

Abstract

The creation of the Foundation Stage of education for children aged three to five years in 2000 was a milestone in early years' education. It brought together a diverse range of provision for children below statutory school age with the reception classes in primary schools. As well as providing a curriculum for this stage, one of its many requirements is that practitioners must work to establish a partnership with the parents of the children they teach. Consequently, the relationship between parents and the practitioners, who teach their children, has become a focus of interest for me and others. In this study, I have tried to discover what parents' expectations are from the Foundation Stage. This exploration has delved into parents understanding of the Foundation Stage, what sort of education their children are receiving, what parents feel are appropriate methods by which young children learn, what sort of relationship they would like to have with their child's practitioner and what type and level of involvement they have in their children's education.

Data has been collected through structured interviews with parents in two British Forces schools in Cyprus. Similar interviews were conducted with teachers who work with these children in school. The findings show that parents' expectations are largely being met by the education they are receiving. However, many parents are yet to view the Foundation Stage as one seamless stage of education, as a number of factors are working against this. Additionally, many parents would wish for greater involvement in their child's education and need to be supported to enable this to happen effectively. Recommendations are made for the development of parental partnerships through facilitating greater involvement in their children's education and in improving the quality of provision of Foundation Stage education in the focussed schools.

‘An exploration of parental knowledge, understanding and expectations of the Foundation Stage of education in British Forces schools in Cyprus.’

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Over a period of almost thirty years, I have been involved, both as a teacher and as a parent, in the early years' sector of state education. As a teacher, I have worked in more than thirty schools, for three education authorities, in three countries and in a number of roles. As a parent, I have tried to support the education of my two, now adult, children through their education, from playgroup, to nursery, primary and secondary schools and into higher education. I have experienced many changes and developments during that time, but have maintained a continuing and growing interest and enthusiasm for what, when, how and why children learn. In particular I am concerned by the impact parents' attitudes and involvement can have on their children's learning,

During the past thirty years, there has been a slow but profound shift in schools' attitudes towards, and relationships with, parents, and the level and type of parental involvement in their children's school and education. Incidents, observations and conversations of interactions between parents and their children's teachers over a number of years have helped form my perceptions of the changing relationships between teachers and parents which, in turn, influenced not only my beliefs but also my developing practice as a teacher. However, as my entire teaching career has been spent in the early years sector of education, firstly teaching children between the ages of five and seven years, later between three and five years, and currently, in training those who work with these age groups, my main focus naturally lies in my perceptions of teacher – parent relationships within this age group.

Early Perceptions

The experiences, which helped to form my perceptions of the nature of the parent – teacher relationship began at a very early age, before I became either a teacher or a parent. As a child, a very large proportion of the conversations I heard, and later became part of, involved the world of teaching, primary schools or some other aspect of education, due to the fact that my mother and other members of my family were teachers. These conversations became more frequent after my mother returned to work in 1955 when I was four years old. Inevitably, these conversations, which were for the most part anecdotal, included issues related to relationships with parents.

I soon began to acknowledge that parents and other adults felt the parent\teacher relationship reached beyond school and could, in fact, extend to home twenty-four hours a day. It was not uncommon for a parent or other adult to call at our house to ask my mother for advice or for an important document to be signed. I cannot recall my mother complaining about this: she just accepted that this was a part of her duty as a professional person, and the relationship she had with people in that small close-knit community, whom she met in a number of other situations, such as at church, out shopping or at social and charity events.

I have no recollections of my father entering my primary school building, other than on the rare occasion he came to collect us. He saw no reason for getting involved as he saw my mother as expert in matters educational, and at that time, it was generally accepted within our community that dealing with issues regarding children, with the possible exception of discipline, was the responsibility of mothers. No parents' evenings took place at that time – the only information my

parents received regarding my progress through the year was a brief annual report, consisting largely of test scores and marks out of ten.

Little was expected of parents in supporting their children's learning – no homework was set, not even reading, although as a nine and ten year old, I was allowed to take a library book of my choice, to read at home. The clear and constant messages my peers and I received as primary school children, from our parents were 'do what the teacher says', 'she knows what she's doing', and 'she's the expert'. I cannot remember hearing those messages spoken directly to me, but certainly feel that they were implied in my home. One major implication of those messages for children translated into practice in school, was that if a child got into trouble and was punished, the news was hidden from parents, otherwise the punishment could well be repeated at home. This reinforced the notion of the teacher knowing best, being the expert, and the professional.

The 1960s saw a significant change in the population of my hometown with the arrival of large numbers of Asian immigrants from India and Pakistan. These groups of people set great store by academic endeavour and achievement, as key to their future prosperity. They also brought with them from their native countries their respect and reverence for teachers, especially as most had received little education themselves. Yet again, my mother was approached for advice and support of many kinds – perhaps, not just because she was a teacher, but as she was the only 'educated' person they had access to and felt they could approach. These experiences served to re-enforce and prolong my perceptions of this traditional parent\teacher relationship, when perhaps in other places changes were starting to take place.

During my seven years of secondary schooling, my parents visited my school approximately ten times - namely, on the annual Parents' Night and on the annual Speech Day, but only if I was to receive a prize. Parents' Night consisted of a series of short, formal interviews where teachers talked and parents listened. This feedback was summarised in the end of year report, which contained vague comments such as 'Good on the whole'.

Communication between school and home was extremely limited. Parents were only contacted if there was a serious problem, such as a disciplinary concern. This took the form of a letter as the majority of families had no home telephone at that time. Little communication of a more general nature took place. Even an issue as important as choosing subject options for GCEs or career advice was relayed by word of mouth, which may suggest that parental assistance in making decisions was regarded as unnecessary or minimal, at best. Perhaps, I was more fortunate than others in that my mother was able to give me the guidance and advice I needed, having been through the higher education system herself, and was more knowledgeable in this area than the parents of many of my school friends. None of my school friends or their parents seemed to expect more of the teachers or the school than was given or received.

Experiences as a teacher

I began training as a teacher shortly after the publication of the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) – the first official report to place emphasis on the importance of involving parents in their children's school and therefore by association, in their education. One module in my training, the Sociology of Education, went some way towards acknowledging the importance of parents and family influence, but more in the context of the values associated with different

social classes in relation to educational expectations for their children, than in teachers working with parents and forming relationships with them. Certainly I have no recollection of links being made between levels of parental expectations and the stages and rates of young children's development and learning, or the implications for a teacher in the classroom.

My recollections as a young teacher date back to my first teaching post as a newly qualified and newly married twenty-one year old teacher in the early 1970s in an inner-city Manchester school, with a predominantly Afro-Caribbean population. I prepared for my first Parents' Evening with some trepidation as it had been explained to me by experienced colleagues that on no account was I to close the classroom door and I was to use the hand bell provided so that I could summon assistance from the teacher next door should a parent become violent or abusive. On the evening itself, I was asked by several mothers, much older than myself, for advice on issues related to their social situation, such as marriage guidance, housing and benefits, rather than information regarding their children's education.

This incident evoked memories of my childhood when my mother was visited at home and asked for advice on a number of issues. I have never been sure why this was but I have since considered a number of reasons. Was it because a teacher was a respected member of their community? Was it because I was a white female in a black community, and had been educated to a higher level than the majority of the population? Or was it because as a junior member of staff I was more approachable than the headteacher or my older and more experienced, and therefore, higher status colleagues? Perhaps, they had no-one else to turn to, or felt that as an early years' teacher, associated with a friendly caring image, I would be more sympathetic? Whatever their reasons, I was

initially surprised, and felt totally unqualified and reluctant to give advice, even though at times I knew it left them disappointed or dissatisfied. I recalled the status of those teachers in my home town, and now many years later in a changed world, teachers were still held in high regard in this inner city community: yet how different it seemed from this new perspective as a teacher myself. One thing was surprising and additional to the relationship my mother had experienced: parents felt they could give me, their child's teacher, advice - albeit on the most effective punishment for their child. They, in effect, gave me permission to 'beat him if he's naughty', 'take a stick to him if he's cheeky - it works at home'. However, on reflection I feel this was a significant move forward, as a form of two-way communication regarding the education of their children was taking place.

My second job added further memorable experiences and developed my thinking about parents and what they want from teachers. I worked for seven years in a primary school, situated in a northern industrial town and with a population of predominantly skilled and semi-skilled parents. The contact with parents of reception children was usually on the day of admission and then once a year on parents' evening. At other times, parents waited outside the school building and many outside the gate too. It was as though an invisible 'No parents beyond this point' sign was posted on the school wall. Most parents gave the impression that they had neither the right nor the confidence to ask appropriate questions, and get involved in, the education of their children, and no-one in school attempted or wished to change that position. They gave the impression that they felt their child's education only took place within school hours, and only inside the school building, and that was how they felt it should be. Neither the headteacher and teachers nor parents made any attempts to change this situation.

My overriding memory of parents' evenings during those years is the recurring scenario of a stream of parents, usually mothers, with the occasional father, who looked uncomfortable and often remained silent throughout the meeting, asking the same three questions about their child's first year in school – 'Is he getting on alright with his reading?' 'Is he behaving himself?' 'Is he eating up his school dinner?' I recall asking myself the question at that time 'what do parents really want for their children in their first year in school?' and also considered the degree to which these expectations matched up with the many other things which happen in school, which parents were either unaware of or perhaps did not feel to be of importance.

I contrast this with a nursery parents' evening I conducted some years later in 1989, albeit in a more affluent 'leafy suburb', when I was asked by a parent of a four year old whether I felt his son would be likely to pass the very competitive 11+ entrance examination for Manchester Grammar School – the most prestigious and selective independent school in the area. I remember once again considering whether nurseries and schools were providing parents with what they would wish for their children at this stage in their education.

The impact of becoming a parent

The impact of becoming a parent of two young children was to significantly change my view of the role of the parent in relation to a child's education and the relationship with the child's teacher. As Oakley points out

'Life is changed because motherhood is a new job and often the only job for a period of years' (1979, p262).

I knew that my experience as the parent of young children would be very different to teaching children of the same age – being concerned for the education and

welfare of one child instead of a large group (Acker, 1999, p137) Even in my new role as a mother, there were certain aspects of my teacher role that I was unable to leave behind. It was instinctive for me to try to get the most educational value out of any situation, no matter how mundane or routine, such as going shopping or hanging out the washing. Similarly, without discussion, my husband, who was also a teacher, although he had no experience of children under nine years old, subconsciously or instinctively behaved in the same way towards our children.

However, as my son began to develop, I soon questioned why I had received new four-year-old children into my Reception class who couldn't count, knew no colours and could barely converse, when he, at two years old, could do these things and lots more. Dismissing the possibilities that I was neither a super teacher nor my son a genius, I began to look for reasons as why there was this enormous disparity. Admittedly, my eight years of teaching experience, before having my own children, was confined to two schools, which although very different, were both located in areas of either high or moderate socio-economic need, yet naively I was aghast at the discrepancy in the levels of development and resulting levels of achievement. I had no knowledge or understanding in this area until later I learned of Burtonwood's work on the impact of social class on children's education or 'cultural capital' –

'Unlike working class parents, middle class parents were said to pass on to their children skills and knowledge with which to make the most of what school has to offer.' (1986, p62)

The marked contrast between my own family situation and my previous teaching experience is summed up in Steedman's words:-

'The mild and genteel methods by which working-class children are led to see – out of what kind and painful necessity it is done! – that really, they aren't very clever, really, can never be like their teacher's own child at home'

and perhaps most significantly - 'the main perpetrators are mainly women' (1982, p. 7) Equally, I identified with Bourdieu's description of middle class values and parents' priorities:-

'they must therefore invest all the more in the education of their children in that their social success, that is to say, at least, their being able to maintain themselves in the dominant classes, depends all the more completely on it.' (1973, p92)

I became aware that the children I taught came from homes which Slowman had described some years previously as 'with no tradition of culture or learning' (1963, p11) or where 'there are not many good books to read, there is very little good music, there is above all not a great deal of very intelligent conversation.' (James, 1961, p155) I came to recognise the above factors as middle class perceptions of 'culture' and notions of 'goodness,' and recognised my own behaviours here.

I tried to reflect on my teacher training and the issues around social class and parental expectations, in contrast to child development, which amazingly did not feature at all. In fact, I had not understood the impact of social class and cultural capital on children's education until I had seen contrasting families and communities at first hand, but largely I was left with the feeling of how inadequately I had been prepared for the range of children and families I could possibly come into contact with in my future teaching career. This was the motivation for me to begin to read more widely in these areas and explore issues around children and their parents.

At this point some of the many questions I considered were:- 'Were parents interested in helping children to develop to their full potential before starting formal education?' 'Are parents aware of the importance of talking to their children?' 'Do parents have the confidence and skills to help their children?'

'Would they welcome the opportunity to develop their own skills?' And, further:-
'If reading books are sent home from school, do teachers explain what is expected of parents?' 'How do teachers know if parents have adequate literacy skills themselves to help their children in reading?' 'While many parents read stories to their children, are they aware of the other things they could do?' and, ultimately, do parents see education as solely the teacher's job?'

I had no experience or insight through friends or family members into the role of the parent of a school age child, so seeing things from an entirely different perspective took me completely by surprise. When my children started playgroup and then primary school, I was ill-prepared for how I would feel standing on 'the other side of the school gate'. On reflection, I feel it was the contrast between being in control of a situation and feeling quite helpless which was the surprise. But I also experienced other feelings – those of shame in how, as a teacher, I had treated parents, and the ignorance of their situation, which had led to my treatment of them. I suppose it was at this point when I really began to take a serious interest in the parent/teacher relationship, when it affected me in a new and much more personal way.

Previously, as a teacher I had on rare occasions encountered parents who came into school on a regular basis for what I had felt were the most insignificant of issues. I sometimes viewed their visits as an irritation and interference in not allowing me, the professional, to get on with my job. As a young and relatively inexperienced teacher, I remember feeling challenged and threatened. These experiences had such a marked effect on me that I was determined not to be 'that type of parent' myself. I had decided that, as a parent, I would keep a low profile, to the extent of not telling anyone in my children's school

that I was an infant teacher. This was in case they should feel I was 'looking over their shoulders' and not allowing them to get on with their job as they felt was best.

As time progressed, I found it increasingly difficult to maintain a low profile and naturally, like most parents, had very strong feelings about anything which adversely affected my children. There were occasions when I went into school to discuss issues relating to my children's education although conflicting feelings did cause me to delay these visits until I felt I had no other choice. I suppose my teacher knowledge helped me to know how my son was and should be progressing, even though I couldn't know how he behaved, interacted with other children and adults, and generally participated in school.

Returning to teaching

Inevitably, after six years at home as a full time mother, I had mixed feelings about leaving my children and returning to teaching, but I knew that I would be a very different kind of teacher than I had been previously, and hopefully, a better one for adding a new perspective. With my experiences as a parent fresh in my mind and indeed on-going, I was now keen to change from the unapproachable and 'teacher knows best' figure, into the type of teacher with whom most parents could identify. I vowed to become more accessible and treat parents in a warmer and more welcoming manner. I also believed that the fact that I had young children of a similar age to those I was teaching would give me more credibility in the parents' eyes and, consequently, I went out of my way to tell them a little about my children and establish a sort of empathetic relationship.

As a working mother in the 1980s, I too had the issues of childminders, collecting children from school, forgetting dinner money and PE kit. I became

more patient and sympathetic to parents' domestic problems. I would like to think I had some influence in changing the image of teachers in the eyes of the parents of children I taught at that time, although that was not my specific intention. On reflection, I suppose I went some way towards putting into practice the recommendation from the Plowden Report that teachers should become 'substitute mothers' to the children (CACE, 1967, p367) or become a 'substitute parent' (Sikes, 1997, p61). I was quite comfortable in taking a child on my knee and giving a reassuring cuddle, just as I would with my own child, if I felt that was what was needed in a particular situation. I felt that's what parents would expect of, and want of, me too. Furthermore, I changed to placing greater emphasis on the needs of the children before curriculum content. The personal relationship I built up with the children, their attitudes and values in terms of their personal, social and emotional development seemed to me of much greater importance and I felt would have a longer lasting impact on their development and their learning.

Communication with parents of children in my care became very important to me and a strong feature of my practice as an early years teacher. I started to inform parents of things I had never before realised they wanted or needed to know – the 'nitty gritty' things concerning PE kit, details of routines, as well as small pieces of information on progress, pointing out milestones in their learning, large and small, and other developments. If I was faced with a scenario I was unsure about, I would stop, stand back and say 'What would I feel like as a parent in this situation?' I also recognised that parents had lots of valuable information about their children, which could be useful to me in working with and understanding them. I valued their contribution to their child's education – however large or small that would be – and knew that parental involvement was key to children achieving their full potential in learning. This I now understand went some way towards what is now known as 'partnership with parents', but pre-

empted the changing role of parents first as 'consumers', and only much later as 'partners'.

These changes to my beliefs and practice were not replicated nor approved of by many of my teacher colleagues, especially those who were much more experienced than I was and did not have children of their own. However, I continued and held fast to my beliefs, in spite of knowing that the relationship I had established with parents throughout their children's Reception year may not be developed in subsequent years. I realised only too well that for successful parent/teacher relationships to develop, there must be a common belief and understanding leading to uniformity in practice across the school, rather than one teacher working in isolation.

In the following years, many more experiences and incidents further influenced my beliefs and practice. As parents began to take a more active interest in their children's education, and were ready to express their opinions, both positive and negative, as to how they felt the provision matched up with what they wanted for their child, I recall two particular incidents which I feel are of some significance. Firstly, before admission to Reception class, I encountered a mother of a young four year old who was dissatisfied with our tried and tested policy of the gradual induction of children into school, which included a half term's part time attendance before full time for the rest of the academic year. Her opinion was that her daughter was now ready to move on from the part time attendance she had experienced in pre-school, to full time school from the beginning of term. I explained that her daughter, and the other children in the class too, would find a full school day, including the additional travelling time of a bus journey to and from school, very tiring. Our decision to initially continue part time attendance was based on many experiences of watching children fall asleep in the afternoons in

the first few weeks of term. The mother remained unconvinced but had to conform to the policy of the school. Two weeks later, on collecting her daughter from school, she came to tell me that I was right, she was wrong and that her daughter had slept every afternoon when she got home. I was naturally pleased that she had told me that piece of information, confirming that our policy was in fact the right one, but also that she had felt she could come and approach me with her changed opinion, and had confidence in seeking to develop our relationship in the best interests of her child.

Secondly, and this was an incident which was eventually repeated with different parents, I encountered a parent, who had what I felt were unrealistic expectations of my time for her child. She felt her child did not receive enough individual attention during the course of a school day – usually relating to such issues as hearing reading and changing reading and library books. I employed the tactic of trying to get that parent in to spend a day, or even a morning, in the classroom to see the routines and practices from a different perspective, namely through the eyes of the class teacher who has to consider the needs of all the children and all areas of the curriculum. As expected, I got the same reaction from the parent - a total change of attitude. In discussion with parents after their visits, I would hear such phrases as 'I didn't know you had to do all those things in a day', 'I don't know how you do it', and 'I wouldn't do your job for a million pounds'. These 'converts' could be heard at the school door singing the praises of teachers to any parents who would listen. Consequently, the parent/teacher relationships with these parents, were some of the best developed, and, as a result, I felt their children receiving the most benefit.

Following incidents such as these, and my growing interest in the role of parents in supporting their children's education, I volunteered to take on

responsibility for the parent classroom helper scheme, which had been in place some years before but had lapsed and now needed to be re-launched. The benefits of additional support for class teachers also resulted in satisfaction for parents in the short term, and increased knowledge and skills in being able to better support their own children's learning at home in the long term. My role involved talking to parents, largely mothers, producing guidelines for them to work to, allocating them to classes according to their preferred age of child and maximising their particular interests or skills. At the same time, the school I was working in felt the need to inform parents as to the way subjects were taught in school in response to requests for more information on the curriculum. Focusing on one subject per term, we gave parents an input on National Curriculum requirements, how it was taught and how it changed as children progressed through the school. I remember the two workshops I most enjoyed presenting, and in return saw the most benefit in terms of increased understanding of parents and subsequent support for their children, were in the areas of the development of emergent writing and the use of books without text.

One final change in the promotion of parent\school relationships at that time was the headteacher informing newly arrived parents by word of mouth and in the school prospectus that the school operated an 'Open Door' policy. I am not sure exactly what his intentions were nor how he saw this operating, but staff and parents alike were unclear as to what this meant. Some parents assumed that they could drop into a classroom at any time and problematically engage the teacher in a lengthy conversation regardless of the fact that she had a class of children to teach at the same time. On reflection, I feel the scheme could have been the headteacher's reaction to the move towards being more accountable to parents and establishing more open relationships with parents, but it did serve to

remind me that any policy must be discussed, negotiated, agreed with and clear to all staff for it to have any chance of working effectively.

Finally, towards the end of the 1990s, the increasingly close relationships developed between parents and their children's teachers, whilst being generally welcomed by my own, now headteacher, husband and myself for most of the year, had an impact on our holidays and time out of school, to such an extent that it became an intrusion, eventually leading us to deny our chosen profession, or travelling 'incognito' when on holiday. Previously, our experiences with parents met casually on beaches or in hotels had fallen into two main categories. Firstly, parents felt they could ask for advice on their children's learning or social problems in school, or secondly, they had a complaint of the inadequacies of their children's teachers or school. Here was a significant move forward from forming and enjoying a relationship with their child's own teacher, to feeling that they could have a sort of parent\teacher relationship with any teacher, even on holiday. Perhaps, on reflecting back to my childhood, this current type of parent\teacher relationship shares some similarities with the position held by my mother in the 1950s, but had moved forward too.

Recent experiences

The introduction of Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), now re-named National Curriculum Tests (NCTs), and the publication of league tables nationwide heightened the focus on and pressure to raise standards, and consequently, impacted on what parents hope their children will achieve by certain ages. These factors, together with the 1998 introduction of Baseline Assessment, a battery of assessment tests administered to children on admission to reception classes, and subsequently replaced in 2003 by the Foundation Stage Profile, served to produce

a benchmark against which future progress can be measured, have had a 'knock on' effect on the expectations of parents. The desire of parents for their child to 'make an early start' or 'get ahead', have exerted pressure on teachers to start formal learning, in the 3Rs in particular, at a younger age. Generally, the types of questions I have been asked by parents on parents' nights are very different and more extensive. I feel they also reflect an increase in the amount of knowledge parents possess, perhaps as a result of input by schools regarding the curriculum and assessment. This inevitably impacts on parents' expectations for their children, and their own role within the child's educational progress and achievement.

However, recent observations and overheard conversations between parents collecting their young children would also indicate that some still want a child-minding facility rather than an educational establishment. Many do not appear to value the work, qualifications and experience of Foundation Stage practitioners, nor do they have any interest in what their children are learning. Eavesdropping on further conversations and exchanges has also caused me to consider that some parents want and need teachers to act as strict disciplinarians to their children. This could perhaps be because of recollections of their own early school days or that their own parenting skills are poor and they are unable to establish an effective behaviour regime themselves. I have encountered troublesome pre-school children of three and four years old being threatened by parents, usually mothers - 'When you go to big school, you'll have to behave yourself. The teachers there will sort you out!' or even 'We'll send you to boarding school.' While I have found this attitude worrying from a teacher's perspective due to the negative attitude a child is likely to bring to school, I have looked a little further and realise this could be a recognition of the teacher as a highly skilled and expert professional: or cry for help from parents, who need help and support in

developing their parenting skills especially in the area of behaviour management. I have then asked myself the question 'Where do parents get this sort of support?' and 'Is it the school's responsibility to provide it?'

Neil Griffiths, a former headteacher and consultant for the Basic Skills agency, in working to increase the basic skills of parents, visited Cyprus to share his experiences of involving parents in supporting their children's literacy development. I remember his presentation was inspiring but his comment about parents supporting children's reading has stayed with me - 'We send reading books home and hope for the best'. I know only too well how true this is, but I have pondered the enormity of the implications for schools and teachers ever since – namely, that if we expect or want to offer parents the opportunity to support their children's learning, schools need to ensure that parents have the skills to do it.

