stated under four thematic headings: the Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments, and

Development and Learning. Each of the principles is based on research evidence about early development, and each informs a broad strand of practice guidance. It is understood that all four themes and principles are inter-related, to the extent that it would not be possible to adhere to one without acknowledging the others: a 'Unique Child' requires an enabling environment, and positive relationships, in order to reach his or her potential as indicated by the goals for development and learning. In the organisation of the documents which together make up the EYFS, the four themes and principles are colour-coded so that they can be linked to the detailed guidance which provides the other aspect of the framework.

The guidance itself is quite complex and can be sliced many ways. It combines an overview of typical developmental progress for children from birth to 60 months (Development Matters) with an itemised account of the content of the six areas of learning, and the goals which are to be used to assess each child as he or she completes the reception year. It describes in some detail the ways in which practical requirements (such as assessment) can be implemented by means of the four principles (acknowledging 'unique-ness') and through collaboration with parents. It also demonstrates, in columns describing the experiences children are entitled to, the framework's underpinning belief in play as the foundation and medium for early learning.

The considerable complexity of the document has enabled the many practitioners whose work it now regulates to engage with it from different entry-points. Each individual's decision of where to 'begin' with the implementation of the framework has been shaped by both their professional role and experience, and the contextual constraints and opportunities of their setting: nursery staff working with under-3s, play-workers responsible for 5-11 year olds, and head-teachers running extended schools, will each be ruled by their own priorities as they seek to follow the guidance. For this reason the study has engaged with as wide a range of practitioner groups as possible, and has offered the opportunity for very open-ended discussions, rather than tying participants to closed questions, or asking them to respond on precisely the same topics.

Structure of the report

The report begins (Section 2) with a brief survey of relevant research literature related to the content of the study. Recent government policy initiatives have been strongly evidence-based and the previous government itself commissioned or funded several significant projects in support of its efforts to improve the quality of early education and care. These projects have included the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project; the

National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS); and the literature reviews which have been commissioned to inform the design and content of earlier curriculum guidance such as Birth To Three Matters. Reports from these and similar projects are widely available, and the review included here refers to broad findings rather than offering detail. It makes reference to the key themes, such as outdoor play and assessment, which have emerged from the consultation with practitioners, but does not offer a comprehensive evaluation of the EYFS against the research evidence from elsewhere.

Section 3 of the report describes the methods of the study, including the recruitment of participants and the nature of the sample (fuller information on these aspects is provided in Appendix 3). The findings of the study are then reported, thematically rather than by practitioner group, in Section 4. The ten sub-section headings within this section represent the ten strongest themes to emerge from the data analysis.

Sections 5 and 6 contain a further discussion of these ten themes, which draws out some common and underlying questions related to the implementation of the framework for all practitioner groups, and some conclusions from the project team's review of the data.

2. Background to the study: the early years context

Educational provision for children under five in England is offered within a range of diverse settings in both the maintained and private sectors. Historically, the fragmented and patchy nature of this provision has created difficulties and divisions for children, their families and practitioners alike. In particular, transition from one setting to another has proved challenging for both children and adults. Reviewing the state of provision around the time that Labour came to power in 1997, Bertram and Pascal (1999:14) concluded that the history of early childhood education in the UK 'reveals a system which has emerged as diverse and uncoordinated, expanding rapidly when attempting to meet periods of chronic national need and crisis and waning in other times, and with little cohesive integration of services.'

Early childhood services in the UK have seen an unprecedented period of development and change since the election of the Labour government in 1997 (Brooker 2007). That government's agenda to ameliorate the divisive and fragmented nature of early years provision in the UK was closely bound up with the desire to reduce child poverty and disadvantage and to encourage more lone parents (and in particular mothers) back to work (DfES 1998). Such aspirations required a major 'root and branch' approach to services for young children and their families (Anning 2006). Central to this approach was the dual aim both to increase the quantity, and improve the quality, of childcare provision. The statutory school starting age in England, Wales and Scotland, is officially the term after a child's fifth birthday. However, at the time of writing the vast majority of four-year-olds in England are in reception classes of primary school. In the global context, the UK is unusual in its policy of admitting children to school at age four or five rather than the more common European and international age of six and sometimes seven (Rogers and Rose 2007). The number of four-year-olds attending reception classes is set to increase still further in 2011 in light of new legislation which will enable children to start school in the September after their fourth birthday.

The research reported here is situated within the emerging landscape of early years provision in England, in which rapid and significant changes in policy and practice have been experienced by practitioners, children and their families. These changes have affected the organization of working practices, and the daily management of education and care, for all those working in the early years sector including staff in schools, daycare, homecare and out of school provision. Within the over-arching framework of *Every Child Matters*, practitioners have taken on the requirements of the Children Act

(2004) and the Childcare Act (2006); have become familiar with the Children's Workforce Strategy (2005) and the Children's Plan (2007); and have encountered the new challenges of the Early Years Foundation Stage (2007, 2008). Concerns have been expressed in various early childhood organizations and fora about the variation in the ways that the framework is interpreted and implemented by practitioners in different parts of the childcare workforce. Clearly, the ways in which practitioners organize provision, as well as the constraints of the physical environment of each setting, will impact upon children's experiences of care and learning.

In 2000, a foundation stage for children aged three until the end of the reception year in school was established in England and Wales, supported by the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (CGFS) (QCA/DfEE 2000). The aim of this initiative was two-fold: first, to establish a long-awaited and distinct educational phase for young children, and secondly, to clarify for practitioners working with young children key areas of learning and appropriate progression towards Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum. In broad terms this initiative was welcomed by early childhood practitioners since it provided a bridge between nursery and Key Stage 1, stressed flexibility and informality in the reception year, focused on child development, practical play and outdoor activity, and provided good guidance for teachers (Taylor Nelson Sofres with Aubrey 2002). Importantly, these changes to the curriculum firmly established the reception class as part of early years rather than of primary education. Building on the CGFS, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was implemented in 2008. It is a statutory framework for children from birth to five, which combines standards for education, care and welfare for young children.

A consensus on high-quality early education and care?

Research undertaken nationally and internationally over the last two decades has helped to establish some common areas of agreement between scholars and practitioners on the most appropriate forms of provision for children from birth until the beginning of formal schooling, and for their families. The summary of research in the report *Early Years Learning and Development* (Evangelou et al 2009) is typical of recent scholarly work in adopting a social-constructivist view of learning which sees the child's development as inextricably linked with the sociocultural environment in which s/he is situated. Children's learning from birth is now widely accepted to result from the child's own activity and adaptive behaviour, which is hard-wired into the brain from before birth (Blakemore and Frith 2005). But it requires the support of other human individuals, both

peers and adults (Siraj-Blatchford 2005) who introduce the child to the cultural tools, such as language, which enable them to build increasing complex mental structures (Rogoff 2003).

Play and pedagogy

Within western societies in particular, the optimal conditions for early learning are frequently viewed as environments where play, both unstructured and structured, adult-led and child-led, solitary and social, provides the majority of the learning opportunities (see for instance Göncü and Gaskins 2006; Wood 2010). The twentieth century was one in which the development of play theories, among western psychologist and educators, replaced earlier theories of learning as inscription upon a blank slate, or imitation of more knowledgeable others. The powerful ideas of psychologists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner have informed successive educational initiatives and curricula, such as the High/Scope curriculum developed from the US Head Start project in the 1960s (Schweinhart and Weikart 2003), and the *Te Whaariki* curriculum developed by the New Zealand government in the 1990s (Ministry of Education 1996). By the end of the century, and with the introduction of the Foundation Stage in England and Wales (QCA 2000) play had been established as ‘the key way in which children learn’.

More recently in England, the findings of the EPPE project (Sylva et al 2004) have prompted a re-consideration of the optimal balance of the curriculum, with support being offered for environments in which ‘potentially instructive play activities’ are accompanied by well-designed adult interventions in children’s learning. While the debate on the nature and value of play for children and for their learning continues to engage many commentators (Wood 2010), the benefits of play for children’s physical, intellectual, social and emotional wellbeing are no longer in doubt. The Early Years Foundation Stage supports this belief (and the study participants were entirely of this view).

Curriculum and Assessment

Alongside the debates on the role of play in learning have developed discussions on the role of assessment in learning (Gipps 2002), where opinion tends to be more divided. The Early Years sector has traditionally favoured *formative* rather than *summative* assessment (Nutbrown 2006), and has fought to sustain a view of the individual child which positively values any knowledge, skills and attributes which can be identified through observation, rather than itemising, negatively, those skills and areas of

knowledge which a child has not yet achieved. Recent evidence on the positive outcomes of 'Assessment for Learning' (AfL) in school as well as pre-school classes (Hargreaves 2005) has confirmed this view, showing that the abilities which children are able to demonstrate, in different contexts, should be the basis for the 'next steps' in their learning. This view of individualised learning based on formative assessment is held to be in conflict with a more normative developmental view of what children in general should be expected to achieve by a certain number of months or years of age, and this tension is present in the EYFS framework, which generates a Profile (EYFSP) against which many children may be measured and found wanting. This tension is identified in many recent evaluations of early childhood curricula (Soler and Miller 2003) and also in the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2010), which identifies as 'increasingly fraught' the opposing views of the child, and of schooling, which co-exist as children reach school age. The unique location of the EYFS – which supports children's development from pre-school into primary school, and then 'hands them over' to the National Curriculum – is one which raises concerns for practitioners on both sides of the divide.

Outdoor learning

A further recent but significant shift of emphasis in research on early learning concerns the advocacy of outdoor learning as an entitlement which promotes development across all domains, including social and emotional aspects, and which may support the different learning styles of different groups. The Nordic tradition of 'forest schools' (Maynard 2007) has been emulated in England at a variety of levels, from regular full-blown visits to woodland settings for extended periods, to the provision of small outdoor areas in which children can experience some of the same opportunities and challenges without leaving their usual setting (Bilton 2001). Early evaluations of such provision have been sufficiently convincing to prompt a requirement for outdoor learning to be offered for all children in EYFS-registered settings, and participants have been keen to offer their own experiences of the benefits and the difficulties.

Transitions

One of the intentions of the EYFS was to provide children with smoother transitions on the journey from home, through the pre-school years and into formal schooling. The many policy initiatives undertaken since 1997, all of them intended to improve the quality of early childhood experiences, are now seen, paradoxically, as increasing the number of

transitions children make in the years from birth to 5 (Brooker 2008). The majority of children living in England begin to attend group care settings long before they are three years old, and many experience several settings in one week. Concern over the short- and long-term effects of transitions on young children has become widespread (see for instance Fabian and Dunlop 2002, Fthenakis 1998), and has also prompted government guidance on the transition from the Early Years Foundation Stage to year 1 (QCA 2005). Children's own excitement and apprehension over moving into new settings has been widely documented in recent years (see for instance Dockett and Perry 2004; Einarsdottir 2007), and efforts have been made at local authority as well as school and setting level to provide continuity as well as challenge for children as they move up the age-range.

Parental partnership

The early years tradition of parental partnership has long existed at the grass-roots level (see for instance Tizard et al 1981; Pugh and De'Ath 1989) and has more recently been confirmed as a significant contributor to children's wellbeing and their outcomes throughout their schooling (Desforges with Abouchaar 2003). With the revolution in child and family policy since 1997, and the advent of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* in 2000, close and respectful relationships with parents and the wider family have been seen as integral to young children's development. Parents are viewed as the 'expert' in their own child, while practitioners are the experts in children's development and learning more generally, and the benefits of developing shared perspectives and efforts between carers and educators have been widely demonstrated (Whalley et al 2007). One important recent finding – the impact of the home learning environment (HLE) on children's long-term outcomes (Melhuish et al 2008a) - has prompted initiatives such as children's centre groups in which parents are supported in developing more supportive and educative interactions with their young children. The EYFS makes the development of such practice statutory for the first time, and requires parents to be given a 'central role' in all decisions made about provision for their child, and to be involved in planning and assessing their learning.

Professional learning

The introduction of new policy initiatives in support of young children and families since 1997 has sharpened earlier concerns in the UK about the impact of the quality of the childcare and early education workforce on the quality of experience offered to children (see for instance Owen 2006; Siraj-Blatchford et al 2002). The last few years have seen

the introduction of a 'qualifications ladder' designed to enable unqualified or poorly-qualified staff to move up to higher levels by means of continuing professional development, or 'professional learning' (Nolan and Kilderry 2010; Edwards and Nuttall 2009). New statutory requirements ensure that all settings have access to support from staff trained at graduate level, either through Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), and there are intentions to set the bar higher during the next decade so that all members of the workforce have at least lower-level qualifications (Level 2 and 3) and that all managers have graduate or postgraduate-level qualifications.

The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) (www.cwdcouncil.org.uk) was set up by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) to lead change in this field, and has been responsible for monitoring and evaluating progress towards a more consistently qualified workforce in the early years sector. Its own surveys of training requirements brought together evidence collected by the Pre-school Learning Alliance and the National Childminders Association, and recommended that training should be 'comprehensive' and carefully targeted at different groups; that provision for childminders, for instance, should be designed by specialists in the field rather than by generic early years trainers (CWDC 2007).

Recent evaluations of the EYFS

The Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA), National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) and The British Association for Early Childhood Education (BAECE) have all recently undertaken surveys of practitioners' views of the EYFS. All report that participants are broadly supportive of the EYFS, according to Children and Young People Now (CYPN) (BAECE 2009).

Respondents to a survey by the PLA highlighted a number of challenges that had arisen since the introduction of EYFS, ranging from a lack of time and resources, and the training of staff, to more specific problems such as the inability to provide adequate outdoor play areas. But respondents also commented on a number of benefits, mentioning child-led learning, user-friendly planning, good practice guidelines and improved record keeping as particularly positive aspects of the framework.

BAECE found that, in general, the 295 early childhood practitioners who responded to its 2009 survey had been encouraged by the introduction of the EYFS. The majority of

respondents (67.9%) referred to the Practice Guidance 'often' in their weekly and daily planning, and around 90% believed that the Early Learning Goals were pitched at the right level. The only exception to this was the statements for Communication, Language and Literacy which many respondents felt were 'too highly pitched', although even these statements were supported by 66.9% of respondents. Interestingly, too, over 90% of respondents confirmed that they felt 'Very confident' or 'Confident' in their understanding of the EYFS.

The most recent review of the working of the EYFS by the QCDA (2010) reported similar findings on the basis of focus groups with 135 practitioners and a survey of 1211 practitioners, suggesting that the findings of the BAECE survey are broadly representative of practitioner views, as well as broadly aligned with the views reported below.

3. Research design and methods of the project

Design

The study design was a survey undertaken in two discrete phases, in six English regions (South-West; South-East; Midlands; Inner London; North; North-East):

1. **Phase 1** Focus groups were convened with seven different practitioner groups in each of the six regions. They were designed to cover a range of general and particular issues about experiences of working with the EYFS framework.
2. **Phase 2** Individual telephone interviews were arranged with representatives from each practitioner group, to explore further explanations for issues raised in the focus groups, and to seek clarification of some responses.

The design was intended firstly to prompt practitioners in the 42 groups convened to construct some collective accounts of their experiences, using the stimulus of group discussion to enable participants to contribute to shared understandings of their day to day work in their settings; and secondly to enable individuals to reflect on specific queries addressed to them about the findings, in relation to their own practice. The two phases therefore serve different but related purposes, with the group discussions generating ideas and themes which could later be considered in more depth by individuals.

Sample

For Phase 1, the sample was designed to include:

- Six local authorities widely situated across England, with different local needs as well as different strategies for fulfilling the statutory childcare requirements
- Seven practitioner groups whose work includes the provision of services for children aged 0 to 5, in each of these authorities: head teachers of primary and nursery schools; teachers in primary and nursery schools; nursery nurses with Level 2 and 3 qualifications; Early Years Professionals; setting managers from the private, voluntary and independent sector; childminders; and children's centre staff in a range of non-teaching roles.
- The full range of providers in the sector, including maintained schools and nursery schools, children's centres, and private, voluntary, independent and community nurseries and pre-schools

- Providers (such as childminders) who are closely linked in networks based on local clusters or children's centres, and those who are more isolated
- Locations with wide social, ethnic and geographical variation including inner-city areas (both highly deprived and more affluent), suburban (middle-to low-income) and rural (including areas of poverty).

For Phase 2, members of the focus groups were invited to participate, but other members of the same practitioner groups, including those who had been unable to attend, were also invited to respond, in order to widen the existing sample.

Recruitment of participants

The study aimed to draw a representative sample of practitioners from each region of England, but because of its reliance upon 'volunteer' participants was unable to ensure this in practice. All key practitioner groups were included in the sampling frame for each region, but the actual members of each group may not be typical of all those occupying that role in the workforce.

Regions. The six regions were selected on the basis of regional variation as well as on the research team's ability to access them within the time and financial constraints allowed by the project. They were: the South-West, South-East, Inner London, Midlands, North and North-East.

Authorities. One local authority was selected within each region, in order to give the maximum variation of authority size and status, and varied geographical and social features. Each local authority was contacted by telephone and then by letter by a researcher, to gain permission to access the settings and practitioners, and to ensure that there were no particular reasons why the authority should not be included in the study. All the authorities facilitated contacts with their Early Years Advisors, who in many cases helped to provide lists of settings and contact details. The local authority was supplied with an information leaflet and a description of the methodology.

Settings. Focus group participants for each authority were selected by means of a sampling frame of settings, which included factors such as: rural, urban or inner-city location; low, medium or high levels of affluence and deprivation; low, medium and high levels of diversity among the population of children and families; maintained and non-maintained provision. Contacts in the settings were supplied with the information leaflet for participants.

Practitioners. Heads and managers of the chosen settings were asked if they would invite their practitioners to participate in the groups. Not all were willing or able to do so, citing specific staffing difficulties or other obstacles. The groups were therefore made up of some practitioners from the invited settings, but also of others recruited through local contacts and cluster meetings, or training days and conferences. All participants were given an information leaflet explaining what the study involved, and the arrangements for confidentiality and anonymity. Some received the leaflet face to face at meetings, while others received it by post or email.

Practitioner roles. The project specified the exploration of seven different practitioner 'roles': head teachers, setting managers, Early Years Professionals, teachers, nursery staff, childminders and children's centre staff. In practice many of these roles overlap: some setting managers declared themselves to be qualified teachers, some nursery heads were discovered to be EYPs, and some childminders had National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) qualifications.

Practitioner qualifications and experience. The project also attempted to recruit practitioners with a range of experience and qualifications, from highly experienced or highly-qualified staff to inexperienced and unqualified staff, but this was not entirely within the researchers' control when recruiting. However, information supplied on the consent forms does suggest that participants have worked with young children for periods ranging from one year to 37 years.

An equally wide range of formal qualifications was listed by participants. Some childminders left this question blank and volunteered that they had no paper qualifications, simply experience as a mother and caregiver for decades, but the majority of non-teaching staff held Level 2 or 3 qualifications, and some were engaged in Foundation Degrees or other part-time courses. Early Years professionals had all completed their EYP training, but some had prior qualifications including Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) gained on a B.A or B.Ed degree. Some teachers and head-teachers had Masters' degrees or were working towards them, while one nursery teacher had a PhD, though not in an area related to her work in the nursery.

Because participants were invited to record their own qualifications, the information supplied is neither systematic nor complete: some participants listed all their qualifications and some only their highest qualification, such as an MA, from which it could be inferred that they also possessed a BA, BEd or similar degree. Some information on qualifications and experience is included in Appendix 3.

Participation in groups. The contract for this project required the research team to aim for minimum impact on Local Authorities, schools, settings and practitioners, and this requirement guided the recruitment period. The data collection took place during the most severe winter on record, when many schools and settings were experiencing difficulties including unexpected closures and serious staffing problems. In consequence, some of the focus groups were smaller than anticipated as potential participants sent apologies at short notice. Some 'groups' had to be convened on two occasions to provide an adequate sample. Since all participants were volunteers, they and their settings are unlikely to be fully representative of the population of practitioners in England, or in their local authority. All findings from the study have to be read with this in mind: the participants were individuals who were sufficiently interested and keen to give up some of their free time to travel to join a group. No inducements were offered except, implicitly, the opportunity to 'have a say' and potentially to influence policy.

Methods

Phase 1: Focus Groups

Focus group discussions, recorded and annotated by the facilitator, have become increasingly popular as a research tool in recent years (Macnaghten and Myers 2004; Silverman 2006). The reason is two-fold. First is the obvious practical rationale that the views of five or six individuals may be canvassed during a one-hour focus group, whereas an individual interview only allows a single individual's views to be elicited in the same space of time. Second, and at least equally, focus groups allow shared knowledge to be socially constructed within the course of the group's interaction, so that the conclusions reached by the group may be 'in advance of' the information which each participant brings to the group. In other words, where an individual interview has traditionally been conceived as an opportunity to elicit information or attitudes which are already formed in the respondent's mind, a focus group discussion is intended to enable the construction of new knowledge, and more considered, qualified or modified attitudes which emerge from the co-construction of ideas within the group. 'In order to get rich data, the focus group facilitator allows the participants the freedom to talk and ascribe meanings while bearing in mind the broad aims of the project' (Silverman 2006: 110). This mode of data construction has proved to be valuable in this project, where the groups were composed of individuals occupying the same role within a variety of different settings.

Discussion guides. A list of eighteen topics for exploration, some with sub-questions and probes, was drawn up in collaboration with the Department (Appendix 1), and a selection of these topics was then allocated to each of the 42 groups.

All groups responded first to three general questions:

- How does the EYFS influence your day-to-day practice?
- How, if at all, has the EYFS supported improvements in the care and education offered by your setting?
- What, if any, obstacles and difficulties do you face in the effective use of EYFS?

Each group was also prompted to respond to a set of subsidiary questions, if these had not already arisen in the general discussion. The subsidiary questions asked for more specific information on the impact of the EYFS on topics such as planning, assessment, achievement for different groups, involving parents and outdoor play. The fifteen subsidiary topics were allocated to the groups for whom they would have most relevance: for instance, head teachers (but not childminders) were asked to discuss children's transition into the Primary curriculum in Year 1, but all practitioner groups were asked to comment on their opportunities for professional development. By allocating the topics to different practitioner groups in different regions it was possible to gain a reasonably broad response – by region and by practitioner group – to each.

Conduct of groups. All focus groups were conducted during a six-week period beginning at the start of February. The time and place of each meeting was negotiated with interested practitioners as far as possible although this inevitably resulted in some potential participants being excluded. All groups commenced with a brief review of the information leaflet and a discussion of the consent procedure and the right to withdraw. Discussions were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed, and analysis of the transcripts was both horizontal - across all childminding groups in all regions for instance - and vertical, across all practitioners within a local authority.

Phase 2: Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews were selected to enable the efficient collection and coding of manageable amounts of data from a larger number of individuals than would be possible in face-to-face interviews, without sacrificing depth (Aubrey 2004). With respect to the aims of

the project, telephone interviews enabled a more penetrating exploration of topics arising from the Phase 1 analysis.

There were a number of potential benefits associated with using telephone interviews rather than face-to face interviews as a means of data collection. Telephone interviews allowed the researchers to: manage resources effectively; minimise any tendency to socially desirable responses from participants; secure a good participation rate because of the low impact on participants' time; and build on the positive relationships established in the focus groups. In the event, most interviews were arranged and conducted without difficulty, although a number of respondents preferred to answer the questions by email, which they found more convenient.

The individual interviews were all conducted within a four-week period (February-March) but fell into two smaller phases. The first group (12 respondents) took the form of individual discussions of the focus group topics, with practitioners who had expressed an interest in participating but had not been able to attend a group. The transcripts of their views were included in the overall focus group data. The second group (30 respondents) were recruited separately, and were asked to respond to a set of more detailed questions which had emerged from the analysis of the focus group material. These questions were developed because the analysis had revealed a number of aspects of the EYFS which warranted further exploration or clarification. Thus the analysis of Phase 1 informed the content of Phase 2. Both sets of data are included in the reported findings (section 4 below) which represent a broad spread of practitioner opinion from all the regions as well as all the practitioner groups. The Phase 2 interview schedule is included as Appendix 2.

Data analysis

Due to the very compressed timetable for reporting findings, analysis of all data was undertaken manually. Each of the five members of the research team undertook a full analysis of the transcripts from a single practitioner group (across the six regions) and the process was then repeated by another member of the team so that all transcripts were independently reviewed by at least two people. The summaries from these analyses were shared in team meetings, and in some cases slightly amended following discussion including the comments of those who convened the groups.

In developing findings, the team first undertook to report the 'answers' to the original questions which had informed the focus groups, and then agreed on the emerging themes

which provide the structure for Section 4 (below). All significant concerns raised by participants were found to be included in these themes, which provide a strong picture of the experiences reported.

Data from the focused individual interviews were collated separately to enable a more quantitative account to be given of the responses, and these data are identified as such in the respective sub-sections of Section 4 of the report.

Reliability and validity of the findings

Were the data collected reliable?

The data reported here have been collected in conditions which the researchers believe to have been entirely conducive to frank and open discussion, and were analysed in such a way as to enable constant checking and comparison across groups and between researchers. It is with some confidence that we present these views as representative of those expressed by participants. However, they can only claim to represent the views of a partially self-selecting sample of practitioners at one moment in time (in the focus groups) although the follow-up interviews have allowed respondents to be more reflective and considered in their comments. These findings must therefore be understood as 'practitioners' *reported* experiences' of their work within the EYFS framework.

How meaningful are the reported findings?

When reporting focus group findings, it is important to be clear about both the advantages and the limitations of this form of data collection. On the one hand, participants may produce much richer data through their co-construction of a reality or story than any individual would have produced in a solo interview. It was often clear that participants developed their own views in the course of participating in the discussion and through interaction with others in a similar role. On the whole the research team felt that the transcriptions offered a realistic picture of the experiences and attitudes of the group, and that the outcomes had strong validity. However, the analysis of such data has limitations which do not apply to other forms of research data, and which need to be understood. The most important of these is that *no meaningful quantification of opinions is possible*.

When participants are invited to reflect on a particular question, for example,

- The fact that a theme or issue is raised, and occupies discussion for a period of minutes, and attracts contributions or confirmation from some or all of the participants

in a group does not necessarily mean that this is a highly significant theme for any or all of the group members

- Similarly: the fact that a theme or issue is not raised within a particular group, in response to that question, *does not mean that that theme or issue lacks significance for that group*; it may simply mean that the discussion took a different direction.

In analysing the data and reporting findings therefore the team was obliged to be circumspect. Our report is based on close and repeated scrutiny of the transcripts. Where possible we have reported that an issue was raised, or an opinion confirmed by 'all groups', or by 'all reception teacher groups'. Failing that, we have reported that the issue or the opinion was held by 'most groups' or 'most reception teachers'. If this was not the case we report that it was expressed by 'many' or 'some' of the groups or individuals (or by three groups, or two teachers). In other words, all the issues reported here are findings which had clear salience for participants from some sectors of the workforce, unless they are reported as deriving from 'one teacher' or 'one group'.

The headlines included in each section of the findings are ones which, we can confidently claim, represent the views of a majority of focus groups. In order to verify this, a secondary analysis was conducted of the presence and importance of the 35 headline statements within the 42 focus groups. Appendix 4 presents, in the form of percentages, the support which was identified for each of the headline findings across all focus groups.

Ethical considerations

The proposal and related documents were scrutinised and approved by several bodies. The design, instruments, leaflets and consent forms were submitted in turn to the Department, to the Institute of Education's Faculty Research Ethics Committee, and then to a National Health Service trust responsible for running some of the children's centres in one region.

All participation in the project was entirely voluntary, and participants were reminded at every stage of their right to withdraw if they wished.

