Annual Conference 2011: Marriott Hotel, Tadcaster Road, York YO24 1QQ

11th-12th November, 2011

'Ready for School?: Research, Reflection and Debate

Programme of abstracts

The details of room locations and times of presentations are contained within each abstract

Presenters are listed alphabetically
(e-mail addresses are only given for institutionally-based delegates)

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Observing, understanding and developing learning dispositions in the early years.

The Foundation Phase in Wales sets out to transform early years care and education. This research focuses on children aged two to four and how this age group learns. It crosses the barrier that can exist between childcare and education. This barrier may reflect different pedagogies of learning through play and child led activities and formal learning that is adult led. This research focuses on the child and how they learn in different circumstances. It provides the early years professional in both school and care settings with a common framework from which to observe young children's learning. It provides the practitioner with a cycle that includes both the adult and child in reflecting on and learning about learning, however the situation has arisen. In terms of debating 'school readiness' this research focuses on the practitioner responding to the learning of the individual child.

The research seeks to place the child and their learning disposition at the heart of teaching and learning. The Welsh Assembly proposes that 'For children's learning to be most effective the learning experiences need to be meaningful for the children. Opportunities should always be given for them to make choices according to their preferred style of learning, or to choose through a combination of learning styles,' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008, p. 10).

Research Questions

a) Can we identify, observe and develop an understanding of learning dispositions in children aged two to four years?

b) Do young children change and develop their learning dispositions with age or adapt them to different situations or activities?

c) How is it possible to adapt pedagogy to influence a child's learning potential, through understanding their acquisition and use of learning dispositions?

Research Methods included semi-structured Interviews with staff, parents and children; focus group interviews and observations of adult- and child-led activities indoors and outside.

Initial Results

An observation tool that can be used to observe children's learning both indoors and out adult and child led.

A typology of learning that can categorise and describe young children's learning for practitioners.

A typology that gives adults a common vocabulary for discussing learning

A means of comparing adult planning with actual practice

A research cycle that observes children learning, necessitates a discussion of the process involved for both adult and child, and leads to a way forward

An action research cycle that includes methods for evaluating learning dispositions and leads to change in pedagogy

The research seeks to place the child and their learning disposition at the heart of teaching and learning.

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Exploring self-regulation in toddlers' classrooms: Are we ready to let them take learning into their own hands?

In recent decades, educational policy has emphasized preparing children for school in the Early Years. Self-regulatory skills have proven to be particularly relevant for learning and academic achievement, and therefore promoting self-regulation before school entrance is seen as a key goal within the Foundation Stage. Nevertheless, research on the development and learning of self-regulation in formal educational contexts typically focuses on school-aged children, leaving a gap in our understanding of the development of these skills in the early years. Research by Whitebread and colleagues at the University of Cambridge i.e. has been an exception studying self-regulation in educational contexts in children from the age of 3 up to the first years of school taking into account both verbal and non verbal indicators in their observational tools.

In this paper, we take a socio-cultural and cognitive approach to the development of self-regulation and following recent research, (i.e. Rodríguez & Palacios, 2007; Basilio & Rodríguez, 2011; Valloton, 2009) we observed very young children, even before language acquisition. We videotaped 13 toddlers in their classrooms three times at 14, 16 and 18-months during typical activities. Our research questions were: 1) Which kinds of classroom activities engaged toddlers and could give the opportunity to display and develop self-regulation? and 2) Which kinds of behaviours can serve as indicators of children's engagement in self-regulatory processes in this context? We have selected clips from the classroom recordings and analysed qualitative aspects of children's engagement in goal directed actions and participation in familiar routines (i.e. using objects, making constructions, having lunch and during pretend play). Preliminary findings indicate that even at these young ages we can observe behaviours that evidence goal directedness, persistence and complex self-regulatory processes like monitoring and control. We discuss implications for educational practice specifically focusing on the role of practitioners in the recognition and encouragement of young children's early self-regulatory skills at the classroom level and during adult-child interactions.