My current role of Advisory Teacher, with Service Children's Education with British forces families in Cyprus, is peripatetic and not based as a teacher in one school. It involves training and development within early years' settings across a number of schools and consequently, my relationship with parents of young children is now very different to that which I have experienced and enjoyed as a class teacher in the past. In short, it has given me the opportunity to take one step back and see the parent\teacher relationship from a different perspective.

While the majority of my time is taken up with running in-service training courses for teachers, keyworkers and other non-teaching support staff working with children aged three to eight years old, there has been a recent increase in the amount of work I have been asked to carry out with parents. This has fallen into two broad areas – firstly, keeping parents informed as to what government

requirements are for the Foundation Stage and how this translates into everyday practice in their child's setting and, secondly, ways in which parents can support their children's learning at home. This aspect of my work has enabled me to speak with parents in a different context. This move goes some way towards reflecting the many initiatives currently in train in the UK to promote parental partnerships and home-school links. The most prominent of these is the Surestart programme - 'a government programme to deliver the best start in life for every child. 'Its purpose is to 'bring together early education, childcare, health and family support.' (Surestart website) This has focussed first on inner cities and other areas of high socio-economic need, and is spreading across the whole of England.

My current role also provides opportunities for contact with parents in yet another context. On occasion, I have been able to listen to the diverse comments and observe attitudes of parents from a distance or as a 'fly on the wall', when they are unaware of my presence and my interest. This can take place at the end of a school day as parents are waiting for children and chatting together, greeting children and sometimes talking with the child's early years' practitioner. Perhaps, the 'laid-back' Mediterranean attitude of Cyprus takes over in the hot summer months when they are not too interested, but in the winter when people revert to a UK-type lifestyle, I have become aware of an ever-accelerating pace of life some parents adopt, as they whisk their children off to music, judo, football, swimming, drama or ballet lessons. I have formed the impression that the notion of 'cultural capital' has given way to Gershuny's 'busyness generation' with parents now investing in their children's 'human capital.' (in *Nursery World*, 2005, p9)

Finally, my experience as a parent of children, who some years ago were aged three to five years old has some bearing on my thinking. My children

attended pre-school, nursery or reception class at a time before the creation of the Foundation Stage or the introduction of the Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning and the accompanying requirements for staff working with young children to be qualified to specified standards. At the time, I gave little thought to what type of pre-school setting they attended, opting for the closest as it was the most convenient and easiest for me to get to, or later on the same campus as the school in which I was working. I recall wanting my children to attend pre-school for mainly social reasons and expected a range of activities to be provided, predominantly geared towards their social, physical and creative development.

On transfer to Reception class, my expectations were very different, perhaps because of the move to primary school, the fact that staff were qualified teachers and that the emphasis would shift to the more formal learning involved in literacy and numeracy – areas I was very familiar with as a reception teacher myself at the time. I took a very active part in their education at home, teaching them what I felt they should learn, rather than working closely with the teacher or pre-school staff to support and extend what learning had taken place during the day.

However, I have recently wondered if my children were young now or if I had grandchildren in the three to five age range, what I would look for and what my expectations would be in deciding on the right provision for them. I feel that I would visit several settings or schools. Before making my choice, I would ask informed and searching questions, expect regular information and feedback on what my children had been engaged in and take an active part in supporting not only their education, but also the setting they attended. Also I have no doubt that my training as an Ofsted Registered Nursery Inspector (Rg NI) would have some bearing on the setting, of my essential and desirable criteria. I also wonder

whether I would really see the two parts of the FS provision as the same stage of education or whether my expectations for children and practitioners in each part would be different.

In sum, recent developments and personal reflections, coupled with my accumulated experience of the increasing involvement of parents in education over thirty years, have led me to think about what parents actually want for their children, in terms of education and relationship with their teacher, at the beginning of the twenty first century. In the context of a nationwide interest in and diverse schemes related to partnership with parents, alongside the many conversations I have had with colleagues, I know this is an issue of interest within my own organisation and to others in the early years' field too.

The research question

The relationship between parents and their children's teachers is multi-faceted and constantly changing. In consequence, the issues around these relationships are many and complex. Within this broad area of parental issues, I chose to focus on what expectations parents have for their children in the Foundation Stage. This included exploring factors, such as whether the expectations of parents change according to the age of the child. As this educational stage straddles the transition between non-statutory and statutory education, and the tremendous development, which takes place in children between the ages of three to five years, I felt that the expectations over the period of the stage would be likely to change, with perhaps some basic principles remaining the same. I also tried to discover whether there is a shift in emphasis in the balance between care and education as the stage progresses. I felt many

parents of five year olds could have the expectation that their children would be making a start on acquiring basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic, ready for the transfer to Key Stage One. Any long term goals or ambitions parents have for their children could easily impact on expectations at an earlier age.

I also wanted to explore what methods of learning parents believed to be appropriate for their children to achieve their expectations. My perception was that most parents of three year olds would consider play to be an appropriate medium for learning, whereas parents of five year olds may prefer more formal and traditional methods of teaching and learning, in assisting them in acquiring basic skills, especially in the three 'Rs'. However, I recognised that factors such as parental background, education and knowledge about how young children develop and learn could also influence their views.

As a large part of my role concerns training those who work in the Foundation Stage, particularly support staff who have little or no previous experience or qualifications in early years education, I asked parents how important they considered the qualifications of the staff, who work with their children, and what level of qualification they felt the employment requirement to be. As partnership between parents and staff is a requirement in the Foundation Stage, I was also interested to find out whether parents see the importance of this relationship and what form they feel it should take.

Before starting out, I expected some of the other issues likely to emerge would be specifically related to the unique context of the research - the British Forces community in Cyprus. (This is explained in some detail in Chapter 3.) I knew that Service Children's Education colleagues had focussed on issues of gender in the military environment in their studies:- Ceri Maher's 'Why do boys like

to build and girls like to draw, (MA thesis, 2002) and more specifically Nicola Walters' 'Gender roles and toys in the home: parents' attitudes and children's experiences.' (2002) Firstly, I believed there could be a difference in expectations by mothers and fathers: namely, that fathers would have more goal-oriented expectations, whereas mothers would be more concerned with 'doing their best' and 'being happy'. Secondly, due to the fact that the study is set in a male-dominated community, I felt there could be different expectations for boys and girls, particularly by fathers who could view their sons as the 'breadwinners of the next generation.' In addition, I was prepared for a variation in expectations according to the position of the child within the family, as parents of a second, third or fourth child reaching the Foundation Stage would be more likely to have experience in, be knowledgeable about and have formed definite opinions on educating young children during the early years. Also, parents who had received information about the Foundation Stage through the school or seeing their child attend, or through other means, would be more likely to have some awareness of the type of curriculum their children were currently receiving and had given some thought to whether they feel it to be appropriate to their child's needs.

From questioning on this aspect of my enquiry, I also needed to explore the level of awareness of the existence of the Foundation Stage as a recognised stage of education for young children and how far this impacted on the opinions and expectations of parents.

While all the above factors interested me, I was aware of and indeed welcomed any other related issues, which emerged as I commenced my study, However, I knew that there would be too many to cover in a project of this size and I had to restrict my focus following the pilot study.

One final factor which motivated me was that as the Foundation Stage is a newly created phase of education, having only come into existence in the year 2000, little research had already been carried out in this area. While acknowledging that this in turn made the study problematic in terms of relevant reference material, it was exciting to be one of the first researching into issues in this field, and thus make a small contribution to the body of knowledge in this area.

Chapter 2 - The development and nature of parental involvement in children's education

Introduction

The involvement of parents in their children's education is now an accepted and integral part of the English educational system. Whilst the level and type of involvement may vary, it is commonly acknowledged to be beneficial to the child, family and school, as Hannon (1995) comments that parental involvement is 'an end – a good – in itself'. (p50),

or as Sir Christopher Ball explains, in reference to our youngest children, –

'It is from parents that children learn most, particularly in the early months and yearsthe closer the links between parent and nursery ...the more effective that learning becomes.' (RSA, 1994)

However, as recently as 1978, Lightfoot viewed families and schools as 'worlds apart', sustaining and reinforcing Waller's (1965) opinion of teachers and parents as being 'natural enemies'. In 1983, Wolfendale felt it was essential to move towards a model of parents and teachers respecting each other with 'equal strengths and equivalent expertise' (p15), and similarly, Tizard and Hughes (1984) appreciated the value of the knowledge and opinions of parents, and recommended shifting

'the emphasis away from what parents should learn from professionals and towards what professionals can learn from studying parents and children at home.' (p267)

In recent years, the terms 'inclusion' and 'partnership with parents' have become everyday phrases. Yet to arrive at this position – from exclusion of parents - typified by signs outside school gates reading

'No Parents beyond this point'

- to varying measures of involvement, has taken a long time. In fact, the process has taken over a century, with many changes coming at an increasing pace towards the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. As detailed below, several education acts have succeeded in changing some aspects of practice, but not necessarily the underpinning entrenched beliefs and attitudes of both parents and teachers.

The development of parental responsibility and involvement in children's education

The Education Act of 1870 established compulsory education for all children up to the age of ten, following centuries where most children had received a degree of informal education at home, usually from their parents. Many parents were themselves illiterate – not having had the opportunity to learn nor indeed, needing literacy skills to carry out their daily work. Therefore, the type of education parents were likely to be able to provide for their children was based largely on 'life skills' and aimed at providing the means to earn their own living. Parents generally tried to give their children the necessary preparation for sons to follow their fathers, and likewise, daughters their mothers, into the same job of work. Children of illiterate parents rarely had the opportunity to extend their level of education in general, and literacy in particular, beyond that of their parents. Therefore, becoming literate and aspiring to a higher level or different type of education was rarely possible, thus barring the route to a more highly paid job of work and a more prosperous lifestyle.

The introduction of mass education took the responsibility for education of children away from parents and placed it in the hands of professionals. This move implied that what parents had been doing previously was inadequate and

inferior. The instruction to parents, and indeed the role for parents in their children's education was clear - that they must send their children to school. This change received a mixed reaction, with many parents feeling it to be an infringement of their rights. Working class parents relied on their children to work and help with household chores. For this group, compulsory education would result in a loss of family income. Some welcomed the new opportunity knowing this could provide their children with greater chances to prosper. The views of others were related to the gender of the child: the notion that education was wasted on girls was particularly commonplace.

Hannon (1995) suggests that from its introduction the

'English system of education was characterised more by parent exclusion than by parental involvement.' (p18)

Indeed, parents rarely ventured near or beyond the school gate and many abdicated all responsibility for their children's education, believing 'the teacher knows best'. Teachers generally encouraged this attitude as it enhanced their professional status and identity through maintaining their perceived possession of a specialised body of knowledge.

It wasn't until the publication of the Hadow Report in 1931 (Board of Education, p93) that there was any recognition of the value of the essential educational experiences parents provided for their children at home, and that the two types of education - life skills and academic capability - should go hand in hand to adequately prepare children for their life ahead. This report, Hurst feels,

'required us to lay the foundations of a new relationship with parents - one in which the nature of the young child made co-operation with the home an integral part of providing appropriate educational experiences.' (1991, p99)

Whilst many developments took place during the following decades of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, these were largely in funding,

focusing on areas such as reduction of class sizes, improved resourcing, the curriculum and examinations, and lengthening of the period of compulsory education. Little development took place in the roles of parents and teachers, and the relationship between them, with teachers maintaining their respected and professional status in society.

The 1944 Education Act marked a fundamental change in attitude towards universal education, by shifting the emphasis from parents being legally required to send their children to school, to a right and an entitlement to quality education. This formed part of a wider entitlement to state-provided services, in response to and in recognition of the universal contribution to the Second World War effort. According to Anning (1997)

'everybody was rightful heir to a welfare state which guaranteed a minimum standard of health, education and economic status regardless of social class.' (p4)

However, parental 'exclusion' continued in many forms (Hannon, 1995, p17) Not only were parents discouraged from physically entering school buildings, with 'No parents beyond this point' notices still displayed prominently until the mid-twentieth century, but teachers maintained tight control of the curriculum and its related resources, keeping education firmly inside school. One extreme example, which I remember in my first years of teaching, took place as recently as the 1960s and 1970s, was the use of the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ita) to teach children to read. This scheme used a system of 42 symbols rather than the 26 letters of the traditional alphabet. Consequently, parents, who were keen to support their children's reading progress, were unable to do so due to lack of both knowledge and access to appropriate resources outside school.

While the Plowden Report (1967, Children and their Primary Schools) is best known for its promotion of the 'child-centred' approach to the education of

young children, with its much-quoted phrase 'at the heart of the education process lies the child,' (para 9) it also brought parental involvement into the spotlight and, significantly, the use of the word 'partnership'

'One of the essentials for the educational advance is a closer partnership between the two parties (i.e. schools and parents) to every child's education (p37)

Vincent (1996) suggests that the aim was to stretch

'the school walls to include those parents who were cooperative and supportive'

and to

'convert' as many *individual* parents as possible to supporting the goals of the school.' (p25)

The term 'Participation by Parents' was born, and the report went so far as to outline how this participation could be effectively achieved through a five point plan. It recommended the formation of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), parents having the right to choose their children's schools, home visits by teachers, the introduction of community schools and pre-school contact with parents. Significantly, it further recommended that 'Open Days' be scheduled at a time when fathers as well as mothers would be able to attend – an acknowledgement that not only the interest and involvement of the mother was needed and valued, but that of the father too: an acknowledgment of the steady erosion of the traditional roles of mother at home as carer and father at work and as breadwinner.

The impact of the Plowden Report was that parents indeed became more involved in the life of the school. However, this was not so much in directly supporting the education of their own children, but rather in the broader and less specific role of helping to raise funds and in mothers volunteering in the classroom, albeit carrying out low-level, 'non-educational' tasks such as washing paint pots and mending library books. Parents still had limited knowledge of and

no influence or involvement in the curriculum, which continued to be the responsibility of the individual teachers or school. Some teachers preferred to maintain control and retain the role and status as the 'expert' and

'felt that parents should be dissuaded from working with their children on reading because it could possibly hinder children's progress' (Weinberger, 1996, p23)

Newson and Newson interviewed parents about their level of support for their children's learning. One parent, following a meeting with her child's teacher, commented that

'I found out that we were doing the wrong thing teaching him a different way, you see, so it's best to leave it alone'. (1997, p145)

The Urban Aid programme of the late 1960s and 1970s poured large sums of money into education in the inner cities in the belief that additional funding and an expansion of Nursery education for children from deprived, immigrant and working class families would 'combat the known effects of social disadvantage'. (Anning, 1997, p5) This notion was based on a deficit model, with extra support being provided to compensate for what was lacking in the home environment, thus the term 'Compensatory Education' was born. In line with similar projects taking place in the USA, language acquisition, in particular, was targeted. It was reported in the Newsom Report that :-

'there is much unrealised talent especially among boys and girls whose potential is masked by inadequate powers of speech and the limitations of home background' (CACE, 1963, p3-5)

While the term 'Compensatory Education' had negative connotations, it was significant in that it acknowledged the importance of what happened in the home and, by implication, the parents' contribution, as opposed to the previously widely held view of the child as an 'empty vessel.'

These measures enjoyed only limited success in the UK as it soon became apparent that for the programmes to have real and lasting effect on the children, 'it was essential to involve parents at school.' (Anning, 1997, p5)

The birth of the playgroup movement and development of pre-compulsory education

Throughout the 1950s, parents, and mothers in particular, who were keen to support their children's education were becoming increasingly frustrated at the slow progress in the promised expansion in Nursery education in the 1944 Education Act. Development of this provision had been slow due to the long financial recovery from the Second World War and, perhaps initially, the desire to keep married women at home, thus providing jobs for returning servicemen. Over time, public demand for some kind of pre-school provision for all was growing and Belle Tutaev's, following a letter in the Guardian in 1961, is credited with the birth of the playgroup movement. These playgroups relied heavily on untrained but caring and experienced mothers as providers and educators of young children. David (1990) saw the strength of the movement as parental involvement because.....

'parents became involved in day-to-day activities, gained both directly as these parents took home the educative practices of the play sessions, as well as developing their own adult skills and confidence.' (p22)

The playgroup movement became an official organisation - the Pre-school Playgroups Association (PPA) – which went on to play an increasing and valuable role in promoting the image and importance of playgroups in particular, and education for the under fives in general. PPA believed in the fundamental importance and value of parents as 'their children's first and most enduring educators' (1989, p7)

PPA also recommended that parents...

'should be involved in all aspects of the group including management, in order to strengthen and build on parental responsibility and increase both enjoyment of parenting and understanding of child development.' (1989, p39)

And further that,

'parents, playleaders and volunteers are essential partners in the development of good care and education practices. An atmosphere of mutual trust and respect is vital to the group's ability to respond to and cater for the needs of individual children.' (1989, p39)

Davie et al (1984) stressed the importance of initiating close parental links at the pre-school stage, as this sets a precedent for strong links in later stages of education. They felt that ...

'staff have a unique opportunity to establish relations with parents at the start, to capitalise on the goodwill and boost the parents' own sense of responsibility and confidence in their ability to contribute to their own children's education.' (p142)

Opportunities for the changing roles and responsibilities of parents

Parents, who were keen to play an active part in children's education, were able to do so at a strategic level through the growth of consumer groups in the 1960s. Groups such as the Advisory Centre for Education and Confederation for the Advancement of State Education served to question policy and practice. (Dowling, 1988, p98)

The Bullock Report of 1975, which reported on the teaching of language, did little to move parental involvement forward. While it referred to parents preparing children for learning to read by instilling the right attitudes, it actually discouraged parents from trying to help their children at home by suggesting that many children experienced reading difficulties due to the

'misguided teaching from over-anxious parents in the pre-school years.'
(DES, p97)

Perhaps the most significant contribution to the shift in the relationship between parents and teachers was the speech by Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan - the 'Great Debate' of 1976. He identified education as a problem, and the failure of the British education system as responsible for Britain's economic failure. He highlighted the complaints of employers, who felt that new recruits straight out of school were lacking basic skills in literacy and numeracy and

'sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required.'
(TES, 1976)

This statement inevitably impacted on how teachers were viewed by the public, which in turn significantly changed the relationship between parents and teachers. This was a fundamental shift from teachers being viewed as belonging to the 'trusted' 'all-knowing' 'expert' profession as previously. Therein started a perception that teachers were performing inadequately and, which consequently developed into being blamed for all the ills of society –

'breakdown of law and order, destruction of family life, the erosion of traditional values' (Menter et al, 1997, p60)

- a perception that continued for many years. This, over time, has shifted to schools and teachers trying to right the problems of society, by taking on responsibility for sex and drugs education, giving children breakfast and providing extended daycare.

Subsequent education acts and reports gave parents opportunities to become more involved in their children's education at a number of levels. In 1978, the Warnock Report, although concerned with Special Educational Needs, refers to the role of parents in their children's education which could be applied to the parents of any child:-

'although we see parents as being the main educators of children, whenever possible we recognize that many parents will be unable to bear this responsibility without help and we therefore recommend that reinforcement and skills should be provided for parents.' (DES, 1978)

However, it took many years for this notion to be apparent in school policies and practice.

In 1977, the Taylor Report (DES) extended the role of parental involvement at a different level. It recommended that parents should make up one quarter of the membership of governing bodies of schools, but this did not become law until the Education Act (2) 1986.

In the early 1980s, a number of initiatives and research projects, such as the Belfield Reading Project, which focussed on issues around parental support for children's reading, produced strong and common conclusions. Their cumulative effect was the message to parents and teachers that parents could make a positive difference to their children's reading achievement.

Teachers found that mothers could also be a useful resource in hearing individual children read in class – a very time-consuming exercise. By the end of the 1980s, most schools encouraged parents to hear their children read at home, many starting to send home books of the appropriate level within tightly structured commercial schemes and programmes. However, it was still made clear to parents that the teachers were doing the actual teaching of reading, with the role of parent being one of support.

At this time, some schools and teachers sought to capitalise on the success of parental involvement in their children's reading, and the growing notion that parental involvement in children's education was becoming not only

acknowledged to be beneficial but also widely accepted as the norm. This was slow in extending to parental involvement in other areas of the curriculum but one project of the 1990s, and perhaps the best known as it spread nationwide, was IMPACT. This project encouraged children to take home simple and practical maths activities to carry out with parents. (Merttens and Vass, 1990)

Parent as consumer

The policies of the New Right government were reflected in the 1988 Education Reform Act, which shifted parents into the role of consumers of education. Menter et al's view was that:-

'putting education into the market place meant making education appear more like a commodity so that parents are given access to a range of products from which they can select' (1997, p26)

Consequently, the status of schools changed to take on some characteristics of manufacturing or service companies, competing against each other in the marketplace, each giving greater consideration to what parents actually want from a school. To some extent, this resulted in setting one school against another in the race to attract more pupils and the accompanying funding. Hughes et al, however, question whether this new role of 'parent as consumer', whereby a parent looks at a school from the outside, standing in judgment on its performance, was in direct conflict with that of 'partner', working in tandem with individual teachers for the benefit of the child. (1994, p7)

Kenneth Baker, as Secretary of State for Education, reinforced and extended the notion of 'consumers' and 'producers' of education and was largely responsible for the introduction of the National Curriculum (NC). He saw the consumer as having power and having...

'the ability to withdraw her 'custom' from an organization, rather than to participate in its running.' (Vincent, 1996, p11)

He suggested that the 'producers' – teachers, LEAs, HMI, etc, – had dominated the system for too long and were responsible for the low and falling standards in education, echoing the message of James Callaghan a decade before.

In taking away autonomy and responsibility for the curriculum and placing it under government control, schools were said to be

'freed to deliver the standards that parents and employers want.'
(Hughes et al, 1994, p10)

But in fact, the implementation of the NC resulted in the undermining of professionalism and loss of confidence of teachers which in turn, impacted on parent\teacher relationships. Teachers experienced a new and unpleasant feeling of loss of control. Perhaps, in their insecurity, many tried to retain as much control as they were able and this sometimes took the form of not sharing and working together with parents. Or maybe, the increasing pressure on teachers to meet prescribed government targets, alongside greater bureaucracy, left teachers with less time to spare for parental issues.

As expectations of and pressure on teachers increased, so teachers developed greater expectations for parents in taking a larger share of responsibility for their children's education through making a more significant input. Teachers, especially in the early years, recognised the valuable contribution of the information parents were able to give about their child. As Smith (1994) explains,

'Parents need to acknowledge the importance of their role as a child's first educators and not automatically abdicate their responsibility once a child enters a pre-school or school setting'. (p77)

Dowling (1988) acknowledged that parents had a wealth of information about their children, and advocated the sharing of it with teachers. She states that:-

'Whatever the home circumstances or quality of relationship that exists, parents know about their child as an individual – his fears and excitements, his favourite playthings, his stamina and emotional strengths and weaknesses.' (p80)

This breadth and depth of knowledge was utilised to give the teacher a greater understanding of the child and assist planning of an appropriate curriculum matched to the child's needs and interests. In practice, teachers and parents alike took some time to effect this change in emphasis, moving towards a partnership, with each having valuable information to share with the other.

The Teaching and Learning of Reading in Primary Schools (HMI Report 1990) responded to claims that national standards in reading were declining. It acknowledged the value of parents' support for children's reading as 'having a positive effect on their standards of reading.' (p12) However, it went on to emphasise that with or without support from parents, the effective teaching of reading is the job of the school. (p16)

The Parents Charter of 1991 set out for parents not only their rights but also their responsibilities to 'become an effective partner in your child's education'. (DES) This was centred around access to five key documents:- an annual written report on the child's progress, reports on the school by independent inspectors, league tables comparing performance of local schools, a school booklet or prospectus, and, an annual report from the school's governing body.

The 1993 Education Act gave parents an increased amount of choice on the type of school available

'through the financial encouragement of specialist schools and through the acceleration of opt-out' (Menter et al, 1997, p30)

The term 'parentocracy' was used to ...