Full anonymity and confidentiality is assured to those who took part as all names of individuals, settings, local authorities and regions have been removed from the transcribed data.

Consultative group

The project has been supported by a consultative group made up of academics, practitioners and the Department's project manager. We thank them for their thoughtful advice and support during the research process.

4. Findings

Findings from the study are reported here under the headings which emerged from the analysis of the focus groups (Phase 1 of the project) but are also informed by the data from the telephone interviews (Phase 2 of the project). Where specific questions were addressed in the individual interviews, the data from the responses is identified separately, as a boxed figure, to distinguish it from the views derived from focus groups.

Each of these key themes is presented to include the voices of all practitioner groups. Each theme contains 'headline' statements for which there was an overwhelming consensus among all the groups where they were discussed: some issues, such as assessing children against the EYFSP, were not relevant for all groups and were not discussed. The level of support for each of these statements is given as a percentage in Appendix 4.

Despite important differences between and within practitioner groups, there was a considerable and positive consensus about the impact of the EYFS framework on practitioners' working lives.

4.1 *Influence of the EYFS on everyday practice*

Among the many themes to emerge under this broad heading, three stand out because they are represented, repeatedly, by all practitioner groups. They are:

- The extent to which the EYFS has become central to practice
- The ways in which it validates practitioners' existing professional beliefs
- The extent to which the framework is felt to be 'child-led'.

These three themes are addressed first, followed by other subsidiary aspects of the influence of the EYFS.

The EYFS is central to daily work with children and families

Eighteen months after its introduction, it was clear that the new framework had become a strong and positive influence on the daily lives of all groups. Groups of head teachers, for instance, maintained that it was the 'bread and butter' of their daily work and that it 'underpins everything we do'. Some affirmed that the EYFS was 'the best thing' for the birth to five age group as it 'has underpinned the Every Child Matters agenda and has supported our holistic approach'.

This view was supported by every other practitioner group, in different ways: a reception teacher described the framework as 'our Bible' and an Early Years Professional described it as 'an intrinsic part of your everyday work'; a nursery nurse referred to it as 'like a big lifeline for all the settings', and a childminder confirmed that 'it guides all of my practice'. Among children's centre staff, who occupy a range of different positions in the workforce, there was also considerable unanimity:

'I think it influences the whole of our practice really. It's what we base our training to our staff team and also what they carry out every day' (manager)

'All the activities that we provide for the children are based on objectives taken from the EYFS to ensure that all the developmental stages are catered for and that we try and incorporate a range of activities or a range of the different areas and different needs of the children' (play development worker)

A children's centre crèche worker expressed it in this way: 'it's more about the love and affection and the caring and the holistic approach to them that is important up to the age of 7, I believe'. This level of approval seemed to derive from a view that the EYFS made good sense to those working in the sector. In a similar vein, a children's centre worker reported that when she encountered the EYFS, 'that was actually a total relief to me, I went "Thank goodness for that, somebody has come to their senses!"'

The EYFS validates professional beliefs

The sense of 'coming home' to a document which broadly maps on to practitioners' professional beliefs and training was almost equally strong among all practitioner groups. The four themes and principles of the EYFS were mentioned in passing by participants from all sectors of the workforce, and formed the common currency of many individual interviews. Interviewees as well as focus group members sometimes explained their practice by saying 'It's the Unique Child again isn't it?' or 'well, it's the Enabling Environment', as if this was common sense and understood by everyone.

Many of the head teachers claimed that the EYFS had validated and legitimated their existing good practice, and 'justified their early years approach'. On the whole they described themselves as comfortable with the EYFS, while some argued that 'there wasn't 'much of a change at all since we worked in that way before the EYFS became the statutory document'.

Reception teachers, despite their difficulties with particular aspects of the framework, frequently made similar points about the overall ethos of the framework: 'It's confirmed a lot of our beliefs, and how we were working before'; 'basically it's saying that's OK for you to be that way, it confirmed that that was the right way of working'. One suggested that the framework has on the whole reassured teachers 'that what they were always doing was right'. No reception teachers dissented from this view.

Setting managers agreed, in every focus group: 'Basically, it's just building on the good practice, the principles of good practice that you've already had.' And in groups of Early Years Professionals, the consensus was that the holistic nature of the curriculum supported the child-centred and play-based learning that was fundamental to their training. One participant summed this up as 'it's just been good to go back to basics. Because the values and principles are common sense aren't they?'

One group which has found the EYFS less congenial in some respects is the group of children's centre staff who run after-school and holiday provision, for whom 'traditional' Early Years practice is less familiar. Members of this group – a handful of the respondents overall – described many constraints and disagreements with the document, which are discussed in the following pages, although they also recognised and appreciated certain common values. One play worker concluded, 'it takes a long time to actually figure out that you've got this document that's telling you what to do, in actual fact, if you take a step back from it, its only telling you to play with the kids'.

The EYFS is child-led and responsive to children's interests

Some of the phrases that emerged most frequently in the analysis of all the focus groups were 'child-led', 'child-focused' and 'child-centred'. All groups of practitioners reported that, despite the superficially prescriptive nature of the statutory framework, experience showed that the EYFS offered them freedom and flexibility for following children's interests and planning according to their needs.

Within the school-age sector, some head teachers stated that the EYFS 'reinforced' their own child centred approach in the Early Years, and in general reception teachers agreed that the framework allowed them to 'be more creative' in responding to children's individual needs and interests. But the managers of pre-school settings, and others working more directly in planning and evaluating children's development and learning, gave the most emphatic

accounts of the extent to which children's interests led their practice. This comment from a setting manager was typical of many others:

'The main changes in the EYFS have been in the way we plan, before the EYFS it was more or less staff initiated planning, now it's more child inspired, if you like. We observe the children then we plan and we also take ideas from the children and the parents and staff'.

Such views emerged in almost all practitioner groups, and received broad assent in all the groups where they were expressed. The support was most evident in the childminder groups, who often expressed the view that their generally intuitive methods of supporting development and learning were validated by the framework:

'Practice is child-led: I do what the children want, they don't do what I consider they should be doing'

'I don't say we're going to do lots of jigsaws because we need to do problem solving and numeracy, it's very much what the children want to do, and then I fit it under what the curriculum, what it comes under'

'With the older ones I say like "What would you like out next week to play with?"

This sense of validation for their practice appeared especially important for this group, some of whom have felt 'daunted' and potentially de-skilled by the size and scope of the new document and its requirements.

Children's centre staff are often involved in making more informal care arrangements for children under three, in drop-ins, crèches and stay-and-play sessions, and some described their initial difficulties in planning for the children who attend them. These difficulties arise from the fact that children's attendance at such sessions is in many cases occasional and irregular, and that some children 'come once and then you never see them again'. But the solution has been to make 'age-appropriate' provision for all children from birth to three using the areas of learning in the framework, and then to use observations of children's interests for reflection and planning:

'We can look at the child's interest that we had from the week before, by writing on this side. We've got, like, observations and things on each child, and what interests

they've got, and from evaluating the week before we look back at what each child enjoyed, certain things that were successful, so we can put that onto the planning for the next week. And then go back to the EYFS and kind of look through and see what we are meeting with each activity'. (Play development worker)

Similar accounts of child-led planning were offered by the majority of nursery staff, nursery teachers and childminders.

Many, but not all, aspects of the EYFS are practitioner-friendly

Included among the dozens of other responses to the general question about the influence of the EYFS on practice are many specific comments on the benefits and problems of working within the framework. These are addressed in the sections which follow and especially in the final section of the Findings, but some should be mentioned here because they were widely felt to have an impact on practitioners' lives.

Positive aspects include: the benefits for children of continuity of provision from birth to five (and beyond); the relative ease and flexibility of planning provision within the requirements; the focus on the environment and resources, both inside and out; and the detailed support for practitioners' own judgements in both planning and assessments.

Negative aspects, particularly 'the burden of paperwork', the difficulties of assessment, and the constant sense of surveillance from OfSTED, are more specific to particular practitioner groups, and are addressed in more detail in subsequent sections of this report.

4.2 *Improvements to practice brought about by the EYFS*

As when describing the overall 'influence' of the EYFS on their practice, participants named an enormous range of impacts. The majority however fall under four key headings: improved continuity and integration of provision; improvements in planning and in the observations which inform planning and assessment; a more holistic approach to children, including an improved focus on physical health and wellbeing; and an improved status for practitioner groups outside the maintained sector.

**The EYFS has supported greater continuity and integration of services and staff
*Education and care... development and learning.***

The decision to bring together development and learning, in the form of requirements for care, education and welfare, was universally approved by focus group participants as well as interviewees. It was felt to give appropriate attention to all aspects of children's wellbeing, and thus to value all the ways that practitioners work with families and children. Respondents explained that, because all members of their staff were aware of the EYFS, 'every one can work towards the children's development':

'I like the bringing together of care and education, because it was seen before I think as about educating children and the care was separate, actually all those routines are fundamental to learning, it's a holistic approach – everything is about learning.' (EYP)

'Now that welfare is incorporated into the document it links everything together' (Nursery Nurse)

One group of children's centre staff agreed that they saw themselves as working not simply within the EYFS but also within the government's larger policy projects:

'They all link in together really, because Every Child Matters is very closely linked with EYFS and Healthy Child. So actually they all kind of.... Wellbeing is within them all, isn't it?' (Children's centre manager)

There was no dissent from this view.

Continuity over the age phases

There was agreement that a continuous framework for children from birth to five made more sense developmentally than the previous 0-3, 3-5 divisions, although some practitioners, including head teachers and reception teachers, argued that the curriculum should be taken forward into Key Stage 1. One head teacher explained that she has extended the EYFS areas of learning into her Year 1 classes, and will be taking them on into Year 2 next.

There was a very mixed reception for the developmental stages (Development matters) described in the document. Some practitioners disliked the overlap between stages ('are they in 22-36 or are they in 30-50 months?') while others approved of this 'blurring of the boundaries' and felt that it was fairer to children as well as more appropriate to their diverse developmental paths:

'children can go at their own pace and it makes it easier to show how the children are progressing' (Nursery nurse)

'I like the overlap of the ages...it's not so cut and dry' (Childminder)

The detailed descriptions of children's knowledge, skills and competence were referred to by several practitioners as particularly helpful in assessing children, but there was also a strong body of opinion *against* putting precise ages, or indicative photographs, alongside these descriptors. The arguments for and against these descriptions were presented in several groups, and are discussed further in section 4.3. below.

Integration of professionals

The experience of working together with a wide range of other professionals is widely viewed as positive, and potentially beneficial for children even if it has initially added to the workload of practitioners. There were no negative responses on this point. School staff point out that, because all members of staff are aware of the EYFS, everyone can work together to support children's development. But practitioners in children's centres are apparently in the best position to evaluate these benefits:

'it promotes communication between different professionals working in a centre and with the associated outreach places... in the past I didn't even know that family support services were available, because that hadn't been communicated to me' (children's worker)

'you're getting the full range singing from the same hymn sheet really' (manager)

Particular mention was made of the importance of sharing expertise with health-care colleagues, which is discussed further below.

The EYFS supports improvements in observations and observation-based planning

Most practitioners, and all pre-school practitioners, claimed that they had always made observations of children, but that their observations were now more systematic, more purposeful and more child-friendly. They described the ways that they used observations to identify children's interests and achievements rather than simply to identify the 'gaps' (although one group of reception teachers pointed out that it is important to 'spot gaps', in their own provision as well as in children's development).

Childminders typically reported that 'We've always done observations but we've always done mental observations' whereas they were now more confident in using their observations in conjunction with the guidance in the framework to plan for learning: 'It's making you more aware of the learning of the children, at what stage they're at'.

While almost all groups of nursery staff indicated that their use of observations for planning and assessment had not changed with the introduction of the EYFS, staff in children's centres explained that the newer kinds of provision they were making for children – crèches, drop-ins, 'stay and plays' – were well supported by the EYFS requirement to observe and plan. These sessions, which children and parents may literally drop in and out of, rather than attending regularly, have only recently been recognised as making an important contribution to both children's development and the development of parenting skills. Staff in Phase 2 and Phase 3 children's centres, which do not offer full nursery services, saw this as the core of their work and were enthusiastic about the EYFS guidance:

'I think with us working hands on with the children it helps us to learn the children's interests because we use it to observe the children, find out what their key interest is, link it with the guidelines and then that gives us what we then plan for the children's next steps' (play development worker)

Members of two practitioner groups – childminders and after-school playworkers, both of whom sometimes work with children over 5 as well as with younger children – emphasised that the guidance on using observations as the basis for planning would support newcomers to the profession, even if they felt it was unnecessary for experienced practitioners:

'if you have something that's completely new and a new member of staff who doesn't have any idea about what I've given the children, it does give you some ideas of things

to do with that child, and what the next step could be for that child' (out-of-school playworker)

There was a broad consensus that the guidance on observation-based planning was 'flexible' and 'easy to use', 'rather than rigid stages' (Childminders) and that it was 'less regimented... more homely' (Setting manager). However, one group of Early Years Professionals, most of whom were setting managers, working within a single local authority, expressed very conflicting views. Some were finding the requirements to observe and record evidence an enormous burden, while others suggested that the EYFS had liberated staff from bureaucratic planning and recording: 'We do a lot more visual observation rather than writing'. This group's discussion continued as follows:

R But that's individuals' interpretation of it, isn't it? Of what...you know, so that's always, I think with any framework, everyone's going to interpret it in different ways.

R Including inspectors.

R Yes'.

In this group and in many others it emerged that there was a need for more detailed guidance about what is recommended and what is required, to allay the anxieties of practitioners who appear to feel the shadow of Ofsted over everything they do.

The EYFS supports a holistic view of children's development and learning

Several aspects of children's development belonging to this heading were discussed in the groups, and overall it was felt that the provision had moved on from viewing children in the 3-5 age range as 'in education' rather than in settings which took a holistic view of their development. In this respect, 'it's such a leap forward from the CGFS' (Children's centre worker). One of the setting managers made a persuasive case for this approach:

'It looks at children holistically. If we want children to be able to access all activities and all the opportunities we have here, we have to make sure that their physical being and their emotional being is catered for. So unless a child's happy, it's not going to learn well, unless a child's not hungry or it's not cold, it's not going to enjoy itself and move on. So yes, it's the whole child'

A number of respondents, including staff from children's centres, put their own daily practice and provision into a broader perspective by arguing that the EYFS has 'raised the status of children':

'The children's agenda is respected in there. You can consult with children like we have through the EYFS. And just about everything that they do on a day to day basis is respected in there' (children's centre manager)

'I think you're allowed to celebrate the complete child. They're competent – the competent child at long last is being acknowledged'. (playworker)

Nutrition

With regard to specific aspects of development, one area which has received far more emphasis under the new framework is health and particularly nutrition, but practitioners were divided on the question of whether enough guidance was being given. On the one hand, all respondents supported the focus on health, with many feeling that it reminded all staff of its importance: 'It very much highlights where children need to be and what they need to be offered in respect to being healthy' (Nursery nurse). On the other hand, most participants claimed to have been familiar with the advice before it appeared in the EYFS: as one childminder remarked, 'everyone knows healthy eating'.

It was clear that the framework had prompted discussions in schools and settings about the role of food and drink in children's social as well as their physical development. Practitioners were divided, and argued amongst themselves, on whether children benefited more from the 'independence' of being able to help themselves to snacks and drinks when they wished, or the social experience of sitting down with others to share the activity. Several commented however that the preparation of snacks had now become an educational activity in its own right, in which washing hands and handling tools, as well as selecting healthy foods, were the focus of adult-child discussions. Settings with appropriate kitchen areas were involving children in all stages of food preparation (starting from 'going to Waitrose and weighing the bananas'), but practitioners with inconvenient premises, including those in pack-away settings, often had to exclude children from experiences which they recognised would be valuable.

A minority of settings, mostly children’s centres, reported on the integration of growing food, cooking and eating together as part of their holistic provision for children and parents:

‘We grow in the garden, a lot of foods in the garden, and we can talk about what sort of foods are good, fresh food, digging up potatoes, cooking them, we are growing tomatoes this year and we are also involved with Healthy Futures’ (senior development worker).

Traditional nursery schools, and some schools, have outdoor resources which permit them to introduce such activities, but for many settings this use of the outdoor environment is quite out of reach (and see section 4.8 below).

In Phase 2 of the study, interviewees were invited to comment on nutritional issues among other aspects of their provision. The responses to this question are presented in Figure 4.2.1 below.

Figure 4.2.1: Phase 2 data from individual interviews (nutrition)

How do you use the nutritional guidelines in your setting (would you like additional guidance)? (10 respondents)

All respondents felt that their basic understanding of ‘healthy eating’ was sufficient to ensure children’s health, and that the daily routines of their setting were appropriate: all mention the offer of fruit, vegetables and/or milk as part of their funding, and all provide children with drinking water at all times. Some refer to the EYFS guidelines while others say they were unaware of them:

‘After reading the nutrition guidelines we employed a full time cook to ensure that we prepared fresh food for the children meals, avoiding processed food. As guided by the nutrition guidelines, all the children under 3 years old have an individual water bottle, with the 3 to 5 year olds provided with access to drinking water from a drinking water tap for them to independently access’. [Early Years Professional]

But there were specific concerns raised. One issue mentioned by several respondents was parents’ lack of information and understanding on nutrition. As a result it was felt that packed lunches brought by children were frequently *unhealthy*; in response, three respondents report that they have improved and expanded their school meals provision, and are encouraging

more parents to take up this arrangement to ensure the children have a proper diet: *'some parents object to being told what they can/can't put in a lunch box' [Nursery Headteacher].*

Another frustrated respondent (reception teacher) reported that her school's healthy eating policy was undermined by 'traditions' which no-one else on the staff was willing to challenge. One of these was birthday parties and celebrations, when parents are invited to contribute food:

'Crisps, processed foods and squashes, cakes, biscuits are contributed despite sign-up lists which try to steer things in a more healthy direction and I have witnessed children be physically sick after eating too much of the wrong thing'.

Another is the practice of weekly cooking sessions in the classroom, which have traditionally been undertaken by a classroom assistant who has been at the school for a long time and must not be 'upset': *'Consequently, cakes and biscuits are a big feature'.*

Only two respondents asked for more nutritional information to be provided. A childminder suggested guidance leaflets for parents, who worry about weaning, allergies and other food problems. And a nursery teacher was concerned that more scientific information should be made available: *'There's research that shows children need plenty of fats and carbohydrates and there's more to it than healthy eating, but we're not told'.*

The key person

Only a handful of discussion groups and interviewees raised the question of the 'key person' role although this is a significant feature of the written guidance. Where this system, or the weaker 'key worker' system, is in place, it was felt to be a valuable support to children's wellbeing. For most pre-school practitioners it appeared to be the norm to have 'key children', but reception teachers explained that staffing, rotas and qualifications made it difficult, or impossible, to implement. One group of reception teachers was vociferous about the expectation that they should take on this role in addition to all their other responsibilities, which they felt was unrealistic.

Safeguarding

One additional aspect of wellbeing that was raised as something which is now universal and essential, was the introduction of water-tight procedures for safeguarding children. In general it was agreed that staff are now far more aware of the issues, and far more likely to act on signs rather than wait for someone else to act: 'Every member of staff is aware of troubles and strife' (Nursery nurse).

The EYFS has raised the status of some practitioner groups and introduced more equality despite unequal pay and conditions

Most practitioners were acutely conscious of the differentials in pay and conditions between different groups within the sector, but there was some recognition that, for the first time, the notion that *all* are professionals, on a qualifications ladder and working to similar professional guidelines, was gaining acceptance. The most obvious groups to benefit from this more inclusion view of the workforce are childminders and play-workers. Members of both groups described how their role involved contacting the teachers who are responsible for their children, and sometimes collaborating with them on planning and assessment for the child or on supporting transitions between settings.

Some children's centre managers, with responsibility for co-ordinating childminding services, described the benefits for children which resulted. One reported:

'The EYFS is core to the child minders, since we've had the EYFS at first the OfSTED grades either stayed the same or dropped, but now that everybody's fully understanding what's required of them and not taking on too much paperwork, the grades are gradually going up'.

Another manager observed that 'they will go and ask if they're taking a child to a nursery, they will go and speak to the nursery teachers, share planning and share ideas around that child which can only be for the benefit of the child'. Childminders themselves gave similar accounts (although they also reported rebuffs from teachers), as did a play-worker on behalf of his colleagues:

'it has made them sort of sit back and look at us as more professionals... over the last eighteen months, we have built up a relationship and there does seem to be a much bigger respect there for us as play workers'.

4.3 The areas of learning and early learning goals

This area of discussion generated both a great deal of consensus (in broad terms) and a great deal of disagreement in relation to particular goals and profile points. Whereas all groups were generally 'comfortable' with the way the curriculum is framed, those practitioners who actually have to assess children against the Early Learning Goals, especially the reception teachers, have many specific criticisms of the way these have been constructed and positioned.

The areas of learning are viewed as appropriate for children in this age group

All groups affirmed, without dissent, that the six areas of learning worked well in ensuring a comprehensive and appropriate curriculum for young children. Head teachers described them as 'set at the right level of challenge'; reception teachers as giving 'good coverage', and setting managers agreed that: 'They're not too unrealistic, which is a big thing, they're not expecting too much from a child at a certain age'. Both nursery nurses and childminders expressed the view that the areas of learning were helpful in planning, and one group of nursery staff agreed that 'I think they're right'. Practitioners offered many examples of their enjoyment in planning activities for areas of learning, based on observations of children's interests, and no reports of difficulties in meeting the requirements.

As described above, children's centre staff who provide drop-in sessions find it more difficult to plan for individual children, and they were particularly pleased with the way the areas of learning facilitated their planning for 'the room', ensuring that the activities provided were suitable across the age range of children who might attend: 'Well, they work for us... you can take everything that the children are doing into consideration'. Childminders, along with other groups, expressed their satisfaction that, because the curriculum areas are interlinked and overlapping, it was possible to plan for a single theme or activity and assess it against several areas of learning:

'It helps you plan...because you've got the specific areas of learning, we do a plan of what... we do a topic and we can fit the areas, each one of the areas of learning into the topics we're doing' (Childminder)

One group of childminders explained that they had previously 'borrowed' planning sheets from a nursery and planned in detail, and in advance, for each area, but that they could now see this was not necessary. Another group, of setting managers, reflected with some astonishment that they used to plan for the year ahead, in three-week topics, and change their provision of activities every morning and afternoon, which they now saw was inappropriate, as children liked to select their own resources and return to them frequently.

Most groups commented that the areas of learning, and the guidance, were play-based, and that the majority of children could make progress if provided with appropriate and playful activities, and good adult support. One area where this was highlighted was emergent literacy, where children learn:

'Through songs and rhymes, different pictures around the setting, so they are looking at print all the time, so they are becoming familiar with it, so it's like child centred and through play. I don't think they should be sat down and told, now you've got to write your name.' (Setting manager)

The areas of learning support inclusion for most groups and individuals

Nursery nurses were the group most likely to raise issues of inclusion, and in general they were positive about the ease with which the curriculum areas could generate learning opportunities at an appropriate level for all children. Several groups pointed out that the continuity and overlap between the developmental stages enabled practitioners to identify suitable activities for children with learning difficulties and for those who were designated gifted and talented. As one nursery nurse explained, 'There's nothing anywhere to say that you have to be here or you have to be there'.

Members of other groups referred to 'the Unique Child' as a principle which underpinned their own efforts to support children of varying needs and abilities, and described the flexibility of the EYFS as the necessary means to achieve that:

'You can focus the EYFS in whichever direction that you'd like, so if you've got children who are particularly gifted or talented, you can take them down their own learning journey and encourage different aspects. And the same with children with SEN, you can also encourage areas where they excel or where they would like to go, and that's the good thing about the EYFS in that you can, it's not prescriptive with regards to what you do' (Children's centre worker).

One fathers' worker described using the EYFS framework to help a Bengali father to understand his son's developmental delay, and to work with the practitioners in supporting him, without making the father feel alarmed or ashamed: 'we had to reassure him that all children develop at different rates'.

The exception that was made was the case of bilingual children, for whom many practitioners reported that there was inadequate support. In inner-urban areas, where more languages were spoken by children, this issue was raised repeatedly by both nursery and reception practitioners, as it was felt to have a strong impact on their daily work with children. One EYP suggested that there were 'big gaps in Communication Language and Literacy for children with English as an Additional Language', and other participants supported this view in relation to the assessments made against the EYFS profile.

Thirteen of the Phase 2 interviewees chose to comment on provision for bilingual children, as reported in Figure 4.3.2, while 21 chose to comment on gender issues, reported next in Figure 4.3.1.

Figure 4.3.1 Phase 2: data from individual interview questions (gender)

How do you ensure that both boys and girls make progress in the six areas of learning? (21 respondents)

All the respondents were confident that boys and girls were supported in learning in their settings, although six referred to boys' difficulties with achieving the literacy targets and especially the writing targets. Only three respondents (two childminders and a setting manager) argued for 'treating the children all the same' and the remainder offered a variety of descriptions of their successful practice, of which by far the most common was the use of the outdoor environment, which was the main focus of eight responses:

'We do outdoor writing with big sheets of paper but there are girls in this group too'
[Headteacher]

'I think the most important way of doing this is by recognising that learning can happen both inside and outside. Our garden is open all day and everyday (rain and shine.) The outside

space is planned for in as much detail as the inside area with the same opportunities for learning, both inside and outside'. [Nursery Headteacher]

'By providing opportunities to learn outside across all areas of the curriculum... in pretty much all weathers' [Reception teacher].

In the outdoor area, provision for mark-making often included large implements and surfaces to mark on, to encourage children whose fine motor skills were still developing. One nursery head teacher explained that through such provision 'you're developing their skeleton really, all the time'.

An equally strong response (seven interviews) referred to the practice of viewing children as unique individuals, and to the EYFS principle of 'the Unique Child'. As one nursery teacher remarked, 'we do not see them as different genders but rather as different learners'. In every case, it was explained that the curriculum provision could, and should, follow children's interests. Some reference was made to introducing superheroes and dinosaurs as a stimulus to writing, but the same respondents often stressed the shared interest of boys and girls.

'We direct the learning through the interests of both boys and girls' [Early Years Professional]

'We don't put them in boxes – it's the unique child, and we meet individual needs. If boys want to be outside – some of them do – then we adapt the curriculum, we take it outside. If they want to be more active, and girls to sit down more, then we provide the environment that suits both of them'. [Nursery Headteacher]

Four respondents spoke explicitly about 'challenging stereotypes' and 'offering an anti-bias curriculum' although there was a sense too that it was important to acknowledge, rather than ignore, innate gender differences: one teacher asked, 'It is OK to say that isn't it?' .

The responses overall showed the importance of the EYFS requirements for outdoor learning and for its emphasis on the unique child, although these emphases may be harder to sustain when provision moves into the primary school.

Figure 4.3.2: Phase 2: data from individual interview questions (EAL)

Can you describe how you might use the EYFS guidance to support bilingual learners? Should there be more detailed guidance on supporting bilingual learners? (13 respondents)

No respondents reported 'using the EYFS guidance', which was not felt to be very helpful to bilingual children or their teachers, although several had found for themselves the (2007) guidance called *Supporting Children Learning English as an Additional Language*.

Responses divided evenly between those (mostly in urban areas) who gave lengthy accounts of the framework's inadequacies, and those (mostly outside London) who felt that it was not a problem: 'They can learn in this environment anyway, everything they do in this environment supports their language learning; a lot of our English children come in way below the level for their age, and they all catch up, they all learn in this environment' [Nursery teacher].