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More than words can say: the diverse communication needs of young children in the foundation stage

It is now acknowledged that delay in language development is the most common childhood disability (Law *et al.*, 2000) and that language skills play an important part in all later learning (Barnes & Todd, 1995) suggesting that poor communication skills will impact on children's 'readiness for school.'   The aim of this workshop is to present initial findings from a research study which describes and analyses the speech language and communication needs (SLCN) of young children aged birth to five years in one local authority in England and the professional response of early childhood practitioners (ECPs) to those needs.

Research questions

- What early identification, assessment and intervention requirements does policy place on ECPs in early years' settings?
- What are the views, understandings and reported practices of ECPs with respect to SLCN in the early years foundation stage (EYFS)?
- How do ECPs across a range of settings implement policy requirements?

Children's communication skills are acquired and actively shaped through the intervention of other persons as mediators between the child within a social-cultural environment (see Vygotsky, 1962; Bruner, 1983). SLCN can be associated with a range of factors that include social and environment, neuro-developmental and sensory disability (Bercow, 2008).

Methodology

This case study examines human behaviour in its natural state, i.e. the interaction between 'young children and the persons, objects, and symbols in their immediate environment' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998). It explores key issues affecting those in case study settings (Denscombe, 2010), through the use of questionnaires and interviews. It is concerned with what is happening in the case study settings in terms of the didactic relationship between ECPs and children through researcher (direct) observation. The project represents a study of contemporary phenomenon in its natural setting using mixed methods and multiple (case) sites (Yin, 2009) with maximum variation of sites.

Findings

ECPs' reports of the range of SLCN they are supporting, the interventions available to them and their individual perceptions of SLCN in young children will be highlighted in this workshop.

Some references

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Bercow, J. (2008) *The Bercow Report. A Review of Services for Children and Young People (0-19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs.* Nottingham: Department of Children, Schools and Families.

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Enhancing children's school readiness: An evaluation of the 'Incredible Years School Readiness Parenting Programme.
Growing numbers of children are arriving in school without the necessary social and self-regulatory skills to succeed. A lack of these skills can predict low academic achievement and poor relationships, leading to conduct problems. Early intervention in preschool years is an effective way to prepare children for school success and prevent later academic failure.

This study evaluates the effectiveness of the Incredible Years (IY) School Readiness Parenting Programme. This four-session programme helps parents to support their child's academic, social, and emotional readiness as they first start school. The aims of the study are to find out how supportive parents find the programme and to establish any difficulties or barriers in implementing the programme.

It is thought that parents will use more academic, social and emotion coaching and report improved child behaviour and parental competency after attending the programme. We also hope to find an enhanced home-school relationship, as reported by the schools and the parents.

11 schools (8 intervention and 3 control) were recruited to run the programme with groups of parents of 3-5 year old children. Data was collected through home visits to the families over a period of 10 months. Parents were asked to complete a battery of questionnaires and to undertake interactive play and reading with their child whilst being observed. The schools were asked to report on the delivery of the programme in their school.

The results of this study will demonstrate whether the IY School Readiness programme is an effective parenting intervention for enhancing children's school readiness. This will determine future rollout of the programme across Wales, and ultimately result in children being better prepared for school.

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Making Sense of 'Readiness'
Over the last century, theorists have made the case for the benefits of sensory play. With evidence that children's access to sensory play is in decline and play changing, a treasure basket can potentially offer a tool for increasing sensory stimulation, especially when the three stages of play set out in the *Sensory Play Continuum* are followed. Treasure baskets can be used for simple exploration; problem solving and domestic role-play; older children use them in pretend and goal-oriented symbolic play, where the objects became something new, reflecting their ideas and thoughts; when combined with other resources, the potential for creativity and problem solving significantly increases. With our senses ultimately the gateway to all learning, this paper explores how treasure baskets can help compensate for children's limited access to multi-sensory experiences, and adults' crucial, yet subtle role in supporting problem solving, creativity and exploration as key foundations for life.