'describe where a child's education is increasingly dependent upon the *wealth* and *wishes* of parents, rather than the *ability* and *efforts* of pupils'. (Brown, 1991, p66)

At this time, members of the government, such as John Patten, justified educational reforms in terms of 'giving parents what they want', yet Hughes et al believe that there is little evidence to suggest that any serious attempts were made to consult with parents to find out what they actually did want and what they were satisfied or dissatisfied with. Contrarily, they found that in their study that the

'overwhelming majority of parents interviewed were positive in their feelings about the school.' (1994, p104)

and also about the quality of the job their child's teacher was doing and the level of their child's progress. (pp 108 & 111) In the same study, Hughes et al also explored a number of other issues around what parents want. Their findings showed that parents preferred practical and fun approaches to learning, that they knew little about what their children were learning and wanted to know more. They also placed emphasis on the ethos, atmosphere, quality of staff and relationships with them before good discipline and high academic standards. (1994, p100)

The 2001 Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (SEN COP) (DfEE – Section 2) extended the Education Act 1981 and Warnock Report 1978, which had recommended the integration of SEN pupils in mainstream schools. This gave parents far greater rights in determining what they felt was best for their children, acknowledging that parents.....

'hold key information and have a critical role to play in their children's education. They have unique strengths, knowledge and experience to contribute to the shared view of a child's needs and the best ways of supporting them.....They should be supported so as to be able and empowered to...have access to information, advice and support during assessment and any related decision-making processes about special educational provision. (para 2:2)

Furthermore, it states that alongside rights, parents also have responsibilities.....

'to communicate effectively with professionals to support their children's education.' (para 2:11)

Each Local Authority is required to establish a parent partnership service and the minimum requirements of this service are clearly stated – one being that....

'parents' views are heard and understood, inform and influence the development of local SEN policy and practice.' (para 2:21)

Parents are increasingly being asked their opinions on their children's education. As part of the OfSTED inspection schedule, schools send out parental questionnaires and inspectors are required to call a parents' meeting to ascertain their views on a range of issues related to the quality of education their children are receiving. The recent move towards inclusion has encouraged parents to express their feelings regarding the ethos and practice in their children's school. Sometimes this opinion seeking has elicited some unexpected results with groups of parents exercising their right to choose and preferring to have their children educated in an 'excluded' situation, rather than in mainstream state schools.

Over the last ten to fifteen years, since the United Kingdom joined the European Community, there has been an increasing political need to compare favourably, perhaps even compete, with other European countries. In the mid 1990s, the raising of standards of achievement, especially in English and mathematics, was high on the political and educational agendas for the Conservative government. Edwards and Warin suggest that this initiative rested heavily on the notion of the

'responsible family and the middle-England, middle-class ideal.' (1999, p328)

This was continued in New Labour's 'Back to Basics' drive, characterised by ever more challenging targets being set year on year for pupil achievement at different

points in the educational process. Many countries with high academic results in Europe and beyond were visited and their curricula and teaching methods scrutinized to discover why their results were higher than those of the UK. Consequently, measures were put into place and a number of initiatives set up, such as the National Literacy Strategy and National Numeracy Strategy, with the specific intention of raising achievement in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics.

Perhaps inevitably, many of these schemes have involved parents, either directly or indirectly, with the belief that additional input and support at home, coupled with more structured and systematic teaching in school can improve standards. Some initiatives have taken the long term view, targeting parents of some of the youngest children, especially in areas of high socio-economic need. One such example is the SHARE project, which to some extent reflects the deficit model of parenting and the Compensatory education initiative of the 1960s. Funded through the Basic Skills Agency (an independent agency funded by the Department of Education and Skills and the Welsh Assembly) this targets parents who are least able to support their children's learning – those who themselves have low levels of literacy and numeracy. This group is targeted and trained in school to support their children through developing their own basic skills. Critics of this, and other such schemes, base their views on mothers being treated as pupils, and schools imposing

'culturally-bound assumptions about good parenting' thus directing 'attention at changing parental behaviour.' (Vincent, 1996, p47)

Another major initiative is Sure Start Children's Centres, where a range of services are brought together under one roof – nursery provision, health care, social service support, adult education and training – to support young and one-parent families. Sure Start, which began in 1998, has a rationale based on

'evidence that early, comprehensive and sustained support for children can help them succeed at school and help to reduce crime, unemployment and teenage pregnancy and other social and economic problems.' (Morrow and Malin, 2004, p164)

Morrow and Malin believe the way forward for parents is through 'empowerment' and suggests this approach provides

'opportunities to build on their strengths and develop practical skills, to establish social networks and to create new relationships with professionals.' (2004, p175)

While many may agree with Pugh et al (1987) and their notion that

'a triangle of child, parent and teacher builds the strongest structure for the child's education,' (1987, p75)

at the same time one must consider that

'Governments should not assume that all parents want the same thing – or that they all will want what the policy-makers currently deem desirable.' (OECD, 1997, p15)

Smith, points out that not all parents want or are able to be involved in their children's educational setting –

'for every set of opportunities, there is often a set of obstacles'. (1994, p79)

She cites some of the obstacles as 'lack of skills or confidence to establish relationships with other adults,

'negative experience at school themselves', and

'parents who work and may not have direct contact with the setting.'

She suggests that the result can often be a feeling of guilt if 'they do not live up to the mythical ideal'. (1994, p79) Similarly, Vincent (1996) suggests that teachers have 'fixed models' of what makes a 'good parent' and that

'in recent years,....researchers have highlighted the way in which mothers, especially in the early stages of their child's education, are subject to considerable pressure to conform to an idealized image of 'good mothering.' (p78)

Similarly, Edwards and Warin (1999) explain teachers' expectations of parents was to

'provide the home background which created the willing pupil who was ready and able to receive the knowledge delivered by the teacher (p327)

but they also suggest that this reduces parents' role to that of 'teacher's agent' rather than

'drawing on the power that parents have as role models and motivators.' (p331)

Bastiani (1995) takes this further by suggesting the parents are little more than 'external props to education and not an integral a part of it' and that schools seek to 'colonise' children's homes. Sadly, these factors, in turn, work against the promotion of partnerships. (in Edwards & Warin, 1999, p237)

However, there is an increasing understanding and acknowledgment at governmental level that parents play a vitally important role in their child's early education. Following QCA's CGFS (2000, p9) recognition of parents as the child's 'first and most enduring educators,' the draft framework for the new Early Years Foundation Stage restates

'the central importance of parents and families for each child's well-being and as their first educator.' (2006, p3)

Others, such as Drake, understand that

'experiences in all aspects of children's lives combine to broaden and deepen their learning.' (2001, p96)

Taking an example from early learning in the area of science, Siraj-Blatchford and MacLeod-Brudenell emphasise the extent of learning which happens in the home on a daily basis

'Our earliest sensory experiences involve touching, tasting, smelling, listening to, or looking at the products of scientific...activity. As parents we act as food technologists, we adapt and combine food products to suit our children's tastes. Proportions are systematically varied and tested. Experiments are conducted.' (1999, p1)

Whilst acknowledging that this area of interest offers enormous scope for further exploration, it is now possible for me to focus on this within the confines of my current study.

Many parents choose and are able to become involved in their children's school and education. Torkington (1986) suggests that this may occur at one of three levels, She cites these as the 'school-focused' approach whereby parents help to raise funds, help with transport: the 'curriculum-focused' approach where parents build upon the learning their children experience in school: and the 'parent-focused' approach where parents and teachers work in partnership to support children's learning. However, David (1990) claims that opportunities for involvement vary widely between schools and often parents' choices are largely determined by which options are on offer at the school.

Parental involvement and the promotion of partnership have taken many forms. Smith records that many early years settings have gone some way towards achieving this through

'a programme of home visiting and shared record keeping systems',
'helping to make connections between what children learn at home and in school',

and provide

'boxes which contain a variety of activities for parents to do at home with their children.' (1994, p77)

However, there are factors which counter the forging and maintenance of close relationships between schools and parents. In 2005, headteachers were given the power to fine parents if their children truant. This measure includes parents taking children out of school in term time, such as on a family holiday, for more than ten days in an academic year. Many schools and headteachers have had to make difficult decisions as to whether to impose fines on parents and risk destroying strong relationships with parents.

Research studies on parental involvement and expectations

'There is now an overwhelming acceptance of the value – to children, to parents and to the workers – of involving parents in work with children.' (Rennie, 1996, p189)

In the 1980s a number of initiatives and research projects contributed to a significant shift in thinking and practice about parental involvement, and a recognition of the move away from, what Bastani calls the 'not really any of your business' view of parents role in the education of their children (1989, p5) Due to the previous focus on compensatory measures to overcome the disadvantaged children of working class and immigrant families, one of the most significant studies was that of Hewison and Tizard. They showed that parents hearing their children read at home was an important factor in improving reading attainment. This led to the Haringey Project, closely followed by the Belfield Reading Project - the former provided books and encouraged parents to hear their children read at home. It found that these children

'had better reading test scores than comparable children whose parents had not been involved in this way in the teaching of reading.' (in Hannon 1995, p23)

The results of the study hit the headlines of the popular press and attracted national interest when the TES concluded:-

'The message is simple. Involving parents systematically in teaching their children to read produced quite spectacular results.' (1981, in Hannon 1995, p23)

Tizard et al (1981) found that significant improvement in achievement in maths, reading, writing and verbal reasoning was directly related to three home factors.:

'where the mother had achieved a reasonable level of education herself; where some form of home teaching had taken place with the mother, however informal; and where the mother had a clear idea of her educational role.' (in Dowling, 1988, p95)

Similarly, more than a decade later, West et al found that the role of the mother, rather than the father, was of paramount importance. Mothers were found to be the main, and often only, supporters of their children's schoolwork at home, except for the areas of mathematics and computers, where fathers took a more active role. In terms of contact with schools,

'mothers were more likely to attend parents' interview evenings than fathers. (1998, p 481)

By the end of the 1980s, most schools had gone some way towards involving parents in hearing their children read at home. Some schools gave general encouragement, resources and advice, while other schemes were more prescriptive. The Paired Reading Project, which targeted special needs children and was led by Keith Topping of Kirklees LEA, was perhaps the most well-known. It spread throughout England and was used with children in mainstream schools too. Hannon reported that

'the cumulative effect of this and other projects was to change the climate for parental involvement'

and persuade teachers that

'some form of parental involvement in the teaching of reading was worthwhile.' (1995, p25)

Whilst encouraging, these projects served to influence only the involvement of parents in supporting the teaching of reading.

Dame Mary Warnock, however, suggested in 1985 that a shift in teachers' thinking was required to move forward relationships with parents. She claimed that teachers classified parents and placed them into two categories - each one problematic. Firstly, she described the interfering and pushy parent who is always right and regularly expresses an opinion on the child's ability and what

should be taught; and secondly, the indifferent parents who neither support nor interfere in the education of their children. (p12)

Hughes et al (1994) explored issues around parental interest and involvement following the rapid period of educational change in the late 1980s. They found that 84% of parents had attended parents' evening about their child's progress and 83% helped their child at home. Their findings also included the fact that mothers were 'almost always involved'. It concluded, perhaps not surprisingly, that

'parents, in general, are interested in their children's education and in particular with the progress made by their own child'. (p87)

Bastiani, in reviewing a number of important studies on parents carried out throughout the 1980s, came to the conclusion that

'their beliefs and expectations, their actual dealings with their children's schools and their wider involvement in parental concerns, are not only enormously diverse, but also susceptible to change on the light of experience.' (1993, p108)

While the importance of the role of parents in relation to their children's achievement was becoming more and more widely accepted, surprisingly this was not reflected in the publication of the revised National Curriculum - Curriculum 2000 - which made no mention of parental involvement other than a scant comment -

'Teachers are required to report annually to parents on pupils' progress' (p18)

However, the focus remained on the impact and influence of parents on their young children's academic achievement, not only in the world of education through research-based documents such as 'The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education' (DFES, 2003) and the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) report, which found that

'The frequency with which parents reported reading to their child was associated with higher scores in all outcomes.' (2004, p14)

but also in the public domain, and reported in the press - one example being a Sunday Times report under the headline 'Working mothers' children lag in tests'

'Children whose mothers return to work full-time soon after giving birth are likely to develop more slowly than those with stay-at-home mothers, say researchers.' (2002, p9)

The development of early years' education over the past ten years

In 1990, the publication of the Rumbold Report - 'Starting with Quality' - made a significant contribution to moving forward nursery education during the 1990s. It placed emphasis on providing quality care and education for the under fives through greater co-operation between health, care and education. Improved qualifications of staff were also recommended and in particular, bridging the gap between vocational and academic qualifications. It was hoped that this would, in turn, impact on the traditionally low status of staff, including qualified teachers who work with the under-fives. In addition, it called for better adult:child ratios, improved facilities and reinforced the notion of an appropriate curriculum for this age group. It also adopted from 'The Education of Children under Five' HMI report, the nine areas of learning and experience:-

'Aesthetic and Creative
Human and Social
Linguistic and Literary
Mathematical
Moral
Physical
Scientific
Spiritual
Technological'

to plan an appropriately broad and balanced curriculum for this age group, building on 'the child's existing knowledge, understanding and skills.' (DES, 1990, P9)

It must be noted that at this point in time, there was no 'national curriculum' for the under fives and curriculum provision was very varied in content and quality.

While this was a significant report in focusing attention on the education of the under fives, its impact was disappointing and progress in implementing recommendations slow, as Smith suggests, due to the fact that

'provision and services for the under-fives remained non-statutory'.
(1994, p16)

and as such, would always remain lower in priority than investment in the education of older children.

In 1996, a milestone in the development of education for the under-fives took place with unprecedented investment in provision for four year olds. Although a significant commitment to nursery education, it was seen perhaps somewhat cynically by many as part of the wider political agenda of encouraging mothers back to work and in turn, discouraging their reliance on state benefits. The investment took the form of a nursery voucher scheme, which entitled all parents with children of four years old to funded nursery provision for two and a half hours education per day, five days per week. This provision was available in LEA (education or social services) nurseries, private or voluntary sectors and parents could choose to redeem their vouchers on whichever type of provision best suited their family preferences and needs. As many working parents required more hours for their children than their funded entitlement, many chose settings which provided extended day care and paid for the additional hours required.

Accompanying this new investment was a quality assurance scheme to ensure that public money was being well-spent and quality education was being provided. A set of quality standards formed part of the Ofsted framework for the

inspection of state-funded Nursery education, along with a curriculum document for all to work to. This 13-page document - the 'Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education' - set down a series of basic targets, across six broad areas of learning, which it was hoped most children would achieve by the age of five years old. The document also briefly outlined common features of good practice and principles for parental partnership. (SCAA, 1996)

This was a real breakthrough, as for the first time, England had a common curriculum for all four year old children, regardless of the type of funded provision their parents had chosen for them to attend, along with a guaranteed standard of quality.

This new curriculum was closely followed in 1998 by a requirement for all maintained primary schools to carry out a Baseline Assessment of children in their first few weeks in their Reception class. (SCAA, 1997) According to Allingham, (2002) the rationale behind the introduction

'was twofold: teachers needed to understand the children on entry to school, and managers and policy makers wanted data to enable accountability.' (p19)

The data collected was to be used to measure progress made throughout the Reception year and as a benchmark for later testing. Previously, some LEAs had their own systems and procedures in place, but these varied in quality and content. Each school was required to use a scheme, which could be devised by their own school or LEA or from a range of commercially produced packages, so long as it met set criteria and had been accredited by SCAA. The mandatory areas assessed were reading, writing and mathematics, with personal and social development added later after pressure from early years' professionals.

There was a requirement for the results of the Baseline Assessment to be discussed with parents, but many practitioners felt this didn't go far enough, as there was no requirement for parents to be involved or to contribute to the assessment process. However, some LEAs, such as Wirral and Sefton, placed great importance on the contribution of parents and consequently, introduced additional documentation for parents, beyond the national requirement.

In 1998, the 'National Childcare Strategy' was unveiled. This included the creation of

'25 'Early Excellence Centres' across the country which would serve as 'models' for high quality practice, integrating early education with childcare.' (Sylva and Pugh, 2005, p11)

They believe that Labour's vision was two-fold –

'to meet the educational needs of young children but also the needs of their families for childcare and parent support for education.' (2005, p12)

However, by far the greatest national impact was the extension of nursery education to provision for three year olds. The Desirable Outcomes document was replaced by 'The Early Learning Goals.' (QCA, 1999) and the Ofsted framework for inspection was amended accordingly. This document was enlarged and enhanced the following year as 'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage' (QCA, 2000) and the Foundation Stage of education came into being.

The Foundation Stage of education

The creation of the Foundation Stage education in 2000 was another significant breakthrough in the rapidly expanding field of early years' education. It built upon the previous years of investment which introduced the Nursery Voucher scheme and its accompanying curriculum document - Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education (SCAA, 1996) It also

started the phased funding of the long-awaited recommendations of the 1967 Plowden Report (p132) and the more recent Rumbold Report (1990), advocating nursery provision for all three and four year olds whose parents wanted it by 2004. In its introduction, the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage document states quite rightly that:-

'The establishment of a Foundation Stage is a significant landmark in funded education in England. For the first time it gives this very important stage of education a distinct identity.' (QCA, 2000, p3)

As well as raising the status of the education of young children, and by implication the staff who work in that sector, it was particularly significant in that it catered for the three to five year age group, thus straddling the transition between pre-compulsory and compulsory attendance.

Children between the ages of three and five years had traditionally attended a diversity of provision. Children of five years old and children approaching their fifth birthday (rising fives) largely attended Reception classes in primary schools, although the start to statutory education remained unchanged at the term after the child's fifth birthday. At this point, the curriculum of the school began, although the reception year had been partly neglected in the National Curriculum, which started when children reached the age of five. As most children reached their fifth birthday at some point during the reception year, there was some confusion and related organisational problems as to when a child's entitlement to and, consequently, a teacher's responsibility to deliver the national curriculum began. Reception class provision was regulated and subject to quality assurance monitoring through Ofsted inspections as part of a primary school inspection. In addition, the old perception that 'real education' began in the reception year when children moved to 'big school' was supported, and indeed perpetuated, by such messages as an article which appeared in the Times in 1995 with the comment that

'the reception class can begin the proper process of education.' (p17)

Provision for children of three and four years was very diverse and fell into three main categories – firstly, public sector funded nursery education run by LEAs and taking the form of either nursery schools, social service day nurseries or nursery classes attached to primary or infant schools. These were largely concentrated in inner city areas and other areas of high socio-economic need, and were well-established in areas where Labour-controlled councils had been in power: secondly, an increasing number of private nurseries, some of which were attached to places of work and intended for staff use: and thirdly, playgroups, often operating in shared premises with largely unqualified staff. The amount, quality, choice and cost of provision varied greatly from one provider and area of the UK to another.

The ethos in the different types of provision varied widely. For example, many playgroups were affiliated to the Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA), who provided training and materials, along with guidance on management and the curriculum. Other providers, especially in areas of high socio-economic need, concentrated on compensatory care and social aspects of education. Some settings, especially nurseries attached to private schools, focused on making an early start on formal education, concentrating on teaching English and mathematics. Others were based on specific ideologies such as Montessori, Steiner, Froebel or High Scope. Consequently, it would appear that within this wide-ranging provision, parents had many choices available to them according to their educational and domestic needs, and financial resources. However, this was only the case in some larger towns and cities. Many families in rural areas had little choice and, in some locations there was no provision at all.

The creation of the Foundation Stage brought together this diversity of provision from the maintained, private and voluntary sectors under one umbrella. Childminders, a type of provision preferred by many parents, particularly working parents, were also included in the funding scheme, and consequently, were subject to training, registration and Ofsted inspection. All types of provision were judged against the same quality assurance criteria through a new Ofsted inspection system. All were to work to the same curriculum guidance document for the stage, QCA's Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage. (2000) QCA perhaps heeded the recommendations of the Rumbold Report (DES, 1990) for rather than imposing a National Curriculum for three and four year olds, as its critics claimed, it provided a

'flexible framework from which the curriculum can be developed to suit the needs of individual children in a variety of settings' (para 64)

The curriculum for the Foundation Stage is based on six areas of learning, extending and enhancing the same six areas first introduced in the Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning (1996) The first of the six areas is Personal, Social and Emotional Development - an important acknowledgment that this area is of paramount importance for children at this stage of development and underpins learning in other areas. The other five areas are ; Communication, Language and Literacy; Mathematical Development; Knowledge and Understanding of the World – an umbrella title for early learning in the NC subjects of science, history, geography, religious education, technology and Information and Communication Technology; Physical Development; and Creative Development.

The curriculum guidance document was developed from and had rectified perceived mistakes and pitfalls in the Desirable Outcomes document. There had been a temptation amongst some early years' practitioners to teach to the Desirable Outcomes, regardless of the appropriateness and the age and stage

of development of the children. The new Curriculum Guidance document laid down not only goals to be achieved by children by the end of the Foundation Stage, but also 'stepping stones' to show the progressive stages children would go through in order to achieve the goals. These steps also enabled accurate assessment to be made and progress measured, as children moved through the stage.

The 'Stepping Stones' document, as it became known, also advocated a practical play-based approach to working with young children in order to achieve the Early Learning Goals. In the previous Desirable Outcomes document, the word 'play' appeared just once (1996, p6) whereas in the developed and expanded 'Stepping Stones' document a section is dedicated to play as a method by which young children learn, and examples of play-based activities are given throughout the document.

The 'Stepping Stones' document also re-enforced the notion of 'Partnership with parents' (2000 p9-10) – again building and expanding on the references in the Desirable Outcomes for Children's learning to 'Parents as Partners' –

Parents' fundamental role in their child's education is acknowledged by staff in the setting and a partnership, based on shared responsibility, understanding, mutual respect and dialogue, is developed.' (1996, p7)

Since the publication of the Stepping Stones document and the establishment of the Foundation Stage, a range of supplementary materials such as planning guidance, has been and continues to be published to support the continuing development of the stage.

In order to support the successful implementation of the Foundation Stage, there was, government-funded nationwide training for all those working in

any type of government-funded provision for three to five year olds. While this was indeed a major breakthrough and a 'first', it must be set in the context of the trend of nationwide training in other areas of education, namely the implementation of the Literacy and Numeracy strategies.

Implications of the creation of the Foundation Stage

The creation of the Foundation Stage resulted in many and wide-ranging implications for provision, practice and, consequently, for parents and children in the stage. Firstly, several factors work against the recognition of the FS as one cohesive stage of education, prolonging the notion of a big and significant step taking place for children when statutory schooling starts. As the stage straddles the divide between non-statutory and statutory education, for many children a physical transition takes place half way through the stage, as children move into the Reception class in the primary or infant school building. Children's attendance in their non-statutory year(s) may vary from part-time funded (2.5 hours per day in term-time only) to extended hours all the year round. This is then followed by full time (5 hours per day term time only) in the Reception class.

The quality of the buildings in which Foundation Stage provision takes place can vary considerably. As Reception classes are located in primary, infant or middle schools, these are usually sole-use, purpose-built premises, with outdoor play areas. In contrast, non-statutory provision can be located in a wide range of premises, ranging from purpose-built, dedicated buildings, with landscaped gardens and well-equipped playgrounds to shared, multi-use buildings without display space, minimal storage and without outdoor play areas, such as village halls and scout huts.

Alongside the issue of quality and appropriateness of buildings, there may be a perception by parents that the Reception year is taken far more seriously as it takes place in school. The ethos of a primary school is different and schools are led by headteachers. Some parents may feel that this is where there is a serious, professional atmosphere, where older children in school uniform are reading and writing, and studying at higher levels; perhaps reminding parents of their own days in primary school, where they learned to read and write. The perceived message to parents could be that this is where serious education really starts and, most worryingly, where play is left behind.

This perception, in turn, may impact on how seriously the education of three and four year olds is taken, and how practitioners, and the importance of the role they play, are viewed. The fact that the curriculum is play-based, may further re-enforce this view amongst parents who do not understand or value play, as a method by which young children learn.