Criticisms of the EYFS and particularly of the assessments came mainly from the maintained (nursery school and nursery class) sector, and included:

'There is no mention of using home languages at all in Language for Communication. That limits early bilinguals to statements such as "Uses single and two word utterances to convey simple and more complex messages", "Understands simple sentences." Of course they could be using complex sentences in their home language, but this isn't acknowledged at all. And to make matters worse the guidance says they must therefore be at a 16-26 month level'. [Nursery Headteacher]

'There is no mention at all of other scripts- children may be able to recognise Arabic writing or may write from right to left as a result of what they have seen their parent do. This isn't acknowledged or valued at all by the guidance'. [Nursery teacher]

'I think the way the guidance is set out implies that bilingual learners are somehow 'behind' where they should be. In my work as an Outreach Teacher, I have visited children in Early Years settings who are bilingual learners but where this has not been recognised as potentially relevant to their behaviour 'problems'. I have been told more than once that a child "should be able to speak more English by now (after 6 months)" and "we have had other children who have picked it up much more quickly so we know there's a problem"' [SEN teacher]

Some settings make provision for EAL children in a wide variety of ways, although this is not in response to EYFS recommendations:

'Children who enter the nursery have a daily language group to give more focussed support'.

[Nursery teacher]

*'I encourage [parents] to speak the mother tongue at home but this term we will be sending home simple picture story books so that as well as sharing books in their own tongue parent and child can share emerging words and vocabulary'.**[Setting manager]*

'We are fortunate enough to have bilingual staff who work with parents from the beginning, starting with the home visits to find out what children can say and understand in their home language so that we can build on this knowledge when the child starts nursery'. *[Nursery Headteacher]*

Although four respondents specifically requested 'more guidance', one teacher said that what was needed was 'better in-service training to make EY staff aware of the existing guidance and what it says'.

Figure 4.3.3: Phase 2: data from individual interview questions (gifted and talented children)

How might the EYFS enable you to support gifted and talented children? Should there be more detailed guidance? (11 respondents)

Of the respondents who chose to comment on this question, three said that they were 'not comfortable' with the concept of gifts and talents, and that particular talents in one field were often accompanied by poor personal, social and emotional development. Only one (reception teacher) respondent requested more resources because 'The difference with the 'g and t' children is that they are very creative thinkers and have a strong sense of what they are interested in and tend to want to tell me what they think/have found out rather than coming to me for help on how to do something'.

The response of all other interviewees was that the rich provision of the EYFS, including the 'continuous provision' in the Enabling Environment, allowed all children to learn and develop in their own way and at their own pace: 'It's just the same as with the other groups, you start

from the unique child, from what you observe, you don't need to be told what to do' [Nursery Headteacher]. Most agreed that all children have individual needs and talents which are met through careful observation.

One nursery in an area of extreme deprivation proudly recounted the opportunities they offer to all children and families:

'We now run an extended school which meets the needs of the whole community, all children can learn an instrument, all have singing and dance classes, sports coaching, swimming and ice skating lessons and every weekend we run free family outings to the cinema, theatre, museums, farms etc'. [Nursery teacher]

There appears to be little demand for additional guidance on children identified as gifted and talented.

Figure 4.3.4: Phase 2: data from individual interview questions (children with special needs)

How might the EYFS enable you to support children with special needs? Should there be more detailed guidance? (15 respondents)

Most of the fifteen respondents favoured the addition of more detailed guidance on supporting children with SEN, even where they felt that the framework offered sufficient range and flexibility for practitioners to work with. A nursery teacher gave a typical response:

'In general children with mild special needs seem well supported by the EYFS in terms of the provision and curriculum being individualised and free enough to allow them access and to allow differentiation... I think it is more complicated with children with severe special needs'.

Only one respondent felt that there was a 'wealth' of advice and guidance already, and that adding more would make the EYFS 'too cumbersome'. Others argued that the principle of the 'Unique child', and guidance on inclusive practice and parent partnership, provided sufficient support so long as they took advice from an SEN co-ordinator. But the strongest views expressed were the voices raised against the age-banding of the Development Matters (an issue previously raised in focus groups), which was felt to demean children with

developmental delays, and to be inappropriate to share with parents. Seven respondents made comments of this kind:

'The age bands are very discriminatory against SEN. So we've removed the age bands so parents cannot see them. We have children on the autistic spectrum so we cannot send the assessment back to the parents. The assessments don't show what the children can do'. [Nursery Headteacher]

'Personally I despise the age bands on the guidance- particularly with reference to children with special needs. There are some children who make significant progress but still find themselves banded with 8-20 months. This is particularly upsetting for parents. We've chosen to leave all the age bands off our documentation'. [Nursery head teacher]

'It's upsetting for parents if you show them what level their child is at and there's a picture of a lovely chubby baby and it says "12 months" when the child is coming up to three'. [Nursery teacher]

Other pointed out that the 'bands' would need to be broken down into much smaller steps to recognise the progress of children with delays: 'Some children with SEN might otherwise never move from one band to another as they are too broad and all the progress made at pre-school is perhaps within only one band' (nursery teacher).

Other suggestions made were that good special-needs practice, such as teaching Makaton or using picture cues, might benefit children more widely; and that advisory staff need to be much better trained for working with pre-school children: 'We get very annoyed for example when we receive speech and language therapy targets and guidance which do not meet the needs of three year olds'. [Nursery head teacher]

In general, and in spite of the approval of the Unique Child principle, special needs guidance is not seen to be adequate.

There are many criticisms of the level and ordering of points in the profile, but no consensus among participants

Reception teachers, who have the greatest responsibility for assessing children at the end of the EYFS, and completing the Profile, were vociferous in explaining the difficulties they

experienced in making decisions and ‘awarding points’. Teachers in the focus groups worked in very varied circumstances and with very different groups of children, so it was not surprising that their perspective on the appropriateness of levels and goals was also different. There were those who protested that some children had ‘achieved all the ELGs’ before moving into Year 1, and others who felt that the expectations enshrined in the ELGs were ‘just outrageous’ in their difficulty; some who felt that the numeracy targets were too easy, and others who felt they were not achievable. But the widest concern across all regions and local authorities was about the difficulty of the ‘writing goals.’ Teachers as well as some head teachers put the arguments that:

- Some children develop later and should not be viewed as ‘behind’ because they do not achieve the writing goals
- The requirements for rhyme as well as for writing are inappropriate for most children in the age group
- Some groups of children (boys are named, but also summer-born children) are disadvantaged by the goals being set so high
- Bilingual children are disadvantaged because there is no provision for them to demonstrate skills in their first language
- There are ‘massive jumps’ between different profile points

Other aspects of the ELGs and Profile were criticised for their inconsistency and illogicality. One group of teachers agreed that the order of scale points in Problem-solving, Reasoning and Numeracy implies a linearity to children’s learning which is inappropriate and counter-intuitive. A group of Early Years Professionals similarly engaged in a detailed debate on the ordering of the mathematical concepts, which they felt was irrational and unfair to children, and contrary to the fundamental EYFS principle that children can learn through exploratory play: ‘that whole thing about grouping and counting... it’s something that has to be taught one on one, for a long, long time...’. The issue was raised in several groups that the ‘points’ should only be awarded to children when they demonstrate their knowledge and skills in self-initiated play or self-chosen activities, and that not all goals or statements were suited to this notion. Unfairness to bilingual children was also raised as an unintended outcome of assessment activities.

Other practitioners pointed out that some statements are of a definite ‘can do/ can’t do’ nature while others were far more vague and ‘airy-fairy’. One setting has opted to assess children against a commercially-produced set of targets, which their Early Years Professional describes as ‘more comprehensible and straight to the point: “Can stack 12 blocks”’.

In general, while practitioners were unanimous in affirming the organisation and content of the areas of learning, those who were involved with the older children felt strongly that the Profile required more thoughtful re-working. One teacher said that 'teaching to the profile point, it's teaching to the test', and others pointed out that working towards these defined goals contradicts the holistic and child-centred ethos of the EYFS itself.

The ELGs and profile statements are both subjective and context-dependent

One further difficulty which was raised repeatedly by head teachers, and by nursery and reception teachers, was that the ELGs and profile statements can be interpreted very subjectively, and that this can be a cause of contention when children move from nursery to reception, or from reception to Year 1. Many nursery practitioners argued that they observe children's knowledge, skills and competencies carefully and only award a descriptor if they are certain that the child has achieved it; but that the same children may be described by the next setting as 'not having the point'. Several of the headteacher groups, for their part, complained that children coming to them had been assessed too highly within the pre-school environment, and that they had to 'start from scratch' when the children entered school. One group of head teachers agreed in finding the assessments made by staff in PVI settings particularly unreliable and unrealistic.

Some participants offered explanations for why this should be the case, based on the different values for children's development which may prevail in school and pre-school environments: 'I think what we classify as being independent in nursery is very different to what we classify in reception as being independence' (Reception teacher). Others were aware that children's ability to demonstrate certain skills and knowledge is dependent on the context in which they are invited to act, and the resources which are available to them. Children who appear to demonstrate certain achievements within a nursery environment may not be able to demonstrate them in the different learning environment of the school classroom. The ambiguities of assessing number knowledge, number understanding, counting, calculating and related concepts were discussed at length in one group of nursery and reception teachers.

The theme of assessment is discussed next, while the problematic nature of the transitions children make between learning environments is discussed further below (section 4.5).

4.4 Assessment experiences within the EYFS framework

Practitioners from different groups in the sector report very different experiences of assessing children, and the tensions and pressures that assessment can create intensify, understandably, as children approach the end of the Foundation Stage. For many of those working with the youngest children, assessment is clearly a pleasure and an integral part of their daily experience; for some of those working with the oldest children, the engagement with external expectations and top-down requirements is reported to be overwhelmingly demanding. This section tries to capture both positions, and the experiences that all practitioners share.

Most pre-school practitioners value assessment activities as an integral part of their daily support for learning

For those working with younger children, assessment was an appropriate part of their daily activities, and they were comfortable with the underpinning values:

‘It’s getting practitioners to look more closely at where the child is at, what they are capable of, celebrating their successes and building upon that. It’s not a case of looking and ticking a box and say, oh they can’t do this, and they can do this. It’s looking at where they are and following the next steps.’ (Early Years Professional)

Observation was reported to be the foundation of the assessments made by childminders, children’s centre staff, nursery nurses, and other pre-school staff, and almost all observations were made within child-led or child-chosen activities, so that they reflected children’s interests as well as their competences. It was rare for a practitioner to refer to ‘setting-up’ an activity in order to assess children’s performance. Many practitioners described their pleasure in observing children, and many were equally positive about documenting the evidence of their observations. Some groups described with enthusiasm the individual records which were built up within the setting (including the childminders’ homes) and were taken away by the child and family at the point of transition to a new setting.

Despite this evident enthusiasm for what could be learned from watching children closely, the requirement to write up observations as documentary evidence of learning was frequently described as time-consuming and by some practitioners as ‘daunting’ or ‘challenging’. There was a clear difference on this matter between practitioners from groups who have been trained in observation and have always used this method, and those for whom it is a new

requirement. It was rare for nursery teachers or nursery nurses to comment on the time taken for recording and writing, because the activity has always been embedded in their practice, whereas for many childminders (and also play-workers) it was seen a huge challenge. Several childminder discussions focused on the argument that 'you can be a good childminder and not be good at writing... or you might be good at writing and no good with the children'. Some said they hated writing, and found it difficult, and many stories circulated in these groups about colleagues who had given up childminding because of the requirement to document children's learning.

The majority of providers relied on portfolios to provide evidence of learning across all areas of the curriculum, and photographs were described as the universal medium for recording, because they capture a process of learning rather than a product. Childminders, for whom this was a relatively new process, found it rewarding as well as demanding:

'I like taking photos and putting them under headings'

'You can see, you've got a visual progression of the child's development, haven't you'.

Some groups of childminders referred to spending almost all day with a camera and notebook to hand, in the belief that they had to produce 'evidence' of every experience that each of their children had. There were mixed views on the assumed requirement to annotate each of these pictures with references to each of the areas of learning. On the one hand, there was pleasure in discovering that a simple child-initiated play activity could provide evidence of several different curriculum areas. On the other hand, the perceived requirement to identify the value of every activity, and then to plan the 'next steps', was felt by many to be onerous. Many experienced practitioners, in all groups, commented that they had the 'next steps' in their heads – 'it just comes naturally' - and there was no need to keep writing them down, while others argued that 'there isn't always a next step'. In one local authority, a childminder group was amused as well as baffled by the possibilities, as this example demonstrates:

'R1: And there's not always a next step. OK, you go out for a picnic, and you do all the questioning, and you look at the trees, and what's the next step?'

R2: Teach them to be a lumberjack!'

The use of portfolios, and the scrapbooks which many children's centre staff construct for the young children attending drop-in services, is discussed further in section 4.7 below.

The EYFS guidance and Development Matters support early assessments and enable early interventions for children falling behind

Pre-school practitioners in particular, including nursery teachers, nursery nurses and setting managers, frequently referred to the detailed guidance on children's development, and the EYFS focus on the 'unique child', which they felt helped with the early identification of delay and difficulties. Several participants implied that the categorisation (and stigma) of children as 'SEN' should no longer apply, since each child was now viewed as an individual with unique strengths and needs. One Early Years Professional explained:

'You tailor EYFS provision to their individual needs, in a way every child has got their own special needs and we're not seeing them separate anymore. You're not seeing them as, that special needs child, that child with a gift, you're seeing that child as unique and how can I plan for that child.'

Others viewed early identification as a priority which was supported by the EYFS:

'The Development Matters statements have helped us to pinpoint where children are at and helped us to identify those children more effectively.' (Early Years Professional)

'Its like every child now has an individual education plan, so we are identifying children who are falling behind quicker and earlier at a younger age.' (Early Years Professional)

Observations continued to be a staple part of the routine of these pre-school practitioners, and the framework was felt by many to support the interpretation of observations, for the child's as well as the practitioner's benefit:

'Everything is laid out within each of the age groups; you can see where the child is at and what they can be working towards next' (nursery nurse)

'There is a lot of information so observations have become much easier' (nursery nurse).

There were, however, negative responses to the high priority that was felt to be placed on written observations.

Practitioners working with 4-5 year olds are critical of many aspects of the assessment arrangements

Respondents working in primary school settings, especially head teachers and reception teachers, described a very different perception of statutory requirements from those experienced by pre-school practitioners. Head teachers in general supported the benefits of the new framework, in one case acknowledging that 'quality EYFS observations are now used throughout the school', but in all their groups there was a view that assessment is 'not right yet'. One head spoke for many in reporting that 'at present there are lots of misunderstandings between staff on the assessment'. Many reported that the assessment process was burdensome and that the number of points to assess in the EYFSP was too great for their teachers to cope with; and all headteacher groups raised the issue that the assessment process was 'highly subjective,' leading to wide variations in assessment by different practitioner groups in the sector. The reported lack of support for assessment moderation at key points of transition, in particular from diverse preschool settings to nursery and reception classes in schools, had led to a situation where, it was said, 'practitioners are really consumed with this'. Head teachers expressed particular frustration at what they believed was a lack of adequate moderation of assessment information as children moved between the private and maintained sectors, but also between different settings in the maintained sector.

Assessment practices under the EYFS were a particularly problematic issue for reception teachers, mainly because of the requirement to complete the EYFS profile, but also because of the potential difficulties associated with transition to Key Stage 1. To some extent, these issues should be seen as related. The reception teachers in the focus groups frequently expressed the view that there was a mismatch between the assessment requirements under the EYFSP, and assessment practice in KS1. The 'gap' between phases for some teachers meant that information passed on by reception teachers was not always seen as useful by teachers in Years 1 and 2. Hence there was widespread support for the idea that the EYFS needs to flow into the national curriculum, so that assessments in both phases refer to similar content and criteria.

There was also frustration that the whole ethos underpinning assessment practice appeared to change once children were five years old. One teacher expressed this particularly clearly, but others made similar points:

‘this whole entire way of assessment that’s deemed unbelievably important in the Early Years is just suddenly not important anymore and they’ve just gone to doing it a different way, and it’s almost like, well if it’s that important how come they don’t have to do it when they step into a different classroom’ (reception teacher).

One aspect of the apparently abrupt shift from child-led to curriculum-led assessments was the view expressed by many nursery staff that their assessment documents, and the ‘leavers’ reports’ which they prepared for each child, were ignored by reception teacher; similarly, reception teachers reported their suspicion that their assessments of children on the EYFS Profile were being ‘put in a cupboard’ once the children entered Year 1.

Assessment requirements ‘take time away from the children

Almost all practitioner groups commented on the amount of time that was taken up by making detailed assessments of each child, but teachers in both nursery and primary schools, and nursery nurses, were more accustomed to viewing record-keeping as a part of their duties, which they undertake in ‘paid’ time; while staff in PVI settings, and childminders and play-workers, commented that the time spent on assessment activities was either ‘taken away from the children’, or undertaken in their own (unpaid) time.

The implications of expecting staff in all parts of the children’s workforce to comply with the same guidance, despite enormous differences in their working hours, pay and conditions, and qualifications, are serious and may require some modification or clarification. Staff working in children’s centres reported that they were caught between the two groups. They were offering provision for children of all ages from birth to five, and so they were required to observe children’s learning and record their observations in the same way as nursery staff. But they were also catering for a fluctuating client group (in the case of crèche workers and early years educators running drop-ins) or for a much broader age group (in the case of play-workers responsible for provision for 5-11 year-olds) so that the requirement to observe was viewed as an additional and onerous duty. Children’s centre staff reported on their dilemmas:

‘you’ve got all this documentation that needs to be written down but no time to do it because you’re hands on with the children throughout the day’ (play development worker)

'You think, for the amount of time that we are actually doing the activities and things, and a lot of it I spend just as much time planning, and writing and evaluating everything, as you do actually doing the activity'. (play worker)

'Implementing it is fine because it's practical and you know what you're implementing for the next steps, it's recording your assessments ready for any inspections that's going to come in like OFSTED and things like that'. (crèche worker)

One additional complication to the picture presented by participants, especially childminders and those working in children's centres, was the lack of clarity as to what the statutory requirements were. Focus group participants frequently disagreed with each other on what was actually required of them – by Ofsted, by the local authority, or by the EYFS. Proper clarification of the kinds of observations and assessments that are needed may help to ease the concerns of these groups.

4.5 *Transitions experienced by children from birth to 5*

One of the original specifications of this project was to explore the extent to which the EYFS supported children's transitions from pre-school to school. However, every practitioner group had its own concerns about the number and nature of the transitions children are making at different points in their first five years of life, including:

- 'Horizontal' transitions between settings within the week or within the day, for children under three who, as a result of the greatly expanded provision of services in children's centres, attend childminders, drop-ins and stay and plays
- Transitions from the first caregivers (childminders or pre-schools, or both) into maintained nursery provision, between the ages of two and three
- Transitions from nursery provision into the reception class
- Transition from reception into Year 1.

The last of these is regarded as the most challenging for children and practitioners, and will be addressed first. Within several focus groups it prompted requests that the EYFS should be carried forward into the Primary Curriculum until the end of Key Stage 1.

Transition from the EYFS into the primary Curriculum gives cause for concern to all those involved with children aged 4 and 5

This transition between key stages is the concern principally of head teachers and reception teachers. The head teachers, who generally praised the EYFS as ensuring a smooth transition within the birth to five age range, expressed concern that this currently 'comes to a halt at the end of Reception'. Many felt that their staff were experiencing a heavy workload, and that they themselves were 'under huge pressure' to manage the transition into Key Stage 1. As one explained, 'at the moment we are pulled in so many different directions', in that they are attempting to promote a play-based curriculum in the school at the same time as sustaining their Key Stage 2 assessment outcomes. Thus they can see the option of a single, consistent, curriculum throughout the school as preferable, more likely to ensure a smooth transition and offering more continuity of learning experiences for children. One head teacher stated that she had already 'changed our year one curriculum to a skills based creative curriculum'. This was in preparation for the new Primary curriculum and, according to this head, the Year Two teacher would like to see a similar curriculum. Thus from their whole school perspective, the head teachers identified a number of tensions for children as staff engaged in different pedagogical practices and with different curricula, depending upon the age of the children.

None of the reception teacher groups felt that the EYFS supported transition to Key Stage 1, and in several regions this was felt to be a major concern. However, it is important to be clear that the teachers did not believe that the problem lay in the EYFS per se. On the contrary, most teachers were supportive of the EYFS for this age group, and many commented that its principles, and the flexible indoor and outdoor pedagogy, should be extended into Key Stage 1, and until children are 6 or 7. One of the difficulties they identified was a lack of knowledge and understanding of the EYFS from colleagues in Key Stage 1, and the expectations that stem from this as children progress. One reception teacher reported, 'actually some of my year one colleagues have no idea about the EYFS and I don't think that's just down to the school...I think it's much broader'.

In terms of expectations for children, several pre-school practitioners and reception teachers expressed the view that their aim was for children to be able to choose their own activities and sustain their own interests, whereas the Year 1 regime required children to be compliant and docile, following the teacher's lead. Differences in teachers' expectations of children were exemplified by this comment:

'like one of the Year 1 teachers said to me "I want the children to be independent" but she doesn't mean independent like our children are extremely independent, she means she wants them to be able to sit down and write' (reception teacher).

The difficulties surrounding this transition appeared to be compounded by the process of data collection for the profile - in itself described as an onerous task by many of the reception class teachers - and by its use by the Key Stage 1 teachers. A reception teacher pointed out that: 'transition would be so much better if the documentation was exactly the same for all the way up to Year 2'. Another reception teacher voiced the views of her focus group in describing this transition as 'like two worlds fighting against each other'.

Transition from nursery to reception almost always involves significant changes for children, but can be supported by using the EYFS framework

Transitions from nursery to reception classes provoked fewer accounts of difficulties, but these again tended to centre on assessment practices and assessment data. Some reception teachers indicated that difficulties experienced during the transition from pre-school settings derived from the lack of consistency in assessment data as children moved into reception classes. Some local authorities had started creating transition documents but 'not everyone uses them, and this can cause tension between settings' and one teacher alleged that differences in assessment practices from various settings 'makes a mockery of it all'. A number of practitioners in all pre-school groups expressed uncertainty as to whether their assessments of children were being read and used by the receiving teachers, and some felt that a lot of time and effort was going into the transition information which perhaps was not then applied for the benefit of the child.

Within the pre-school sector, nursery nurses, Early Years Professionals and setting managers reported a range of good and bad transition practice; their experiences suggested that it is perfectly possible to manage transitions smoothly and positively by using the EYFS to ensure continuity, but that local constraints and practices still impede this for many children. In many practitioner groups, practitioners offered accounts of their efforts to build links with schools and reception teachers, and the variability of the response. Some nurseries, and practitioners, begin the process months before the actual move, with children receiving 'visits' from their reception teacher throughout the spring and summer; while others reported that their local authority refused to inform parents of their child's school

place until later in the year, so that the preparation for transition was delayed. This issue obviously needs to be addressed at the local authority policy level.

One aspect of the transfer to school was noted as a particular difficulty for some children: those children who are used to being outside all the time, and whose preferred learning style was physical and active, are very likely to be disadvantaged by the move to reception. This issue was exacerbated in one local authority, according to many of its practitioners, by the fact that children are starting school earlier and will all have a single point of entry from 2010.

‘Children are going into the school system earlier, and it’s very diverse, what they are offering, some of them are really structured, you know, you see the children, if you go to the school you see the children you work with in nursery setting, and how different it is for them. It’s a bit shocking’. (senior development worker).

There was agreement that the move from pre-school to school was often the point at which boys ‘became disadvantaged’, because the learning opportunities offered to them were gradually diminished. At the same time, staff ratio changes were noted, and several practitioners pointed out that children in pre-school settings are used to having adults around them to listen and attend to them, but that this was impossible in a large reception class with two members of staff. This lack of individual attention was felt to have more impact on some children than on others.

The nature and number of transitions made by children under three needs to be examined, and continuity provided between settings

Many respondents working with under-threes, while recognising that the existence of a common framework supported some continuity of experience for children, expressed concerns about children’s experiences of multiple transitions in their pre-school years, as well as about the traditional transition from pre-school to school. These concerns are not a direct result of the EYFS itself but are a consequence of the whole package of government initiatives which have resulted in a far higher proportion of children entering group care at an early age, and spending longer in such care.

Regional variations in provision and practice play an important role in shaping children’s experiences. In some local authorities, childminders reported that they only kept children until they were about two and a half, and then ‘handed them over’ to PVI pre-schools, who then

'handed them over' to maintained provision in the period before reception. The norm in this local authority was for a child to experience at least three pre-school caregivers and environments before starting in reception at the age of four. In at least one region, however, childminders reported that they looked after children until they started school.

Several causes for concern were raised in relation to children's need for continuity between the settings they attend:

'Some of our development folders need to be like a passport or something so that they go with the children. They come to crèche here, then go to us ... you know even if you only see them once ... actually see that development folder, you know where the children are at' (Setting manager)

As a result of the expansion of provision, respondents also expressed concern that children's frequent 'horizontal transitions' (in the course of a day or week) might be inappropriate or undesirable at such an early age.

'so on Thursday they'll come to us, then they'll go to another centre on a Monday or a Wednesday, because that's what, particularly the childminders, they sort of travel around to different children's centres, experiencing, you know, stay and plays. So sometimes the children are at different stay and plays, in different buildings, every week' (Children's centre worker)

Members of both childminder and after-school groups expressed the view that, if the demands of the EYFS for the provision and assessment of the areas of learning are imposed in all settings, children may be deprived of the opportunity to simply relax and play in 'non-purposeful' ways. It was suggested and discussed in some groups that children would benefit from having a less 'educational' environment from some of their providers:

'I'm worrying about children being so early at school, and then they come to after school club. So their day – half past 8 till 6 is a long day for them. And we as childcare providers really need to take that on board and have a very nurturing time as well for the children, and it's very different that it's not school' (after-school worker)

More positive comments were made by staff in new (phase 3) children's centres, who reported that they were beginning to make links with local schools by offering to hold outreach sessions on the school premises. These staff were optimistic that the youngest

children would become accustomed to the school site and that this would make the eventual transition to school easier. Friendships between children, and between mothers, in the local area, were also expected to be of benefit in supporting transition.

'I had a mum say to me the other day that she's really happy that she started coming here, as well, because her child's made a friend who is somebody that they know will go to the school behind us, so it'll be nice to know that he'll be going to school with somebody as well, now. You know, so it is quite nice when the children make friends as well, to progress into education with' (Children's centre manager)

The intentions of the EYFS framework to offer smooth transitions and continuity for children were understood by all practitioner groups, but their accounts suggested that many local arrangements need to be looked at carefully and critically in order that these intentions are met.

4.6 Professional learning

The importance of high levels of practitioner learning and expertise, widely recognised in recent research on quality and equality, was also recognised as a priority by almost all focus group participants, and by the individual interviewees. Many staff saw themselves as on a qualifications ladder, and referred to their recent or ongoing courses and awards – one entire group of setting managers was enrolled on an Open University course, with the support of their local authority, and many other groups reported on the awards they were working towards. These awards include for instance 'Quality First' and First Aid for childminders; Level Two, Three and Four awards for nursery staff; Foundation degrees and part-time BA courses for setting managers; MAs for teachers and head teachers; and professional qualifications such as the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) for those managing children's centres. The accessibility of professional learning related to the EYFS was seen as an important topic by participants. The findings are summarised here.

Introductory training for the EYFS was of very variable quality

There was a remarkable degree of variation in the reported experience of different practitioner groups, in different regions, as they were first introduced to the EYFS. Both the

quantity and quality of training was reported to be uneven, suggesting that the implementation of the framework is likely to have been equally uneven.