The revised EYFS places an emphasis upon 'school readiness' rather than life; 'educational programmes' and 'teaching' rather than play; and number, shape and sums rather than problem solving and reasoning. Observations of treasure basket play reveal naturally occurring examples of problem solving, pattern, shape, size and number as well as creativity and imagination. Take the three four year olds playing with sand and objects who made the links between a tiny flowerpot and the big pots in the garden; the four year old who discovered, with the support of another child, that adding water to sand changes its consistency; and the two year olds that mixed up amazing 'meals' and developed songs and games.

Within a positive environment, sensory-rich objects enable play to evolve at a child's pace; for connections to be made in the brain in readiness for an enriching life; and for practitioners to challenge their own views and role in supporting play.

Gina Houston. Leeds Metropolitan University

The experiences of black children in the Early Years Foundation Stage.
There has been a wealth of research on black children's experiences in primary and secondary education in England although few studies have focused on black children in reception classes. My doctoral study is researching young children's experiences by listening their 'voices' and analyzing the data through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. CRT encompasses tenets with which to understand the black child's unique experiences in the education system. One important tenet is to place a socially constructed definition of race as the central focus for understanding how racism operates to discriminate against marginalized groups in society, particularly those who are perceived as either black or the 'Other'.

Another important tenet in CRT is to listen to the 'voice' of the marginalized communities. I have used this principle to frame a method to listen to the voices of seven black children over a half term in four separate reception classes across four inner city schools. Participant observation has facilitated discussion on their views and feeling about race and school.

I am beginning to understand how DuBois' concept of double consciousness and Sue's theory of micro-aggression can affect the experiences of the target children as they enter the institutional culture of the school. Children are learning to leave their home culture behind when they conform to the usually white constructed norms of the classroom. Initial findings suggest that they are learning a double identity with their early black cultural identity from home, being 'veiled' to expose their newly acquired cultural identity, which conforms to the norms of school expectations. This may have psychological implications on some children as they go through school with this 'double consciousness' as it could result in them feeling alienated within the school environment. An awareness of black children's needs during their transition from home to school can avoid any feelings of alienation. This can partly be achieved through a better understanding of how racism operates in society and schools at both personal and institutional levels, informing an Early Years praxis and the ethos of the setting, which will better support black children in their 'readiness' for school.

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DuBois, W.E.B. (2009) The Conservation of Races, in: L. Black & J. Solomos (Eds) *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader.* Oxon: Routledge

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Home Visits – Who benefits?
Home visits by nursery practitioners in school settings are often part of the routine transition into the school nursery setting. Home visits that also link this visit with other agencies, such as the local children's centre, are rarer. This type of joint venture might be seen as a way forward in the search to engage with hard to reach families, particularly in deprived areas.

There is little research evidence of the value of home visits to nursery aged children, although they are sometimes described as being part of effective practice for parental involvement and transition. The value of linking home visits with a proposed engagement in the local children's centre, and the development of 'pre-school preparedness' is a different model of practice, that creates a new dynamic between home, school, and now the local children's centre.

Is there a value in using the traditional 'home visit' as a way of engaging families in a newly envisaged model of home, school, and, children's centre? Will there be costs to the child in an extended model that emphasizes family rather than child in terms of transition, and shares responsibility between the local school and children's centre?

Method and theoretical frame
The paper presents the results of an action research project carried out since January 2011 in an inner London borough. I worked with a cluster of three schools in a local children's centre (CC), in partnership with teachers and children centre practitioners. This was a pilot project agreed with the borough. The school staff carried out a series of planned home visits with the CC staff as a prelude to a CC session on school readiness (for parents with a creche provided for children) and was delivered by a range of speakers. Three sessions were suggested, developed and delivered. We evaluated each session as a team.

This paper analyses the strengths and weaknesses of both the home visits and the sessions, and proposes a new model. We are currently on the second cycle of the action research project implementing improvements in our practice. Questions of school readiness are pivotal to this approach, because they were designed also to identify children for CC support, and this is now a very clear model of parent / child involvement in CCs.