There is also a distinct difference in staffing. The statutory ratio in non-statutory funded provision for three to five years olds is one adult to a maximum of 8 children, whereas in Reception classes there is a recommendation that classes should not exceed 25 children and that a qualified teacher should teach the class, with the aid of a teaching assistant. The issue of qualifications is another factor which divides the two parts of the stage. While a qualified teacher is responsible for teaching a Reception class, there is a requirement that a non-statutory funded setting has 'teacher input' but in many cases, this may not be on a day-to-day basis. Nursery and pre-school groups are taught by practitioners, who may be unqualified or who hold one of a range of accredited qualifications at a lower level than teachers. This will vary from one setting to another but all settings must meet

the requirement of employing at least 50% of practitioners qualified to level 2 or above on QCA's Qualifications Framework (2001)

A number of pressures have impacted on practice and the intended implementation of the FS curriculum in Reception classes. In some cases, these have resulted in children's learning being more structured, more emphasis being placed on reading, writing and maths and the provision of less practical, play-based experiences.

From Summer 2003, Baseline Assessment of children in the reception year was discontinued as it was now felt to be inappropriate to report assessment on children mid-way through a stage of education. This was out of line with nationally required assessment which takes place at the end of key stages. It was replaced by the Foundation Stage Profile, which required the reporting of assessment scores at the end of the Foundation Stage. It was generally welcomed by Reception teachers as the assessment foci were more closely related to the FS curriculum, and took the form of on-going formative assessment across all six areas of learning and was not related to set tasks. It was felt for a time that should help to ease the pressure on producing results. However, this view was short-lived. From 2004 there was an LEA-wide requirement to report scores and benchmarking against other schools began to take place. Perhaps more worryingly, the resulting data is used to set targets and predict individual achievement for children up to six years ahead.

Reception teachers have had to bear pressure from a number of groups of people, many of whom have been urging a start to formal learning at an early age. Some parents are keen for their children to make an early start on formal learning in the areas of reading, writing and maths, in the hope that they will

achieve high levels in NCTs at the end of KS1. This view is particularly common in private schools and from parents with expectations for high levels of academic achievement of their children. Similar pressure sometimes comes from headteachers, KS1, and especially Year 2 teachers in the hope of improving end of key stage test scores. Many Reception class teachers have fought against the rigid structure and prescriptive nature of the daily lessons, promoted by the National Literacy Strategy and National Numeracy Strategy, as inappropriate for their children at this age and stage of their development.

'Parents as partners' is outlined as a requirement in the Curriculum Guidance document, and gives recognition to the fact that :-

'When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have apposite impact on the child's development and learning. Therefore, each setting should seek to develop an effective partnership with parents.' (QCA, 2000, p9)

but no definition offered as to what this term means. Among those who attempted a definition are Margie Whalley, who suggests a

'real partnership with parents involves power-sharing, a recognition of parents' equally valuable knowledge and expertise and an understanding of the real pressures that young families face.' (1997, p5)

However, nine common features of effective practice are listed to achieve successful partnership. Some features suggest attendance by parents to discuss their child's progress and the practitioners' duty to keep them informed. Other features are more subtle, yet fundamental, and involve changes in attitudes of both parents and practitioners, through building trusting relationships over time. The document uses such words as 'show respect', 'shared', 'understanding', 'listen', 'flexible', 'welcome', 'valued' as guidance for practitioners to aid this development. (2000, p9)

Inevitably these nine features have been interpreted and put into practice in different ways and in varying degrees in schools and pre-school settings. Some parents may choose to take advantage of these; others may not for many reasons. Also the moves and measures towards creating a partnership may look different in the two parts of the FS. Traditionally, pre-schools have enjoyed a warm and informal relationship with parents, perhaps reminiscent of the time when playgroups were run by willing, yet untrained mothers. In contrast, schools' relationships with parents have been more formal and based around reporting pupil progress. This may appear different due to less day-to-day contact and may be focused more on what is appropriate for children in the school as a whole.

'Partnership with Parents' is, of course, also reliant upon the practitioners being willing and enthusiastic in forging closer relationships with parents. Pease's (2002) suggestion that there is 'paradox in being a professional and being committed' would I feel probably be a particular issue for teachers, due to the fact that

'the definition of a professional implies possession of a special knowledge base, expertise and the holding of an institutional position that places professionals in a position of power over others.' (Morrow and Malin, 2004, p175)

The varied factors described above demonstrate the complexity of the many issues and relationships in and around the FS. These, in turn, are all likely to contribute to parents viewing the two parts of the FS as being dissimilar rather than forming a cohesive stage of education and consequently, resulting in very different parental expectations for children in the two parts of the stage.

Planned development in the early years' sector

A number of factors already in train will seek to influence provision for young children and the practice of those working in the early years' sector in the coming years. These, in turn, will impact on parents and the relationships between parent and practitioners.

In 2005 changes were made which may serve to remove some of the pressures for FS practitioners – in FS2, in particular. Firstly, perhaps in response to teachers and parents wishes and reflecting the decision by Wales to end NCTs at the end of Key Stage 1, there are measures to remove some of the rigid structures of assessment erected in the preceding years. For example, from Summer 2005, the emphasis has shifted away from NCTs towards teacher assessment in English schools. Formal tests now form only a part of the evidence contributing to levels achieved and formative teacher assessment can take place in a less pressured way over time, contributing to summative assessment decisions on a common national reporting date. Secondly, within the new Primary National Strategy (PNS) the post of Director for the Foundation Stage, supported by a team of regional directors, was created in 2004. This move was welcomed by FS practitioners and FS2 teachers in particular. The initial holder of this post was Lesley Staggs, a recognised champion of the rights and needs of young children. Thirdly, a relaxation in the rigidity of the curriculum previously promoted at KS1&2 has taken place. The publication of the Excellence and Enjoyment (2003) document for primary education promotes a more creative and cross-curricular approach to learning, and reflects the integrated way of working operating in the FS. Also, the framework for the teaching of literacy and numeracy is currently being re-written and a less rigid and prescriptive version is expected to be published in Spring\Summer 2006.

The current Labour Government's Childcare Strategy, according to Moss, Petrie and Cohen, is driven and dominated by getting more

'childcare to boost employment and reducing poverty.' (2004, p22)

or in the words of Ball and Vincent (2005)

'can address several agendas: increasing social inclusion and in particular child poverty revitalising the labour market, and raising standards in education.' (p558)

However, they also remind us that childcare is to allow

'women rather than parents to enter the labour market.' (p563)

This strategy will be driven by the Every Child Matters (2003) agenda, which is likely to have far-reaching implications for childcare and educational provision over the next 10 years. The 2004 Effective Provision in Pre-School Education Project (EPPE) has been and continues to be, according to Sylva and Pugh,

'influential in guiding the development of policy and had been used by ministers and the Treasury as the 'evidence base' for expanding universal services and targeting enhanced provision for the poor.' (2005, p23)

The promise of 'an education and childcare revolution' by education secretary, Charles Clarke, in 2004, and the creation

'across the country a seamless system of high-quality and affordable childcare for our under-fives.'

will support the government's aim to

'close the gap in outcomes between children living in poverty and the wider child population ' (Morrow and Malin, 2004, p165)

This will take the form of an expansion of the Sure Start Children's Centres initiative, and the promise of a children's centre in every community and extended schools for children up to the age of 14 by 2010.

In order to achieve the 'seamless provision for under fives, the Early Years Foundation Stage - a new stage of education and care for children from birth to 5 years – is due to be launched in 2008. This will combine the 'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage' and the 'Birth to 3 Matters' documents into a

single framework for all practitioners to work from. While the new framework is expected to

'include educational programmes suited to children's abilities and maturities', (Nursery World, 2006, p11)

initial reactions have included concerns that there could be a

'top down' approach with its content shaped by the demands of the national curriculum rather than the needs of young children.' (Vevers, 2006, p10)

and furthermore, that there could be

'even less realistic expectations for very young children and an atmosphere of educational bullying.' (Lindon, in Nursery World 2006, p11)

These factors may serve to maintain, and even increase, the pressure on practitioners working with children age 3 to 5 to place greater emphasis on academic achievement than is appropriate for children's age and stage of development.

Foundation Stage issues within British Forces Cyprus

Many of the issues regarding the FS outlined above will apply equally to the FS provision in SCE Cyprus, others may not. In addition, there may be additional factors which impact on parents' experiences and provision because of the unique situation of SCE in Cyprus.

Firstly, many parents of SCE children will have had different experiences as parents of FS children in other places – not only other SCE locations and England, but also outside the area, where the Foundation Stage and its curriculum apply, most commonly Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is likely to occur where the child currently in the FS is not their oldest child, and thus, there is a strong possibility that parents will have experienced more than one school and pre-school setting. They will undoubtedly feel that previous provision is different to

current SCE provision; they may feel it is better or worse. These previous experiences may be positive or negative and will impact on the development of their views. Thus, their wider experience will put them in a position, where they may compare and contrast, and perhaps will put forward a more balanced and informed view. In the close-knit military community, parents will not be living close to others who send their children to a different school as there is virtually no choice, but many parents will share conversations about previous experiences with their friends and neighbours. As Bastiani reminds us –

‘their beliefs and expectations, their actual dealings with their children’s schools and their wider involvement in parental concerns, are not only enormously diverse, but also susceptible to change on the light of experience.’ (1993, p108)

There will also be a group of parents, who have one child or where their FS child is their older\oldest child, for whom this will be their first experience of FS provision. Thus this diverse group of parents with contrasting amounts and types of experience should provide an interesting balance and perhaps be a typical group of SCE parents to interview.

The issue of the two parts of the FS provision being located in different buildings on separate sites is likely to support the impression that the stage is not one. Even though it comes under the line management of the school, the pre-school or nursery could be perceived by parents as being unrelated to the school.

In British Forces Cyprus, parents have very limited choice as to the type of nursery\pre-school provision for their 3-4 year olds. The only funded provision available is that provided by SCE. Other options available in Cyprus are private nurseries at some distance away and of uncertain quality, and with fees charged. These have neither a curriculum matched to the UK education system nor a quality assurance mechanism. Thus, the vast majority of parents take advantage

of SCE's funded provision but, were they to be in the UK, many may make different choices for their children. This could be for a range of reasons. Some parents may choose private nurseries for their extended hours matched to their work commitments or for their more academic approach: others may choose nurseries according to the particular ideology such as Montessori; others may prefer sessions at the local playgroup; yet others may choose a childminder for a smaller and more family-based setting. Consequently, the SCE provision may not accurately meet parents' needs or preferences.

The military community is one which is steeped in tradition - very formal and structured and, at times, resistant to change. Perhaps this will be reflected in their views of education and approaches to the education of their children. The fact that it is also a male-dominated community and most teachers especially in the early years are women may influence parents' views. It may also impact on their views as to whether they want different things for their sons and their daughters, and whether they see the value of play as a means to learn.

Conversely, some families embrace the more relaxed atmosphere of Cyprus and view their time in the sun as a 'fun or sunshine posting'. Or perhaps mothers are more likely to want to get involved in their children's school and education as fewer find work and consequently, have time to spare. Others may be thinking ahead to their return to the UK, mindful of the difficulty of getting children into a preferred school, perhaps of the independent or boarding type.

NFER's survey of parental views of SCE schools, headlined as 'Parents award Service schools top marks' in the local British Forces newspaper in Cyprus (LION, 2005) produced data to indicate a level of parental satisfaction as to their children's current schooling.

'This research aimed to help inform schools and SCE of any areas for which there was a high level of satisfaction, as well as areas where improvements could be made.' (NFER, 2005, p2)

Whilst noting that the survey was conducted across SCE worldwide, and that separate data for the two schools in my study was not available to me, parents' views of the 41 Foundation Stage 1 settings was reported separately from the primary age range and is therefore, I feel, relevant to report here. There is no separate data for FS2 parents as this is included in the primary data. On some issues, comparisons are made between the responses of parents of FS1 and primary children.

The parental questionnaires included questions which related to :-

- The standards of education in their child's school
 - The relationship between parents and their child's school
 - The support given to pupils by their school
 - The overall satisfaction with the education their child receives
- (NFER, 2005, p3)

A total of 2,512 primary\FS1 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 26%.

The most significant findings were as follows. Firstly, in relation to general satisfaction:-

'Parents with children in FS1 settings appeared to be more satisfied with their child's education than primary parents overall, with 54% of parents indicating they were very satisfied. Only 4% of FS1 parents reported that they were not very satisfied or not at all satisfied.' (p18)

As regards the general provision:-

'FS1 parents were more likely to agree or strongly agree that the FS1 setting is safe and secure (93%), that it is clean and attractive (97%) and that the FS1 setting encourages pupils to avoid behaviour which could damage their health or well-being (91%).' (p11)

In response to questions about FS1 practitioners:-

'The parents who indicated that their only or eldest child attended an FS1 setting appeared to be more positive about their relationship with their child's school, than primary parents overall, as they were more

likely to agree that the school was welcoming, the staff approachable and easy to see, and that the school encourages them to play an active role in the school.' (2005, p6)

Parents of FS1 children were also asked additional questions related to the young age of their children. The responses produced data to show

'the majority of parents were fairly or very satisfied with how their child had settled in (93%), the way their child is treated by staff (91%), how the child is encouraged and supported to develop self-help skills (89%), and the opportunities that the FS1 setting offers for them to be creative (88%) (p14)

And finally,

'only a small proportion of parents expressed any dissatisfaction with aspects of the FS1 setting, The area about which most dissatisfaction was expressed was related to the information and support provided by the school to enable parents to support their child's learning at home. Although more than three-quarters of parents (77%) were fairly or very satisfied with this support, a notable minority of parents (14%) were dissatisfied.' (p15)

The above findings, chosen from the body of the report, demonstrate a general level of satisfaction with the quality of education provided for children in SCE schools and FS1 settings.

The factors unique to the British Forces community as outlined in this chapter, some aspects of which are explained in greater detail in Chapter 3, alongside others I may not have recognised or considered, set the context and serve to influence the views of parents of children in the Foundation Stages of SCE schools in Cyprus.

Chapter 3 - The setting of the study

Geographical location

Whilst acknowledging that all communities, schools and education authorities are different and vary according to their geographical and social situation, the setting, schools and personnel used in my study are truly unique. This uniqueness necessitates the provision of the following information to describe in some detail the context and issues directly related to it. My home, work and research setting are situated more than two thousand miles away from the British mainland on the island of Cyprus, yet it is a British community in that it comprises British Forces personnel and their families.

The British Forces community in Cyprus is divided between two geographical areas – the first located at the eastern end of the island in the Eastern Sovereign Base area (ESBA) and, the second on the south coast near to the town of Limassol, in the Western Sovereign Base area (WSBA). My study is conducted in the WSBA, which comprises two locations of Episkopi, the headquarters of British Forces in Cyprus and an army base, and nearby, Akrotiri, a Royal Air Force (RAF) staging station. Together, both bases contain a diverse population of approximately 10,000 army, RAF and Ministry of Defence (MOD) civilian personnel, including civil servants, meteorologists, radio broadcasters, customs officials, medical professionals and teachers, many with their accompanying families.

The Community

A British Forces community situated outside the United Kingdom (UK) is unlike any other located within the UK. It functions as a real community – a group of people living and working together, and looking within for support. Perhaps, this is because there is a sense of being a far distance from 'home' and all 'being in the same boat'. It is also atypical in that the average age of the population is less than thirty years old and there are no community members over the age of sixty. Family life is also different in that children miss regular contact with grandparents and other members of their extended family, leaving parents without family support.

Few of the social problems found in a typical British community exist. Firstly, there are few one-parent families, virtually all children living with two parents. Secondly, there is no homelessness, as a home is provided with the job. Thirdly, there is little unemployment and, consequently, very few cases of poverty or financial hardship. Each child has one parent, usually father, in regular full-time employment, with some mothers working full- or part-time too. Employment opportunities for spouses are very limited and positions hard to find. However, some families make the considered decision on arrival in Cyprus to spend their short time on the island as 'family time', with mothers taking a career break whilst experiencing the travel, cultural and sporting opportunities available. Fourthly, it is very a male-dominated community with husbands and fathers in the role of breadwinner and 'head of household'. Spouses, largely wives, are considered 'dependents', and often feel and are treated like second class citizens. The serviceman takes total responsibility for the well-being and behaviour of his family. There is also a strong 'macho' culture of sport and heavy drinking. Fifthly, the community is predominantly white Christian with most children speaking English

as their first language. There are few service personnel from ethnic minorities, in spite of recruitment drives to make the British Forces more representative of the UK population as a whole. Finally, there are few disabled adults - the nature of the role of service personnel requires them to be in top physical condition. There are few children with severe special educational needs due to the provision of only a limited range of medical and educational support services.

However, a range of stress factors and problems can occur which impact on the quality of family life. Working as a member of the British Forces community is not one which has regular hours nor the job forgotten when work is over for the day. It is a lifestyle of which work is only one part. It involves living, working and socialising with the same group of people. Many service personnel, and consequently their wives and children, are under pressure to carry out the role governed by their rank, carry out set duties and conform to accepted standards of behaviour. These expectations are taken very seriously as there is a perception that these family and social factors may impact on promotion prospects.

A factor unique to service life is the constant movement of the population – most families spending two or three years in one ‘posting’. This can occur either as ‘trickle posting’, with a constant stream of personnel arriving and departing throughout the year, as at RAF Akrotiri, or where every two years an entire regiment or battalion moves as one to a new location, as happens in Episkopi. This transitory and turbulent lifestyle often results in the formation of swift but shallow friendships, rather than deep and lasting relationships in a more stable population. Teachers and a small number of other civilians on long-term contracts form the only real stable element of the community. On posting overseas, families will experience changes in most aspects of their lives including:- location, residence, school, teachers, friends, social activities, climate,

sleeping patterns, eating habits and frequency of family reunions. However, one positive impact of personnel spending a limited time in a location is in their attitude towards making the most of time and opportunities available, rather than delaying until sometime in the future. This attitude makes a significant contribution to a very busy, active and dynamic community.

Disruption to family life can also occur when there are long periods of separation, especially in time of war or other deployment to potentially dangerous locations. A parent, sometimes departing at very short notice, may be absent for several weeks or months on military detachment or exercise. It is likely that at this time, the whole family will have an increased level of anxiety about the safety and well-being of each other.

Parents

The parents of children in the British forces community come from a variety of backgrounds and with a range of educational experiences and qualifications. Rarely, I feel, would such a diverse group of parents form a community and send their children to the same primary school in the UK.

To enter the army or RAF as an officer, 'A levels' or a degree are required. Traditionally, although perhaps decreasingly now, many officers enter directly from public or independent school, with more now joining straight from university. To join as a private soldier or airman, educational requirements are much lower, with no formal educational qualifications (such as GCSEs) being required for some trades. Following entry to the British Forces, as well as undertaking training directly related to their specific trade or post, personnel are encouraged to take the opportunities offered to extend their educational

qualifications, both academic and vocational. Recently, teachers of basic skills have been appointed to increase the reading, writing and mathematical capability of those who have minimal skills in those areas and who left school without formal qualifications. Thus, considerable value is placed on formal education and the acquisition of qualifications as a means to promotion and a better future, both in the British Forces and later in civilian life.

Many of the civilians employed by the MOD and forming part of the service community are educated to a high academic level with professional qualifications (meteorologists, teachers, social workers, doctors, nurses, civil servants) and enjoy officer status. Similarly, the spouses of service personnel and MOD civilians have a wide range of educational experience and qualifications - a small number of parents having very poor literacy and other basic skills.

Inevitably, parents' own educational experiences and achievements, alongside many other factors, are likely to impact not only on their attitudes towards and on their expectations and aspirations for their own children's education, but also on their opinions of their children's current educational provision.

Service Children's Education

Service Children's Education (SCE) is an agency of the MOD and

'is responsible for providing schooling for the children of Service personnel and civilian support staff working outside the United Kingdom.' (SCE, 2002)

Its mission statement is to:-

- provide an effective and efficient education, from nursery through to sixth form, for dependant children residing with MOD personnel serving outside the United Kingdom

- enable those children to benefit from their residence abroad
- provide advice and support for Service parents on maintained and independent school provision in the United Kingdom (SCE, 2002)

SCE operates largely in the same way as a UK local education authority (LEA), but with funding coming directly from the MOD. Schools and SCE are subject to Ofsted inspections, carried out by a team, of Her Majesty's Inspectors. However, there are a number of important differences – two of which are

'the wide geographical distribution of SCE schools and the fact that about three-quarters of the children attending such schools are of primary age (mainly because of the younger profile of service families)' (NFER, 2005)

In practice, SCE provides education for 10,800 children in 44 schools, and 1,900 children in 41 Foundation Stage settings in ten countries - Belize, Brunei, Cyprus, Denmark, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Italy, Belgium, Holland and Germany. (NFER, 2005)

SCE's offer of service is to provide a

'system capable of delivering the National Curriculum (England), and in all other ways of reflecting good educational practice throughout the United Kingdom.' (SCE, 2002)

Its rationale is to create maximum uniformity in practice and systems to make the transition as easy as possible for children returning to the United Kingdom or moving to a SCE school in another part of the world. The schools are organised and run in a similar way to state schools in England, with schools following the National Curriculum for England and Wales with Primary National Strategy and Secondary Strategy in place, and children taking National Curriculum Tests, GCSEs and 'A' levels,

However, the wider nature of the curriculum is explained to parents as consisting of

'all those activities designed or encouraged within a school's organisational framework to promote the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of its pupils. It includes not only formal lessons but also those features which contribute to the school's ethos, for example, the quality of relationships, equality of opportunity, the moral and ethical values upheld by the school and its staff, as well as a wide range of social, cultural and sporting extra-curricular activities for its pupils.' (SCE, 2002)

In contrast to the maintained and independent sectors in England, there is no competition and rivalry between schools in attracting children. As one SCE school is located in each geographical area, parents have no real choice of school for their children. This results in a high level of cooperation between headteachers, teachers and schools in sharing expertise and resources.

'The devolution of managerial responsibility and discretion to individual schools in accordance, so far as possible, with United Kingdom practice.' (SCE, 2002)

Teaching staff are UK qualified (with Qualified Teacher Status) and are largely recruited from the UK. This reflects SCE's 'offer of service' to provide a

'system capable of attracting and retaining teachers of the highest calibre with qualifications, training and experience matched to the requirements of the posts.' (SCE, 2002)

SCE headquarters is located in Wegberg, Germany, close to where the majority of its schools are situated. However, a Cyprus area office, staffed by an education officer, clerical staff and advisory teachers, is responsible for the day-to-day running of and support for the six schools, two secondary and four primary, on the island. (SCE, 2005)

The school population is, of course, representative of the parents of the children attending. Children are predominantly white, with few ethnic minority children as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Number of children from ethnic minority groups in Akrotiri and Episkopi Schools in academic year 2001-02 (statutory school age only)

Ethnic group	Number of pupils in Akrotiri School	Number of pupils in Episkopi School
Black Caribbean heritage	2	0
Black African heritage	0	0
Black other	0	3
Indian	0	0
Pakistani	0	0
Bangladeshi	0	0
Chinese	0	0
White	449	397
Other	2 [^]	2 [*]
Total	453	402

[^] Fijian (Children of Fijian soldiers)

^{*} Nepalese (Children of Ghurka soldiers)

There are few children whose first language is not English. There are two main instances where one or both parents are not English native speakers – the exceptions being, service personnel from other countries serving temporarily or permanently with the British forces, or service personnel marrying the native of a country in which they have been previously posted, most commonly Germany. See figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Number of children with English as an additional language in Akrotiri and Episkopi school in academic year 2001-02 (statutory school age only)

	Akrotiri School	Episkopi School
Number of children with English as an additional language	4 1 Russian 3 German	2 Nepalese

The most challenging problem facing SCE and its schools is the lack of continuity in education of the children. It is extremely rare for a child to start nursery at three years old and proceed through primary school to Year 6 or into secondary school in the same location. In fact, a typical tour of duty for a forces family is between two and three years before moving on to another country and a different school for their children. It is not uncommon for a child to have attended ten schools between the ages of 3 and 18 years.