The most advantaged groups in this respect were the Early Years Professionals, all of whom had recently been trained or re-trained specifically to introduce the EYFS and to lead change in settings by providing professional development for other staff. As one participant explained, 'EYFS frames the EYP role, it's sort of the 39 training standards and everything'. Members of these focus groups explained that their role was to model or 'cascade' learning to colleagues who were less qualified, and to encourage reflective practice. At the same time, their own professional learning was supported, in every authority except one, by active networks:

'We have an EYP network in the authority which we're members of and from that we have had some money available to us for our professional development which we have used in different ways.... As a network at the moment, we've had some outside people come in and train us about using the outdoors, in the hope that we can then train others from that, so that's one way of doing it.'

One way in which the Early Years Professional role differs from other forms of training is that it places a premium on reflection and self-evaluation, and encourages practitioners to identify their own needs for professional learning. The Early Years Professional then attempts to meet these needs by providing support within the settings:

'So I think it has made people more aware of their own needs and encouraged more self-audits and then the training, hopefully this is meeting their needs, as opposed to just having a book saying oh yeah we'll do this and this.'

Some other practitioner groups described a situation in which the introduction of the EYFS had been less well supported. One group of primary head teachers agreed that their own local authority had offered them no training at all, and they had had to 'pick it up from the reception teachers', by going in their classrooms and asking for explanations. Reception and nursery teachers, on the other hand, had all been offered extensive training, even if the quality was sometimes uneven, and in general the staff in the maintained sector (schools and nursery schools) claimed to have had many opportunities for induction into the EYFS.

Setting managers in most regions confirmed that the level of support from central government or the local authority had been high, that there were now many more qualified

staff than previously, and that the quality of provision in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector had improved as a result. But several of the setting managers were also experiencing difficulties in training their own less-qualified staff, and one group expressed concern that after the Graduate Leader Fund had wound up there would be no financial support for community and charitable settings in the PVI sector to train their newer and younger staff. Some recently qualified nursery staff in one local authority pointed out that their initial training had not prepared them for the EYFS, and that this needed to be remedied.

Some dissent to a broadly positive report of introductory training came from both childminder and children's centre groups. Childminders' experiences differed by local authority, with some having extensive support and some feeling that they had floundered. Those who were most unhappy were the older childminders, who had the most experience but the lowest levels of professional qualifications, and found the introductory training deeply unsatisfactory. Members of one group reported:

'I left the training feeling very confused and very downhearted'

'We were more confused when we went to the course. After the course we were just like "what on earth" ...'

Some children's centre staff, both managers and crèche workers or play-workers, reported that they were equally disappointed. In the beginning, working with the new framework was felt to be challenging for many respondents even if they are now using it competently:

'when we got the EYFS we actually got the book and that was it and they said "follow the lead" and we got no training whatsoever, none whatsoever... They would do the safeguarding and they would do the things that they had to have like food and hygiene and stuff like that and first aid, but the rest you just didn't get' (Children's centre manager)

In such cases, there appeared to be a wide gap between what practitioners felt they needed, and what they were offered, giving no opportunities for staff to feel ownership of the framework or of their own implementation of its requirements:

'I think it would have been nice if there'd been a level that was taught and then we could then go our own way from that and build it up to where we want it to be for your setting and where we want it to be for ours'. (Children's centre worker)

Other children's centre staff described the way they had pooled their existing expertise, such as nursery work or family support work, and helped each other to work out precisely how their new roles should function. All members of this practitioner group reported working with enthusiasm towards an integrated service, but some managers were aware of gaps in their knowledge which would need to be supplied by further training.

It seems likely that the quality of provision offered to children and families, at least in the first year of the EYFS, will have been influenced by the quality and quantity of training for practitioners. Given the diversity of the workforce as they begin working with children and families, especially in new services, there is likely to be a need for more individualised opportunities for professional development. Children's centre staff within one focus group disagreed completely about the training that had been offered to them, one declaring it 'terrible' while another felt it was very good, and a third insisted 'I've had no training, no training whatsoever'. This situation will take time to put right, and it is important for development opportunities to be ongoing as well as fine-tuned. It should not be assumed that practitioners have now had the training they feel they need.

Professional learning is still needed, on different aspects of the framework, and for different groups

Most groups commented on specific training needs that they were aware of in their own settings or neighbourhoods. For some head teachers a major issue of concern was that the successful implementation of the EYFS demanded high quality staff and that 'getting enough of the right people is a challenge'. They felt that the EYFS was a complex document and, as one said, 'can only be as effective as the people delivering it'. This view was exemplified by a nursery head teacher with a combined children's centre, who felt that the quality of the staff depended upon the pay they received, which was hugely inequitable. This participant maintained that the EYFS demands 'high calibre staff' but that she often interviews poor quality candidates who are unable to meet these requirements.

There was considerable support among the groups for professional development offered, formally or informally, within schools and settings or within local clusters, rather than externally and by visiting trainers. One head teacher suggested, for example, that teaching

assistants needed better training 'particularly around issues to do with the assessments and with observations.' She felt that her own teachers should provide this guidance as school based training which would be context specific, or else organized within a local group of schools. Some reception teachers, similarly, reported that their teaching assistants or nursery nurses had not been offered sufficient training.

Children's centre staff, from managers to crèche workers and play-workers to fathers' workers, presented a picture of training for the EYFS which had been somewhat haphazard. Several groups discussed how they accessed training in general, and compared how easy or hard it was to have their needs met. Although, overall, the budget for training children's centre staff was viewed as adequate, the quality of the training was described as mixed, and in some areas rather basic:

'the courses are written by the Early Years team, but they're not necessarily delivered by the people who have an expertise in that area. So somebody can be picking up a pack on the laptop and it's death by PowerPoint' (children's centre manager)

'I've learned more of working with the children with other members of staff and learning from them rather than learning from the course' (crèche worker).

Professional learning within the EYFS is potentially more inclusive

The development of an inclusive programme for children from birth to 5 has led to both difficulties and improvements in the professional learning offered to pre-school staff. Among practitioner groups, the nursery staff, who were working under a range of professional titles and across a range of settings, were most likely to draw attention to this.

Nursery nurses, and practitioners with Level 2 or 3 qualifications, were in general very satisfied with the training opportunities open to them although the eventual pay and conditions differentials remained a sore point. Many commented on the inclusive nature of the new roles open to them, and the training which accompanied these roles: 'everybody is much more aware of everybody... you have to be aware of the whole age range'. In several groups, participants indicated that, because everyone in the setting was working to the same programme, 'everyone feels involved', from support staff to managers. Their training now encompassed the whole age range so that practitioners working with under-3s, and 3-5s, were no longer seen as operating in different spheres. This was reported to be difficult for some staff, and especially for those trained to work with under-3s: practitioners who had got

used to the *Birth to Three Matters* framework were now obliged to change to a more comprehensive overview of development. For some of those who had undergone birth-to-3 training, the new requirements appeared to make their earlier qualifications redundant.

The differentials in pay and conditions between teaching and non-teaching staff continued to occupy staff at this level, however. They were aware that they might possess similar expertise, and fulfil similar roles, to teaching staff, but that their salaries would never compare; for this reason, the attractions of continuing professional development could seem double-edged.

Provision for professional learning may be described as inequitable

The variation that was reported between regions suggested that the EYFS was not being supported equally well for different groups in different authorities. Some participants reported that their LA or practitioner network could be relied on to provide all the training that practitioners requested. Others reported that the quantity and quality of training was insufficient for their needs.

For childminders, the issue in all groups was mainly of when and where training was offered. Every focus group raised the issue that their training and qualifications – unlike that of practitioners in the maintained sector – was undertaken at some cost to themselves. Many pointed out that ‘unlike teachers’ they had to undertake all professional development in their own time and without pay, and that this was often on Saturdays when they wished to be with their families. Nevertheless, there was great variability between local authorities in the extent to which childminders felt supported. One group agreed that ‘It’s taken a long time for training to be put in place for childminders’, and that they were the last group to be thought of. Other groups, in two different local authorities, remarked:

‘If you do need any training that we think we need, we’ll just ask the childminder team’

‘If we think we need a course on, the childminding team supports us and does the best they can to put it on for us’

The difference in provision for training between maintained and non-maintained settings was also highlighted by groups of Early Years Professionals and setting managers, all of whom work within the PVI sector. One setting manager appeared to speak for her group on this point:

'Support training for us has been pathetic. They wouldn't do it in schools, they'd have a riot on their hands. Can you imagine them introducing a new curriculum into schools, nationally, and giving head teachers two or three hours training and saying go and train the troops?' (manager, private nursery)

Children's centre staff, many of whom were working in brand-new settings and for providers who were new to early years provision (such as libraries and NHS trusts) provided an interesting case. Most practitioners working in children's centres reported that they had come to the job with initial qualifications in childcare or education, but that they were able to identify their own ongoing training needs and request courses from the local authority or the CWDC, including management training. Heads of centres were helping staff to identify their needs, but some also recognized that in this new and complex environment they needed to be patient and build up their team's expertise gradually. One manager commented, 'There's so much to do, and so little time to do it in', and another said 'Rome wasn't built in a day'. A childcare worker explained that 'the training will be identified through our one to one sessions and going to appraisals', while another reported a very *ad hoc* approach:

'my line manager will sort of say to me, and she'll pass things on to me, saying have a look at this, do you think it's worth doing, do you feel you want to go on this? And I'll say I've got a gap in my development and I need to focus a bit on this and learn a bit more about that' (crèche worker).

Staff in more than one region complained that the notification of training opportunities was restricted to the internet ('there are no more bulletins') and that they often missed out on training because they were not 'office-based' and did not use the internet regularly. But in other local authorities, professional development was reported to be responsive to the needs expressed by practitioners:

'we all realised that there was an issue with speech and language development didn't we, and we all realised that when we actually came together that within this area that was an issue for us... that's what these working parties are for, we can then work together and if we need professional development in that area we can build that in' (nursery nurse)

One positive aspect that was reported was that staff were being encouraged to enrol for more accredited courses, rather than just taking on the basic training, although this also varied between local authorities. Some managers were now enrolling for the NPQICL, and

many childminders were also starting on the qualifications ladder. A children’s centre manager reported:

‘a lot of childminders are now doing their NVQ Level 3 and we’re also offering a Diploma in Home Based Child Care, run by the NCMA, that’s starting in March, and through the Workforce Development in [Local Authority] are having the opportunity to sign up for foundation degrees’.

Individual interviews, reported in Figure 4.6.1 (below), enabled more detailed responses on professional learning to be collected and considered.

Figure 4.6.1: Phase 2 data from individual interviews (professional learning)

What additional professional development opportunities are needed, and how should they be provided and by whom? (25 responses)

As on the issue of overall resources, there was appreciation of the efforts that have been made by many Local Authorities to provide training ‘on request’, but also concern that funding streams will not continue, and remarks about areas where training has been inadequate. Early Years Professionals have received the most lavish and most recent investment in training:

‘I have been lucky that whilst I have been in my setting I have achieved several training opportunities including my Early Childhood Studies degree and my EYPS. I also have training from within the borough that I work in and any training which I may see that is on offer, which is usually during the day, my managers will arrange cover for us to enable us to attend’. (Early Years Professional)

‘The local authority has been very good in providing professional development through the Early Years Professional Network. EYPs have visited Pen Green Centre and attended courses there; visited pre-schools in Reggio Emilia in Italy; and attended courses at the Early Excellence Centre in Huddersfield. Next year, the funding will be reduced and allocated regionally rather than locally’. (Early Years Professional).

While it was recognised that EYPs had been highly advantaged by their training, two respondents pointed out that older and very experienced practitioners who did not gain

appropriate GCE/GCSE results when younger are now barred from entry to this programme, even if they have subsequently taken an Early Childhood Studies degree.

Other practitioner groups displayed different concerns. The timing of courses (and the need for supply cover if staff are to attend) was raised both by childminders and by a setting manager. Childminders were obliged to attend professional development in evenings after the children had gone, or at weekends, but they were keen to take up training opportunities and one felt she need business and book-keeping advice in particular.

The requested training was of different kinds and at very different levels – national, regional and local. The need for more and better leadership training was mentioned by three respondents, who felt that the National College for School Leadership was not doing enough for early years staff.

'For me personally I am interested in exploring more about leadership within the kind of team a nursery teacher, or room leader, or subject co-ordinator works in. I know there is headship training and national centre of integrated leadership training but what I am talking about is the opportunities needed to reflect on working with a team of early years educators and assistants and introducing change' [Nursery teacher with EYPS]

Three other respondents suggested that the training currently offered was much too low-level and should be at Masters level (or that Masters' degrees should be funded by the local authority or employer). The poor quality of much of the introductory training for the EYFS was commented on by others:

'The training we've had is absolutely terrible, unbelievable: "Open your pack... take out card 2.1... discuss with the person next to you how you do that in your setting". And then they end up by suggestions like "You might like to take out the sheets and ask someone in your setting to laminate them in case they get tatty"'. [NT].

This teacher and others would have preferred to attend 'proper conferences' rather than attend LA training. One head teacher reported:

'Everything you go to, it's so basic, 'how to use the EYFS'. When we go to Pen Green for conferences or to join in action research, that's a real dialogue, that's reflection, that's learning from each other'. (Head teacher)

Learning from other practitioners, both within the setting and between settings, featured in several comments: two respondents pointed out that there had been no school-based training for early years staff in recent years. A teacher reported *that 'It has been really difficult, nearly impossible, to find a time when the Foundation team can meet together for longer than ten minutes. I think everyone would see that as a problem'*. Nursery nurses, heads and teachers would also like more time and support for: reflective sessions in their own schools; proper curricular discussions; joint evaluation and planning sessions; increased input by teachers into the professional development of poorly-qualified assistants; and support for 'key people', who are under a great deal of pressure in their role but are not offered supervision of any kind. One teacher suggested that visits to other settings should be facilitated:

'Regular, funded release time to visit other settings to see and discuss good practice. Good practitioners do this as a matter of course but it is either in their own time, or as a result of time consuming negotiation with other colleagues to provide cover'. (Reception teacher).

For many respondents this was a greater priority than opportunities for external training. One reception teacher suggested that training by current practitioners, funded for day release, would be more relevant than input from 'trainers who are not doing the job themselves'

Finally, an aspect prioritised by both a head teacher and a reception teacher was the need for proper moderation of the EYFS Profile assessments. The head teacher explained why:

'They are used across lots of different kinds of settings. For example a childminder's and a private nursery's judgements vary enormously. There's lots of professional development needed to ensure consistency'. (Head teacher)

While there is no clear consensus on this question, it does appear that practitioners should be consulted by their local authorities about the training they require, and that many are ready for higher-level professional development now that the EYFS is established.

4.7 Engaging parents within the EYFS

Practitioners in all the focus groups felt that the EYFS promoted partnership with parents, and many offered examples of how the implementation of the framework in their setting facilitated this. The extent to which any practitioner works closely with families depends on

her or his role, and the age of the child, as well as on the ways that the setting implements the EYFS. Participants who have a key-person role, especially with the younger children, view this relationship as integral to their work while, for different reasons, head teachers and play-workers may rarely develop these relationships. Head teachers made few comments about parents in the focus groups, but when asked they agreed on the whole that the EYFS both confirmed the early years practice in their schools, and helped to motivate some parents to become more involved as partners in learning.

The EYFS encourages closer engagement with parents

Reception class teachers commented frequently on the importance of partnership with parents and some specifically mentioned that the EYFS emphasized and enabled this. Many schools hold meetings with parents before children move into the reception class to explain their approach to learning, and in some cases parents are encouraged to share home experiences with practitioners. One account was quite typical of the experiences mentioned by all these groups: practitioners were generally conscious of making additional efforts since the introduction of the framework, but they accepted that not all parents would respond to their invitations to engage more.

‘We started working a lot more with the parents and kind of getting the parents involved a lot more and the learning journeys that the children have like the ring binders, what the children have been doing, we invite the parent to look at those and we say “you know you’re more than welcome to come in whenever you want to”, although they don’t, but we say you know and kind of operate more of like “come in whenever you want to and see these”’. (Reception teacher)

Nursery staff in both school and pre-school settings generally reported that they had always worked closely with parents, but that the framework enabled them to show parents how and why they made provision for learning and development. Almost all participants in these groups had undertaken home visits, and they were unanimous in believing that they gained a great deal of important information about the child and family on these visits, which helped them to plan for children’s needs and interests. Some settings had developed simple versions of their weekly planning, based on the EYFS areas of learning, which they displayed on the wall and showed to parents, to encourage them to take an interest in the child’s developing knowledge and skills while they are at home as well as in the nursery. Some nursery nurses also spoke of how they involve parents in classroom activities and outings,

although they were wary of assuming that parents would make a contribution of this kind, as those parents who were unable to do so might be made to feel uncomfortable.

Some Early Years Professionals commented specifically on the importance of the key person role, which is statutory for the first time within the EYFS:

‘One of the positives of the key person role is they really get to know the family and the extended family, if they have any concerns I think they’re able to flag them up early.’

One noteworthy aspect discussed in this focus group was the extent to which fathers were reported to be included in provision, and a wider variety of ‘family’ arrangements supported. A fathers’ worker in another region explained,

‘We do get a lot of men, and the importance, for me, in the project, as well, is it’s about reaching men and families who don’t normally access children’s centres. You take a walk, and a lot of my stuff as well is outreach... I will stop men in the street pushing a pram, pushchairs, whatever, and I will speak to them, give them a leaflet... I think it’s really important to consider all different types of families’. (Children’s centre staff)

Other children’s centre staff commented similarly on the extent of their involvement with parents as a result of implementing the EYFS recommendations for partnership:

‘you’re involving the parents more so you’re working with the partnership of parents as well as just the child so the whole family community that you’re working with, not just the individual child’ (children’s centre crèche worker).

These staff attributed the success of the partnership to the relaxed environment and welcoming ethos they were able to provide in the children’s centre, where there is little pressure to meet targets for the small children who are attending on a more casual basis. They described their role as supporting parents as much as supporting children’s wellbeing:

‘it’s just such a relaxed environment, you can kind of notice the parents that have come to the centre for the first time, and are a little bit wary, but after the session you can see how much they’ve relaxed and enjoyed the session’ (crèche worker).

One group offered several examples of the ways that such informal provision enabled them to listen to parents’ concerns – about housing, health, training and benefits – and refer them

to specialist staff associated with the children's centre. Like other groups, they explained that their first task was to gain parents' trust so that their advice could be seen as constructive and non-judgmental.

The childminders, as in many other aspects of the EYFS, were the strongest dissenters from the general view of the improvements brought about by the EYFS. In several groups it was argued that parents have always been their close allies, and that nothing is added to this relationship by the EYFS. In some respects they felt the framework had been *unhelpful*, as detailed below.

Involving parents in assessment is a significant theme

The engagement of parents in their child's learning and assessment has been a relatively new development for many practitioners, but is now widespread, and was reported by all practitioner groups in this study. Practitioners described how the use of different forms of record-keeping, such as learning journeys, diaries and photographs, had helped parents to understand both the work of the pre-school and their own contribution to their child's learning: 'Photographic evidence, and what children say in their learning journeys, is interesting for a parent to look at' (setting manager). Many practitioners described how open access to children's folders and portfolios had strengthened partnership working and parents' involvement in the setting, despite the view of one group of head teachers that there was an associated difficulty: that, with so much parental access, parents might begin to compare their children with other children on the EYFS assessment scales.

'We now have the learning journeys we create for the children, parents can get them at any time, the parents know if they have any issues, or we have, then we can link with them, to get a plan together and things like that, so it helps that.' (Setting manager)

Some children's centres had successfully involved parents in documenting children's development, constructing their portfolios or sharing their observations.

'[staff] do observations and they do next steps but because they're shared with the parents and they're linked with the parents, we have memory trees in the rooms where the parents put comments and things on, put photographs, and there's a camera there so that they can take pictures of them' (children's centre manager).

Every practitioner group made reference to involving parents in some kind of assessment of their children. Most practitioners who work with children aged 3 to 5 reported that they had continued their existing practices of building profiles and portfolios, while those working with under-threes and in more informal services had developed innovative ways to draw parents in to this role. Some children's centres offered short courses for parents on creating a 'Book about Me' for their child, so that both parents and play-worker could contribute to the record. Figure 4.7.1 reports the information given by 18 respondents in individual interviews

Figure 4.7.1: phase 2: data from individual interviews (assessment)

Can you describe how you involve parents in the ongoing assessment of their children? (18 respondents)

Almost all respondents referred to talking to parents: they talk to them daily when dropping and fetching, 3-weekly for conferences, termly for meetings, yearly for 'moving up meetings' and by a variety of other well-tried arrangements. It was clear that all expected to keep an open and ongoing dialogue with parents, although some parents were not available to speak to them (and in this case phone calls might be made). One setting manager, describing her parents as 'hard to reach' explained that this was because they were affluent, jet-setting professionals rather than because they were suffering deprivation and exclusion.

These face to face meetings were used for sharing information, setting targets, and adding information to the children's records or profiles. One nursery holds a 'talking about children' meeting every week to which parents are invited, and a school holds 'Gold Book Week' once a term when joint observations are collected and shared. As one reception teacher explained, parents observe children doing things that the teacher has not seen: *'In this situation, I would readily accept what the parent said as evidence of the child's attainment and include it in the Foundation Stage profile'*. Two respondents mentioned the importance of home visits for establishing relationships focused on the child, but rather surprisingly, only three respondents mentioned a key person or key worker who would be responsible for this relationship with parents. Child minders reported offering 'little questionnaires' to their parents if they were too busy to talk regularly when dropping off and picking up children: *'It's quite hard to get anything back from them – they are so busy'*.

All respondents also referred to the systems of written record-keeping which are shared with parents. These include:

Scrap books (used by childminders and nursery teachers)

Learning journeys (nursery teachers)

Learning diaries (nursery and reception staff)

All about me books (Early Years Professionals)

My Unique Child books (nursery staff)

Learning loops (reception teachers)

Contact books (nursery and reception teachers)

Portfolios (widely used).

Although respondents reported real efforts to be available to parents, by an 'open door policy', and to work closely with parents ('we always use first names instead of Mrs with the parents') they admitted that they were still working on the difficulties: whether because 'our parents don't see this as their role' or because the language of the EYFS is 'not particularly parent-friendly'. Scrap-books and portfolios with pictures of the children are greatly enjoyed and appreciated by parents, but only a minority are actively contributing to them. A nursery head teacher commented, *'we encourage them to put work in their children's portfolios although not many do at the moment, that's dropped off a bit'*

Parents need help to understand the EYFS principles and practice

After more than a year of implementing the EYFS, most participants felt that they were confident of their own grasp of the document but that too little attention had been paid to informing parents about the framework. Some practitioner groups identified a need for better publicity, from government or the Local Authority, for the EYFS, so that parents were reassured that their children were benefiting from a free-play regime when they were very young: 'there's not enough people know what EYFS is, whereas if you were to say to them "the national curriculum", they would know about it' (children's centre crèche worker).

Reception teachers and nursery staff reported that for some parents there is still a wide variation in expectations, and some parents are convinced that children only begin to 'learn' when they stop playing.

'There are still a lot of parents who associate learning with sitting at a table writing and doing sums' (reception teacher).

'There is still a divide and misunderstanding regarding play and learning, not all parents understand that they are being taught through play. Parents still have an idea that they are going to learn more in a structured school environment' (nursery nurse).

The same view was reported by a children's centre worker caring for under-threes:

'I think some parents don't realise that the children are learning through play...if they've got a treasure basket with natural objects in, they don't understand the experience that they're actually getting from just exploring the objects.' (Children's centre worker)

However, some practitioners had taken on the responsibility for explaining the framework and principles to parents, and were using the EYFS documents as a guide to inform them about children's learning and development:

'The document can be used to show parents "this is why we have...", to explain why things are done in a particular way. It acts as a guideline.' (Nursery nurse).

Participants generally felt that the language and presentation were clear and helpful in showing parents what the EYFS meant, and a reception teacher commented: 'it's nice language isn't it, it's nice to use with parents, to be saying, look this is how much they've learnt through their play.'

One area of disagreement concerned the use of the Development Matters descriptions as an explanation to parents of their child's progress in relation to developmental norms. Some participants were enthusiastic about them, and adopted them as the basis for consulting parents:

'when we do our development files when the parents look through them, we actually explain and then I think sometimes they get to realise that they are learning that way' (children's centre crèche worker).

More frequently, concerns were raised over the damaging effect of showing parents developmental information which would highlight their own child's delay. Participants in the focus groups and in the Phase 2 interviews (see Figure 4.10.1) repeatedly argued for the removal of the month-bands and the indicative photographs from the table of descriptors, because for some parents 'it's very hard when they see their child is not within the months' expectations for their child'. Head teachers in one group, similarly, agreed that they would 'never say to a parent at that age "your child's not on track"'. But this is obviously a contentious issue where further guidance may be needed on the best way to consult frankly

and openly with parents without damaging the parent's or child's self-esteem, or the parent-practitioner relationship.

In the children's centres especially, practitioners described their role as supporting parents in learning how to support their children, a role which they sometimes found quite sensitive. Building close relationships and trust with families who attend very infrequently, and supporting the development of their children in occasional sessions, proves challenging:

'a lot of the parents that come in don't necessarily know what EYFS is, so if we are sitting there doing observations on their children, they are probably going to feel a bit intimidated. It's going to take time to go around to those parents and explain why you are doing it, and what you are doing it for.' (Crèche worker)

Parents attending relatively new forms of provision, such as drop-ins and stay-and-plays which are supported by expert practitioners, may not be aware of the expectations of the group (which are that parent-child interaction is fostered).

'speaking to parents and engaging, getting that trust factor as well, with them, getting to know the children whilst writing an observation, it's quite hard to do everything at the same time' (children's centre manager).

This manager went on to explain her own staff's tentative approach to the induction of parents into the centre's ethos:

'stay and plays are about encouraging parents to interact with their children. So if we saw a parent wasn't interacting with the child we would go and role model that play, and interaction with that child, and if we felt that a child was not being looked after, and being unsafe, then we'd talk to that parents and say, you know – just to remind you that your child is your responsibility. Shall we play together, or do this together?' (Manager)

EYFS requirements do not always respect parents' preferences

Some childminders argued that the EYFS framework requirements actually jeopardised their relationship with parents, as these parents had made a deliberate choice of home-based provision which has differing priorities. In most childminder groups, the view was expressed that parents do not want to be informed about the areas of learning, or involved in assessing their children: that they employ a childminder to give their child care and affection in a

homely atmosphere, rather than to promote their curriculum learning. One of their strongest criticisms of the EYFS is this:

‘All we are being made to do now is create small, loads of little small nurseries everywhere... All our homes are being turned into little nurseries.... We don’t want to be a nursery’, (childminder).

Childminders appeared unanimous in asserting that they know and understand the wishes of each of their parents, and have always respected them. Those who have made determined efforts to build portfolios on the children’s learning, and share them with parents, reported very little response from the parents. In every group, accounts were given of the importance of daily discussions with parents about the child’s overall wellbeing and happiness: ‘But that’s our old-fashioned way, because you give the parent the folder to look at, they don’t want to look at it, do they?’ As one reported, ‘I do make sure the parents know everything but they’re just not interested’.

Childminders in all six regions described very high levels of trust between themselves and parents, and argued that they should respect parents’ wishes for their child’s care. Two groups reported that they knew of parents who expressly asked that no photographs should be taken of their children, but that they themselves believed they were obliged to keep a photographic record of the child’s activities. In another two groups, the issue of food and nutrition was contentious, as childminders reported that they had always cooked midday meals for their children but could no longer do so because the regulations for kitchen procedures were so stringent. As a result, parents had to supply meals for their child every day and childminders could only offer fruit, drinks and biscuits in addition. In these cases, the quality of care offered to children and parents was seen to suffer as a result of the statutory requirements.