Summary of key findings:
- There are a number of different home visit models currently in use
- Considering which model is best fitted to purpose needs to be clarified before the visits. This might also involve an ideological shift in model for the schools.
- Pre-school 'preparedness' sessions also carry inherent ideological assumptions. Just like home visits, there are a number of models of 'preparedness.' Selecting which model is best also contains the question, 'best for whom?' Will the same model be best for the parents determined to prepare their child for school or the hard to reach family?
- As the new government is proposing a 'payment by results' system for children's centres, identifying tangible results for successful joint home visits might be seen as a useful way forward

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The relationship between early childhood education and compulsory school education in Italy. The perspective of educational continuity.
The presentation explores the concept of *continuità educativa* (educational continuity) as a way to understand the relationship between the different components of the education system in Italy. In this sense educational continuity is a complex concept that encompasses several dimensions – socio-cultural, political, institutional and pedagogical – and that is played out in different contexts – local and national legislation, structural organisation of educational institutions and pedagogy underpinning the everyday work with children , parents and local communities. The way educational continuity is currently discussed in the pedagogical and political debate in Italy is the result of a long – sometimes contradictory – process that took origin at the end of the Nineteen-Sixties and it is still evolving. Starting from a critical analysis of the historical and socio-cultural conditions that contributed to shape the approach of educational continuity in the context of local experimental projects, this presentation will aim at highlighting the values and understandings that are framing such approach in the present time. A particular emphasis will be placed upon the work of Bruno Ciari, the *pedagogista* that coordinated the experimentation on municipal pre-schools (*scuola dell'infanzia*) and full-day primary schools (*tempo pieno*) in Bologna. Within the Bolognese experiment compulsory schooling was re-thought from the perspective of early childhood education as an opportunity for the social and cultural

promotion of all children, addressing children's learning needs within an integrated framework. The original features of educational continuity which were defined in this context, are still orienting the pedagogical work of educators and teachers across the two institutions today. These features are: right-based approach to education centred on children's needs, co-constructive approach to learning, cross-disciplinary approach to knowledge construction and collegial approach to teaching. During the presentation these issues and underpinning conceptualisations will be reflected upon and critically discussed with the audience.

References: Moss, P. (forthcoming) *Reconceptualising the relationship between pre-schools and schools.* Oxon: Rutledge.

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The Early Years Professional and the Early Years Teacher: Complementary but essentially different. A Mixed Methods Study

The Early Years Professional is now becoming established in the early years workforce and the first phase of implementing Early Years Professional Status is drawing to a close. The next training phase will begin imminently but rather than being pioneers in the change agenda the new candidates will start their training being able to draw on an emerging evidence base that suggests that this new professional role and status, imposed by the former Labour Government in 2006, is impacting on the quality of early years provision and outcomes for children.

This paper reports on the doctorial study exploring the concept of professional identity through a critique of the concept, implementation and impact of Early Years Professional Status as a new professional model. It will specifically report on the findings emerging about the similarities and differences between the Early Years Professional and the Early Years Teacher.

The work of Bronfenbrenner on ecological systems theory provides the underpinning theoretical framework. The research design drew on mixed methods with the mixed analysis combining the quantitative data gathered through questionnaires and qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with both Early Years Professionals and stakeholders.

The main findings suggest that the Early Years Professional and the Early Years Teacher are complementary but essentially different. In settings where they both exist findings clearly indicate that they can be extremely powerful together and that the Coalition Government may have been a little premature in removing the requirement for both professionals in children's centres.

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Does Early Childhood Education and Care Mean Business? An exploration of young children's problem-solving in three English settings.

In advocating 'business priorities for education' in the United Kingdom, the CBI (2011) identifies a 'pressing need to improve standards of literacy and numeracy' (p.6) and 'alarming weaknesses' in school-leavers' problem-solving capabilities (p.6). However, whilst the proposed revision for England's statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2011) focuses on preparing children to receive instruction in literacy and numeracy at school, little emphasis is given to children's problem-solving. This imbalance may inhibit young children's dispositions for problem-solving, potentially damaging the long-term economy.