Figure 3 Number of children arriving and leaving in the academic year 2001-02

NB Excluding children starting at the beginning of nursery education and leaving at the end of Year 6.

	Number of children arriving	Number of children leaving	Total
Akrotiri School	194	198	392
Episkopi School*	132	165	297

*Episkopi School operates on a 2 year cycle – one year experiencing a regimental change and the following year some with drip feed change. The year 2001-02 shown above was drip feed change. The following year would show much greater turnover.

Due to the large number of children arriving and leaving on a regular basis, SCE schools necessarily have comprehensive and well-established systems in place for the transfer. In the academic year 2001-02, the two schools on my study experienced the transfer of children as shown in Figure 3 above.

Systems and strategies vary from one school to another but there are many commonalities. As well as school booklets, which can be accessed on the school website, many parents often contact the school prior to arrival. On arrival, parents of individual children are welcomed by the headteacher or deputy headteacher, complete admission forms, are shown around the school, meet the child's teacher and see the classroom, and are given any additional information they may need.

Individual children usually start school the following day to enable the class teacher to make the necessary preparations and read the child's documentation from the previous school. Individuals arriving are helped to settle in quickly by strategies, such as a 'buddy system' where a new child is allocated an appropriate friend, who stays with them for the first few days or as long as is necessary, show them where things are and how things are done. The 'buddy' is in the same class and usually lives close by, so that the friendship can continue to develop outside school hours.

Where there is a change of regiment or battalion involving the movement of a large number of children, preparations are made well in advance. Before the families leave the UK, the headteacher of the receiving school travels back to speak with parents and children, giving them information, usually through a video presentation, about the school and providing an opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns. In this situation, while children may come from a

number of different schools according to where they live and their parents' preferred choice, many children move with a group of friends. This visit also provides an opportunity for the receiving headteacher to make contact with relevant headteachers to ensure that comprehensive records are sent with children on leaving, and children with special needs are identified and appropriate provision made.

On arrival in the new location, parents and children come along to the school for an Open Day to look around the school, meet the teachers, and buy school uniform before actually starting. As regimental changes usually take place in the middle of an academic year, efforts are sometimes made for the teachers to 'move up' with their class to minimise the number of teacher changes children experience.

All schools have thorough and effective assessment and record keeping systems, and

'a transfer documentation folder.....prepared for each child. The transfer folder contains important information for parents about pupil progress and achievement. ' (SCE, 2002)

Records are directly related to the National Curriculum and Early Learning Goals, and therefore, meet requirements for schools in England. Transfer documentation is indeed comprehensive and is viewed by Ofsted as a strength of SCE. (Ofsted, 2004) These measures, however, cannot enable such an effective transfer when children move to and from schools in different parts of the UK, such as Scotland and N. Ireland, where curriculum, teaching styles, and the start and finish of statutory schooling are different.

The MOD, through SCE, try to compensate families for the many moves which service children make, by resourcing schools to a high level.

Schools are generously staffed and equipped compared to UK schools - equipment being constantly updated and enhanced, especially in the field of Information and Communication Technology. In order to compensate for SCE schools not being able to access the many funds and grants available to schools in the UK, the MOD matches the level of funding through a parity bid system. The army and RAF also provide support with resourcing, if and when needed.

Enhanced staffing levels not only ensure that class sizes remain small, but also that children receive assessment on arrival, individual attention and extra help when settling into a new school. SCE also funds the provision of teaching assistants, calculated on the ratio 1:2 KS1 classes and 1:4 KS2 classes. In addition, SCE's School Effectiveness Branch

'exists to ensure that standards are maintained. This service consists of a team of inspector advisers, advisers, and advisory teachers who provide support and challenge to schools on leadership, standards, curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning.' (SCE, 2002)

The level of support is particularly generous in the early years' sector, reflecting the bottom-heavy school population and the higher proportion of staff who do not hold QTS.

A further difference between UK and SCE schools lies in the provision for special needs children. Historically, there have been few children with special educational needs (SEN) in SCE schools. In recent years, most families with SEN children have not been posted outside of the UK and a screening system is in place to prevent children arriving in a location where their needs cannot be met.

'This is most notable where needs are complex and only occur infrequently within the population as a whole.' (SCE, 2002)

This is due to the fact that SCE has not had the resources and professional personnel to provide the range of special units and schools, and the specialist teaching and learning support assistants to staff them. Soldiers, Sailors and

Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA - the British Forces equivalent of Social Services) and military hospitals have been unable to cater for such a comprehensive range of physical needs of many children and their families, as would be available in the UK. However, as SCE employs Speech and Language Therapists in each geographical location, children with most types of speech and language problems are posted overseas and have received a high level of support.

The publication of the Special Need Code of Practice (2001) brought about change, reflecting the change of policy and practice in the UK. This gave parents and children increased rights in deciding the best type of education for their children, resulting in a move towards the inclusion of a wide range of special needs children in mainstream schooling, and the closure of many special units and schools. In response, SCE appointed a number of Inclusion Development Teachers, with professional specialisms such as visual impairment, hearing impairment, and autism spectrum. This enables SCE to mirror the implementation of this policy change and put into place systems and training programmes to enable an increasing number of special needs children to be posted out to overseas locations and for schools to meet their specific needs. To further enhance special needs provision, many schools have been modified to accommodate children with physical disabilities and new buildings have included special needs facilities in their design.

The SCE school population is very 'bottom heavy'; there being many more children in the 3-8 years age range than in secondary education. SCE statistics for 2002 show that there were

'53 more children in FS than in the secondary phase. Only the Key Stage two cohort was bigger.' (2005, p3)

This is due to several factors. Firstly, many service personnel sign up for short

terms of six or nine years. During this time the majority get married and have children. Many leave the British Forces after this time returning to civilian life, taking their children with them. Others choose to send their children to UK boarding schools when their children reach the age of 8 or 11 years, in order for them to maintain maximum continuity in their education, or due to an increasing level of difficulty in gaining admission for their children to the school of their choice on return to the UK following an overseas posting.

Entitlement and Provision in the Foundation Stage

In accordance with policy in England, statutory schooling begins for children at the beginning of the term following their fifth birthday. In line with many LEAs, SCE 'operates an annual admission policy' (SCE, 2002) admitting children to reception classes at the beginning of the school year in which the child's fifth birthday falls. Rarely do parents choose to delay their child's start to more formal schooling, even though no pressure is exerted on parents. Unlike English schools, SCE schools cannot refuse to admit children because they are full; a place being guaranteed for every child as and when required.

From September 1998, SCE was tasked by the MOD with providing part-time funded nursery education for all 4 year olds in line with the government's voucher scheme. This was achieved through the creation of nursery classes which were attached to primary schools and fell under the line management of the headteacher. These were staffed by qualified early years' teachers and nursery assistants, using the ratios 1:13 in line with England. This was followed in January in 2001 by funded provision for all 3 year olds. Every effort was made to put this into effect well in advance of England's target of 100% provision by 2004. This was given priority funding by the MOD as part of their recruitment and

retention drive. This provision was achieved in SCE through primary headteachers taking over the management of existing nearby or off-site army and RAF pre-schools, and incorporating them into their schools. Thus, unlike many maintained schools in England, each headteacher had responsibility for the whole Foundation Stage (FS). While many of the headteachers had no experience in working with children in the three to five age group, nor would they consider themselves experts in this field, they are, of course, qualified and experienced teachers and existing managers. They are practised in monitoring and evaluating, and through such means, are able to gain an overview of the continuity and progression through the Foundation Stage as a whole on transfer of children to Key Stage 1.

In each school, an experienced teacher holds the post of Foundation Stage Leader (FSL). This reflects the findings of the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) –

‘Effective pedagogical practices are dependent upon headteachers\managers developing a strong overall management and organisation ethos in which practitioners feel they are important, valued and have status.’ (2002, p2)

And furthermore, in the Effective Provision of Pre-school Practice (EPPE) report which concludes that

‘Children make more progress in settings with a high proportion of qualified teachers.’ (2004, p18)

This FSL post is non-class based and holds significant management responsibility, as well as the modelling of exemplary early years practice. Duties include the day-to-day leadership and management of the stage, leading a team of teachers and teaching assistants who work with FS2 or Reception children, and also a team of keyworkers who work in FS1. Keyworkers are employed on a ratio of 1:8, as required for 3-4 year olds in England in the Children Act. (1989) In day to day operation, this means that each keyworker takes responsibility for a small

group of up to eight children and being the first point of contact for parents in all matters. SCE has endeavoured to better the required ratios, and in practice, ratios far exceed the requirement, in order to be prepared for in-coming children and especially in the first two terms of the academic year. Foundation Stages follow the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) and Ofsted inspections are carried out by HMI as part of the primary school's Section 5 inspection.

Although attendance at nursery is an entitlement, rather than compulsory, in practice, virtually all parents choose this provision for their children. Statistics for the summer of 2002 show that SCE were providing for 1,971 funded three-year-olds. (SCE, p3, 2005) However, a tiny minority of parents choose to keep their children at home, or prefer to use a SSAFA registered childminder or a private nursery in nearby Limassol. The range of funded provision available to parents for their young children is not typical of an English community and few alternatives are available to families. This is due to a number of factors. Firstly, there are limited employment opportunities for spouses of MOD personnel, with many mothers working part time or not at all. Where mothers are in full-time employment, working hours which are geared to the climatic conditions of Cyprus, are an extended morning of 7.00 to 13.30, rather than a traditional UK working day. Consequently, demand for extended provision is considerably reduced. Secondly, SCE had been tasked with providing a service matched to the needs of the population, and to date has not been asked to establish an Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYCDP) which co-ordinates the different types of provision, in the public, private and voluntary sectors, Thirdly, it is uneconomical for more than one type of provision to be offered in one location. This would not be cost effective, due to the small number of children and the turbulent population.

Admission of children into the Foundation Stage 1 is

'termly and children become eligible for free places from the beginning of the term after the child's third birthday.' (SCE, 2002)

This pattern of admission results in the length of time spent in FS1 provision varying between three and five terms, as transfer to FS2\reception takes place in the September following the child's fourth birthday. In FS1, attendance is for a daily session of three hours, from 8.00 until 11.00 in term time only, exceeding the two and a half hour entitlement. Following a settling-in period of part-time attendance, FS2\reception children attend for a full school day. In line with the working hours of military personnel, schools operate a 'continental' day. School begins at 7.20 or 7.30am, and finishes at 12.30am for FS2 and KS1.

A small number of children experience a mix of funded and non-funded provision during their years in the Foundation Stage. A typical scenario for a child with both parents working full time could be:- left at a registered childminder's house in the early morning, and\or taken to and collected from nursery or school by the childminder, or a Filipino or Sri Lankan live-in housemaid, who would look after the child until the end of the working day. However, children experiencing a mix of care are in the minority and by far the majority attend the funded setting only, being brought and collected by a parent or maid. On admission to FS2\reception, children are entitled to funded transport to and from their home to school, should their parents wish to use it. Where children use the transport provided, parents are encouraged to collect their children from school from time to time in order to maintain the links with and develop the relationship with the class teacher.

Figure 4 - number on roll (NOR) in academic year 2002-03 at the schools involved in my study

Akrotiri School (children 3-11 years)	Number On Roll - 530 Incl. 155 Foundation Stage
Episkopi School (children 3-11 years)	Number On Roll – 500 Incl. 140 Foundation Stage

Schools and nurseries are located within walking distance of where most families live. This enables most parents to enjoy daily contact with school, and close links are established and maintained between parents and staff. However, parents have limited powers in the running of the school. In the place of Boards of Governors operated in UK schools, SCE schools have School Advisory Committees (SACs) which fulfil a similar role, but in an advisory rather than decision-making capacity. Both schools run 'Friends of School' committees, whose main function is organising social activities and raising funds.

Staffing and training

The turbulence of the forces population has a marked effect on movement of staff, as most non-teaching staff are dependants of MOD personnel and, therefore, also move on every two or three years. A study of FS issues across SCE, which included the mobility of its support staff, has produced data giving

'annual turnover figures of 33%, 44%, 50%, 58%, and 66% in individual locations. One nursery has recruited 120 keyworkers in the last three years representing a massive 600% turnover.' (2005, p10)

The limited job opportunities for dependants, coupled with the timing of working

hours, make working in a school or nursery an attractive job for many women with school-age children. However, many of the service wives employed as keyworkers or teaching assistants often have neither relevant qualifications nor previous experience. SCE statistics for 2005 show that in Cyprus the total number of keyworkers was 35, with 22 being qualified to NVQ level 3 or equivalent, and 13 being unqualified. (SCE, 2005, p9) It is worth noting that the report found Cyprus schools and settings to have the highest percentage of qualified staff in all areas of SCE provision.

Since September 2001, Ofsted standards require 50% of nursery staff to be qualified to NVQ Level 2 or an equivalent qualification, as specified in QCA's Early years education, childcare and playwork framework of nationally accredited qualifications (2001). In order to reach and indeed, exceed this requirement, as shown in the statistics quoted above, SCE chose to offer and fully fund NVQ Level 3 in Early Years Care and Education for its FS non-teaching staff. NVQ was chosen as most appropriate qualification for SCE's unique workforce. It is a flexible and modular qualification, which can be worked on at the practitioner's own pace over a period of three years. It takes into account the likelihood that some staff will return to different parts of the UK or be posted elsewhere abroad, where they will be able to continue and complete the award. NVQ awards are also becoming the most widely recognised qualification for childcare posts in the UK. Many former employees have returned to the UK and obtained childcare posts at management level due to their qualification and increased confidence gained while working in their first post with SCE.

The trend of FS support staff has tended to be that unqualified staff are employed, achieve or work towards a qualification while in post, and leave, being replaced by another unqualified person. This has necessitated a continuous and

rigorous on-going training programme not only to support the achievement of this qualification, through providing the necessary underpinning knowledge, but also to update qualified staff on current developments and UK initiatives. However, due to the increasing number of dependent personnel arriving already experienced and qualified to NVQ 3 level, SCE has extended the range of qualifications offered, and is funding a Level 4 qualification for practitioners. The Open University's Foundation Degree in Early Childhood Studies was found to be the most appropriate due to its modular structure, its 'distance-learning' nature and its accessibility on return to the UK or move elsewhere.

My role as Advisory Teacher for Teaching and Learning (Early Years Training and Development) in Cyprus includes providing training for all staff working with children aged 3 to 8, although the main focus of my work lies within the Foundation Stage. As there are only four SCE primary schools on Cyprus and one advisory teacher for early years, practitioners enjoy and benefit from a high level of training and in-setting support. This support and training can be intensive and specific, and targeted where and when it is most needed. My role includes the delivery of QCA and SCE written courses, as well as facilitating visits from SCE (Germany) and UK presenters. (SCE, 2005) As part of my role in school support, I work closely with teachers and parents to help to promote parent partnership as outlined in QCA's Early Learning Goals (1999) and Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (2000) documents. Training also takes the form of visiting other schools and nurseries, and working alongside a wide range of colleagues and practitioners.

Parental Involvement and parent/teacher relationships

SCE and its schools see the involvement of parents in their children's education as vital and SCE has parental partnerships as a high priority in its Education Development Plan.....

'encourages close co-operation between parents and teachers. All schools actively seek to promote among parents and the Service community as a whole an awareness of school aims.' (SCE, 2002)

This includes the appointment of an education officer for FS and partnerships, based in Germany working across SCE to develop links between schools and parents, and currently focussing on the implementation of the Every Child Matters agenda. SCE has funded a number of initiatives, including the SHARE Project in many of its schools, initially in lower Key Stage 2, and extended it throughout the schools as further materials were produced. The rationale for the FS as explained in the SHARE newsletter is that

'early years practitioners work in partnership with parents to value and build on children's previous learning and to pass on their expertise, so that parents are better able to help their children.' (2002)

In addition, SCE has commissioned National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to conduct a number of surveys of parents' opinions as to the quality of education SCE provides for their children. This has included parents' views on the level and quality of partnerships between parents and their child's teachers, as outlined in Chapter 2. (NFER, 2005)

Both the schools in my study welcome parent volunteers to work alongside teachers and other practitioners. The number of volunteers varies and is largely comprised of mothers. In my experience, parents volunteer for a number of reasons. Firstly, some mothers have excess time available and enjoy doing something useful for the benefit of others. Secondly, some see volunteering in school as a way into securing a paid position as a teaching assistant or

keyworker, when one becomes vacant. Many, in fact, are successful in using this approach, due to the fact that teachers can assess their suitability in working and interacting with children, which is not always apparent from a formal interview situation. Thirdly, some parents lose interest when they are assigned to a class other than that of their own child, confirming the notion that some parents are only interested in their own child's education and not in the broader aims of the school.

A number of parents sit on the School Advisory Committee, as representatives of groups and units within the garrison or station. My experience suggests that parents choose to take on this role for a number of reasons; some of these are of a personal nature, rather than for the reason intended; namely, representing the views of groups of parents. Some serving personnel may hold the position in order to add breadth to their CV and in the hope of enhancing their promotion prospects. Some see an opportunity to put forward personal grievances as opposed to being a representative and bringing up issues of a more general nature. Others see the limited power of the SAC in comparison to governing bodies on England and decide not to get involved as their influence would be minimal and they are only in Cyprus for a short time.

A diversity of comments and overheard conversations around the school and nursery gates have made me aware of the range of levels of interest parents have and show in the nursery experiences of their children and the reasons for taking up their entitlement of funded provision for their children. Some, parents work and are not at home to care for their children themselves. Some want a free minding facility, to enable them to maximise social opportunities. In contrast, others want a quality educational establishment to enable their children to be prepared for the more formal learning of later schooling. The diversity of parental comments at the end of a nursery session also provides an interesting insight into

their needs and expectations. Some parents welcome their children with great joy and enthusiasm, asking detailed questions as to the morning's events and achievements, while others express irritation at their child for providing yet another painting to take back home. For yet another group, their only concern appears to be whether the child has behaved well that day.

I feel that the position and perceptions of teachers in the military community by service personnel may impact on the nature and quality of parent/teacher relationships. Teachers and most other civilians enjoy accommodation with free rent and utilities, and permanent postings, often envied by others, especially those of lower military rank, who are less well paid and have no control over where they are sent to work. As in the UK, teachers enjoy longer holidays than most other jobs offer, and endure the same jibes as teachers elsewhere.

Most mothers and fathers uphold what could be considered traditional roles in family life in general and, specifically, in relation to their children's education. In practice, this means mothers largely take responsibility for and provide the continuity for their children's care and educational support. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the serving military person, usually the father, is often sent away on detachment or deployed overseas and can be away from the family for extended periods of time. Secondly, many mothers are unable to find employment in Cyprus, which results in them having more time at home with their children and daily contact with school. This said, many fathers take the opportunity to bring children to and from school when they return from detachment or are on leave, trying to 'catch up' when they have time available.

Relationships between practitioners and parents vary and are often

related to the level of education and degree of educational success achieved by parents, usually mothers. Mothers, who had little academic success, and did not enjoy school themselves as pupils, can find the notion of entering school with their children very intimidating. Thus, the development of a relationship with a teacher can be difficult to establish. It may take a considerable time to build up the confidence of the mother until she is able to relax and understand that the well-being and progress of the child is the common ground between parent and teacher. Parents, who were successful at school, achieved academic success and perhaps hold a higher military status, generally approach teachers with a higher level of confidence. They attempt to form relationships with their child's teacher, recognising that the education of their child is a shared responsibility. Perhaps this is partly due to feeling they are equal educationally and socially, due to teachers holding officer status.

The relationship between parents and keyworkers or teaching assistants is significantly different. I would suggest this is for two reasons. Firstly, teaching assistants and keyworkers are usually wives of service personnel. Many mothers feel that they have a lot in common with them and can identify with them on a personal level – a good starting point for establishing a relationship. Many parents may know the staff socially too. Secondly, because teaching assistants and keyworkers are not as highly qualified as teachers, many parents, especially those with less confidence and who had limited educational success themselves, perceive them to be on an equal level to them and feel more comfortable than with a teacher.

I feel that the size and closeness of the community, compared to the catchment area of a school in the UK, and the closeness of relationships both social and professional, are likely to impact on not only the expectations of parents

of their children's teachers or keyworkers, but also confidentiality. Firstly, parents are very well-informed as to the specifics of the school setting. Personal experience has led me to believe that the impact of this is that expectations are greater and that parents believe they have a right to approach teachers and keyworkers in places other than in school. As a classteacher, I have experienced instances where parents have felt it acceptable to initiate a conversation about their children's progress in the military supermarket or even across the dinner table. Ultimately, this greater claim on practitioners' time may indicate high expectations of practitioners and ultimately perhaps, on their equally high expectations for their children's achievement.

I am aware that because parents and children usually have experience of more than one school, pre-school and nursery, the type and quality of relationships they have encountered previously, may impact on their expectations for their children. This accumulated experience will be more extensive and varied if there are several children in the family, and will perhaps have the greatest significance for the youngest child in the family. Also, these experiences, whether with SCE schools in different locations or in one or more countries of the UK, are likely to influence their perceptions of what type of relationship they would wish to have with their child's teacher. However, there will be parents, Fitzgerald reminds us, for whom

'early years practitioners may be the first group of people associated with education that they have contact with.' (2004, p74)

Finally, in a male-dominated community where gender roles are mostly traditional and clearly defined, some fathers may have different expectations for their sons than their daughters. It is not uncommon for fathers to complain that their sons have been allowed to dress up in girl's clothes in the home corner, played with 'girls' toys' or been partnered with a girl in activities. This is also

apparent at parents meetings when fathers view aggressive behaviour as acceptable for boys, when it would not be for girls. Other SCE teachers have identified and explored some of the gender issues related to living in a British forces community - one looked at girls' and boys' play (Maher, 2002) while a second examined the choice of toys parents bought for their children (Walters, 2001)

The background to the military community and diverse range of related factors described above serves to demonstrate that the issue of parental expectations for their children's education in the Foundation Stage is a complex and multi-faceted issue in the setting of British Forces Cyprus.

Chapter 4 - Methodology and Research Design

My starting points for my research project were the questions – ‘What is my area of interest?’ ‘What is the focus? What is my question?’

Having arrived at answers to these three questions, as described in previous chapters, in this chapter I examine how I addressed my next question ‘How am I going to do it?’ It explains how I approached my research and the processes I went through before and during its execution, or as Wellington defines methodology –

‘the activity or business of choosing, reflecting upon, evaluating and justifying the methods you use.’ (2000, p22)

Initial thoughts and plans

I certainly identified with Nutbrown’s suggestion that the purpose of research is for the social good and researchers want to make a difference and change something for the better. (2002, p4) And similarly, with Sikes’ view that research is to

‘get knowledge and to communicate that knowledge, often with the ultimate view of informing practice and/or policy and thereby, improving things in some way.’ (2003, p10)

In practice, I would be making

‘an interpretation based on what can be known given the available resources, knowledge and understanding.’ (Sikes, 2003, p11),

or as Nutbrown (2002) suggests, I would be.....

‘asking questions, exploring problems and reflecting on what emerges in order to make meaning from data and tell the research story.’ (p4)

I heeded Usher's view that generalisations have been traditionally considered the highest level of research and very often as what research should always strive for...