4.8 Outdoor learning

All practitioner groups responded positively when invited to discuss the EYFS stipulation for outdoor learning. Three strong themes emerged from the analysis. First, for many practitioners including childminders and nursery staff, the outdoor learning requirements simply validated their existing daily routines and practices. For others, however, working in the outdoors was relatively new and was beginning to transform their understanding of the learning potential of outdoor spaces. Secondly, there was a consensus that outdoor learning

suits some children's learning styles, particularly some boys', and therefore enabled more child-led provision. Thirdly, it was agreed by the majority of practitioners and groups that the settings' ability to utilize outdoor spaces was highly context dependent, and that the requirement made greater demands of some participants than of others.

Outdoor learning requirements validate practitioners' beliefs and routines

Practitioners in all groups believed that the high profile given to outdoor learning in the EYFS validated their principles for children's learning and development. The head teachers were unanimous in their support for outdoor learning and welcomed its inclusion as a requirement in the EYFS, one group noting for example, that this was 'a big shift' and 'fantastic for children'. One head teacher reported that the outdoors 'has now effectively become a big classroom where whatever goes on indoors can go on outdoors', although others described difficulties in making the necessary structural arrangements in their schools, and one was distinctly unenthusiastic about the idea of keeping the reception class doors open for free-flow access to the outdoors.

It is clear that the EYFS outdoor requirements have encouraged practitioners to make creative use of their outdoor space, with indoor provision being reflected outdoors. These setting managers noted:

'There has been a total change around – it's like bringing the outside in and the inside out.' (Setting manager)

'It's been great actually, we are doing more inside, outside, you know, you are taking it outside, whereas staff before would just have the outside equipment, but now the classroom is going outside.' (Setting manager)

Most nursery nurses maintained that the EYFS outdoor learning guidance had reinforced and validated what they were already doing, and explained that the EYFS had been helpful in challenging and questioning pre-conceived ideas (including those of parents) that learning can only take place indoors. In one setting, the nursery nurses reported that they were working with the children on a shared project to develop their outdoor space. This involved the transfer of 'indoor' activities to the outside and the enhanced utilization of previously under-used space. The children now have the choice of where they want to be, inside or out, throughout the session.

Similarly, the childminders in every region felt that their traditional practice of taking the children out every day, or encouraging them into the garden, was vindicated by the requirements of the EYFS. They maintained that 'we are required to take them out every day, regardless what the weather is', and depending on their location described a range of excursions, such as to parks and farms and the beach, as well as local shopping trips and provision in their own gardens. This appeared to be an aspect of the requirements which they enjoyed as much as the children, and they described a wealth of activities undertaken with the children, such as growing vegetables, 'using sand, water play, bubbles, paint brushes in the garden' and picnics.

'As a childminder we use the outdoor space anyway, that's just second nature to what we do. So like we can just go out and play in rain and go round these puddles and go sledging in the snow...' (childminder).

Partly in response to the EYFS stipulations on outdoor learning several childminders now have an outdoor covered learning area in their gardens. However, there are those childminders who live in flats in inner-urban regions, and hence rely on local parks and gardens. All participants in these groups utilised network facilities at their local children's centres, where their children could spend a session in a 'nursery' environment with a large outside area.

A few practitioners reported their own learning curve as they increasingly experienced outdoor learning opportunities.

Outdoor learning spaces support children's different needs and learning styles

Practitioners from all groups agreed that outdoor learning within the EYFS had the potential to support child-led play and learning, and it was frequently noted that the outdoor learning environment could support children's different learning styles. One setting manager noted that the use of outdoor experiences for boys appeared to suit their preference for more physical and kinaesthetic learning.

'Practitioners are putting in strategies to support boys' learning for example, outdoors. I can't say I have particularly seen the impact of that in terms of children's outcomes, but I am seeing impact in terms of children having a much more individual learning experience' (setting manager)

'there are children that will not necessarily want to try mark making or whatever, indoors on paper, but they might like to paint the wall with a brush and they're actually practising at mark making outside there' (Early Years professional)

Several respondents pointed out that for some children, outdoor activities offer a more inviting mode of learning than the same or similar activities indoors: 'some children prefer to be outdoors and they kind of have that learning curve outside rather than indoors'. A group of nursery nurses agreed that the use of outdoor space is 'brilliant for disadvantaged children from poor backgrounds,' especially if these children had limited access to open spaces and freedom of movement in their home environments.

All the groups agreed that outside activities should not be restricted by adverse weather, and that children should be enabled to play outside throughout the year. Respondents enthusiastically described the ways they enabled outdoor learning to take place, regardless of weather conditions.

'the doors open and out they all go – all weathers – mud, snow, you name it, we're all out there. ...' (nursery nurse).

'we don't have an open door policy hence we have to keep the room temperature right for the babies, but we do get to go out throughout the day and again rain or shine if you've got the outdoor weather proofs' (setting manager).

One nursery nurse noted that parents have sometimes expressed doubts about this approach, but the EYFS has enabled them to see the benefits of outdoor learning. Several reports were offered by nursery staff of parents' belief that their child would catch a cold if they played outside in cold weather, or that the child had a cold and should be kept indoors. The response to this was always robust: 'if they're not well enough to be outdoors they're not well enough to be at nursery' (head teacher).

One reception class teacher noted that in her setting 'outdoor provision continues in all weathers...it is something that's very important in the Early Years, but I feel like this isn't something that's continued into Key Stage 1'. This is clearly an issue to be addressed when the continuity of transitions is considered.

Outdoor learning is constrained by resources and ratios

Although the comments on outdoor learning from all practitioner groups were overwhelmingly positive, a number of groups described the constraints they experienced in implementing the requirement. Respondents acknowledged the difficulties faced by (for instance) pack-away pre-schools without outside areas, but all supported the requirement to be outdoors and one said, 'I think it should be set in stone that if you're providing full day care you have to have an accessible outside space – without exception' (nursery nurse).

Some head teachers pointed out that, even with appropriate physical resources, their children were unable to access the outdoors as much as the teachers would like because of the adult-child ratios this would require. Although all the reception class teachers were strongly in favour of outdoor learning, and identified the benefits to children's learning and development, they described significant variation in the extent to which reception class children are able to access outdoor provision. Lack of space and suitability of the environment was a constraint for some, and one teacher reflected on the difference children experience on moving from nursery to reception:

'a lot of our children have come from [an] outdoor area that's amazing...they could be out there all day. We can't do that with our two meter by two metre square bit of concrete' (reception teacher).

It was noted by a group of nursery nurses that the transfer to school can be particularly difficult if the children no longer have free-flow access to outside space.

This situation was particularly likely to be true of the private and voluntary (PVI) settings. Although all participants reported that they 'met the requirements', some were able to provide environments in which children had free access to outdoors all day, while others had to plan carefully and restrict children's access. Some setting managers working in inner-urban locations described the limited access available on their own premises, although all cited local parks, garden and recreation grounds which they visited daily. Two participants from one setting reported complex arrangements for bringing children downstairs and around the outside of a building where other activities were taking place, and through the car park which led to a small open area. Some of these practitioners, along with the childminders located in similar areas and living in flats, pointed out how important this new stipulation was for children who live in flats and whose outdoor experience mostly comes from their group care under the EYFS.

Even children's centres have varying levels of facilities and resources, including their access to outdoors, and the EYFS requirements are not necessarily easy to meet even though all staff endorse them.

'The actual purpose built children's centres, because the EYFS wasn't around when they were built eight years ago, they've got a car park and a little garden and that's about it' (children's centre manager).

'The major barrier would be actual space and then the people, staffing factor really, to cover Health & Safety issues with regards to how many children you can have outside with supervision and what have you' (manager).

Those working in shared premises or pack-away settings had often been obliged to make the greatest efforts to meet the requirements, but even so the experiences they reported were positive. This aspect of the EYFS clearly has the full support of practitioners but is one where additional funding would be required in order to give children an equitable entitlement.

4.9 Continuing challenges

Although practitioners were broadly positive about the EYFS and its impact on practice, the majority also described constraints which made the implementation of the EYFS challenging. These challenges were experienced very differently by participants performing different roles, within different local authorities and in different regions, and so it is not easy to make generalisations about them. All of them have featured in earlier sections of the report. However, we draw particular attention here to those which seem from the analysis to be important to the largest numbers of project respondents, both within the focus groups and in the individual interviews. They concern: time taken for paperwork, and for observing and collecting evidence; challenges resulting from changes in ratio as children become older; associated difficulties over transitions within and beyond the EYFS; and some of the rules and regulations which are experienced as excessive.

The EYFS creates a burden of paperwork

Practitioners from all groups mentioned the increased paperwork that has followed the implementation of the EYFS. For pre-school staff this stems mainly from the requirements for observation and assessment of children's progress, record keeping and making risk assessments, while for school heads and teachers it includes larger-scale tracking, levelling and monitoring requirements. While all practitioners recognised the need to monitor and record children's experiences, and many had found ways to manage the demands placed upon them, there was a widely held view across the groups that the demand for written evidence was excessive and that this took valuable time away from their work with the children. For example, one EYP talked about her concerns for her over-worked team. Her response was to try to

'free up staff to have the time to do the planning to fit into the EYFS, and it is a lot of work. And then all the monitoring and all the paperwork, and the observations, and everything that goes with it, it's a lot of work for the staff, and they find it very, very, very, demanding , very demanding, and I do feel they think it takes them away from the children, when the children should be and are our main priority.' (Early Years Professional)

Another EYP reported: 'The burden of recording has increased dramatically in my view... they say it's a paperless thing. I mean, it's a joke!'

In the case of childminders, several respondents from different regions noted that although they felt obliged to compile detailed portfolios of children's progress, parents were not interested. Similarly, there was a perception in all groups who work at key points of transition that assessment records were not being used to inform planning and progression as children moved on to new settings. Completion of the profile was made more challenging for practitioners in reception classes by a shortage of adults and insufficient time to meet with colleagues to share information about children:

'it is that time issue... when we're on PPA [non-contact time for planning, preparation and assessment], you're not with your team and you need to be with your team you know so can we have planning time with our teams please' (reception teacher).

Paperwork was a particular obstacle for the group of play workers attached to children's centres because it was essentially a new requirement for them which demanded additional staff resources and time which they felt could be put to work with the children:

'We're looking to tick boxes that we've invented ... this form that we've invented looking to tick boxes on early learning goals, we were looking at, counting up ticked boxes, and loads of incidents, and accidents that had happened at the clubs during the week ... staff really don't like it. We haven't got the staff, we haven't got the excess of the staff, or the man power, it's just not logical, it really isn't' (children's centre play-worker).

Other children's centre staff confirmed that 'A lot of it is writing – paperwork world' although there was agreement in some groups that the time invested in detailed planning (based on observations of children) was well spent, and actually increased their job satisfaction.

The requirement to observe takes time away from the children

Observation of young children is a well established practice in early years provision. Nevertheless, the increased demand for observations to be recorded was identified as a constraint across all groups. For example, one nursery nurse described how she felt: 'You are policing them, not playing with them'. Other nursery nurses talked about how the pressure to record observations prevented them from interacting with the children: 'you do something, you want to get stuck in and enjoy it with the children but you're standing there with a notepad and a camera'; 'you've got to keep watching them with your pen and paper'. One confessed to feeling that the pressure to record everything had 'taken the enjoyment out of it.'

A setting manager noted that non-contact time was required to conduct quality observations as part of the key-worker role:

'I think the amount of non-contact time in order to be able to complete all observations is a big role. I think we have to organise more non-contact time for the staff, especially in the key worker system because we really want people to be able to understand the child and to be able to work with parents...'

But more experienced practitioners, like this Early Years Professional (and setting manager) tried to temper what they saw as the current statutory requirements with their own fundamental beliefs and values.

'I went into a setting, I was absolutely gobsmacked, there was actually an interaction between an adult and a child, and she was scaffolding the learning, and then suddenly it just stopped, because she decided she had got to go and write it down!'

The apparent tension between statutory requirements (however these are interpreted) and the underpinning principles of the EYFS helped to support some experienced practitioners in holding fast to their own beliefs about the most appropriate practice for working with children under 5.

For children's centre staff running drop-in sessions, writing observations was only one of the many tasks they felt they were trying to perform simultaneously, including engaging with children, listening to parents, and modelling interactions for parents. One group agreed that 'It is like doing three jobs at the same time, if you're doing observations'.

Reception teachers were also ambivalent about observation, simultaneously recognising its benefits whilst reporting on the practical difficulties. Commenting on conducting observations for the EYFS profile, one reception teacher stated that

'you've got this barrier, either a clip board or post it notes and your writing ... sometimes you just want to get rid of it all and you just want to like get on in there and have fun with the children and you know in your own mind as a teacher what your children can do and what they can't do'.

Assessment practice and in particular completion of the profile presents reception class teachers with additional workload, generating significant paperwork. This is compounded by the fact that the adult-child ratios in reception are much less favourable than in other EYFS settings. But there is an urgent need for clarification, for all practitioner groups and in all regions, of what their statutory requirements entail, since different groups reported receiving quite different messages on this matter.

Staff ratios impact on the EYFS particularly in reception classes

The issue of staff ratios was raised most frequently by reception class teachers, but it was an issue that could not easily be resolved since decisions about staffing are set by current national policy on adult-child ratios and influenced by the funding available at a local level to provide additional adult support. The lack of adults to support children under the EYFS in

reception classes was mentioned frequently by respondents and appeared to impact upon the extent to which they could effectively practice differentiation, observation and assessment, attend to the general care of children and adequately support outdoor provision. To illustrate, the following comments capture the general experience of this practitioner group:

‘Obviously in reception you only have yourself and the teaching assistant; and you’ve got inside and outside’ (reception teacher).

In relation to observation and assessment:

‘OK, you’ve planned yourself in and I am going to observe this afternoon. And 9 times out of 10 you don’t; someone will do something and you end up doing this...and then you’ve spent two hours on doing ten minute observations and you’ve [only] done two.’

On planning for individual learning:

‘Differentiating 30 ways is almost impossible.’

Lack of adults to support children in the outdoors was a significant constraint in some reception class settings with less favourable adult-child ratios as these comments illustrate:

‘with only two people, if someone’s sitting down doing quite high quality writing you need the other adult in the room to do all the rest...’

‘I’ve got 26 with a learning support assistant...we just can’t physically do it.’

In some groups of reception teachers, concern was expressed that staffing levels could be reduced further if pupil numbers reduced:

‘They do need two people, they are small children, if someone does wet themselves there’s not an awful lot you can do on your own...’

‘...last year it was a smaller class and they said – we might take someone off you- and I said you can’t’

Some head teachers wanted greater clarity on the ratios between teachers and children as they felt there was a lack of consistency between private nurseries and schools. Others regarded children’s experiences of the EYFS as problematic as some children were moving

from settings with a 1: 8 ratio to a school setting with a 1:30 ratio. One head teacher asked, on behalf of the child: 'Can you imagine coming from a one to eight to a one to thirty?'

Reception classes continue to occupy a rather ambiguous position in the EYFS, falling between pre-school and statutory schooling and subject to different histories and funding mechanisms. The requirement to complete the profile, described by many teachers as 'time consuming', has added to workload, but adult-child ratios have not significantly improved to meet this additional demand. Moreover, with increasing numbers of four-year-olds set to enter reception classes in 2011, following a revision in the Schools Admission Code, it is imperative that the issue of ratios for this particular group is considered once again to ensure effective delivery of the EYFS and to bring reception class settings into line with other early years settings.

Because of these concerns, a question about the adequacy of resources was included in the Phase 2 individual interview, which 17 participants chose to respond to.

Figure 4.9.1: Phase 2 data from individual interviews (resources)

Are you able to meet the requirements of the EYFS with the resources you have? (17 responses)

All the responses to this question were favourable, although with cautions and reservations in some cases. Five interviewees said yes, their resources are sufficient at present and this is likely to continue. Others indicated their concerns that resourcing might not continue to meet their requirements, or gave specific instances of emerging needs:

'We need better qualified staff which we are finding challenging to get' (nursery teacher)

'There has been no cover for support staff when they are absent or on courses and that does cause major disruption to plans' (reception teacher)

Of those who were fully satisfied, three mentioned the positive effects of funding sources on their provision – capital funding, Graduate Leader funding and LA funding – although it was pointed out that none of these is guaranteed to continue. Greater threats were perceived to come from the introduction of two planned changes: the Single Funding Formula and the 15-hour flexible provision for all three- and four-year olds. The SFF, currently postponed but still

anticipated, fills head teachers with concern as they expect to lose funds and increase adult-child ratios. The introduction of the 15-hour nursery entitlement is also expected to result in a deterioration in nursery ratios. One nursery school plans to offer all children six sessions a week instead of five (5 mornings and an afternoon, or 5 afternoons and a morning) without additional funding: *'That means at least 8 extra children in each session and we're going to notice that'* (nursery head teacher).

One reception teacher gave detailed examples of the staffing constraints which impinge on the quality of provision and the adherence to EYFS guidelines:

'It is sometimes difficult to provide both indoor and outdoor provision simultaneously. When the classes are properly staffed provision runs smoothly between the indoor or outdoor area, however as the early years have more staff than other classes, support is often removed to cover absent staff further up the school. It is also sometimes difficult to make the most of the local environment, visiting the parks and shops etc, again this is often due to the greater amount of adults needed to support these visits' (reception teacher).

It was widely felt that the quality of provision is currently high but will need to be sustained by continuing funding streams as equipment deteriorates and additional staff training is needed.

Differences between settings impede smooth transitions through the EYFS and into Key Stage 1

Early Years provision in England is historically characterised by diversity and division. Indeed the EYFS and its predecessor (the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage), were designed specifically to ameliorate such divisions. However, it is clear from this study that in spite of considerable progress in establishing a coherent framework for young children, divisions still exist particularly at key points of transfer and transition.

These points are elaborated in the earlier sections of the report. However, the most obvious point of difficulty and one which is worth emphasising here is the transition from reception class to Key Stage 1. The structural conditions of schools (poorer adult-child ratios, smaller spaces, reduced opportunities for outdoor learning) were reported by reception class teachers to impede the continuation of optimal EYFS practice into the classrooms of 4-5 year-olds. This played out quite dramatically in the pressure felt and expressed here by reception class teachers to prepare children for KS1 (rather than focus on the requirements

of the EYFS) and to complete the Profile, which for some was an onerous task conducted with and compounded by poor adult-child ratios. Related to this was some scepticism on the part of reception teachers over the uses to which the profile data was put and the way in which it might be used to inform children's progression into KS1.

We do not wish to overstate the difficulties experienced by the practitioners in this project. Most practitioners across all groups welcomed the EYFS and were making it work successfully in their particular settings. However, a better understanding of the EYFS on the part of KS1 teachers, some re-thinking of the profile and the uses to which it is put, and more favourable and consistent adult-child ratios, might overcome some of these difficulties as children progress into statutory schooling.

Regulations and risk assessments are a burden for some practitioners

A number of aspects of the statutory framework were singled out for particular criticism, but the most frustration and exasperation was expressed on the subject of risk-assessments, which appeared to have a disproportionate effect on the daily lives of a small sector of the workforce.

All practitioners recognised the need for addressing risk and health and safety issues. However, there was considerable concern from both childminders and children's centre staff that requirements for risk assessment had become excessive and arbitrary. Both practitioner groups cited rules and regulations which seemed to them to make their work with children more difficult, and many childminders, in particular, felt that this implied a lack of trust in their experience, expertise and common-sense. Some childminders had cared for children for 30 to 40 years, and had also worked in nurseries during that period, so that the requirements which (they believed) were imposed on them caused real annoyance: 'you've got to put everything down to show you are not stupid, things you've just been doing for years and years and years' (childminder).

One group described the rules they come up against on a daily basis, both indoors and out. :

R1 You know, each outing you go on, if you go to the park they want a risk assessment. If you take the children to the park you've got to write down, you know...

R2 If it's...you have to check everything they are playing on, if it's fixed.

R3 *But we use our brain on that, don't we, when we go to the park?*

R1 *It's...you naturally do it anyway....*

R3 *We always make sure there's no glass or no needles on the floor.*

R2 *Yeah, yeah.*

R3 *We even take dustpan and brushes with us now, and sweep up.*

R2 *[and it's] time, and, you know, you've got, say your little ones, especially in the summer holidays, you've got your little ones and your big ones – alright, we are going to the park, just a minute, I've just got to fill in a risk assessment before we go.'*

The same group belonged to a Local Authority network in which they received support for filing risk assessments on their own houses ('the coffee table in my dining room, I've done that!'). Two groups in other regions told similar stories, and participants described their daily domestic routine of checking and dating laminated check-lists, and photocopying and filing them. It was unclear whether all local authorities make equally stringent requirements, or indeed whether the EYFS is intended to be implemented in this way.

The reported experience of children's centre staff providing outreach facilities was not dissimilar, but was again inconsistent between providers and regions. For these staff, typically from Phase 2 and Phase 3 children's centres, a range of difficulties presented themselves as they attempted to find venues for their off-site services, transport equipment, set up the play environments and conduct a risk assessment each time they embarked on an activity outside the centre.

'the difficulty that we have with some of our groups is the venues that we actually deliver from because we're delivering outreach venues across the locality' (outreach play worker)

'it's finding the venue that's suitable that we can use and either leave the room set up or finding the time to get somebody that can come in and set the room up as it should be each week and then adding to it' (children's centre manager).

Local regulations varied with the venue and the service provider. For children's centre staff employed by one NHS trust, there was a check-list which required them to see the boiler safety certificate for school premises each time they visited. Even where the regulations were less stringent, it was clear that making checks took a lot of time on every occasion that an outreach session was provided.

While all these practitioner groups, working outside the school sector, acknowledged the importance of health and safety, it was clear that the associated regulations were applied more fully or more stringently in some local authorities than in others, and that in a minority of cases these made it much harder for practitioners to achieve the tasks they set themselves.

4.10 What changes would practitioners like to see?

Although many of the changes practitioners would like have emerged in the previous sections, the question was put directly to individuals who were interviewed in Phase 2 of the fieldwork. The responses of the 24 practitioners who chose to answer this question are summarised in Figure 4.10.1. They showed surprisingly little appetite for change, and a surprising convergence of views.

Figure 4.10.1: Phase 2 data from individual interviews (changes to EYFS)

Is there anything that you would really like to see changed in the EYFS? (24 respondents)

The EYFS in general is widely praised by respondents, four of whom suggested there should be no change or only very minor changes. One of these described it as ‘a catalyst’ which had introduced a holistic view of development and learning across the sector. Three other respondents suggested that there should be a much stronger emphasis on the ‘Four principles’ as these should guarantee high-quality provision without the need for so much detailed or prescriptive guidance.

‘When our governors visit we give them a copy of the four principles to look out for, not a copy of all the goals and targets’ (Nursery head teacher).

By far the greatest desire for change concerned the ‘statements’, the Early Learning Goals, and the Development Matters. Many complaints were made about the statements, some of which were viewed as inconsistent in their conception and presentation:

‘Re-write some of the statements and some of the goals, they’re inconsistent: some are very specific and you might as well put “child can” or “child can’t” do this; others are all waffley like expressing their feelings – and then the one following that will be “create a 3-D structure”, something really specific’ (Nursery teacher.)

Both teachers and head teachers disliked the strong emphasis on emergent literacy and numeracy (CLL, PSRN) and felt that these goals tended to be pursued at the expense of personal, social and emotional development. Four respondents referred to the activity of ‘ticking boxes’ dominating practitioners’ thinking and planning, especially as many of the

Early learning Goals were hard to achieve or inappropriate. Phonics and numeracy statements were singled out for criticism, as in the focus groups.

'The expectations with regard to Letters and Sounds are not achievable for many children and therefore cause anxiety amongst parents and schools spend too much time on them because they need to be in place to lead into Key Stage 1' (Reception teacher).

At the same time, the problem of progression from reception to year 1, and the inconsistency of expectations and curriculum, was raised as an issue needing urgent attention. As described above, the 'age bands' in the Development Matters were seen as a contradiction to the ethos of the Unique Child, and several settings had cut them off or covered them up in order to avoid measuring children against developmental norms:

'There isn't a norm for early years children, they're all different. They should take those [levels] away, and the ages in months' (Nursery head teacher).

Additional issues were raised by only one or two respondents: one felt the document was too complex, and another that the language was 'daunting', and two commented on the time needed for paper-work. But most respondents seemed to have developed a familiarity with the framework and could work with it comfortably, except for the issues of measuring children against statements and norms, which were seen as inimical to the Unique Child principle. There was no enthusiasm for major revisions except to these descriptors.

5. Discussion

The study has validated many of the aims and intentions embodied in the EYFS document. Like other recent studies, including those conducted by BAECE, the PLA and the QCDA, the present study confirms that after 18 months of use the new statutory framework has been accepted by most practitioners as a foundation for their practice, and is welcomed as supportive and manageable. One of the strongest messages from all groups of practitioners is ‘don’t change it again’.

The ‘headlines’ in the preceding sections tell a largely positive, but still mixed, story. For the vast majority of practitioners, the framework:

- has become fundamental to their working practice
- is seen to validate their professional beliefs
- is viewed as child-led and child-friendly
- confirms a holistic view of children’s development and wellbeing; and
- is seen to support needed continuity within and across the sector.

The care and welfare arrangements are widely viewed as ‘good practice’, largely self-evident, and acceptable – many respondents feel that they have not changed the way they see their role as caregivers. The areas of learning, similarly, are widely understood and increasingly confidently applied, with the result that most practitioners are able to explain how their own implementation of the curriculum ensures good opportunities and outcomes for children from different groups, including boys.

But within this broadly positive picture there are a number of distinct areas of dissatisfaction:

- the requirement to assess children against the EYFS Profile is felt to be increasingly problematic as children reach the reception class, and practitioners attempt to map children’s individual developmental trajectories on to a scale which many practitioners regard as ill-founded, illogical or inappropriate.
- the pressures on practitioners to produce ‘outcomes’ and ‘evidence’ for external scrutiny are felt to be in direct conflict with the early years ethos of the framework, but are the inevitable result of the ‘clash of two worlds’ which is described when children transfer from the EYFS into the Primary Curriculum.

- the assessments made at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are viewed by some practitioners as subjective and unreliable, and also as subject to manipulation and interpretation, rather than as supportive of children's learning; few participants feel that they support continuity and progression as children move into Key Stage 1.

The degree of ease with which practitioners have adapted to the new requirements reflects the nature of their role. For those participants who work in nursery schools and nursery classes, and in many pre-schools, the new framework has seemed to be simply an extension of their existing practice. For those working outside the traditional 'nursery' sector however, and particularly for some childminders and children's centre staff (as well as for some primary head teachers), the required changes have in different ways proved dramatic and difficult, because they imply quite new ways of working.

Some themes emerging from the analysis are therefore highlighted here as questions for further consideration as the EYFS is reviewed.

1. Is the requirement on all providers to follow the six areas of learning actually beneficial for children?

- Some practitioners, including childminders and children's centre staff, express concern that children are 'offered' the six areas of learning by several providers in one day, ranging from breakfast care through morning and afternoon sessions in pre-schools through to childminders' homes or after-school clubs. While children who attend a single form of provision receive their entitlement to access the areas of learning from this provider, children who attend multiple forms of provision may be presented with the same areas of learning several times in a day or week by different practitioners, which is unlikely to be beneficial.
- Some practitioners suggest that children should be allowed a 'down time' after a busy day so that from (say) 3.00-6.00 they can relax, potter, do nothing or simply socialise, without the necessity for adult input or assessment. This view is widely held by childminders and play-workers who provide services for children after school.

2. Similarly, is the requirement for all providers to assess children on an ongoing basis actually in children's best interests?