This paper reports part of a small-scale critical ethnographic study adopting a constructivist grounded approach (Carspecken, 1996; Charmaz, 2006) and explores ways in which seventeen children aged 4-8 years found solutions to problems in three English early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The full study conceptualises ways in which children aged 4-8 years may be considered researchers and builds on research perspectives from the fields of 'new' sociology (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Alderson, 2008), psychology (Piaget, 1970; Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 1999), philosophy

(Drew, 1980; Bridges, Smeyers and Smith, 2009) and ECEC (Bruce, 2005; Gammage, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008). Research questions include: 'What is the nature of ECEC research?' and 'What support structures and barriers might affect young children's enquiries?' Outcomes indicate that ECEC research comprises a range of behaviours, including 'finding solutions', and that participating children found diverse solutions to diverse problems. Some problems were set for them, whilst they set others themselves; some problems engaged children in high order thinking, whilst others did not. Opportunities to select their own resources and to trial activities until their interest was captured engaged children in 'finding solutions'. Conversely, when children's time, provocations and activities were directed by adults, they focused on pleasing adults, the quality of their solutions was limited and their motivation to propose solutions decreased.

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Towards a Framework for Pedagogical Involvement in Preschool Children's Social Pretend Play.

While various categories of play are associated with positive learning outcomes, Vygtoskian (1978) and Neo-Vygotskian theories (Elkonin, 2005; Elkonin, 2005) view social pretend play as the leading activity of the preschool years. According to activity theory (Leontiev, 2005), as the leading activity of the preschool years, social pretend play should prepare children for study at school, the leading activity of middle childhood. Social pretend play, from this perspective, prepares children for the transition to formal schooling through supporting the development of self-regulation in addition to the further development of symbolic thought (Karpov, 2005). While a robust research base already indicates a relationship between the representational aspects of pretence and a range of social and cognitive gains, the metacommunicative aspect of social pretend play may be particularly important for the development of young children's self-regulation. The variability reported in young children's social pretend play (Smilansky & Shefyata, 1990; Howes & Matheson, 1992) indicates that contextual factors such as adult mediation may have a salient influence on social pretend play development. There is little consensus however, around what constitutes optimal pedagogical involvement in social pretend play and there are concerns that adult involvement may diminish the child-initiated nature of this type of play.

Drawing on preliminary pilot data from a mixed methods PhD project, this paper will explore the role of metacommunication in preschool children's social pretend play and, the strategies used by educators to support young children's social pretence. Problematizing these issues is considered essential to developing a sustainable framework of pedagogical involvement which can be applied in realistic classroom contexts.

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Supporting Early Years teacher trainees to prioritize children's talk.

The paper will build on previous research undertaken through an Early Career Research Grant investigating the ongoing impact of the *Every Child a Talker* strategy for children in the reception classes of two primary schools across Bristol (Screech, 2010). The findings of this work highlight the significance of teacher's specific knowledge and understanding of language pedagogy, environment and intervention if children's early language, in its many forms, is to develop and progress at a level appropriate to allow them to fully access the curriculum and all aspects of school and community life. A lack of confidence in this area is particularly noticeable in Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) beginning their teaching careers in early years' classes and settings.

As Pascal and Bertram suggest (2011), 'within a climate of intense expectations, all practice should be evidenced and all practitioners should be engaged in systematic professional inquiry about the outcomes and impact of their work'. This small piece of practitioner research seeks to explore an ongoing collaborative project between the University of the West of England and South Gloucestershire local authority designed to support early years' teacher trainees (training to teach children from 3 – 7) in their third and final year of training and exiting the programme as NQTs in June

2012, to prioritise children's talk and understand how to support and develop it according to children's individual needs. The research audited trainees' confidence at the beginning of the module; will follow their progress as they acquire both theoretical knowledge of language acquisition alongside input on language intervention programmes and language placements in local schools and will further audit their confidence levels on completion.

Findings from this pilot project will be used to inform the development of subsequent language programmes (CPD) within both the local authority and the university and it is hoped that materials developed will be produced for dissemination more widely.

Reference:
Pascal, C. and Bertram, T. (2011) Practitioner Research: An Intellectual and Adventurous Narrative at a Tipping Point, presented at EECERA 21st Annual Conference – Education from Birth: Research Practices and Educational Policy. 14th -17th September, 2011.