'In the natural sciences generalisations are sought because they enable predictions to be made.... Not why does x happen in this particular classroom but does it happen in all classrooms and if so is there an underlying and common cause?' (1996, p10)

However, I started out with no illusions as to the limited impact of my study. It was not my intention to try to make sweeping generalisations or claims related to absolute truth. This is due to the 'case study' nature of my project as the setting of my research is indeed a unique and atypical community in many ways (as detailed in Chapter 3) and the interpretation would be unlikely to relate to communities in the UK. I was simply looking at an issue and seeking opinions and perceptions related to practices, within my own community. However, I would like to think that my small piece of research would have a place somewhere - as Bassey (1990) says

'systematic, critical and self-critical inquiry which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge.' (Quoted in Wellington 2000, p13)

My question of 'What are parents' expectations for the Foundation Stage of education?' seemed to me to suggest the qualitative paradigm with its subjective and interpretative nature. It did not lend itself to a quantitative approach and its related research methods and collection of numerical or statistical data, or as Bell puts it -

'Quantitative researchers collect facts and study scientific techniques that are likely to produce quantified and, if possible, generalizable conclusions. Researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are more concerned to understand individuals' perceptions of the world. They seek insight rather than statistical analysis.' (1998, p4)

In addition, my starting point was not a hypothesis which I wished to test. I merely wished to pose a question and explore viewpoints. To remove any possible

doubts, further reading led me to Wellington's five features of qualitative research and data which I felt fitted my particular situation exactly -

1. it is usually an exploratory activity;
 - 2 data is usually collected in a real-life, natural setting and is therefore often rich, descriptive and extensive;
 3. the human being or beings involved are the main research 'instrument';
 4. the design of a study emerges or evolves 'as you go along'...
 5. the typical methods used are observation, interview, collection of documents and sometimes photography or video recording.
- (2000, p133)

In exploring issues around the qualitative approach and its related research methods, I knew it was important to state my position within the study, noting Walker's definition of positionality as –

'the personal, political, social or professional relationship or situation of the researcher in relation to another individual, group or constituency.'
(2002, p2)

And furthermore, a declaration of these all important factors produces

'a rigorous and active appreciation of how facets of ourselves become enmeshed in our study.' (2002, p7)

Similarly, Opie et al believe that a rigorous researcher should have

'acknowledged and been honest about their stance and the influence it has had upon their work.' (2004, p7)

and thus, I tried to be open and clear. Then finally, I felt reassured by Ball's comment that 'Qualitative research cannot be made researcher-proof'. (1993, p43) thus, rejecting the positivist notion of research and researcher being 'an objective, detached, value-free knower' (Wellington, 2000, p15) in favour of an interpretative stance.

I have already described in some detail in Chapter 1 how and why I came to be interested in issues of parental involvement and the many incidents and influences throughout my life which had brought me to this point. I am very much aware of the fact that these factors will influence my approach from the

outset, research methods chosen and the subsequent interpretation and analysis of data. I identified with Hannon's view that the context is a vital part of the research and that social research takes place within a community –

'Think of educational research as a living plant in interaction with its environment - constantly reviewing itself, sometimes growing, sometimes declining.' (1998, p150)

This, I feel, relates to the twin processes of reflexivity and reflectivity which take place side-by-side throughout the research process - the notion of reflexivity defined by Walker as

'active awareness within any situation as it unfolds,' (2002, p4)

alongside reflectivity, which takes place in retrospect, looking back after the event.

I tried to consider ethical issues when choosing my research methods and procedures. I asked myself Sikes' questions

'how would you personally feel if you or your children or your friends were 'researched' by means of them?' (2003, p16)

I felt initially satisfied that I would not be asking anything which would make me or parents feel uncomfortable, but I continued to consider this issue until I had conducted my pilot interview, at which point my doubts disappeared.

Planning the project – choosing methods

To address the question 'How am I going to go about getting the necessary information I need?' I considered a number of possible ways of collecting data. I felt a questionnaire was too formal and distant for my purposes. It could also prove less likely to ensure participation and completion for several reasons - time, level of commitment and parents' own literacy skills. Neither does a questionnaire provide the opportunity to ask follow up questions and probe a

little more deeply into issues. Whilst I knew that speaking with individual parents would be time consuming, being a parent myself, I understood that for parents to talk about their children and their hopes and aspirations is a very personal thing, which requires the personal face-to-face approach. For these reasons I opted to choose interviewing as my main method of data collection.

The new and increasingly popular methods of interviewing did not seem to appeal to me or to be appropriate to my particular situation. I rejected the telephone interview as all the people I wished to talk with lived within a few miles of either my home or workplace and I felt the person approach would be more fitting to conversations about their children. I had even stronger feelings about interview by email or internet for the same reasons and also because I knew it could restrict the field of those who would participate as it would exclude any parent who did not have access to a computer or had limited skills in its use. I knew the face-to-face personal interview had to be the most appropriate for my project.

I chose to use the term 'interviewee' when referring to those people I spoke to in an interview situation. I considered that in an interview one is 'put on the spot' as in a job interview, which was not the type of relationship I wanted to establish, but I found it preferable to others currently used, including the term 'informant' (Sikes, 2003, p19) which for me living in a military environment has sinister and secret connotations, linked to spying or criminal investigation.

Next I needed to decide on the type of interview I would conduct, dependent on which type fitted most closely the needs of the project. I rejected McNiff's (1988, p79) suggestion of using group interviews. Whilst I admit that they could be a realistic possibility on the grounds of time, I felt that talking about one's

children is very personal matter, and I was unwilling to take the risk of some parents being influenced by the responses of more dominant others in a group situation. I was also less confident in my ability to keep the group on track to cover the issues I was interested in.

Having made my decision to conduct individual parent interviews, I then turned to Wellington's (1996, p27) ideas on the types of interviews available to researchers - structured, semi-structured and unstructured - and considered the benefits of each in relation to my purposes. Wellington's comment that a structured interview may be 'little more than a "face to face questionnaire" ' (Parsons, quoted in Wellington 1996, p26) convinced me that this would not lead to the rapport and relationship with parents that I was hoping to achieve. Neither would the unstructured approach be appropriate as it could not guarantee to provide me with what I required in this type of project, where information on specific issues is essential. I also took particular note of Sikes' view that

'the less structure an interview has, the less reliable the data produced',
and, furthermore,

'the more the interview is in the control of the interviewee, the more work the researcher has to do when it comes to analysing the data they collect'. (2004, p11)

Therefore, I chose to try a semi-structured interview - something Wellington describes as a

'compromise between the two positions which will overcome the problems inherent in the latter approach but avoid the inflexibility of the former.' (1996. p26)

I liked the idea of the interviewer having

'considerable flexibility over the range and order of questions within a loosely defined framework.' (p27)

I also knew that an interview with some structure would prove easier to analyse later.

I next considered my role as interviewer. I could not see it as a passive one or as Holstein and Gubrium describe it - 'a disinterested catalyst'. (1995, p38) I aimed to adopt the role of 'active listener' and to gain as much information as possible by saying as little as possible. It was my hope to get a flow of talk in a relaxed manner. But realistically, I knew it was more likely to resemble an active interview, where both the interviewer and the interviewee are equally active, each being involved in

'meaning-making work cultivating and constructing meaning throughout the dynamic interview process.' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p12)

Still at the planning stage, I looked to Wellington again for further guidance and took his advice on the essentiality of having the entire process planned out in a systematic and well-organised manner - preparing the schedule, piloting, selecting the subjects or sample and finally, carrying out the interviews themselves. (1996, p21) In my case, piloting would serve to try out my chosen interview format, and test the appropriateness of the questions themselves, in producing the type of information required. If possible, I hoped to produce a recorded version of the interview which would be helpful in enabling me to make a detailed analysis and evaluation of the different factors in the interview process.

Before starting to devise the questions for my pilot interview, I wanted to set a structure. I tried to use a 'funnelling' technique, whereby the first few questions were of a factual or general nature which would be easy to answer and help to put the interviewee at his\her ease. I would then proceed to more focussed and open-ended questions, which I felt would provide me with the information related to the real focus of my study. The composition of the

questions was my next task and, in particular, how I could phrase the questions. When starting on this task, I considered the type of language which would be appropriate for the questions. I was mindful of Sikes' view that

'Language is critical and the language that we use reflects our fundamental assumptions, understandings and beliefs.' (2003, p19).

Being guilty of this myself, I am only too aware that educationalists speak in jargon and 'education-speak' which to outsiders is foreign and incomprehensible. I knew I must not insult interviewees by making the questions sound patronising, but neither did I want to embarrass or put them at a disadvantage by asking questions which they did not understand and therefore, could not answer. I also noted Wellington's advice on composing questions and the five types of questions to avoid - double-barrelled, two-in-one, restrictive, leading and loaded. (2000, p82) I tried to prepare myself for the reaction of the interviewees, and possible signs of confusion or non-comprehension, when I may need to re-word questions.

Thus, I devised an interview schedule comprising sixteen questions. This was divided into two sections - the first being factual questions on issues around themselves and their family situation, and the second related to parental expectations for their children in the Foundation Stage, which would hopefully provide me with the information I was looking for.

I was aware of the many pitfalls faced by interviewers. I knew that my attempt to find some kind of 'reality' is an impossible task and the interviewer will never know how close to 'reality' she has come. The interviewer has to accept that some interviewees deliberately set out to deceive, but generally

'interview data is what people say they do, did, think, believe or whatever: it is not necessarily what they actually and really do, did thought, believe and so on.' (Sikes, 2004, p6)

So I knew I had to accept the fact that there could be a possibility of interviewees giving me incomplete or untrue information. There was the possibility that some may try to please me, perhaps by saying what they thought I wanted to hear and what a 'good' parent would say. I felt this would be most likely to become an issue where the parents I interviewed were aware of my role within SCE, especially in Akrotiri where I lived and, therefore, was better known.

I next reviewed the options for recording the interview. I rejected the idea of video recording interviews for a number of reasons. While acknowledging that video tape provides a record of facial expression and body language, which is not picked up by audio tape, I felt this could be inhibiting to some parents. I was not convinced that it would provide me with significant information, which could not be obtained by other means. Had I been conducting group interviews, my decision could well have been the opposite, as a video recording would have picked up on group interaction and group dynamics which I would have struggled to observe. It may have produced an additional visual perspective, which I could not have observed fully in person nor would it have been recorded on audio tape. I also rejected it for technical reasons - access to appropriate equipment and my own lack of confidence in using it.

I chose to try recording my pilot interview onto audio tape, using my own domestic tape recorder. I considered but rejected taking notes as I knew this would be a difficult task and distracting for the interviewee, as the interviewer has to look down to write, thus losing eye contact and this can stop the flow of conversation. Unless the interviewer is proficient in some form of shorthand, it must be almost impossible to write everything down. I decided that an audio taped interview would be my chosen option - appreciating the advantage of returning to it later. I intended to transcribe the interview for easier analysis, as common

themes and issues could be seen simultaneously. I knew I would be conducting all the interviews myself and transcribing them too, as I have no access to any secretarial support for my research purposes. Perhaps, my choice was also a reflection of my own preferred learning style as a visual learner.

Before embarking on my collection of data, I knew I should inform a number of key personnel within my own organisation and give them some kind of outline of what I was about to do. I was aware of the importance of gaining the permission and support, particularly from those who would be in the position of 'gatekeeper' and could refuse me entry and access to the people I most needed to speak with. Firstly, I informed my ultimate line manager (Assistant Chief Executive for Quality Assurance) As well as feeling that she should be aware of my commitment to the EdD programme and my research interest, I wished her to know that I may be able to make a significant contribution towards development within our own organisation. Secondly, I needed the support of my day-to-day line manager in Cyprus (Senior Assistant Area Education Officer) and my line manager (Inspector/Adviser for Early Years) in SCE headquarters in Germany. I preferred to do this on an informal basis in person, rather than write a formal letter, which would suggest I was asking permission, and therefore, could produce a negative response. Although my education authority was supporting my EdD programme financially, I felt I may need further support in terms of study time as my research progressed, and early warning would be preferable to 'springing it' on people later. I also felt it would be wise to inform them to 'cover my back' in case anything should go wrong and I needed their support in the future.

I next informed the headteachers - the real 'gatekeepers' - of the schools containing the Foundation Stage where I hoped to carry out my research. I briefly outlined my intentions and I assured them that I would like to speak with

parents in an interview situation. However, I assured them that questions asked of parents would be of a general nature and not specific nor inviting of criticism of their school or their staff. I offered to talk with them in more detail should they wish and discuss my interview schedule. My offer was not taken up in either case, perhaps due to the fact that I know both headteachers well, having worked in their schools over the past six years, with a high level of professional respect and trust established and developed over that time.

Around the same time, I also spoke with the Foundation Stage Leaders in the two schools. They were colleagues I knew well and had worked with over a number of years, so they were supportive and receptive to my wishes to spend time talking to parents of children in their stage. They were also keen to learn of the general outcomes of my study and how this could influence the development of their own practice and procedures. I understood how important it was to have their support, as they were the people who held key information and would be instrumental in facilitating my meeting with parents in the main part of my study. At all times during this stage and throughout the course of the interviewing programme, I was mindful of Wellington's words –

'anyone doing educational research needs to be tactful, persistent, polite, socially-skilled and in possession of a resilient sense of humour.'
(1996, p68)

I was unsure as to the size of sample which would be considered large enough to be sufficient and significant in my project. I asked advice from my supervisor, who suggested that 20-25 parents would be a realistic number, based on my particular circumstances, and I acted upon her recommendation.

The Pilot Interview

In order to pilot my interview schedule to test its effectiveness, I acknowledge that interviewing is a skill and requires practice, I rejected the advice of Berg (1989, p40) who recommends enlisting the help of a friend or colleague to role play the interview. Instead, I decided to use a neighbour, who I knew to have children in the Foundation Stage age group. Although I knew this person only slightly, I knew her to be an articulate and forthright person who I felt would not only be able to answer the interview questions, but also be honest with me and critical in the effectiveness of the whole process. I hoped this informal and conversational approach may also highlight areas, where I may need to add further areas of discussion. It would also show which questions if any were unclear, ambiguous or produced irrelevant information. But my greatest concern was that I felt it would highlight shortcomings in my own performance as an interviewer.

I approached the neighbour, explaining my situation and she willingly agreed to my request, so together we fixed a mutually convenient time. The interview was conducted in the interviewee's home as she preferred to meet there where her youngest child could play in his own environment. There were a number of distractions, including several telephone calls, which made for a disjointed interview and conversation afterwards. This lasted for more than one hour in total. The interview was recorded on a tape recorder having gained consent from the interviewee. The interviewee answered all the questions I asked at length and I obtained all the information I had set out to collect. Both of us agreed that the time had passed very quickly and she had enjoyed talking about her two Foundation Stage boys. Perhaps, inevitably, issues came up of a personal and critical nature in relation to the children's school and school staff, and

comparisons made. Consequently, I tried to move back into general areas of discussion when it was possible to do so. This was an area I needed to be wary of in future interviews and to stress that we were talking generally and hypothetically. While I welcomed their views based on specific and personal experience, I was unwilling for parents to actually name names, especially when speaking critically of their children's practitioners.

In an effort to refine and develop my interview technique I listened to the recording of my pilot interview several times and tried to gain some understanding of the issues around and behind the answers given, as opposed to the answers themselves. The interviewee said she felt I had been very supportive of her viewpoint but this caused me to wonder about the type of message I had given her. Maybe I had given the impression of holding similar views or agreeing with her views by nodding and making noises of approval. In spite of Oakley's view that good interviews are dependant upon

'the researcher being willing to share personal information with their informants as opposed to just asking questions of them' (in Sikes, 2004, p20),

I rejected this notion, and felt in future interviews I would actively try not to influence the responses through including my own views or experiences, nor change the shape of the interview in any way. For reasons of time taken for each interview, I would make an effort to talk less - something I knew I would find difficult as this contrasted markedly with my usual role in working with parents, where I give information and advice about Early Years education and how parents can support their children's learning. In spite of these efforts, however, I was not so naïve as to think that I would have no influence on the type of answers I would receive from the interviewees.

Modifications after pilot interview

One of the main things I gained from conducting my pilot interview was in removing any feelings of guilt or doubt that the parents were 'doing me a favour' in giving up their time in coming to talk to me about their children. I felt satisfied that I was not ...

'asking people things I wouldn't want to be asked' (Sikes, 2003, p20)

As a parent of children, although somewhat older than those in the Foundation Stage, I should have known that parents love to talk at length about their children and the many issues surrounding their development and education. It also confirmed for me that I had made the correct choice of individual rather than group interviews.

Following the pilot interview in the interviewee's home, I felt that the most appropriate place to conduct future interviews would be in a neutral place - not my home or theirs, preferably a quiet room in the school or nursery, which would be familiar and comfortable, yet where there would be the minimum of distractions. I also realised it would be wise to provide books or quiet toys to occupy any accompanying small children, in order to enable the interviews to proceed with the minimum of interruptions.

The format of the interview and the questions themselves seemed to give me the type of answers I was hoping for. I felt I had no need to take out any questions I had used, but I needed to rephrase the question concerning the methods by which young children learn, without making it leading. I also decided to add an extra question related to parents' long term expectations and aspirations for their children, as my pilot interview had unexpectedly moved into this area. I

felt the information this question would produce could be useful in how it related to short term expectations.

In order to try out my amended version of the interview schedule, I enlisted the help of a work colleague who had children but older than the Foundation Stage. I knew that some of the questions would be irrelevant or that she would be unable to answer but I felt it would be worthwhile to conduct a further pilot and discuss the questions and other issues around the interview with a known person before embarking on the main interview programme. This gave me the reassurance I needed to go forward without further amendments. (see appendix for amended version of interview schedule used in main study)

In preparation for the main body of interviews, I acquired a mini hand-held tape recorder and a supply of spare cassette tapes. I felt the size of the tiny tape recorder made it unobtrusive in use in the interview situation and also easier for me to carry around than the large domestic version I had used previously in the pilot.

Planning the Main Study

In preparation for the main part of the study, I visited the Foundation Stage Leader in one school, and the Foundation 1 Leader and Foundation 2 Leader in the second school in the spring of 2003. I was heavily reliant on their support to enable me to access parents, who matched my criteria of having children in SCE education in the Foundation Stage age group. I explained to them in detail that I wished to interview parents of approximately 20 children in the Foundation Stage. I had few doubts as to gaining enough willing interviewees as West et al's study on parental involvement found that

'parents, in general, are interested in their children's education and, in particular, with the progress made by their own child.' (1998, p463)

In an attempt to interview some kind of 'representative sample', if such a thing exists, there were other practicalities and constraints which dictated the parents selected. In reality, we were aware that the choice of parents I approached was dependant on who would be available and willing to speak with me - i.e a convenience sample.

My ideal 'representative' sample was parents of boys and girls in equal numbers, and also equal numbers across the two years of the Foundation Stage and the two schools. We discussed at some length the most appropriate and practical way in which to select parents as potential interviewees. We already knew that the time of day when parents were most likely to have time available was in the mornings during military working hours. We agreed that the parents, largely mothers, who would be willing to give their time to speak to me, were those who did not work during the mornings, or perhaps, worked on a part-time basis. At first, it worried me that the sample would be largely mothers but I was reassured by West et al's (1998) findings in their study of parental involvement that

'in school activities such as open evenings to discuss the child's work, we found the mother was almost always involved.' (p481)

As few mothers in the community of my study are employed (as outlined in Chapter 3) and fathers often spend long periods of time serving away from the family home, I felt that mothers taking major responsibility for their children's education was probably the general pattern in both Akrotiri and Episkopi. On choosing the sample I did not take into account whether the MOD-employed parent was in the Army, RAF or a civilian and the position or rank held within these organisations.

Consequently, days which were mutually convenient according to my work schedule and to the programme of the school or nursery were identified and entered in our diaries. Parents, all mothers with the exception of one father, were identified according to whether they worked during the mornings. An even mix of parents of boys and girls, and Foundation Stage 1 and 2 across the two schools were targeted. Together we planned a timetable meeting parents at half hour intervals during the morning. Where possible, we tried to make it convenient for parents by scheduling interview times to coincide with the start and finish of school or nursery, when they would be leaving or collecting children, and thus reducing the number of journeys to and from school a parent would need to make. Anticipating that not all parents would reply or agree to meet me for an interview, we decided to send out 30 letters in the hope that at least 20 would provide a successful response. We also drew up a reserve list in case it was necessary to send out a second batch of letters, in the event of a poor response.

I drafted a letter to parents, addressing the letter to both parents in the hope that some fathers would be willing and available to meet with me. I heeded Bell's advice on writing well in advance, and in considering ethical issues by being open and honest about exactly what I was trying to find out. (1999, p23) I explained in brief and simple terms what I was trying to do and asking if they would be willing to meet with me to talk about their child(ren). I considered whether my role within SCE and the official nature of my letter could influence their response in terms of agreement to meet me and in turn, the types of answers parents may give me at interview. However, I decided that I would send letters written on SCE headed notepaper, but I did not mention my role as Advisory Teacher for Early Years Education; neither did I say that I had gained the permission of the respective headteacher, although I felt this was implied as the letters were

distributed from the setting or school via their children, ie through official channels, rather than being distributed by post or by some other means.

I allocated a date and time and included a tear off return slip so that they could indicate whether they would be able to come on the stated day. The slips were returned to me via the school or nursery. From the 29 letters sent, most parents accepted the interview appointment, two were willing to meet with me but the date I had suggested was inconvenient, and four failed to reply.

In each school or nursery, we also identified an appropriate place to meet. A small quiet room, with comfortable chairs, away from children and without a telephone, was allocated. In all but one situation, a quiet room was possible but in one nursery due to their lack of space, a corner of the hall was all that was available. I noted Carey's belief that 'coffee and cookies' help to smooth the process (1994, in Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p74), but adapted this to the provision of cool drinks, taking into account the summer climate of Cyprus in June and July.

Conducting the Main Study

I was disappointed that several parents failed to attend their scheduled interviews, in spite of returning their acceptance slip. I considered contacting these parents but decided against it. I felt a telephone call could be perceived as harassment and parents were under no obligation to give me their time. The consequence of this was that I needed to allocate further days and schedule an additional group of parents in order to obtain my desired number of interviews. However, this altered the balance of my 'representative' sample I had hoped for. In two instances, mothers brought along husbands who chanced to be not working

that day or were working shifts. This was an unexpected yet welcome factor which I feel enhanced the data collected.

The sample of parents interviewed was as shown in the Figure 4 below. As advised by Sikes (2004), names were changed and pseudonyms used to maintain anonymity.

Analysis of parents interviewed

Mothers 20 Fathers 3

Episkopi 6 Akrotiri 15

Army 3 RAF 13 Civilian 5

Parents of

Boys 13 Girls 9

Parents of children in

F1 11 F2 11

Figure 4 - Parent interviews conducted - Spring\Summer 2003

Name	Mother Father	F1\2	Child M\F	Akrotiri Episkopi School Nursery Preschool	Army RAF Civilian	Comment
Mrs Nelson	Mo	F1&2	2M	<u>Akr</u>	R	Pilot 1
Mrs Davis	Mo	N/A	N/A	Epi	C	Pilot 2
Mrs Campbell	Mo	F2	F	Akr Sc	R	
Mrs Deakin	Mo	F2	F	Akr Sc	R	
Mr & Mrs Croft	Mo	F1&2	M\F	Akr Sc	R	
Mrs Dean	Mo	F2	M	Akr Sc	R	
Mrs Diss	Mo	F2	M	Akr Sc	R	
Mrs Hurst	Mo	F2	M	Akr Sc	R	
Mrs Danvers	Mo	F2	M	Akr Sc	R	
Mr & Mrs Hill	M&F	F2	M	Akr Sc	R	
Mrs Jones	Mo	F2	M	Akr Sc	A	
Mrs Fox	Mo	F2	M	Akr Sc	A	
Mr Jacks	Fa	F1	M	Akr Pre	C	
Mrs Pollard	Mo	F1	F	Akr Pre	R	
Mrs Twist	Mo	F1	F	Akr Pre	A	
Mrs Hardy	Mo	F1	F	Epi Nu	C	
Mr & Mrs Baynes	M&F	F1	M	Epi Nu	R	
Mrs Brady	Mo	F1	M	Epi Nu	R	
Mrs Carver	Mo	F1	F	Epi Nu	C	
Mrs Smith	Mo	F1	F	Akr Pre	R	
Mrs Stone	Mo	F1	F	Epi Nu	C	

Before the first interview, I reminded myself of Wellington's eight rules to follow in respect of ethical considerations. (2000, p57) At the beginning of each interview, I welcomed the parent(s) and thanked them for giving up their time to speak to me. I reiterated and expanded on the information I had given them on the initial letter I had sent. I explained that my reason for speaking to them and other parents was to get a general view of what parents want for their children in the Foundation Stage and that they were contributing to the 'big picture'. I tried to be honest in explaining that the general findings could possibly help them and their children's education but were more likely to effect changes, which would help future parents and children moving through our education system. I assured them that anything they said would be treated confidentially and whilst I may use quotes in my thesis, they would not be named, nor would quotes be attributed to them personally. I asked their permission to record the conversation on audio tape, explaining my reasons why, and assured them that no-one else would hear it. All parents agreed to the use of the tape recorder, which I placed on a low table between me and the interviewee, sitting in a face-to-face position in comfortable armchairs. At the conclusion of the interview, I thanked parents for their help. Many commented how much they had enjoyed talking to me.