- There is evidence from play-workers in particular that assessing children's after-school activities has replaced the traditional play-worker role of *playing with children* according to children's own wishes
- There is a point of view expressed by childminders that 'you're not playing with them, you're policing them'
- The argument is made that some children will have records created for them by a number of different practitioners, who rarely work together for the benefit of the child.

3. Do the requirements for development and learning, and assessment, meet the wishes of parents?

- There are strong indications from childminders in particular that the EYFS has removed choice from parents and that those who have consciously chosen a 'home from home' rather than a nursery environment for their child are now presented with a nursery-style environment complete with assessment pro-formas.
- Parents are reported to have rejected efforts to monitor and record their child's development, preferring an informal experience for their child.
- The presence of 'ages and stages' (in months) and of photographs (of babies, toddlers, pre-schoolers) alongside the developmental descriptions, is widely disliked by practitioners who report that they have to 'hide them from parents' to avoid giving inappropriate messages about a child's delay or difference.

4. Is the 'burden of paperwork' really necessary or is it the result of misinformation and misconceptions?

- There is evidence of widespread confusion as to what is required of different providers by the EYFS, by the local authority and by Ofsted. Some providers believe

it is essential to document and assess every activity children undertake, while others maintain that only occasional observations and records are required

- Staff who have not traditionally kept records (play-workers and childminders) find the process particularly challenging and time-consuming

5. Is the nature of risk assessments properly understood and equitably disseminated?

- Staff in different forms of provision, or in different regions, or engaged in services with different providers, are undergoing different levels of risk-management: for some this involves daily checklists and paperwork, while for others a more 'common-sense' view is accepted. There appears to be no clarity or equity in this situation, but some practitioners describe giving up potentially valuable experiences for children because of the requirement to document the potential risks and preventative measures.

6. Is it possible to ensure continuity from the reception class to Year 1?

- There are few reports of schools where attention has been paid to continuing EYFS practice, curriculum and assessments in to the first year of the Primary Curriculum. Most practitioners working in schools acknowledge that children experience dramatic changes as they leave the EYFS and enter Year 1. These changes include a less favourable adult-child ratio, a more subject-based curriculum, and a more formal and adult-led learning experience.

7. Does the fragmented nature of services for children aged birth to 5 actually prevent children from experiencing the continuity which the EYFS aims to secure?

- The existence in many areas (but in different ways) of diverse and competing forms of provision has created local hierarchies in which children are 'handed over' from one provider to another as they progress through the pre-school years. For many children there is evidence that more frequent, rather than less frequent, transitions are experienced in the years before school
- Pressure from primary schools seeking to maintain their own numbers on roll are reported as the cause of many parents being encouraged to move children into the

maintained sector, and into school, when such moves may not serve the child's best interests

- It is essential that *all aspects of early years policy* are considered together, when considering the effectiveness and appropriateness of the EYFS

8. Has sufficient, and appropriate, training been provided for all practitioners working with the EYFS?

- Training for the EYFS, and provision for professional learning more generally, varies enormously across local authorities as well as across practitioner groups, and is widely felt to be inequitable: some head teachers claim that they 'picked it up from the reception teachers', children's centre staff report that they 'learned more from their colleagues than from the course' and so on.
- The practitioners who are best qualified, and best equipped to access training (reception teachers, nursery teachers and Early Years Professionals), generally report that all the training they require is available and sometimes even plentiful, whereas staff with lower qualifications are frequently required to access training without pay and in their own time.
- Local authority variability might be investigated to see why such different offers and options for professional learning are available in different authorities; one Local Authority participating in the study has a network of 90 Early Years Professionals while another has only 9 (but is supporting some staff in taking Open University degrees)

9. Can equitable and continuous provision across phases be secured when the fundamental values of the EYFS (the Unique Child; the outdoor curriculum) are not prized in the Primary Curriculum?

- Curricular differences appear to be the external symbols of more profound differences in beliefs and values between the pre-school and the school tradition, exemplified in views of appropriate behaviour and learning styles
- The 'independence' of pre-school children is often understood as an ability to make choices and take decisions, while the 'independence' of school children may be understood as an ability to comply, conform and self-regulate in accordance with adult expectations

- The structural conditions of schools (poorer adult-child ratios, smaller spaces, reduced opportunities for outdoor learning) are reported to impede the continuation of optimal EYFS practice into the classrooms of 4-5 year-olds

10. How can the widely-reported inclusive practices in pre-school environments be carried over into the school environment?

Nursery and pre-school practitioners offer detailed accounts of the ways in which they ensure that boys, children with additional needs, bilingual children, and gifted and talented children, have opportunities to learn at an appropriate level and pace and in an appropriate style; these opportunities are rarely mentioned by primary school staff. Some participants working in the pre-school sector implied that the 'disadvantage' of some groups of pupils is the product of the school environment rather than the product of difficulties associated with home experience, gender or ability. Two themes of the EYFS - the 'Enabling Environment' and the 'Unique Child' - are described as giving all children opportunities to learn at their own pace and in their own way. The ethos of the Primary Curriculum is not believed to support such opportunities.

6. Summary and recommendations

As this report has made clear throughout, and in accordance with a series of recent surveys of the EYFS, most practitioners in the children's workforce have accommodated their own previous beliefs and practices to the requirements of the framework and have found them to be broadly compatible. There is a high degree of satisfaction with this mode of working, and a strong desire by the majority of practitioners to keep the EYFS in place. At the same time there are equally strong desires by significant minorities to modify certain aspects – whether the scale points in the profile, the ages and stages in Development Matters, or the procedures for regulating practice. All these concerns need to be further investigated with the groups who are voicing them, in order to improve practitioners' sense of comfort with the requirements.

This study was concerned with reviewing 'practitioners' experiences' of the EYFS, but it must be emphasised that these experiences are the consequence not simply of the quality of the framework itself, but of the way in which the requirements are implemented at a local level. The study revealed huge discrepancies in both the levels of support that have been offered to practitioners- in the form of training and networking – and in the level of reliable information which has been disseminated – including messages about the quantity of documentation that is required. These discrepancies arise at the level of the region or local authority, and at the level of the practitioner group.

A re-launch of a (slightly modified) EYFS would need to be undertaken with careful attention to implementation and information. Meanwhile further clarification of practitioners' roles and responsibilities might enable those working with children and families to continue to enjoy their work, and commit to it, but with fewer of the anxieties which many are currently reporting.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Phase 1 Focus group topic guides

Appendix 2 Phase 2 Interview questions

Appendix 3 Analysis of participants

Appendix 4 Analysis of support for the headline findings

Core Questions for all focus group participants

A. How does EYFS influence day-to-day practice?

B. How, if at all, has EYFS supported improvements in the care and education offered by your setting i.e. school?

C. What, if any, obstacles and difficulties do you face in the effective use of EYFS?

Professional Specific Questions

D. How does EYFS contribute to children's learning and development?

Respondents: HT, T, SM, EYP, CM

E. Regarding the specific areas of learning, do the six areas provide the best structure? How effective are they in enabling professionals to support children's L&D?

Respondents: HT, T, NN, CM

F. How effective are the learning goals in enabling professionals to support children's L&D – do the goals provide the right content for children's L&D?

- Are they set at the right level?
- Are the writing goals helpful?
- Do girls' and boys' experiences differ?

Respondents: HT, T, SM, EYP

G. How does EYFS support the welfare, well-being and health of children?

Respondents: T, SM, NN, EYP, CM

H. How does EYFS support the transition to primary school?

Respondents: HT, T, SM

I. How does EYFS support children in danger of falling behind the majority?

Respondents: HT, T, NN, EYP

J. How does EYFS support children with special needs e.g. SEN, gifted and talented?

Respondents: HT, NN, SM, EYP, CCS

K. Using the EYFS profile scales at age 5, do you feel that the ELGs are set at the right level?

Respondents: T

L. When making and recording observations to inform assessment, how effective is EYFS in supporting you to produce development statements, formative and summative assessment? Do you the scale clear and useable?

Respondents: T, SM, EYP, NN, CM

M. Do you think that the EYFS enables staff to better engage with parents? Are you able to engage parents in assessment?

Respondents: SM, NN, CM, T

N. Do you think EYFS should have more specific details about nutritional requirements?

Respondents: SM, NN, CM, CCS, EYP

O. What are the practical effects of the EYFS requirements for outdoor space?

Respondents: SM, NN, CM, CCS

P. What are the practical effects of the EYFS requirements for staff ratios and qualifications?

Respondents: HT, SM

Q. How does EYFS support professional development?

Respondents: HT, SM, NN, EYP, CM, CCS

R. How does EYFS support play-based learning?

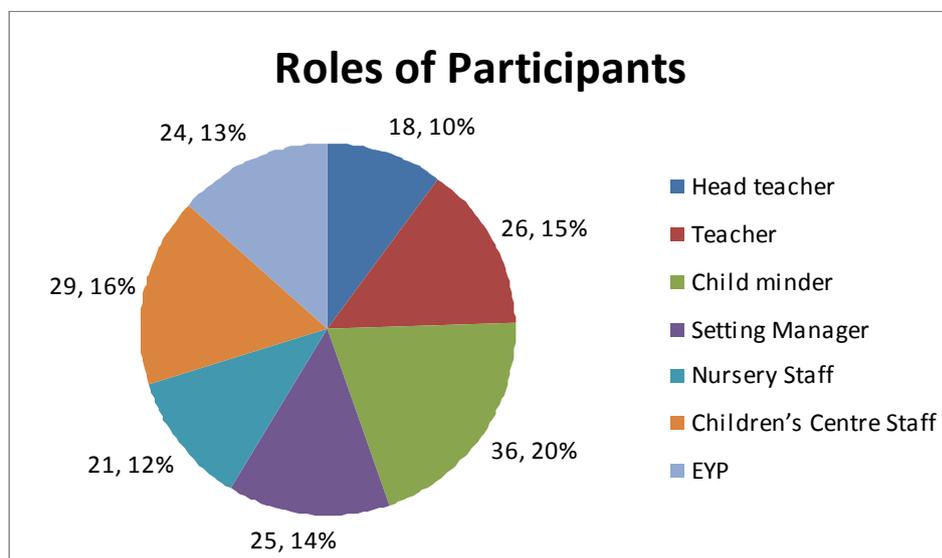
Respondents: T, NN, EYP, CM

Appendix 2 Phase 2 Interview questions

1. Can you describe how you make provision that enables both boys and girls to make progress in the 6 areas of learning?
2. Can you describe how you might use the EYFS guidance to support bilingual learners?
 - a. Should there be more detailed guidance on supporting bilingual learners?
3. Can you describe how the EYFS might enable you to support gifted and talented children?
 - a. Should there be more detailed guidance on supporting gifted and talented children?
4. Can you describe how the EYFS might enable you to support children with special needs?
 - a. Should there be more detailed guidance on supporting children with special needs?
5. Can you describe how you involve parents in the ongoing assessments of their children?
6. Are you able to meet the requirement of the EYFS with the resources you have (including the staff ratios)?
7. Can you describe how you use the nutrition guidelines in your setting?
8. What additional professional development opportunities would you help you in your work? – What exactly? Provided by whom? When would they be? How would you like it to be?
9. Is there anything that you would really like to see changed in the EYFS?

Appendix 3 Analysis of participants

1. Percentages of participants from each of the seven practitioner groups (n= 191):



2. Practitioner qualifications, where given (n=179).

Some participants named 2 or more qualifications

Qualification named by participant	Number of participants
Degree (BA, BEd) or Cert.Ed	81
MA	5
NNEB	9
Early Years Professional Status	23
Level 4	8
Level 3	38
Level 2	5
NPQH (headteachers)	4
Diploma, Certificate or Foundation degree	15
None	10

3. Years working with children under 5, where given (n=168)

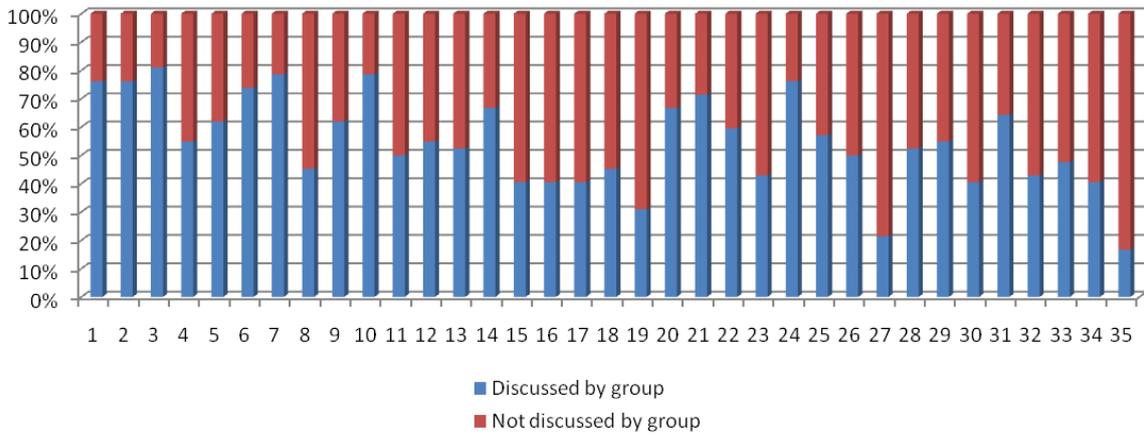
Years	0-5	6-10	11-20	21-30	31+
Number	27	38	57	32	14

Appendix 4 Analysis of support for the headline findings

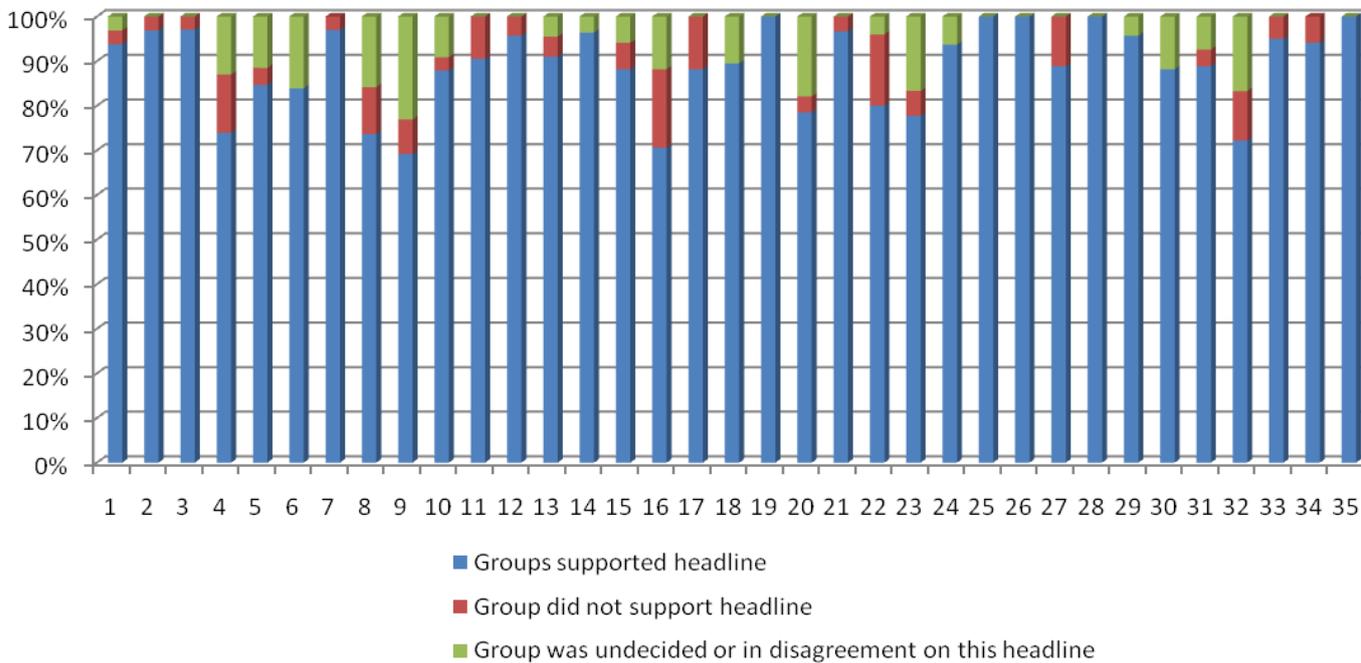
1. The EYFS is central to daily work with children and families
2. The EYFS validates practitioners' professional beliefs
3. The EYFS is child-led and responsive to children's interests
4. Many, but not all, aspects of the EYFS are practitioner-friendly
5. The EYFS has supported greater continuity and integration of services and staff
6. The EYFS supports improvements in observations and observation-based planning
7. The EYFS supports a holistic view of children's development and wellbeing
8. The EYFS has raised the status of some practitioner groups and introduced more equality despite unequal pay and conditions.
9. The areas of learning are viewed as appropriate for children in this age group
10. The areas of learning support inclusion for most groups and individuals
11. There are many criticisms of the level and ordering of points in the Profile, but no consensus among participants
12. The ELGs and Profile statements prove to be both subjective and context-dependent
13. Most preschool practitioners value assessment activities as an integral part of their daily support for development and learning
14. The EYFS guidance and Development Matters support early assessments and enable early support for children falling behind
15. Practitioners working with 4-5 year olds are critical of many aspects of the assessment arrangements
16. Assessment requirements 'take time away from the children'
17. Transition from the EYFS into the Primary Curriculum gives cause for concern to all those involved with children aged 4 and 5
18. Transitions from nursery to reception almost always involves significant changes for children, but can be supported by using the EYFS framework
19. The nature and number of transitions made by children under three needs to be examined, and continuity provided between settings
20. Introductory training for the EYFS was of very variable quality
21. Professional learning is still needed, on different aspects of the framework, and for different groups
22. Professional learning within the EYFS is potentially more inclusive
23. Provision for professional learning may be described as inequitable
24. The EYFS encourages closer engagement with parents

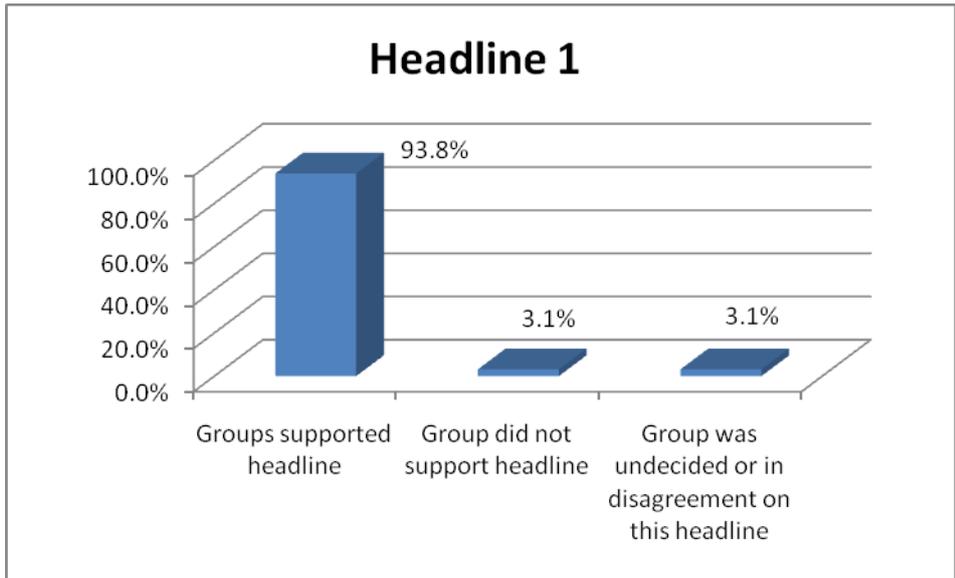
25. Involving parents in assessment is a significant theme
26. Parents need help to understand the EYFS principles and practice
27. EYFS requirements do not always respect parents' preferences
28. Outdoor learning spaces support children's different needs and learning styles
29. Outdoor learning requirements validate practitioners' beliefs and routines
30. Outdoor learning is constrained by resources and ratios
31. The EYFS creates a burden of paperwork
32. The requirement to observe takes time away from the children
33. Staff ratios impact on the EYFS particularly in reception classes
34. Differences between settings impede smooth transitions through the EYFS and into KS1
35. Regulations and risk assessments are a burden for some practitioners

Percentage of focus groups where the themes of headlines 1-35 were discussed

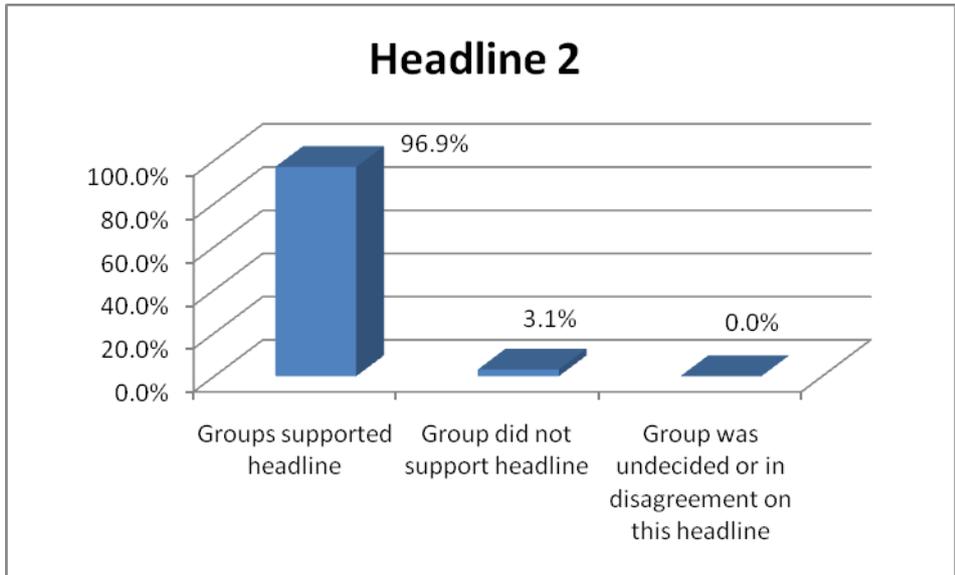


Percentage of focus groups where discussion took place where the group supported headlines 1-35

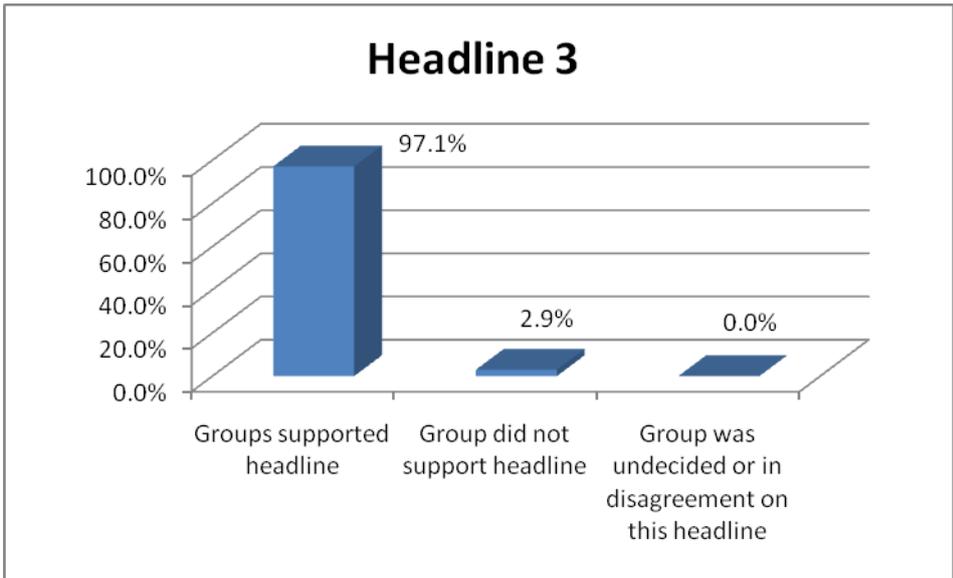




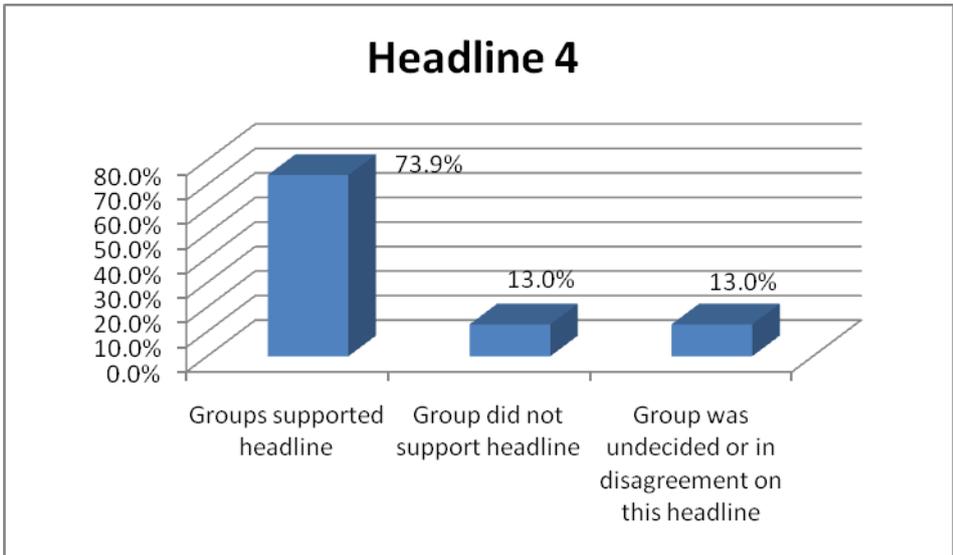
The EYFS is central to daily work with children and families



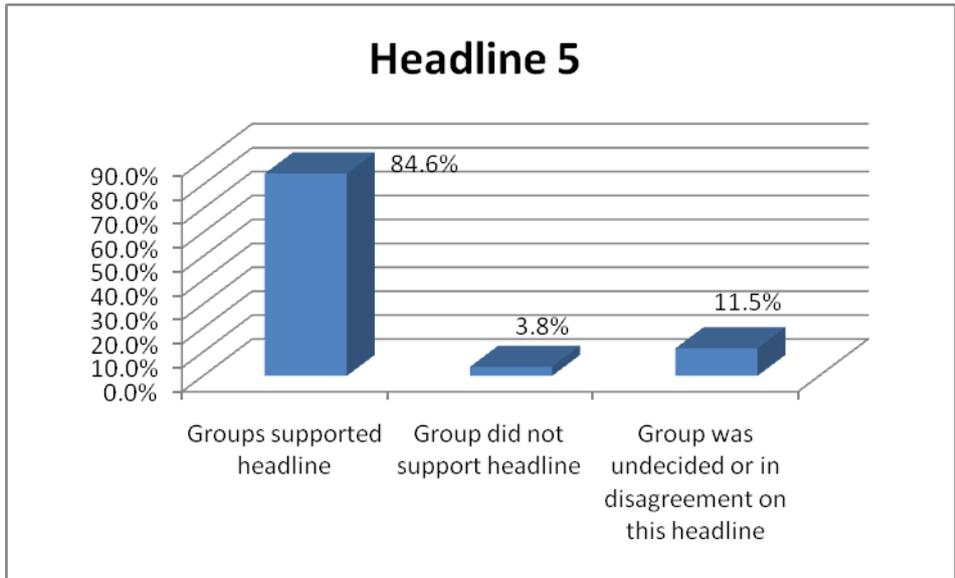
The EYFS validates practitioners' professional beliefs