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Payment By Results – what is the impact on practitioners, researchers and children?
The Payment By Results (PBR) scheme is being piloted by DfE with 9 Local Authorities in 2011 who will explore this approach in their local areas. The reason given for this approach is:

> '… to improve child development and school readiness among young children and to reduce inequalities.' (DfE, 2011a)

This is further expanded by DfE (2011b) as meaning personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language from pre-birth to age 5,' (page 2)

The DfE (2011a) has recognised the following dangers:
- The need to avoid the risk of perverse incentives
- Measures should be meaningful and simple
- Measures should incentivise partnership working
- It is helpful if the measures can assist in benchmarking.

These are manifest dangers but does this omit the latent pressure of a discourse of children as being measurable products?

The emphasis on outcomes for children has long been emphasised and become part of public services (Hoggarth and Comfort (2010)). I have been involved in evaluating the impact and outcomes of Babytime sessions at 5 Children's Centres through examination of service users' (parents') perspectives and the outcomes for the babies and parent. This research led me within my role as a researcher to question how the discourse of children and babies. In this instance the discourse was on children as measurable products rather than my preferred discourse of children as active participants with rights. I questioned whether this was due to the age of the children or the prevailing ethos and pressures from the outcomes focus. The parents wanted to support the Children's Centres but some questioned the focus on outcomes as they already know/do these things for their children, but equally some realised it was part of the continuing funding game.

The link with debates about school readiness has to be considered alongside the payment by results agenda. School readiness could rapidly become a series of measures that children can be marked against, leading to a dominant discourse of children as human capital with economic value in later life, rather than active with agency in their own lives. These measures impact on younger and younger children until 'good' babies are those that are on the way to being ready for school. How will this affect practitioners? Researchers? Parents? And importantly children themselves?

Questions for discussion:
If we accept Hoggart and Comfort's words, are there any positive benefits to an outcomes focus?
What are the potential costs to an outcomes focus in work with Children's Centres?
How can these costs be counter balanced by those undertaking research/evaluation?

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Revisiting Research on Alphabet Books as Readiness Tools for Early Literacy
Research Questions*:*
1. What impact do alphabet books have on vocabulary development of young children?
2. What are the implications of this research on literacy instructional practices?
3. How do alphabet books' teaching strategies fuel the *reading readiness* debate?

Theoretical Framework:
Early educators and parents of young children world-wide recognize the importance that books play in early literacy development. The alphabet book, in particular, is a common choice found in home, school and library collections to foster *reading readiness*. Historically in America, the alphabet has been the foundational tool for literacy instruction, since the founding of settlements in New England. Concepts used, then and now, reflect the culture, manners and mores of their times. Current reading specialists continue to recommend alphabet books in various formats as basic *reading readiness* tools for early literacy programs.

Methodology:
The research study, to be presented in an interactive power point presentation, is a longitudinal project that examines this established tradition by determining the impact of alphabet books' conceptual representations on young children's vocabulary. The research project has two parts. The first part is a survey of randomly selected alphabet books for the most common symbols used as letter representations; the second part is children's input. A tally of the symbols for each letter in each edition was made to identify the most frequent symbols. The symbols were compared with children's choices for concepts that represent the letters. Salem State University's Horace Mann Laboratory School second graders, the final of the Early Childhood years in Massachusetts primary education, participated as a multicultural sampling. The age range for the primary years is 5 to 8 with most second graders being 7. Graduate student- assistants with a SSU faculty member reviewed book collections from schools, homes, and centers in Massachusetts for a frequency count of symbols, recorded children's responses, and rendered a comparative analysis of data reported in percentages of agreement.

Findings:
 1. Matches between alphabet books' symbols and the children' concepts were evident.
 2. Alphabet books influence knowledge and word usage in both boys and girls.
 3. Children's voices are critical to research on *readiness* practices for early literacy gains.
 4. Recommendations and future research of electronic alphabet books are needed.