The amount of time allocated proved adequate for all interviews, which lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. In a few cases I had to rephrase questions or add supplementary questions, when parents were unsure of my meaning or if I needed to get them back on track. In one instance, a parent had real difficulty in answering even when I had phrased questions as simply as I could. I decided to cut this interview short as the parent was feeling uncomfortable and I was too. In addition to answering my questions, some other issues were raised by the interviewee. While I could have cut the interviews short, I believed it would be unwise to curtail these digressions, as the interviewees felt these points to be of

interest and relevance. The most common of these digressions, were the comparisons parents made between their older child(ren) and their younger Foundation Stage children, and how things were changing in the light of recent educational development and their own developing parental skills. Many made comparisons between the different types of early years provision they had experience of in the diverse places they had lived in different parts of the UK and abroad. However, there were points raised, which were not of direct relevance to my research but could of use to me in my future work in schools as an Advisory Teacher.

Inevitably, I suppose, several parents brought along babies and toddlers - the younger siblings of the children in the Foundation Stage. In some cases, these children caused distractions. Some mothers came prepared, with toys and drinks to keep their young ones occupied. As planned, I also had a range of toys and others distractions available should they be needed, but I was ever mindful of the fact that young children's concentration is still very limited.

The nursery, in which we had to use the hall to conduct interviews, was far from satisfactory and background noise made the tape recording indistinct and difficult to transcribe. There is the added possibility that the distractions may have had an effect on the length and quality of the responses of parents.

In spite of the words of warning given by Wellington (1996, p34) I was surprised at the amount of time I needed to spend in transcribing my taped interviews. However, the constant listening and re-listening to the points parents made helped me to hear things which I had not heard in the original interview.

Analysis methods & considerations

The analysis of my data started earlier than I had planned - in fact even before I had started to really consider how I would attempt the task. I was aware of Berg's (1989, p42) warning that analysing data is the most difficult and time consuming part of any qualitative research project, as qualitative data does not fit so neatly into rigid and specific categories as quantitative data; and similarly, Wellington's view that analysing data requires the researcher

'to be painstaking, thorough, systematic and meticulous.' (2000. p147)

Consequently, I delayed giving any real thought to how I would tackle the task.

In listening to the taped interviews over and over in the process of transcribing, the significant issues slowly began to emerge as common or similar responses were heard. The more interviews I listened to and transcribed, the more I became aware of what the issues were.

I jotted down notes as I went along and identified possible passages to quote. After working through a number of transcriptions, I decided the best option for me in terms of time, would be to start back at the beginning with the first script and using a number of different coloured highlighter pens, identify the same issue in each script and highlight it in the same colour. At the same time as making further notes, I marked on the transcriptions which would be the most interesting quotes to use to exemplify viewpoints, when writing the analysis. In fact, what I found was in line with Roizen and Jepson's view that

'Each transcription is a single opinion or perception which gains weight from its consistency with other pieces of evidence.' (1985, p11, in Wellington 1996, p34)

This process also served to reassure me that the size of the sample of parents I had interviewed was probably sufficient for the purpose. For as recurring themes

and patterns emerged, I believed that conducting further interviews would be unlikely to produce large amounts of significant data, or as Wellington explains –

‘the researcher knows that future data collection will be subject to the law of diminishing returns.’ (2000, p138)

I had inadvertently started on my ‘data reduction’ - the first step of the three step process of data analysis as advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994) I next needed to proceed to ‘data display’ whereby data are organised and assembled, and finally, move to ‘conclusion drawing’ through interpreting the data and extrapolating the implications. (in Wellington, 2000, p134)

Before starting out, I had no pre-established categories for my data. However I understand that the questions I composed and asked the interviewees were a major factor in determining which categories would emerge, but at the outset I had no way of knowing which issues would be the most significant.

I am aware that my interpretation of data is exactly that - my interpretation - and that another researcher would bring their own influences to bear on it. This means that other researchers would identify different issues as significant and use different quotes from interviewees to illustrate these. I have detailed factors which have formed my own positionality in Chapters 1 and 3.

After the interviews had taken place and significant issues were starting to emerge as I transcribed, I wondered what my next step would be. After seeking advice, I decided to interview practitioners to see to what extent their perceptions matched those of parents. This would give another perspective on the issues raised with parents and also provide a degree of triangulation, as Cohen and Mannion (1994, p233) put it - triangular techniques

'map out, explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint.' (in Wellington, 1996, p18)

On reading Sikes' opinion that group interviews can be a

'stimulating experience, helping people to explore and clarify their thinking, aiding memory and recall and reaffirming shared social experiences'. (2004 p13)

I considered this as an option, although it was not something I had tried before. I decided in favour of conducting group interviews, firstly because of the time involved - I had already discovered how time-consuming interviewing individuals and transcribing could be - and secondly, I knew that as early years practitioners share a common language and understandings, they would be less likely to feel uncomfortable or at a disadvantage, I considered Wellington's advice on group composition –

'the maverick voice or the long monologue; dominant individuals who may monopolize the interview' (2000, p81)

but all the interviewees knew each other well and would feel confident in speaking within the group and with me. Once again I intended to audio record the interview for later transcription.

I amended my plan for time and logistical reasons and decided to conduct one group interview with only the three FS Leaders. I felt the composition of the group of three – being Leaders of FS1 and FS2 in one school and the whole FS in the second – was a good balanced combination, which provided different perspectives; one giving an overview of the whole stage, while the others focussed on their own year. Also the current FS2 Leader had experience of working in a management role in both settings as she had recently spent 6 months as FS1 leader due to a maternity leave. I proposed a time and date, even offering to buy lunch following a training morning. I next needed to consider the structure and the questions, or to choose points for discussion, as I viewed them. I

pondered on whether to ask most of the same questions as I had asked the parents or whether to reveal what the trend of parents' responses had been and ask their views in relation to those. I decided to read the questions out one by one and ask for their opinion as to the general response I received from the parents. Following this, I would tell them the general response and then I anticipated a discussion would result. My main concern was the length of time this could take were I not to manage it effectively. I knew my colleagues could easily discuss a single point at great length. I also knew I must be sensitive in the language I used in putting across any responses which could be perceived as negative or critical of individuals, schools or settings.

Although the group interview with teachers was to take place some time after the parent interviews and this cohort of parents would have moved on, this factor did not worry me too much as I was interested in the group perception and I felt this was unlikely to differ greatly from one cohort to that of the following year. Also I knew the views of the teachers, who had all been in their current posts for three or more years, would have been built up over several years experience in Cyprus and would not be confined to the current year.

The group interview took place as a relaxed and informal, social occasion. The questions were worked through one by one, as planned. The audio recording was later transcribed. I then set this alongside the parent interview transcriptions, comparing and contrasting responses. For ease of analysis purposes, I again used highlighter pens, choosing the same colour for the same issue with both parents and practitioners, for easy visual identification. I then laid all the scripts out in lines across the floor, so they could all be viewed at the same time. I worked systematically through the scripts, from beginning to end, dealing with the issues largely in chronological order, which corresponded to the order in

which I had asked questions. However, as there were too many issues to deal with in detail, I chose to focus on those which I felt were the most significant.

In conclusion, the process I described in this chapter enabled me to arrive at a position of having a bank of data, analysed in such a way that I was then able to go forward to draw out the main issues and implications. The following chapters, 5 and 6, detail the findings and the implications of the research project.

Chapter 5 - Findings and analysis

The findings in this study are based on data collected from twenty two interviews. During the course of the series of interviews with the parents of twenty three children, a large amount of information was obtained in relation to their views and beliefs, based on their experiences and expectations of the Foundation Stage. Subsequently, a group interview was conducted with Foundation Stage teachers in the schools and settings attended by the children of the parents interviewed. Views and comments on the same issues by the two groups serve to support each other to a greater or lesser extent, providing a degree of triangulation. (Wellington, 2000, p24)

The issues, which emerged from the data collected, are largely directly related to the questions posed.

These are:-

1. Parents' knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage
2. Parental expectations for children in the Foundation Stage
3. Gender issues
4. Teaching and Learning methods
5. Parent/practitioner relationships
6. Practitioner qualifications
7. Parental involvement
8. Further involvement
9. Long term aspirations

These are described and analysed in some detail below.

1. Knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage

In order to gain an insight into the position from which parents were basing their opinions and responses, the first area explored with parents was the depth of parents' knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage as a

stage of education. This took into account the fact that all parents had at least one child attending a Foundation Stage setting, and had taken up their entitlement to funded provision for children from the term following their third birthday, even though the children were below statutory school age.

The parents interviewed were found to have widely varying knowledge and understanding of the term Foundation Stage. All parents had heard of the term 'Foundation Stage' and all expressed some views or opinions on the Foundation Stage as a stage in their child's education.

'It's a new concept, a new name.' (Mrs Smith)

'Foundation is from age 3 to about 5 or 6.' (Mrs Nelson)

'They've changed the name from reception to Foundation because they've then included the nursery start.' (Mrs Dean)

Perhaps, not surprisingly, as the word 'foundation' suggests, five parents chose to make the analogy to building, by using such terms as ground, structure, start, and basis.

'My perception of it is that it's laying a good ground rooting for the children going through school. It's giving them a structured education through play..... For me, it's giving them a good foundation for the rest of their school years.' (Mrs Nelson)

'It's the early stage of school. Giving them a sound grounding for their future years when they get older, basically teaching them the basics and social skills.' (Mrs Hurst)

'Building blocks for future developmentally...The way I see it, it's the base knowledge you need to be able to progress' (Mrs Hill)

'It's the first steps in their education with learning through play not pushing them academically: to get their social skills, just to get them free and easy with other children.' (Mrs Brady)

'Foundation for me is the beginning. The foundations are what you lay for them....it's structured learning to integrate them into the education system but foundation as a rule starts at the very beginning.'(Mrs Carver)

Six parents extended this view to the purpose of the Foundation Stage being a preparation for later schooling.

'Sort of an introduction to big school where it lays the basic foundations.'
(Mrs Danvers)

'I feel it's getting them ready to go to big school – getting them used to having a teacher who'll tell them.....not what to do as such, but instruct them, getting them ready for school.' (Mrs Baynes)

'It's the basic foundations of what they're going to start to learn for real in Year 1.' (Mrs Smith)

Three parents were less secure in their responses, using words such as 'presume' and 'assume', but still holding a similar view.

'I presume it's like a reception year before they actually go to school so they're actually preparing them in my eyes to read and write their name, recognise the first 10 numbers, and that sort of thing to prepare them for going into school.' (Mrs Twist)

'I'm assuming it's just the first and second years of schooling. I'm assuming.....the pre-school is included in the Foundation Stage which is the term after their third birthday – it's the year at the pre-school and then the first year of school. (Mrs Fox)

Three parents admitted to finding it 'very confusing' (Mrs Campbell) and felt that the system was different to what they had previously experienced.

'I don't know if they have it in UK.' (Mrs Croft)

Two parents were very unsure but had drawn their own conclusions based on their often limited experience.

'I don't really know. We've been here three months and I presume it's like a reception year before they actually go to school.' (Mrs Twist)

'It's for younger children moving into school.' (Mrs Hardy)

Four others had a clearer, more accurate understanding.

'They've changed the name from reception to foundation because they've then included the nursery start. So starting early rather than keeping nursery and schooling separate. I think it's good because it's been brought together.' (Mrs Dean)

'The pre-school and then the first time they move up into school in Foundation 2 – reception as it used to be.' (Mr Jacks)

Five parents showed they were aware of the age range provided for by the Foundation Stage.

'For children 3 to 5, I think.' (Mrs Stone)

'It's between 3 and a half to 5 depending on when their birthday is.' (Mrs Baynes)

Five parents held a range of differing views, none of which were accurate -

'I personally think foundation begins 2 years 9 months.' (Mrs Carver)

'Foundation Stage is from age 3 to 5 before they start pushing them.' (Mrs Brady)

'I just presumed that Foundation 1 and 2 is what I knew as reception but since they changed the rules and they take them from an early age.' (Mrs Pollard)

'It's for age 3 up' (Mrs Hill)

'It's for 4 to fives.' (Mrs Hurst)

'It's the year before they start Year 1.' (Mrs Croft)

As described above, it was found that parents' depth of knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage varied widely from merely having heard the term 'Foundation Stage' in relation to their child and stage of education, to an in-depth knowledge of the stage.

Teachers' experiences through conversations with parents served to confirm the wide range and depth of parents' knowledge about the FS. Not surprisingly, parents who have recently arrived from outside of SCE were less confident in the use of the correct terminology. This includes the use of the terms 'Foundation 1 and 2', in place of 'nursery' and 'reception', which is generally used in England. Modelling the use of the correct terminology by practitioners takes place in both FSs on a daily basis and serves to help parents become familiar with it and in turn use it correctly themselves. One FS Leader felt that while many use the terminology of the FS, FS1 parents view it as a curriculum rather than a stage

of education. She also felt that in spite of using the FS1 and FS2 terminology correctly, parents still do not see FS1 and FS2 as part of the same stage of education. The FS2 leader felt that parents of children, who have already been through FS1, not surprisingly used the terminology more confidently and had a greater understanding of the stage as a whole, compared with parents who had arrived when their children were in FS2.

Parents were next questioned as to where they had acquired the information or formed their views as to the function and structure of the Foundation Stage. Responses were mixed but the majority were complimentary in terms of the information provided for them by SCE schools.

'The information you get from school and pre-school is very, very good. You're updated and there's bonding going on with the parents and teachers.' (Mrs Nelson)

'Just got the info from school really.' (Mrs Hurst)

'I went to one of the parents' evenings and that told me quite a bit about it and they gave us things.' (Mr Hill)

'Information was sent through before we came.' (Mrs Twist)

'We had a prospectus from the school.' (Mrs Brady)

Six parents implied they had no knowledge before moving with their families from a variety of locations, and their current understanding had been obtained and accumulated since their arrival in Cyprus.

'Learned it here – never heard of it before that.' (Mrs Campbell)

'...didn't used to until I came here. Now I understand it.' (Mrs Croft)

'Not from UK.' (Mrs Dean)

Five parents talked about the value and usefulness of the verbal information and conversations with practitioners in developing and extending their knowledge and understanding. Many were appreciative of the time and effort spent with them by

the practitioners in the schools and nursery settings, recognising the value of learning about the Foundation Stage through meetings of different kinds.

'Basically, it's when we go in to speak to the teachers about how they're doing. We did have a few leaflets before they started but I learned from talking to the teachers.' (Mrs Diss)

'It's meeting with the keyworkers and they explain to us exactly what J's been doing. So basically, it's the people working here who've given us the information. More verbally than notes and bits and pieces.' (Mrs Smith)

In sum, the majority of parents largely received written information on the Foundation Stage from the school or setting, before or after arrival in Cyprus. This had been accumulated over time and proved useful and relevant to parents. However, parents found the verbal information given and discussions on a one-to-one basis in relation to their own child had been very useful in extending their knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage. This view was born out by the FS1 leader who felt that apart from the initial information received before or on arrival, the amount and depth of further information received by parents was largely due to the quality of the relationship built up with practitioners in the FS1 setting and the daily contact at the beginning and end of a session.

All FS Leaders confirmed that a large amount of written information is given to parents both before and during the child's time in the FS. This includes a welcome booklet, outlining the factual information around the running of the setting or school, on-going regular newsletters, which incorporates notice of events, the current topic to cover the curriculum and ideas for parents to support their children's learning at home. They felt that most parents valued the one-to-one time set aside for individual meetings with their child's teacher or keyworker. It was rare for a parent not to attend, and in many cases both parents attended,

even though these meetings are usually scheduled in military working hours. This was in marked contrast to the findings in West et al's study that

'mothers were more likely to attend parents' evenings than fathers.'
(1998. p481)

The FS2 Leader explained that a high priority was placed on and considerable effort made to supply parents with wide-ranging information, in marked contrast to the teacher of her own child higher up the school in KS2.

'As a parent of S (Year 4) I receive no information about what is happening in school. I know very little and I work there. I want to know more.'

In conclusion, there was considerable disparity in parents' knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage – an indication that there is still some way to go before parents recognise the Foundation Stage as a stage of education in its own right...

'For the first time it gives this very important stage of education a distinct identity. '(QCA, 2000, p3)

and are familiar with its underlying principles and curriculum as detailed in the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage.

2. Parental expectations for their children in the Foundation Stage

All parents of children in FS1 responded to an enquiry into what they felt were the most important things they wanted for their children at this stage of their education. There is an acceptance, on asking this question, that all parents want 'the best' for their children but also 'they may not agree on what 'the best' is.' (OECD, 1997, p16) In all cases, parents of children in the Foundation 1 year gave priority to the development of social skills in some form. This view reflects the responses of parents in Kernan and Hayes' study who

'selected social skills with peers as the most important skill for young children to learn.' (1999, p33)

There was also, I felt, an implied recognition that the world their children live in now and will encounter later as adults, requires an increasingly high level of interaction with others in a group, and social skills for personal happiness, as well as educational and professional success.

'I think....is that they are taught...with a group of other children. (Mrs Baynes)

Two parents gave the reason for this priority as their lack of opportunity for mixing with other children when they were a similar age, perhaps due to sparse provision of nursery education in many areas of the UK two or three decades ago.

'I was painfully shy as a child and I suppose if I was in something like this, it would have brought me out a lot earlier.' (Mrs Baynes)

Parents held a range of views as to the type of social skills they felt were important for their children. These ranged from mixing with other children and communicating, to sharing and taking turns. Two parents recognised and thus felt one of the main reasons for wanting their child to attend the non-statutory setting was that something was offered that the child didn't have at home.

'I think it's communication with other children, social skills and learning to share and get on with other children. That's what she gets here that I can't offer her at home.' (Mrs Stone)

While, in contrast, another parent saw the setting mirroring and re-enforcing what the parents and child did at home.

'For the 3 year old at the moment I'd like him to learn social interaction.....where he has to learn to sit down, takes turns and all the stuff we do at home.' (Mrs Nelson)

One father felt his greatest priority for his son at this time was increased independence, and attendance in the Foundation Stage setting could offer opportunities for development in this area.

'...the chance to choose his own activities and learn what he wants to do and perhaps what he doesn't want to do.' (Mr Jacks)

Enjoyment was mentioned by four parents

'To enjoy himself, learning with other children.' (Mr Jacks)

Three parents valued happiness as her first priority for their children.

'I just want him not be happy in himself. Basically, just be happy and not feel anything's a chore for him.' (Mrs Brady)

'I want him to be happy and I want him to feel secure...unless they're happy and secure they'll never learn.' (Mrs Carver)

'To be happy and comfortable in her environment really.' (Mrs Smith)

Confidence was seen as the priority for two parents.

'...to be confident, to mix more. She's more confident than when she started but the more confident she gets at this age, I think that's the most important thing.....confidence is most important' (Mrs Pollard)

'She's a shy girl. I want her to come out a bit more. She sits in the class and she's very quiet.' (Mrs Hardy)

Only two parents of Foundation 1 children spoke of academic learning as being important for their child at this time.

'I have great expectations of H. I expect.....to be able to write her name...and she'll recognise the letters of the alphabet.' (Mrs Twist)

'I think it's making a start on letters and words and counting. It's not too much reading, not getting used to the letters and the ABC' (Mrs Baynes)

The priority given to social skills was also the opinion of the FS1 and FS leader, based on comments and observations of parents with children in FS1 over time. They were of the opinion that within this broad area parents wanted their children to get along with others and be happy. The FS1 Leader said

'I think they want them to become independent and they are concerned they learn to behave with others.'

She also was of the opinion that 'they are interested in developing some of the early reading and writing skills.' This was not generally borne out by the group of parents interviewed, but perhaps the parents more concerned with early

reading and writing had specifically expressed their thoughts and beliefs to teachers, but not to me for some reason.

Two parents interviewed each had two children in the Foundation Stage – one in Foundation 1 and one in Foundation 2. This provided an interesting perspective and they were in a position to be able to compare and contrast, speaking from real and current experience of what they perceived as their expectations and priorities for their children in each of the two Foundation Stage years. However, both parents said their priorities were the same for both their children: these being related to social skills and attitudes towards learning rather than specific learning or attaining goals.

'..to interact with other children, learn how to share and get on with people ready for moving up to year 1.' (Mrs Croft)

' ...main thing would be self confidence and enjoyment and ready to go on to the next stage with excitement as opposed to anticipation that this isn't good and I don't enjoy it. (Mrs Nelson)

The FS2 Leader's perception that the general message she had received from parents of FS2 children was that the focus of priority still stayed firmly on the development of social skills as in the previous year(FS1)

'Most parents still want social skills as a priority – the same as in FS1. They want social skills and children to be happy.'

This did not reflect the overall opinions of parents who fell into two distinct groups. One group had contrasting expectations and priorities to the child's previous year in FS1, perhaps conveying the message that they feel there is a distinct difference between the two Foundation years, rather than a gradual change in FS2, with parents holding the view that this is where the real academic work begins. This view is in accordance with the Times article of 1995

'the reception class can begin the proper process of education.' (p17)

Perhaps, this view should be expected, as there are many factors which could influence parents' thinking and one or a combination of the following factors could account for them holding this view. Foundation 2 or Reception, was where schooling started for them many years ago, is where education becomes compulsory and full-time, is located in the main school building, and children are taught by qualified teachers as opposed to keyworkers. This viewpoint represents a shift from Bennett's 1987 findings of a high percentage of parents prioritising progress in reading, writing and arithmetic for 4 year olds, towards Hughes at al's (1994) findings that parents ranked the quality of staff and the ethos of the school over academic results. (Anning, 1997 p50-51)

Six parents' comments were related much more towards academic progress, achievement and accumulated knowledge. Some parents conveyed the message that they are keen for their children to be moved towards making rapid progress, especially in the traditional 3Rs and get in early to get ahead. One mother expressed her satisfaction at the specific achievement of her son and that he was already 'ahead' -

'J is doing really well as he's already moving on to Year 1 cards and words.' (Mrs Croft)

'I want him to be challenged' (Mrs Hurst)

'At this age, early intervention with children, I always feel pays dividends. Because they've got such a thirst for knowledge, if you get in early when they're keen to learn, it's so much easier and pays dividends in the long run.'(Mrs Nelson)

Three parents felt the school had changed the focus towards more academic learning and progress in the 3Rs, at the expense of the informal, socially-based approach of Foundation Stage 1. Some parents were concerned that their children were being moved into a more formal and structured stage of education too soon for their young age.

'It's quite regimented on some ways. I'd like him to have a bit more of being a child. When it's decision making, he's in the sand first....I think sometimes it's quite structured but they are just little at the end of the day. I suppose it's finding the happy medium where they can.' (Mrs Diss)

In contrast to his Foundation 1 year –

'There was more play and it has been a bit of a culture shock.' (Mrs Diss)

Five parents of Foundation Stage 2 children still saw their priority as issues related to social and emotional development, such as enjoyment and motivation to learn rather than specific learning and academic progress.