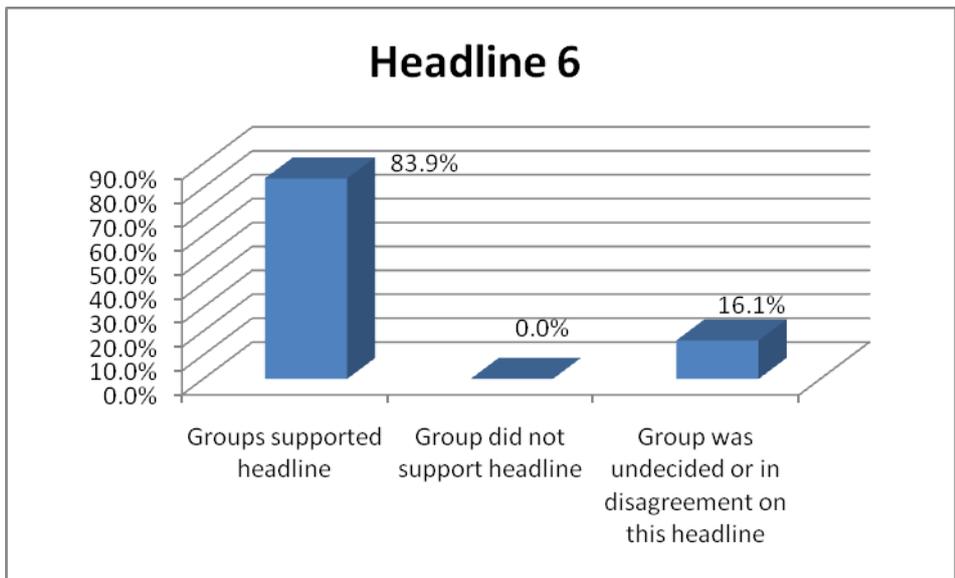
The EYFS is child-led and responsive to children’s interests



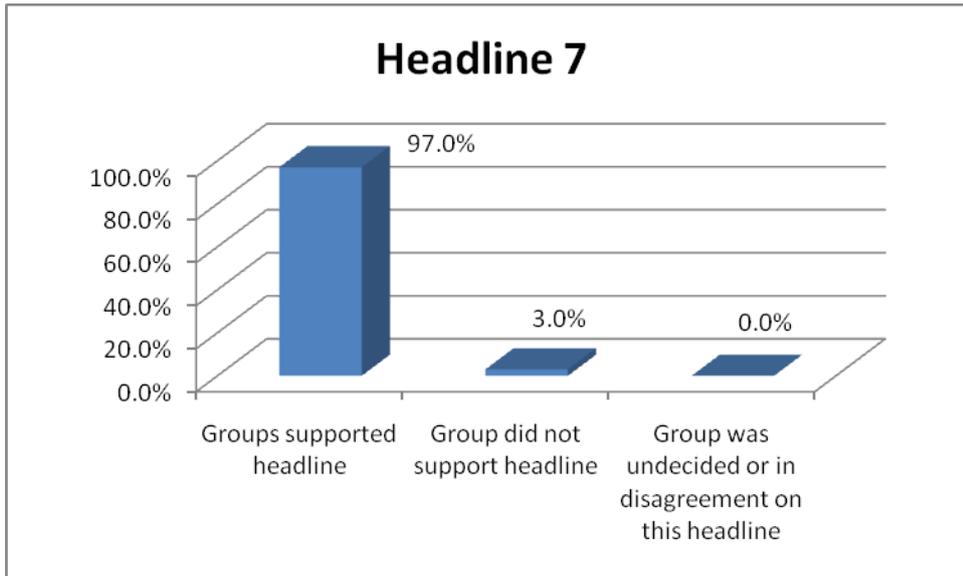
Many, but not all, aspects of the EYFS are practitioner-friendly



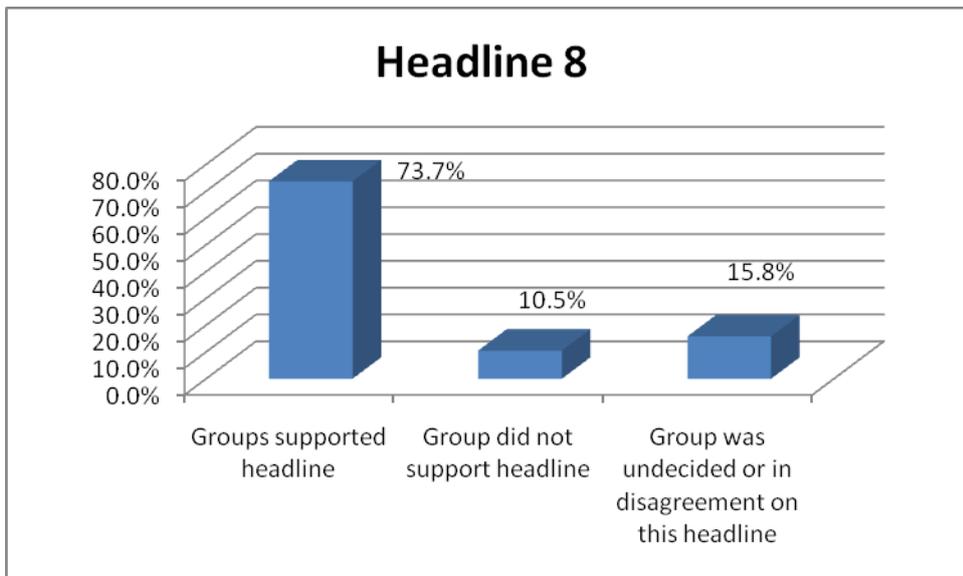
The EYFS has supported greater continuity and integration of services and staff



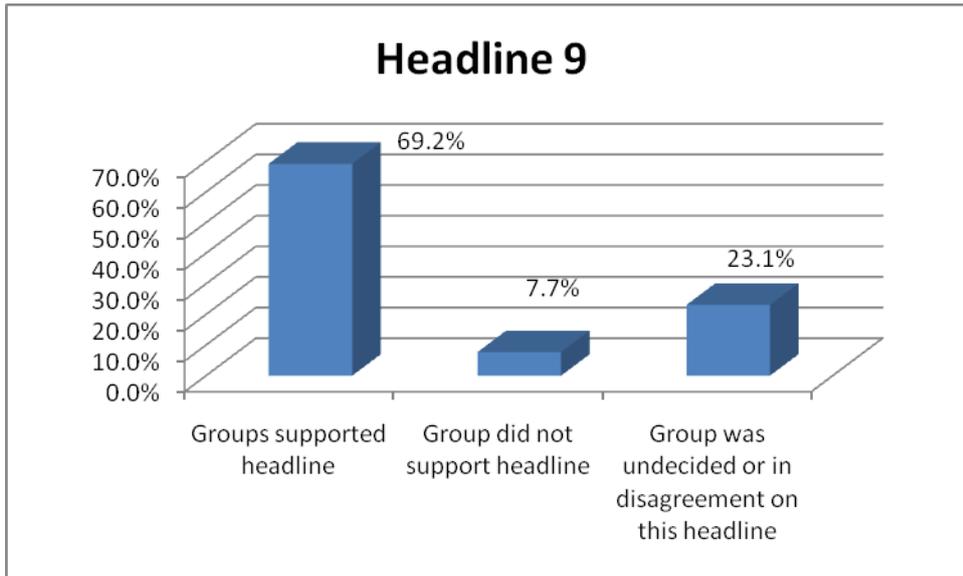
The EYFS supports improvements in observations and observation-based planning



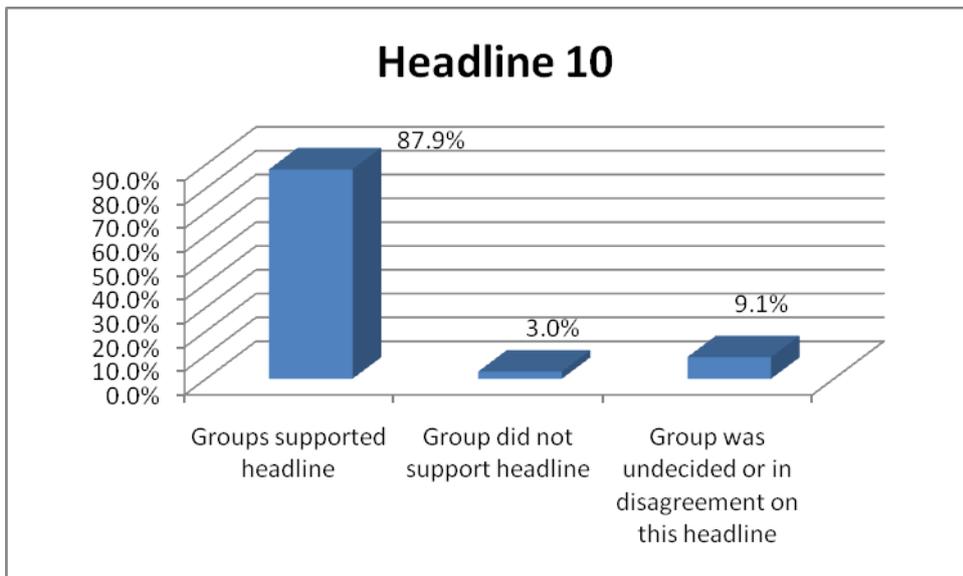
The EYFS supports a holistic view of children’s development and wellbeing



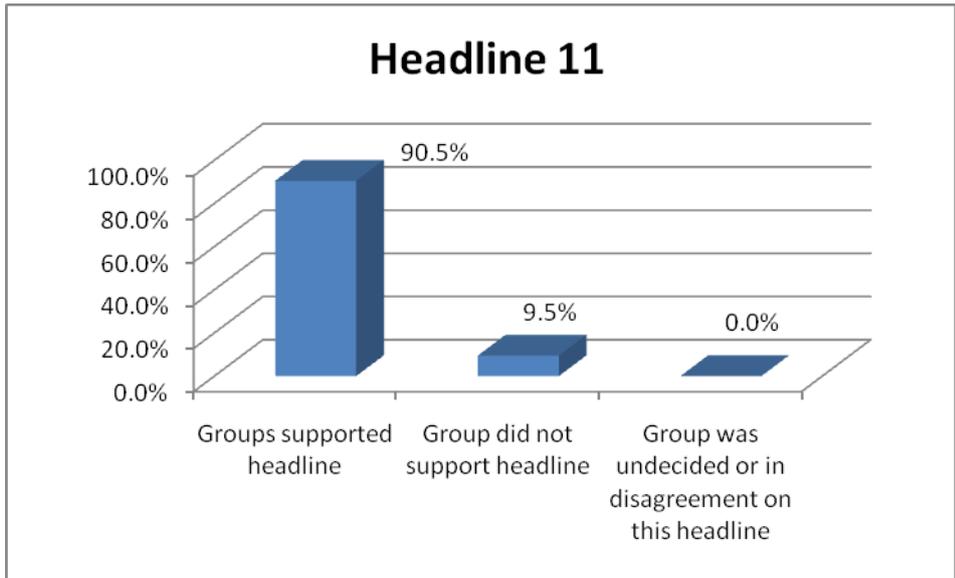
The EYFS has raised the status of some practitioner groups and introduced more equality despite unequal pay and conditions.



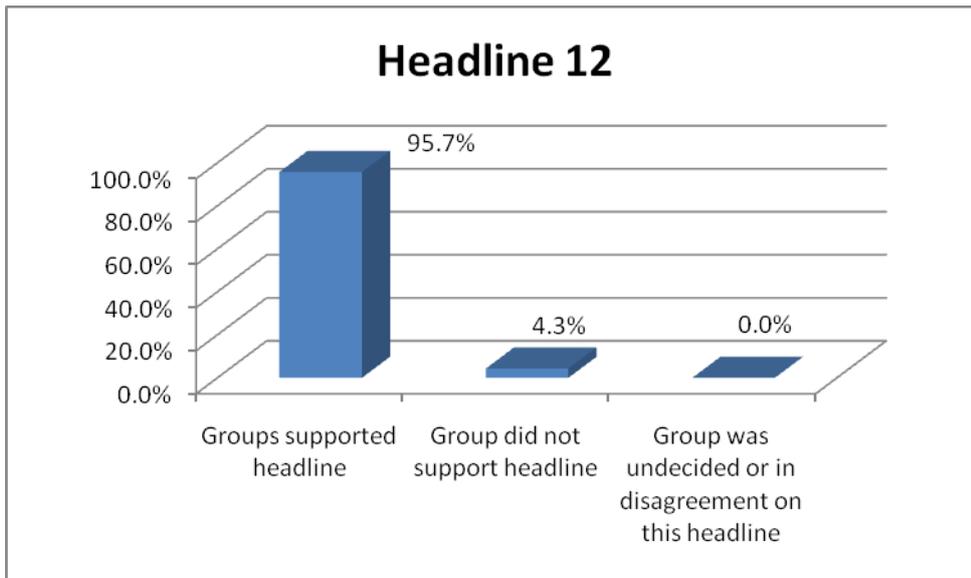
The areas of learning are viewed as appropriate for children in this age group



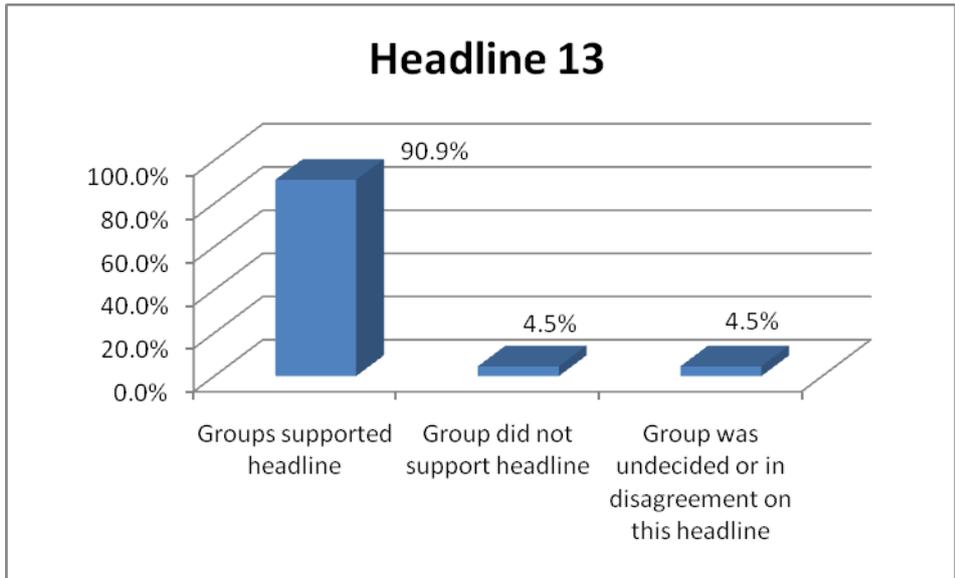
The areas of learning support inclusion for most groups and individuals



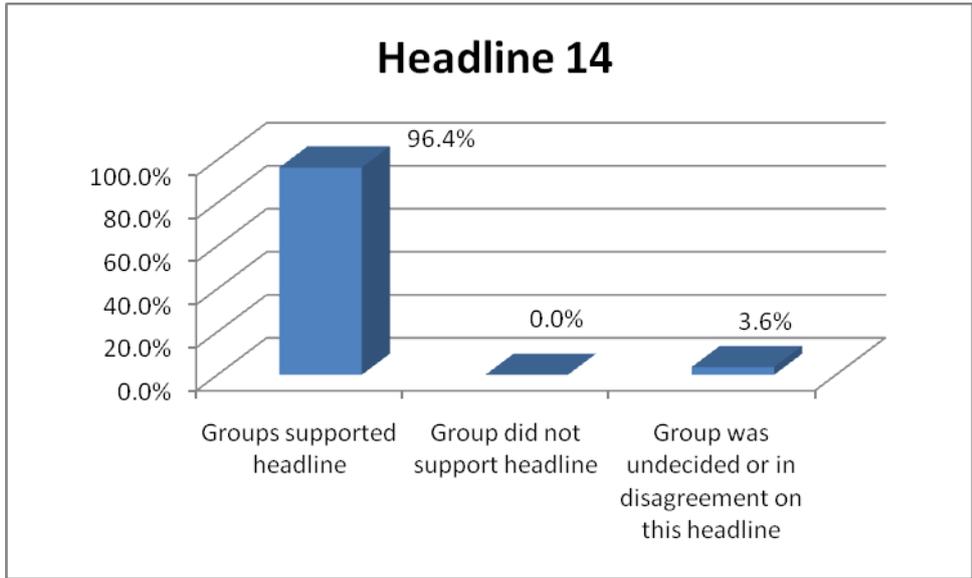
There are many criticisms of the level and ordering of points in the Profile, but no consensus among participants



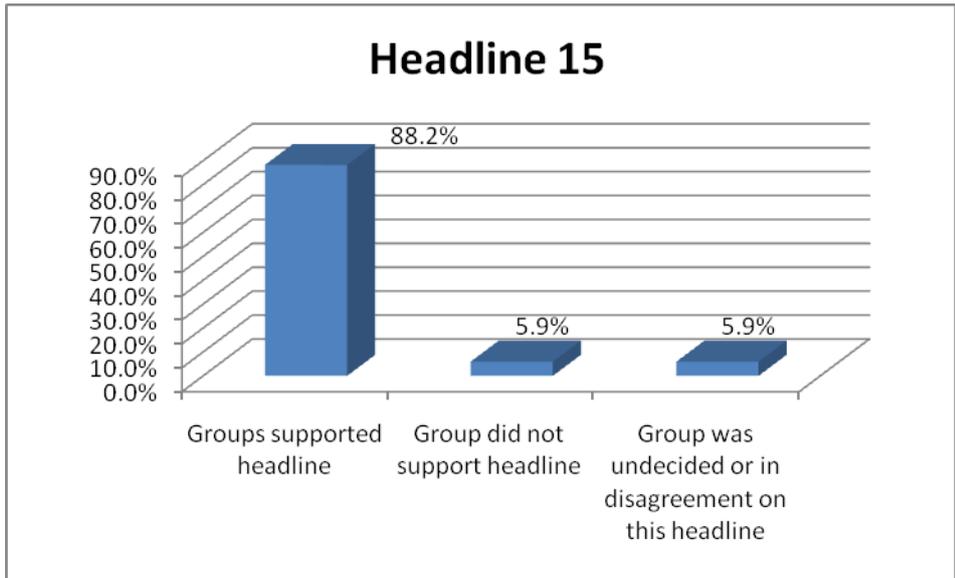
The ELGs and Profile statements prove to be both subjective and context-dependent



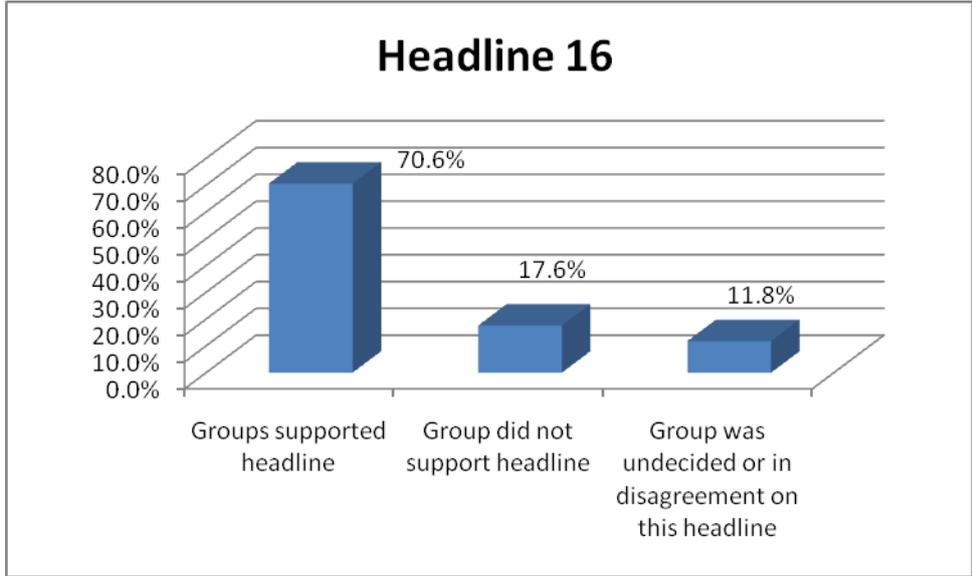
Most preschool practitioners value assessment activities as an integral part of their daily support for development and learning



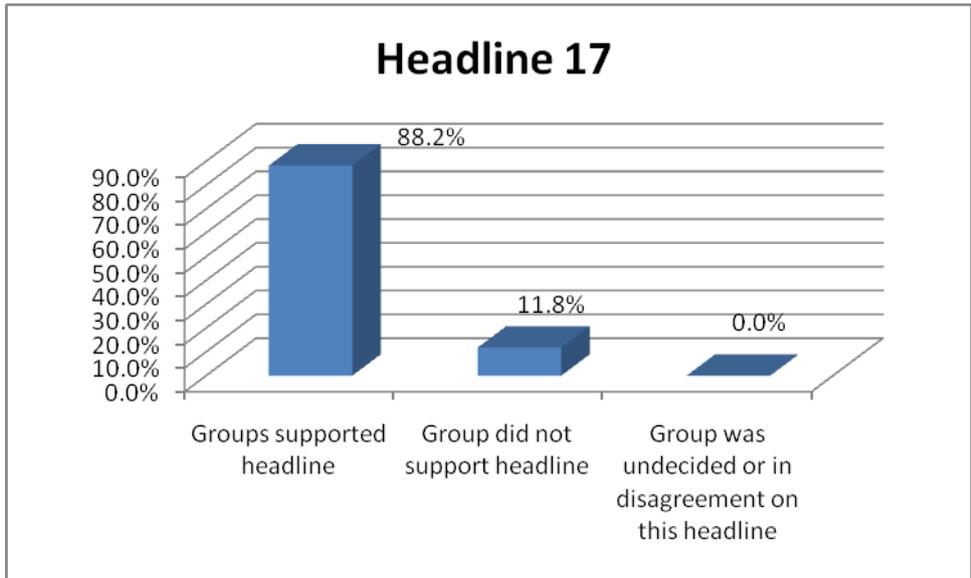
The EYFS guidance and Development Matters support early assessments and enable early support for children falling behind



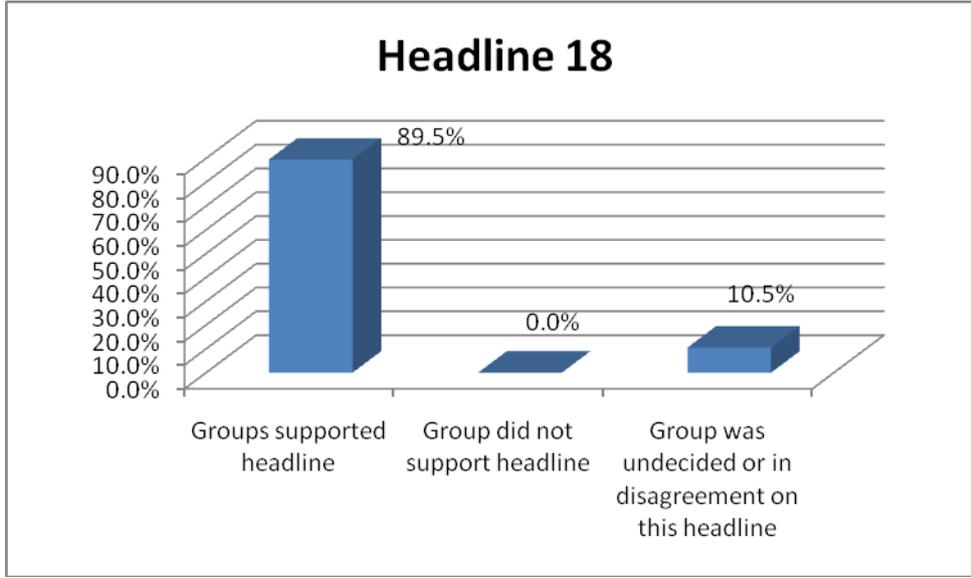
Practitioners working with 4-5 year olds are critical of many aspects of the assessment arrangements



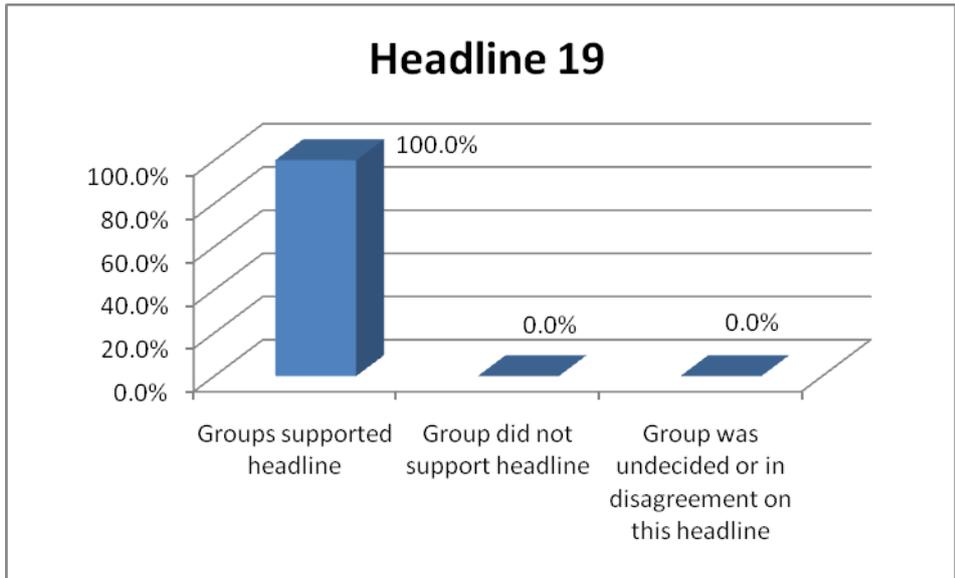
Assessment requirements 'take time away from the children'



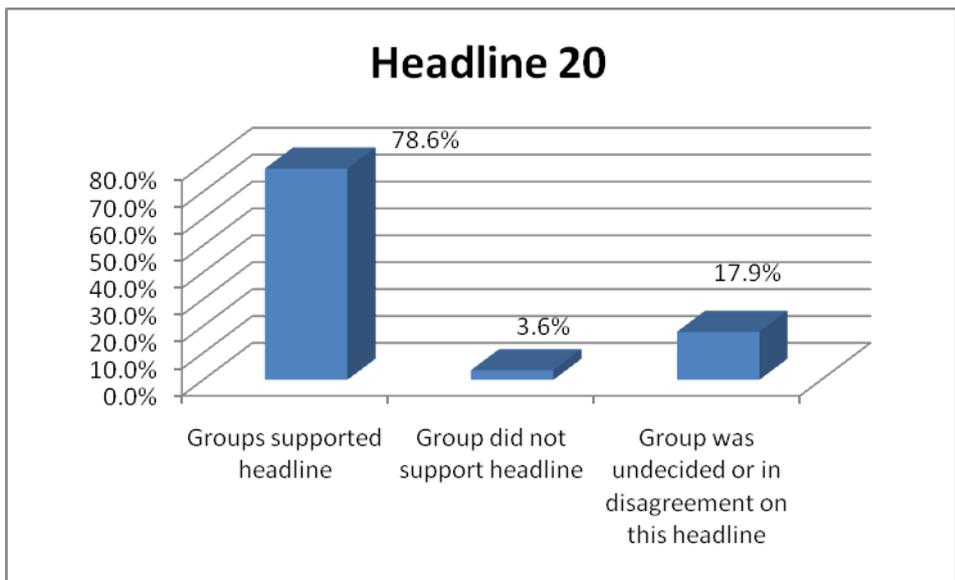
Transition from the EYFS into the Primary Curriculum gives cause for concern to all those involved with children aged 4 and 5