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The importance for Grade R for school performance in the primary school
For learners to perform satisfactory in Grade 1, a proper developmental foundation should have been laid during the preschool phase. To have all the necessary school readiness skills, learners must be stimulated in all domains of life namely, affective, cognitive, social, physical and normative. If learners enter the primary school well prepared with the appropriate skills, they will most probably thrive in the formal education situation. There for the purpose of this research is to indicate that Grade R can influence learners' school performance throughout primary school.
Unfortunately, today many learners in South Africa go to school without the necessary foundation. Without the experience that learners should have gained in the preschool phase, a proper foundation for Grade 1 is lacking. This brings about that learners start formal school with certain back locks that influence their Grade 1 school performance negatively. Unfortunate beginnings can sometimes never be caught up again and the negative influence on learners' school performance can go on and can even escalate. In a longitudinal empirical research, the school readiness of learners was compared with their school performance in Grade 1 and again in Grade 4 and Grade 7. This research indicates

that the foundations that were laid in Grade R (as preparation for Grade 1) influenced the learners' school performance throughout their primary school career.

Negative school performance has negative side effects on the individual learners' emotional and social development. But, learners with unfortunate school performance also have an overall negative effect on the class room situation that affects all the other learners too. Thus, to better the education system as a whole, good beginnings might be a very good place to start.

Dr Ona Janse van Rensburg, North West University Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa
School Readiness: What role do teachers play?
In this presentation research undertaken regarding school readiness skills and performance of Grade R learners requested by one of the nine educational departments in South Africa, is reported. In South Africa, Grade R form part of the Foundation Phase since 1998. Every year about 1,000,000 learners enter Grade 1 classes and at this stage only about 70 to 80 persent attended a pre-school or Grade R class. Grade R means the not yet compulsory year before learners start formal schooling. Recently new focus is placed on Grade R classes as a national priority because Zuma (2009) announced that each Grade 1 learner must have been able to attend a Grade R class before entering Grade 1 by 2014. Each province implement this national priority differently. Some provinces try to establish more Grade R classes at primary schools and appointed teachers with minimum qualifications in these classes. A problem experienced by educational departments is the fact that only 12% of teachers and/or practitioners in South Africa have got a registered qualification. The research question therefore is: What role do teachers play regarding the school readiness skills and performance of the learners in their classes?

A quantitative approach was followed. The school readiness performance and skills of Grade R learners (n=114) selected from 10 different schools were measured by means of a registered school readiness test. The results are not good and compares well to the systematic assessment of 2002 and 2007 of Grade 3 learners in South Africa.

As a theoretical framework on this phenomenon, Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic theory and Vygotsky's social constructivist theory as well as the Reggio Emilio model are used to look into the role these teachers play regarding school readiness skills and performance of the Grade R learners in their classes. The presentation concludes with recommendations.

Key words: School readiness, school readiness test, school readiness performance, Grade R, primary schools, teacher qualifications.

Dr. Susan Le Roux: Educational Psychologist/Director: Optima Academy
Optima School Readiness Assessment

Readiness for school forms the platform for adequate academic achievement. Many learners are under-achievers because of learning problems, under-developed learning skills, social-emotional problems, or latent learning difficulties. These learners do not fulfil their own potential. It also aggravates teaching problems in the classroom. Learners become disruptive, causing disciplinary problems and also get disinterested in learning.

The answer is to test the prescoolers' readiness for learning **before** entering school. At the University of Pretoria author developed a school readiness test which has been applied widely throuout Southern Africa . This test was known as The Group Test for School Readiness and about 4,000 teachers were trained to apply it. The results proved to be very valuable. Not only was it possible to detect learning difficulties before school entry, but intervention could take place timeously. Emotional problems mainly caused by ill-informed parents with poor parenting skills, were likewise detected and addressed before school entry.

This test has now been upgraded and expanded by the author, and currently consists of 5 subtests of equal value. This paper intends to give an overview of the Optima School Readiness Assessment

Test explaining how it can be used to detect problems before school entry. A definition is given on each concept, followed by the relevancy for the foundation phase of school. It is then followed by exercises that can be done to overcome/alleviate the problem.

