Approaches to the teaching and learning of English as an additional language in early years settings

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Increasing numbers of children are entering education in the United Kingdom with little or no ability to speak English. Since this is the language for both education and assessment, this raises important questions in terms of children's attainment and achievement. In 2006, the Department for Education and Skills identified that 21.9% of UK children were from ethnic minority backgrounds and did not have English as a first language; this figure is projected to rise nationally to 23% by 2018.

This was the catalyst for a longitudinal study conducted from September 2008 to July 2011, which set out to investigate the teaching and learning of English as an additional language by following a cohort of children, from reception to the end of year 2. Data collection drew on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative paradigms and combined observations of children and staff, interviews with staff and, focus groups with parents. Alongside, were assessments of children, a review of records and policy documents, and an analysis of guidance and literacy strategies. The sample group in the study included a cohort of 150 children aged five to seven year, fifteen teaching staff, and 60 parents.

The play-based approach to learning of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2008) was practiced in all settings, with the teaching style moving progressively towards a more formalised and directive approach by the end of KS2. Some elements of the play-based learning of the EYFS remain incorporated into literacy e.g. the use of resources.

Of the key themes to emerge were; the extent to which creative resources and activities were used to underpin literacy, the quality of professional working relationships between staff, and effective partnership with parents. More importantly, what emerged was the difference between schools and therefore of the educational experiences of children

The one clear aim throughout the study was to throw useful light on effective teaching. Indeed, Evans (2002, p.228) raises the questions, 'What use is educational research if it does not inform and impact upon what goes on in schools?'

In light of the projected increase in the number children with English as an additional language the research findings remain pertinent. This paper will explore the key findings of the study and discuss the impact on educational practice in the early years.