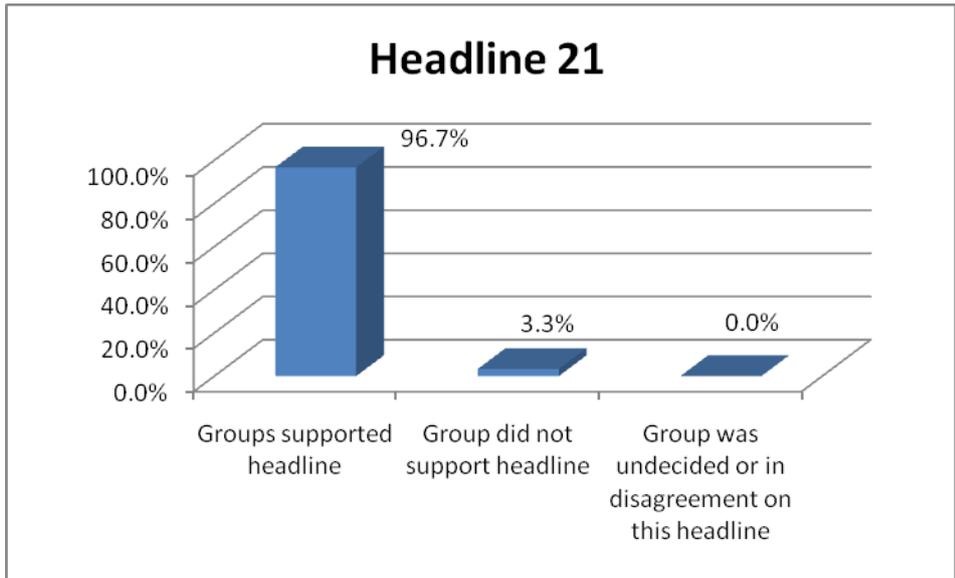
Transitions from nursery to reception almost always involves significant changes for children, but can be supported by using the EYFS framework



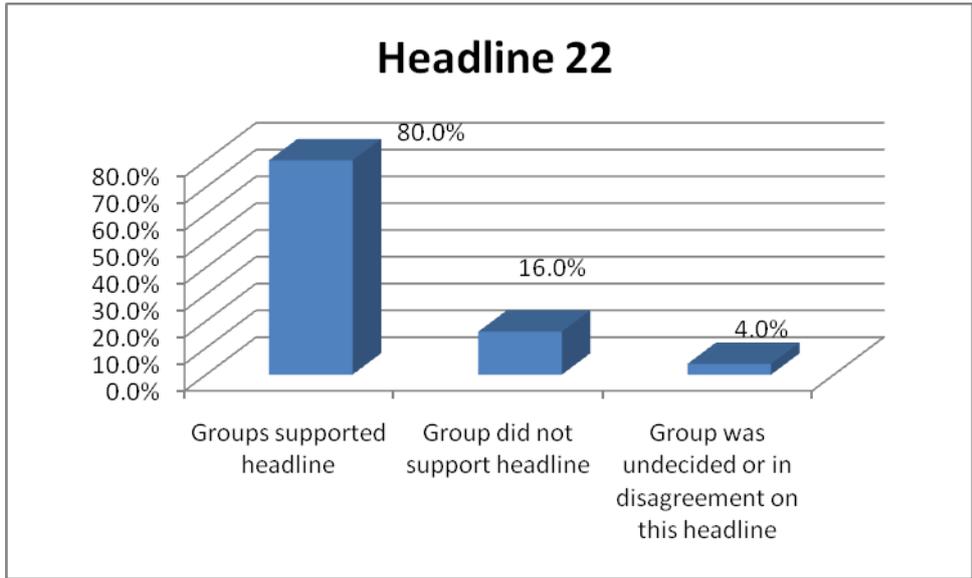
The nature and number of transitions made by children under three needs to be examined, and continuity provided between settings



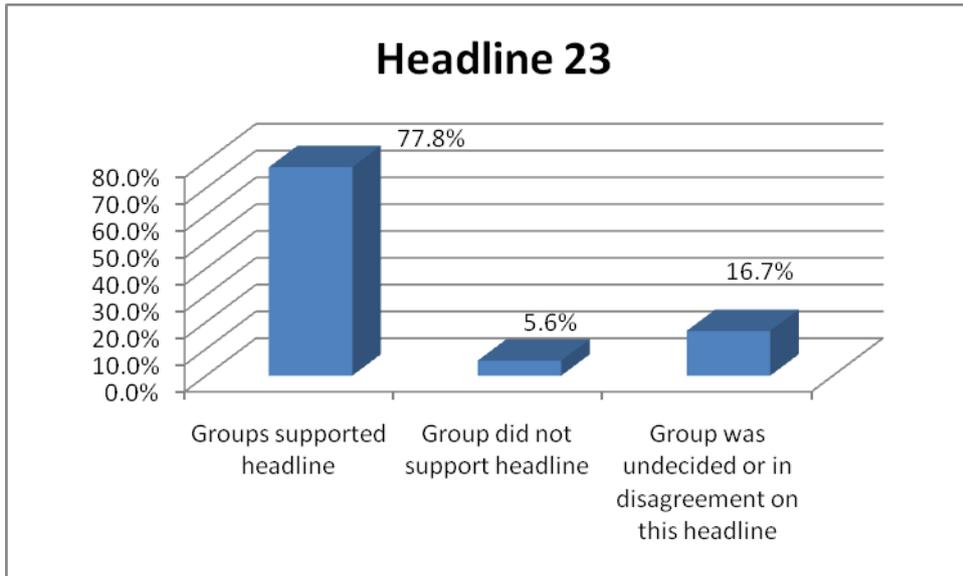
Introductory training for the EYFS was of very variable quality



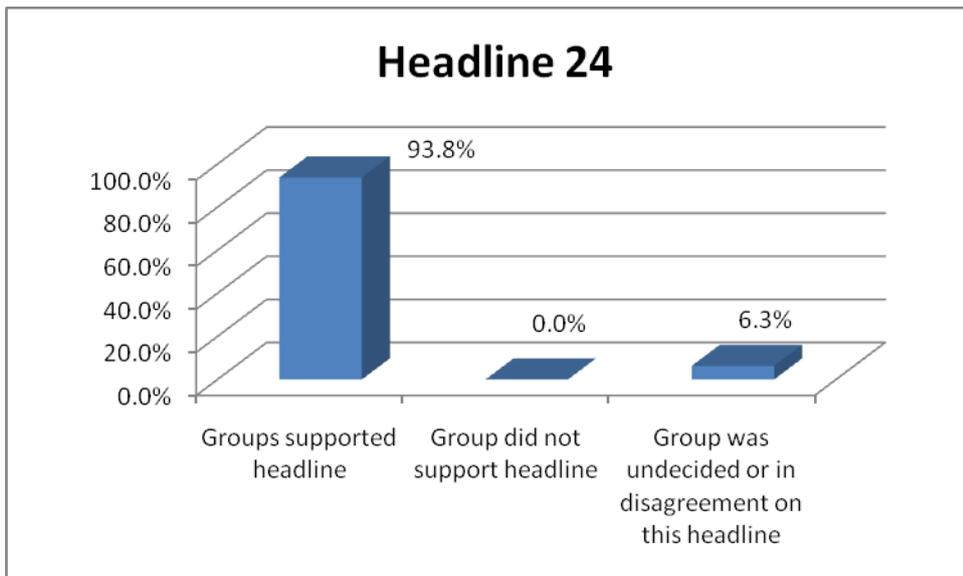
Professional learning is still needed, on different aspects of the framework, and for different groups



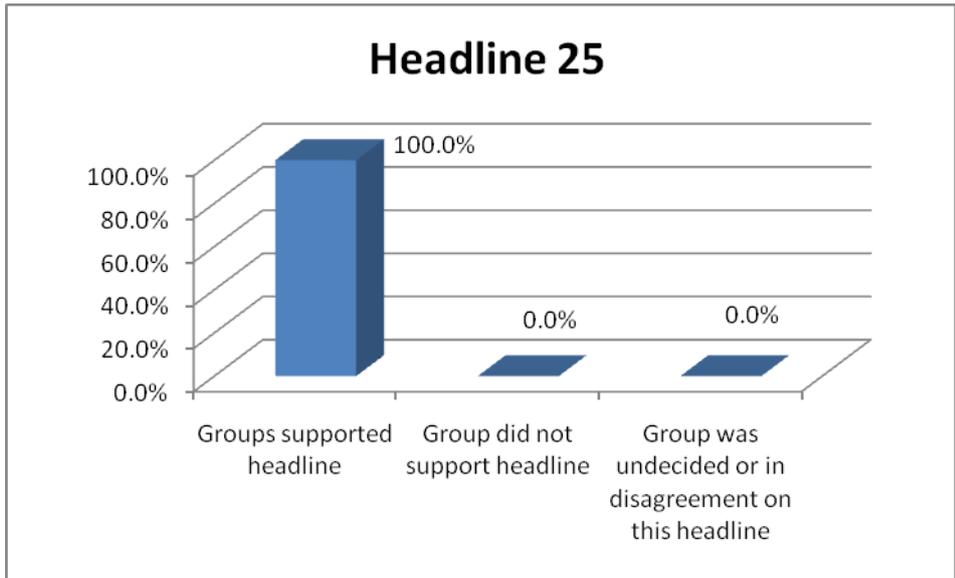
Professional learning within the EYFS is potentially more inclusive



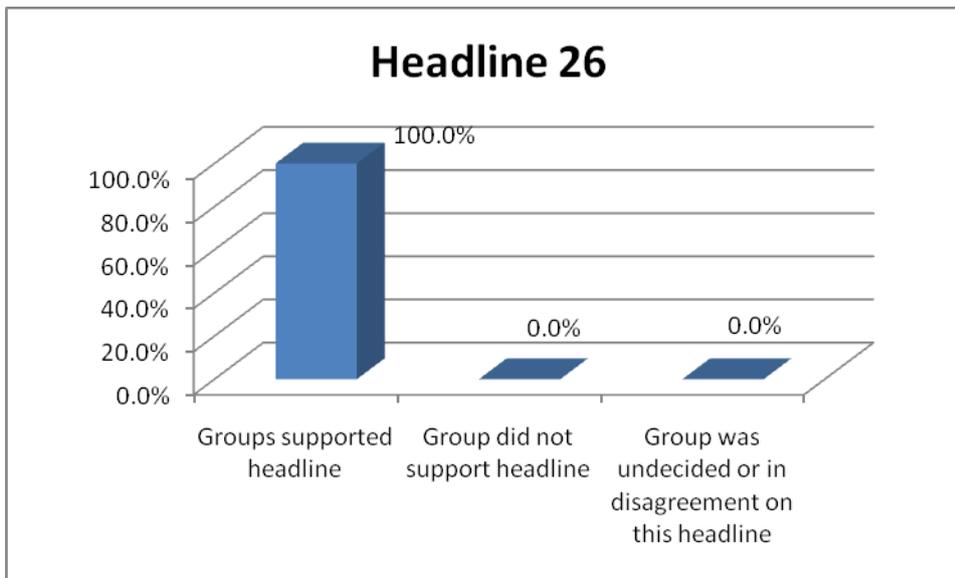
Provision for professional learning may be described as inequitable



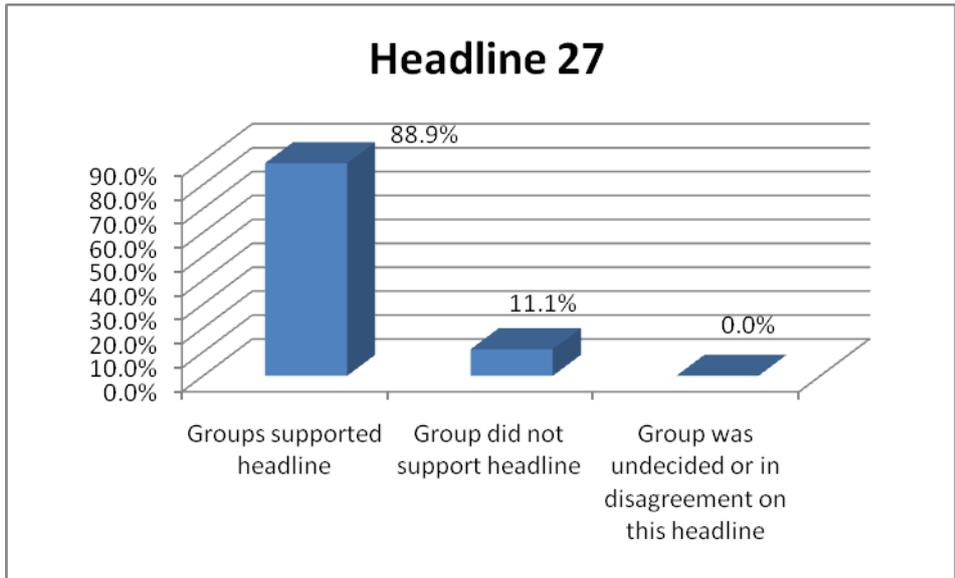
The EYFS encourages closer engagement with parents



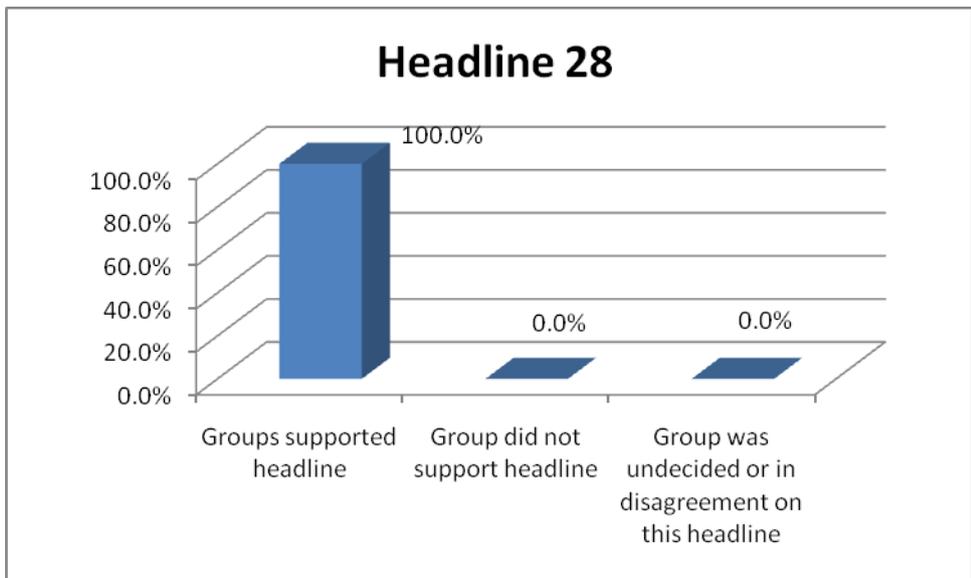
Involving parents in assessment is a significant theme



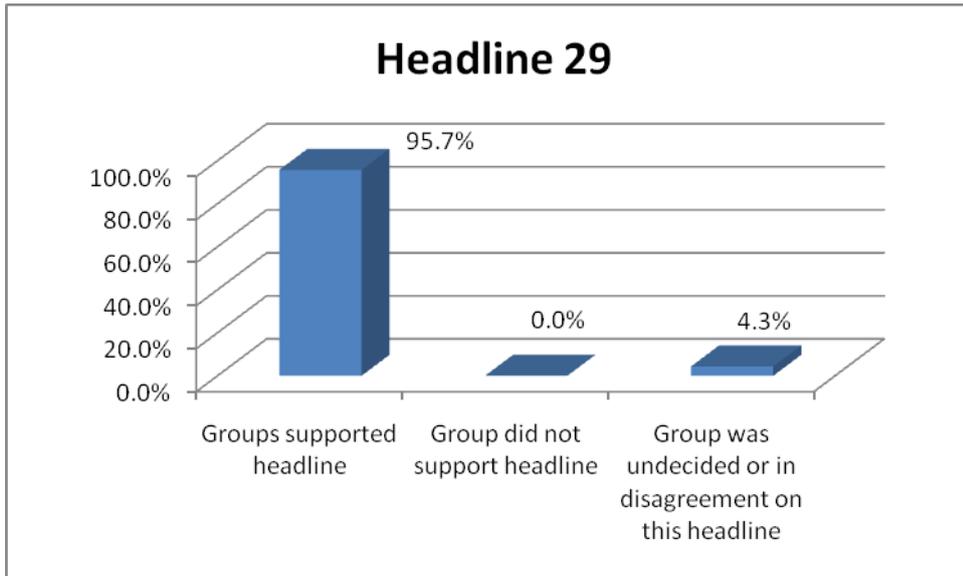
Parents need help to understand the EYFS principles and practice



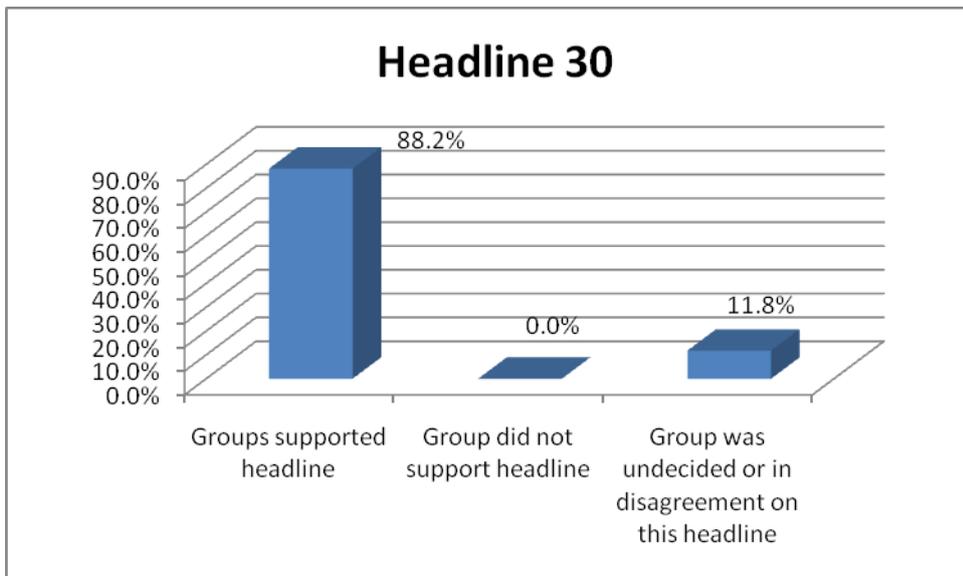
EYFS requirements do not always respect parents' preferences



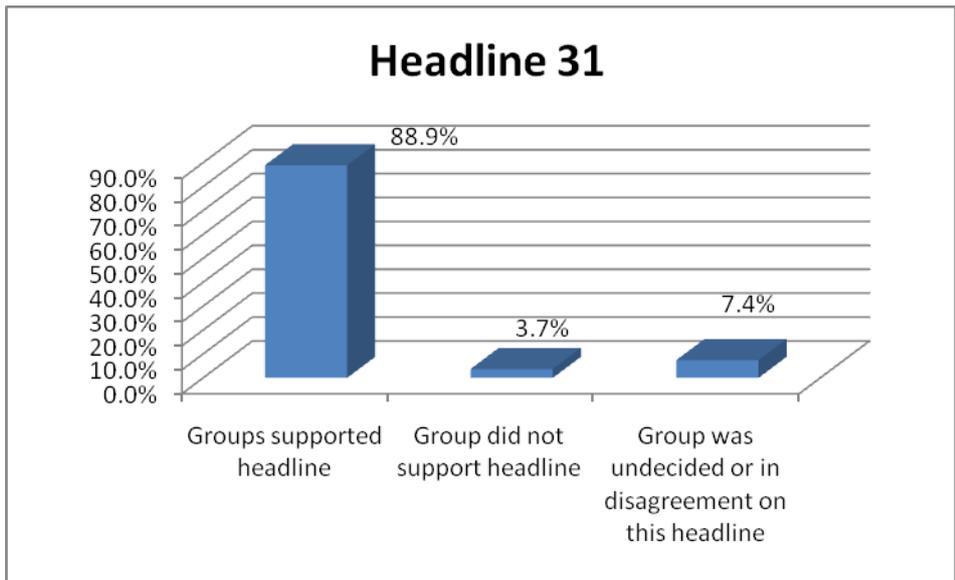
Outdoor learning spaces support children's different needs and learning styles



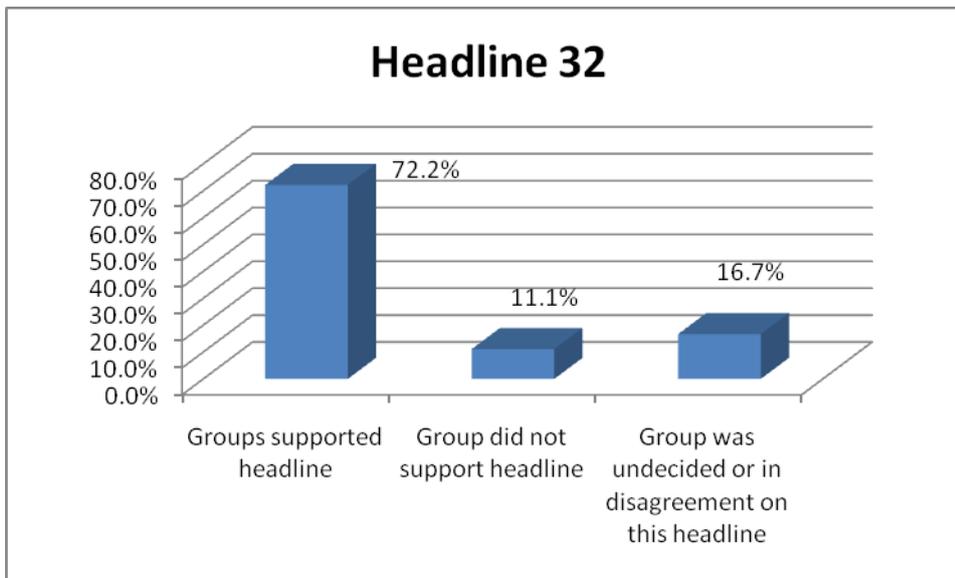
Outdoor learning requirements validate practitioners' beliefs and routines



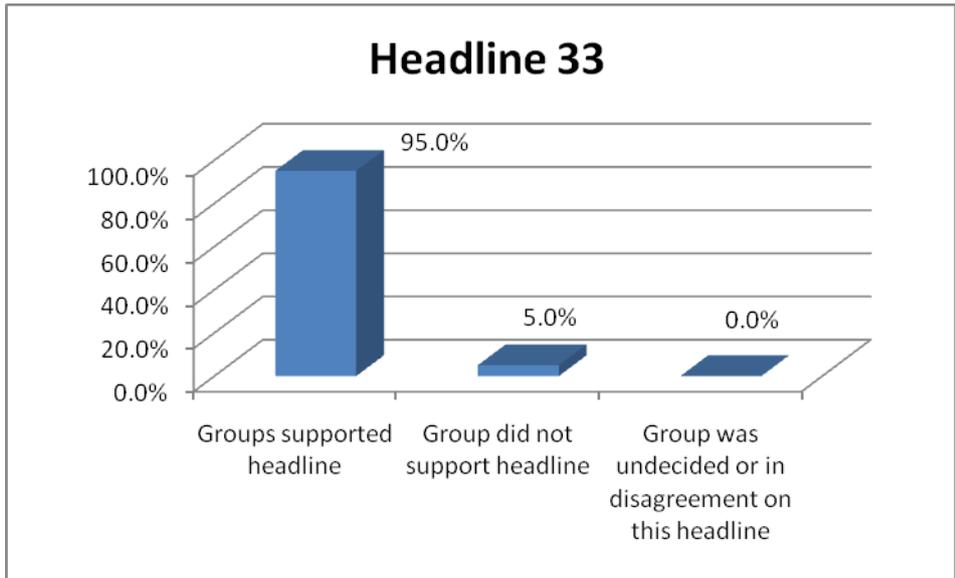
Outdoor learning is constrained by resources and ratios



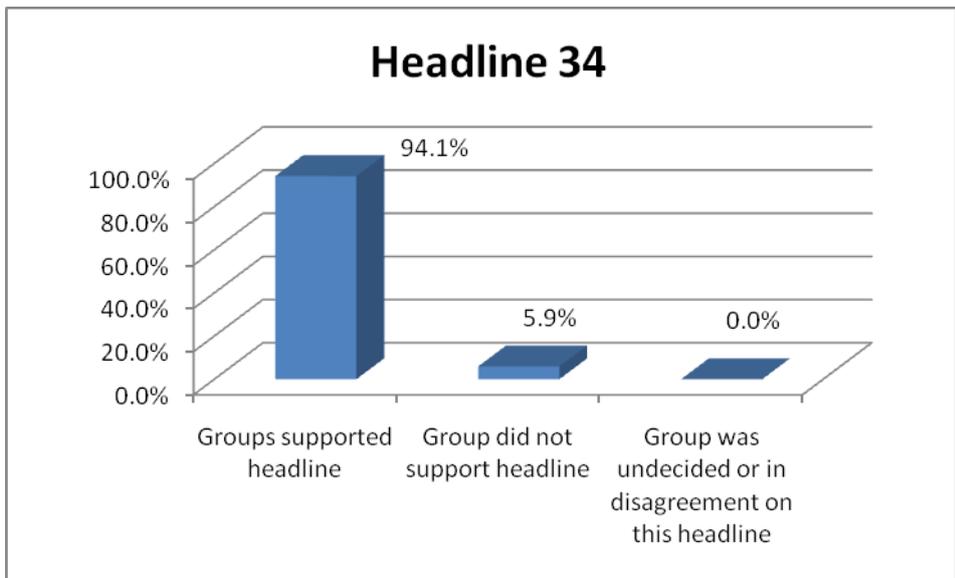
The EYFS creates a burden of paperwork



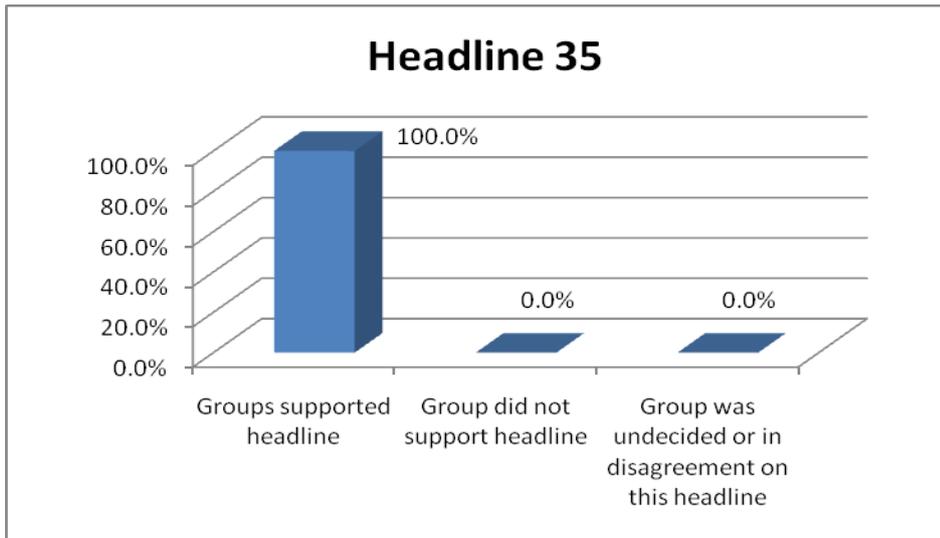
The requirement to observe takes time away from the children



Staff ratios impact on the EYFS particularly in reception classes



Differences between settings impede smooth transitions through the EYFS and into KS1



Regulations and risk assessments are a burden for some practitioners

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