The Test Battery consists of:

1   Visual Perception
2   Auditory Perception
3   Spatial Orientation and Number Concept:
4   Social/Emotional Development
5   Fine Motor Coordination and Gross Motor Coordination

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'Lost in transition?' An exploration of factors that enable children, families and practitioners to feel more confident during the transition from a Nursery School to a Primary School.

The aim is to discuss and reflect on a study investigating factors that make for a more successful transition from a Nursery School to a Primary School for children, their families and practitioners. The study involved a small-scale practitioner enquiry initially based on five individual cases and incorporating the perspectives of the parents and children, Nursery Key Workers and Primary School Reception Teachers. It draws particularly on Rogoff's (2003) theories of the cultural nature of human development, Brooker's work (2002) on young children learning cultures and Mezirow's concept of perspective transformation (1981). Much has already been written with a focus on children and transition (Dunlop and Fabian 2007, Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry 2008, Booker 2002, 2008). As a Nursery Team we particularly wanted to find out how we could build on the *relationships* Key Workers form with children and families in the Nursery and to ensure that the understanding and knowledge that the Key Workers gain about children's home cultures is not "Lost in Transition".

Following a short presentation about the research project a workshop will engage participants in reflecting on the key messages for transition in relation to their own practice.

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'The children are in charge today' – an investigation of parental involvement in an outdoor learning project in England.

This research workshop will explore the role and perspectives of parents in the construction of shared narratives around outdoor spaces. The research outlined draws on findings from a long-term project investigating young children's learning and the outdoor curriculum. The project is ongoing and involves children aged 3 to 4 years in a nursery school in England. The children are given regular access to extensive wild outdoor environments and are afforded the opportunity to explore and play in the environment with minimal adult direction and intervention.

The focus of the workshop will be to discuss how parents and children interact with the natural surroundings and engage in the shared construction of narratives around outdoor environments and the implications for schooling. In the past two years of the project parents have been involved in every outdoor session and their perspectives of this experience have been documented through focus groups around visual data recorded by both children and parents, following in the 'polyvocal' method (Tobin, Wu and Davidson, 1989). A number of parents have expressed concerns about the lack of opportunity for their children to continue these experiences once at primary school.

Workshop participants will be invited to consider the implications of parental involvement in outdoor learning drawing on frameworks developed by Whalley (2006) and related to their own settings.

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The power of pretence: role-play and mathematics – informing the 'school readiness' debate'

This paper draws on data gathered for doctoral research, tracing the emergence of *children's mathematical graphics* in imagination and symbolic play. It is based on a Vygotskian, cultural-historical theory, informed by a social-semiotic, multimodal perspective of young children's appropriation and creation of symbolic tools, with consideration of their communicative potential (Vygotsky, 1978; Kress; 1997).

Using longitudinal, ethnographic case studies, data were gathered from 3-4 year old children in an inner city Children's Centre nursery in England. Data include written observations and photographs of the children's role-play and graphicacy, and it is these that are analysed.

Gifford (2005) has previously commented on research that found a distinct lack of observable mathematics in children's role-play (e.g. Munn and Schaffer, 1993; Gifford, 1995; Rogers, 1996). Drawing on a number of case studies this paper focuses on incidences of mathematics and graphicacy in role-play episodes. Research questions include, do young children choose to freely explore mathematics in their self-initiated role-play? How do children communicate their mathematical thinking? How do children use graphical symbols to communicate different genres?

The findings show young children spontaneously communicating their mathematical ideas in role-play, and the extent to which they freely drew on their personal 'funds of knowledge' (Riojas-Cortez, 2001), using their multi-literacies to communicate personal ideas. They confirm that where learning cultures support children's mathematics and adults are are tuned to children's mathematical meaning making, they arouse in children an 'intrinsic need' to communicate aspects of mathematics that are 'necessary relevant for life' (Vygotsky, 1978).

These findings contrast with those of the previous studies, revealing the power of young children's mathematical thinking and communicative competences well before they start school. They challenge current curricula that emphasise a narrow set of mathematical skills, and raise questions about children's mathematical experiences in school, pointing to a need to re-evaluate mathematics from the perspective of young children.