'More than anything I want him to enjoy it.' (Mrs Danvers)

'No specific goals educationally, just that he wants to come to school, he's happy being there, he behaves and he's in a class of children.' (Mrs Fox)

'I think the most important thing is to make him feel secure and happy, want to be there, want to learn, make it fun, regardless of what it is they're learning.' (Mrs Dean)

In contrast, one parent of a Foundation 1 child was looking for more structure in Foundation 2, perhaps in preparation for the move towards what children will experience in Year 1.

'I guess there needs to be a little bit more structure. I think it needs to be gradually phased inso that they get used to having certain session for different subjects.' (Mr Jacks)

While another mother voiced concerns as to her child's forthcoming year in FS2

'I think sometimes we push them too hard too early. I want to be happy about going to school. I don't want him to be upset anyway or feel pressured into doing things'. (Mrs Brady)

As detailed above, parents have contrasting expectations for their children in the two parts of the Foundation Stage, and also within the second year of the stage in particular. This serves as a further indication that parents do not view the two parts of the Foundation Stage as one seamless phase of education

for their children, and that perhaps it does not operate as one discrete phase with common priorities and practice.

3. Gender Issues

Parents were asked about their expectations or wishes regarding any differences in provision if their child was a boy instead of a girl or vice versa. Parents were unanimous in their responses, all wanting the same thing for their children regardless of gender. Here, it must be noted that the parents interviewed were all mothers with the exception of three fathers. One parents had very clear feelings on this issue –

‘I can’t imagine anyone not wanting the same in this day and age.’ (Mrs Davis)

Two parents qualified their initial response with additional comments, giving examples of what the issue meant to them...

‘Boys can play with dolls; girls can play with cars.’ (Mrs Dean)

However, Mrs Hurst’s comment ‘At this age I think they’re equal’ perhaps implied that this situation would change as children grew older and they may prefer different things for boys and girls later. One parent added a contradictory statement

‘We would sit down with a boy and do exactly the same. He wouldn’t obviously go to ballet lessons; he’d go to football lessons or something like that’. (Mrs Twist)

Five parents acknowledged that boys and girls are different and generally display different characteristics and prefer different learning styles – boys preferring a more active learning style than girls. Two parents commented that, in educational terms, the gender of the child was unimportant but children should be seen and treated as individuals.

'I think each child should be taken differently, otherwise you're going to push a child into something which they're not ready for'. (Mrs Campbell)

'Gender doesn't come into it, I don't think'. (Mrs Nelson)

In response to a further question on gender issues, parents, largely mothers, interviewed were unanimous in saying they would want the same thing for their child should it have been the opposite gender. They cited specific examples of what this issue meant for them at this time. However, the majority acknowledged that all children are different regardless of gender, their preferred learning styles may differ and these factors should be taken into account.

'I'd still want a girl to get on at school as well as she possibly could. I think it's harder for a boy in some respects. You put more pressure on them when they're little, to be tough. Whereas girls can get away with sitting on Mum's lap for much longer, can't they?' (Mrs Fox)

All FS Leaders confirmed that there had been little evidence to suggest that parents wanted different things for girls and boys. However, one FS1 Leader recounted a potentially difficult situation which she had overcome.

'We were about to start on a topic about babies. I pre-empted potential problems by explaining that we have to think about children's future and most boys will become fathers. All the children chose a doll to take home to look after. Not one of the boys didn't want to take one home. The parents really enjoyed it and all the comments were positive in the doll's diary. They bathed it, put it to bed and weighed and measured it. Some of the boys cried when they had to give them back. The topic took place in the Autumn term and the outcome was that several boys who didn't have sisters and consequently, dolls in the house, asked for dolls for Christmas and I know a couple of parents who did buy them.'

When asked whether she was surprised or the reason for the parents' positive reaction. She gave her reasons as

'They've built up trust with us over time. They know that we wouldn't give them anything inappropriate.'

Parents were unanimous in their responses to the issue of 'wishes for their children's education' in that they wanted the same provision.

4. Teaching and learning methods

All parents responded to the question regarding the methods by which children learn and are taught during their Foundation Stage years, and all expressed definite views. There were marked differences in the responses made by parents in the two years of the Foundation Stage, perhaps reflecting parents' changing expectations as the Foundation Stage progresses. All parents of FS1 children, with one exception, were unanimous in their mention not only of an informal style of learning being appropriate for children of three or just four years old, but also were full of approval and praise for how this was translated into practice in the Foundation 1 settings. Parents expressed these views in different ways within a common theme.

'They play. From the day they are born, they learn through play and talking'. (Mrs Brady)

'.....here they've got the ability or the opportunity to choose what table they go to with different activities. I think that's important. Decision making is another skill we all have to learn so I'm happy that he's trying different things'. (Mr Jacks)

'There's a lot of play involved which is good for children of this age'. (Mrs Baynes)

'..it's a lot of learning through play and songs and things that sometimes they don't realise they are learning things'. (Mrs Stone)

'They learn by playing and doing practical things. The sitting down comes later'. (Mrs Davis)

'....yesterday he went to the airport. I think getting out and about a bit.....'. (Mrs Diss)

The majority of Foundation Stage 1 parents were full of praise for the setting their children attended and the appropriateness of the teaching and learning methods used - a typical example being -

'...they learn through play...I think it's excellent. I don't think you can underestimate that because I think through play comes the social skills and hopefully he'll gain all that. The social skills and the concentration – they learn all that through play and to share and take turns.' (Mrs Carver)

The perception of the FS1 and FS Leaders on this issue was in line with parents' responses. The FS1 Leader commented that most parents hear and use the term 'learn through play' readily but she was not convinced that all parents believe and understand what it means in practice. However, she was sure that parents want activities and for their children to be 'doing things, 'or as Anning (1997) explains

'Children learn through first-hand experience, particularly through play activities.' (1997, p31)

This also reflects Hughes et al's findings in their 1994 study which reports that parents prefer practical and fun approaches to learning (1994, p100)

One parent gave her priority as children being treated as individuals and being able to work and progress at their own pace. She used the comparison of her own two children and the differences between them to illustrate her viewpoint.

'At three, he went to pre-school. He knew the alphabet. She still doesn't know her alphabet despite the coaxing we try and give her. But that's the different ways children learn. They've just got to learn at their own pace'. (Mrs Smith)

Two parents saw the potential and value in children learning from other children whether from older siblings at home...

'We do a bit at home.....If he wants to do it, when he sees C doing his homework or whatever and he wants to sit down with a bit of paper and copy out his name or draw or whatever, I'm quite happy to do that but I won't pressure him into doing it'. (Mrs Brady)

.....or from peers in the Foundation Stage setting

'....there are some things he wouldn't do three months ago and he comes home and tells me he's doing them. He's seen other people doing it.' (Mr Jacks)

One mother contrasted her own experiences as a child at nursery with those of her daughter

'When I went to nursery school, all I can remember is the climbing frame. It was structured in that there was discipline but there was less to do....whereas here, they're now starting to learn the basic groundwork for them to start school (Mrs Stone)

And two others related to how young their children were -

'They're only children once and when their childhood is gone, it's gone.' (Mrs Carver)

'They're still babies really.' (Mrs Baynes)

Four parents spoke of how learning should be and is made fun for the children in the setting they attended. Another parent commented that as well as fun, she wants a more personalised approach.

'It's got to be fun. It's got to be a little at a time. They've just got to learn at their own pace' (Mrs Smith)

However, in contrast to all other Foundation 1 parents, one mother believed the approach to be too formal.

'I realise they're taught through play but I think it's a bit formal.' (Mrs Pollard)

She made comparisons between what she felt was the higher level of formality in the English system and her knowledge and experiences of Norway, where statutory schooling starts at age six, yet results at the end of the primary stage are similar to those of England.

The FS2 Leader was of the opinion that most parents of FS2 children wanted some play to continue but with more structure, to reflect their developing level of concentration and in preparation for the transfer to Year 1 with the perceived increased demands and expectations of the National Curriculum. This was borne out by some parents' responses, such as

'They need to know that they have to sit down and write' (Mrs Campbell)

While another parent felt that the formality and structure was coming along too soon.

'I mean there's homework. I didn't get homework until was in secondary school, so it's quite a culture shock for me.' (Mrs Hill)

However, a common theme which emerged in the interviews across both years of the Foundation Stage was the need for a balance in the type of methods by which children learn and are taught. This would reflect the practice of the two Foundation years, whereby a 3 hour or 5 hour session generally comprises a structured mix of adult-led, adult-supported and child initiated activities, with children working in large and small groups or as individuals. It also suggests that most parents are satisfied that this balanced approach of free and more structured activities is appropriate for their children at this time in their lives, as expressed by Mrs Croft

'A balance at the moment. They have a bit of both. It seems to work for them. I think it'd be too soon to sit down and totally get rid of all the play activities. They learn while they play anyway.'

Three parents felt variety was essential to keep their interest.

'It should be varied. If they have to sit down at a table too much then it would become boring and they would lose interest. Whereas if there's many different aspects, different things they're doing, I think it keeps it constantly interesting.' (Mrs Dean)

'I think they need variety, that's how you keep their attention.' (Mrs Hurst)

'He seems to do a lot of different things. That's really good and he learns in different ways. I think they have a lot more playing and fun than I imagined him to. I think that's really good. I thought it might be more formal at school, but it doesn't appear to be.' (Mrs Fox)

One parent specified.....

'J. brings home lots of stuff – they do baking, cooking, the computer. I like it. (Mrs Baynes)

Four parents extended this view to include structure along with variety.

'.....but I do think they need to have a structure so that they know what they are doing and they have routines.....' (Mrs Hurst)

However, the same parent made an interesting analogy set in the context of the military community.

'I don't agree with them sitting at tables all day and being little soldiers'.
(Mrs Hurst)

Comments also showed that for three parents there is a clear distinction between 'play' and 'work'.....

'...there's a time for them to play and a time for them to work. ' (Mrs Hurst)

.....while six parents regarded play as the means by which children learn at this stage their lives – reflecting Isaacs theory that

'Play is indeed the child's work, and the means whereby he grows and develops.' (1929, in Anning 1997 p31)

'They learn while they play anyway.' (Mrs Croft)

One parent had an interesting perspective, as she had two children, one in each of the Foundation years so she was able to make a simultaneous comparison, and spoke of the progression which took place within the stage.

'For the one who's three, certainly learning through play and enjoyment. The one who's coming up 5, I would say learning through a more structured environment with certain goals for him to attain. I would say more structured play in F2, like when they're doing counting, and are maybe involved in toys or something that have numbers on them so that they can recognise numbers.' (Mrs Nelson)

She was also in a good position to look at the stage as a whole and comment on the common characteristics and the importance of a shared ethos.

'All children, if they get praised, love to be the centre of attention regardless of age and they feel special and they put more work into it and they get the benefit in the long run.' (Mrs Nelson)

A second parent with two children in the Foundation Stage spoke of the stage as a whole and a balanced approach throughout, not making any distinction between the two years.

'A balance at the moment. It's too soon to sit down and totally get rid of all the play and activities. They learn while they play anyway.' (Mrs Croft)

Eight parents expressed concerns, the most common being their lack of confidence in their ability to support their children's learning at home when they reached the F2 year. This largely related to the teaching of reading, writing and basic mathematics. Parents expressed their willingness and wish to support their children in these areas but, in line with Fitzgerald's belief that 'parents may feel they lack skills.'(2004, p6), five believed they lacked the knowledge and expertise. One parent knew the teaching methods were now different to those used when she was at school. Consequently, she felt it better to do nothing rather than confuse her child.

'I find it hard to help her with her phonics system. I don't think parents have been told how it's being taught. She's also left-handed so I didn't know how to actually show her how to write her name so I've basically left her to the school's devices and hope that when they were bringing home the cards to learn words, it's knowing how to actually do it. That's the biggest worry for a new parent. (Mrs Campbell)

'We read with her at home and she can actually recognise some words and I just think, well..... I personally don't know if this is correct. Perhaps you can tell me.' (Mrs Twist)

The same parent felt she and others would benefit from sessions run by teachers giving specific information on how to support their children in reading, writing and maths, through detailed explanations of the teaching methods used in school and how this could be mirrored in supporting the child in the home environment.

'I don't think there's enough emphasis on how to help parents. Maybe parents' meetings even up at higher level schools. 'This is what we're doing in numeracy' or 'this is how we're going to teach your child to write. Can you follow the same method?' We could confuse him and he'd take a backward step again.' (Mrs Campbell)

A comment made by another F2 parent suggested a concern as to what was happening in the classroom and the need for explanation.

'They do 'decision making'. I asked him what he did and he said 'What I want' so I went to talk to Mrs T.' (Mrs Danvers)

Similarly, this appears to be a further instance of the need for more information as to how children learn.

Parents' responses on the issues of teaching and learning methods recognised the similarities and differences in the two parts of the FS. All were agreed that a practical and fun approach was appropriate for their children at this time, while acknowledging the need for more structure in FS2 in preparation for the transition to Key Stage 1.

In retrospect, I wondered whether the timing of the parental interviews – the second half of the Summer Term - was an important factor in determining responses on the issues of teaching and learning methodology. This is the point when children are about to move to the next year group -the more structured National Curriculum in Year 1 in the case of FS2 children - and parents can look back and reflect upon the past year. Perhaps interviews at the beginning of the academic year, when children are still settling into their new class, would have produced different responses.

5. Parent\practitioner relationships

In exploring the issue of relationships between parents and their child's teacher and\or keyworker was explored, I was mindful of Hughes et al's findings in 1994 that parents place a high priority on the quality of staff in making a good school. (Anning 1997, p51) While I was hoping for views based on recent and personal experience, I did not wish to invite criticism of individuals, and

discouraged using names. I tried to pose this question in a hypothetical mode – ‘What would you be looking for in the ideal relationship with your child’s teacher or keyworker?’ Parents all had opinions to express on this issue, and, inevitably I suppose, spoke of their relationship with their child’s current teacher or keyworker. In many cases, this was the first relationship of this kind parents had experienced. For other parents, who had older children or had already experienced moves since their children had started in the Foundation Stage, they had more experience to draw on and comparisons could be, and were indeed, made.

Parents’ were almost unanimous in their responses, using the word ‘approachable’ in relation to the practitioner in what they felt, for them, was the ideal relationship. This was the term also used by the FS Leaders in response to the same question. It was also in line with SCE’s NFER survey which reported parents finding

the staff approachable and easy to see, and that the school encourages them to play an active role in the school.’ (2005, p6)

In order to gain an insight into their understanding of the term ‘approachable’, I probed further and asked for clarification. Parents then explained their understanding in a number of ways. One parent talked about a ‘friendly approach’ (Mrs Campbell), another ‘.no standoffishness’ (Mrs Diss), another

‘....an open relationship with the teacher and feel comfortable with them’ (Mrs Hurst)

Yet another parent of an FS2 child qualified the term ‘approachable’ with the acknowledgement that teachers are not available to talk to parents during the school day, as they are usually busy working in the classroom with children....

‘....there’s a fine line when to approach. ..I could approach a teacher before and after school and ask for a time to meet. I’ve done so and there’s always been a time made for me. ‘ (Mrs Campbell)

....and also that teachers are busy people and talking to individual parents takes a lot of time, in addition to all their other work-related commitments.

'You couldn't do that with every single parent or teachers would never get home, would they?' (Mrs Hill)

Teachers' interpretation of the term 'approachable' included 'work together', 'comfortable', 'share information' and 'parents are listened to and valued'. The FS1 Leader cited examples of parents feeling comfortable in coming to ask for advice. She felt that especially with the less confident parents this took time, but daily contact was the key. In her setting, this was achieved through a number of strategies: one being valuing parent opinions by encouraging the writing of entries in a parents' comments book. The fact that the FS1 Leader spoke to the parents later and said how useful it was, in turn encouraged them to make further comments. She was also convinced that parents would be quick to tell her if they weren't happy with something.

The FS1 Leader felt that over time practitioners got to know parents and children very well. For one parent this meant.....

'I just want to know they know my child as well as I do.' (Mrs Carver)

While not actually using the word partnership, the term used in Foundation Stage requirements, comments made by parents implied this by talking about

'a two-way relationship' (Mrs Baynes)

'.....relationship where we're both comfortable to explain if there's a problem.' (Mrs Nelson)

Ten parents talked about the importance of communication

'...me to be able to talk and say what I feel and ask to have a word with them, if I need to, and vice versa....There's no barriers.' (Mrs Croft)

'I think there needs to be a lot of communication between parents, the school, the teacher.' (Mrs Dean)

'She tells me anything I need to know. I tell her what she needs to know.' (Mr Jacks)

'I can go up and speak to her about anything'. (Mrs Diss)

'I like to chat to her whenever I can' (Mrs Danvers)

One parent specified that she wanted to have communication with the keyworker on matters good and bad.

'Whether he's hit somebody, I want to know. If he's been a really good boy, I want to know...' (Mrs Carver)

For four parents their explanation of approachability suggests accessibility and communication are the key factors.

'I just want to be able to go after school and have a word with her and see how C's getting on.' (Mrs Hardy)

'I'd like to be able to walk in to say to the keyworker 'I'd like a word' but I'd also respect them saying 'I'd like word'. (Mrs Carver)

Speed in dealing with problems or answering questions was seen as a priority for two parents:

'If you've got problems, it's sorted and dealt within minutes.' (Mrs Diss)

'I go to the keyworker here and she's answered my questions. If she can't answer it there and then, she's had the answer for me the next day.' (Mrs Twist)

It is worth noting here that the comments made on the issue of communication broadly reflect the views of Fitzgerald –

'Positiveness, sensitivity, responsiveness and friendliness can all be demonstrated through effective communication and form a central element of establishing and maintaining effective partnerships.' (2004, p13)

Another group of parents hold perhaps a more traditional, and perhaps now outdated, view of that relationship, still with the emphasis on the teacher supplying information on the child's progress, usually in the formal situation of a parents' evening appointment.

'I go and see what's happening and what things they're doing and they tell me how they're getting on'. (Mrs Davis)

'That was useful.... I was really impressed with the amount of information they had on her.' (Mrs Pollard)

Two parents talked about making use of and enjoying the regular informality of the daily personal one line comment when picking up their child at the end of the session.

'...his teacher will happily say 'He's had a good day today' or 'We've had a few tears today.' It's nice. It just keeps you in touch with how he's been through the day.' (Mrs Hurst)

'..usually you tend to get a couple of minutes chat each day.' (Mrs Smith)

One parent commented on what she felt was a marked change in the relationship when children move from Foundation 1 to 2, where children moved site, had access to the school bus and adult:child ratios were different. The majority of parents saw maintaining the relationship as important, with some making a particular effort, in spite of constraints such as lack of daily contact. One parent had decided to strike a balance between regular contact and promoting her child's independence.

'My older son goes on the bus but I try to go down to speak to the teacher once a week.' (Mrs Nelson)

Another saw that the relationship had declined and cited the reason as the change in adult:child ratios...

'I wouldn't say it's a bad relationship. I do appreciate she's got 20+ children and I expected it to change but I hadn't expected it to change so much. So it's not as good as it has been, but it's not bad.' (Mrs Fox)

The FS2 Leader didn't see a big change in the relationship between practitioners and parents following the move to FS2, in spite of there being less daily contact. She was surprised that parents felt that the relationship was different and that they had expected this to be the case.

Four parents commented on the usefulness and appropriateness of formal parents evening for children of this age; one making suggestions as to how further measures could be put in place to extend and enhance the relationship, for the benefit of the child.

'I find you don't get enough time with the teacher. Sometimes I feel it's a bit rushed...that's why I like to be able to just go in when I want to know something.' (Mrs Brady)

'I don't find at this age that formal parents meetings are that helpful. It would be better to meet every month, if you wish, and then assessment is on-going. Then they can tell me what I can do to help with reading or writing.' (Mrs Campbell)

In summary, parents were generally positive and in agreement about the type of relationship they would wish to have with their child's practitioner, and expected and accepted a change on transfer to FS2.

6. Practitioner qualifications

Parents were asked about their views as to how important they felt qualifications were for Foundation Stage practitioners and what these qualifications should be. With the exception of one parent, all had views on this issue. Firstly, some parents were unsure as to what qualifications practitioners had achieved....

'I wouldn't even know what qualifications they've got'. (Mrs Diss)

Responses were mixed in terms of SCE's and DfEE's requirements were, with some parents being clear

'Qualified teachers for F2 but not for F1.' (Mrs Davis)

and others not

'I was initially surprised when I learned that the teacher in charge is the only one who is a qualified teacher as such.' (Mr Jacks)

Parents generally understood and used the terminology of the different roles of practitioners within the two years of the Foundation Stage, using the terms teacher, teaching assistant and keyworker appropriately.

'the teacher's there to teach and the assistant's there to support.' (Mrs Stone)

Most parents were very satisfied with the present staffing situation, in spite of a number of recent changes in the FS1 settings, due to posting out of Cyprus of keyworkers with their families. Surprisingly, only one parent who commented on the recent changes,

'We've had a bit of a mess around just recently with different teachers coming and going.' (Mrs Baynes)

However, this could perhaps be due to the fact that many parents have a clear understanding that most of the FS practitioners are dependents of military and MOD civilian personnel and as such they and SCE have no control over their movements.

Parents expressed a marked difference in what type of practitioners they wanted for their children in FS1 and FS2, perhaps highlighting the differences in how and what they feel their children's needs are and what they will be learning in the two different years of the Foundation Stage. One parent explained what she felt was the fundamental difference in the role of the practitioner in F2 as opposed to F1 as:-

'..actually teaching as opposed to helping them learn.' (Mrs Brady)

Parents were in agreement that children FS2 should be taught by a qualified teacher, implying that the role of the practitioner in F1 is more of a supporter and facilitator, while in F2 a qualified teacher is needed because there is more direct and traditional teaching. The FS Leaders suggested the reason

for this collective opinion was that parents view FS2 as the start of formal schooling.

'There is less emphasis on care. Parents feel that 'teaching' begins.'
(FS2L)

Most parents are aware that statutory education starts in the FS2 year and this was where and when parents started to learn the basic skills of reading, writing and maths themselves. Parents still appear to hold the view of the headline of the 1995 Times report 'the reception class can begin the proper process of education.' (p17) and expressed definite and similar views.

'They need proper teachers when they start in F2 as that's when the more formal things like learning to read and write starts.' (Mrs Davis)

'When it gets to F2, you definitely do need to have like the older children have – an actual qualified teacher in the class, because then you are actually getting into the serious side of schooling.' (Mrs Dean)

'It's nice up here (F2) to know there's a proper teacher. You do want our children to be taught by someone who's qualified.' (Mrs Diss)

'Their main teacher should have a degree. The assistant helpers should have a good standard of education.' (Mrs Campbell)

'..Mrs C, she's the teacher, ..is a bit more formal and I think that's right.'
(Mrs Fox)

'I think as it moves more and more into traditional teaching methods, you need a qualified teacher.' (Mrs Smith)

'I do like the idea of having a proper teacher and then an assistant.'
(Mrs Danvers)

'In F2 you definitely do need to have an actual qualified teacher in the class, because then you are actually getting into the serious side of schooling aspect. It's not just doing the ABCs and the fun things, you're getting into the serious side of schooling, the poor things!'
(Mrs Dean)

Most parents put other qualities for practitioners F1 above formal qualifications like degrees or qualified teacher status (QTS), such as previous experience of being with and interacting with young children, understanding and actually liking children.

'The main thing is they need to understand children and like children.'
(Mrs Hurst)

Many implied they were looking for the qualities of a good mother, taking on aspects of the role of the child's own mother for the time spent in FS. Others mentioned this specifically, explaining that these qualities were most likely to be found in someone who is a mother herself and has had experience of bringing up her own children.

'I think definitely experience of having done it before. I suppose it helps if you're a mum because you've dealt with children and know how to handle children.' (Mrs Croft)

'It's more important to know how to interact with children than have a degree. I think overall, a rapport with children is far better' (Mrs Smith)

Parents emphasised the fact that experience of working with children outside the home was important, perhaps suggesting that while there are similarities in the role of keyworker and mother, they are not the same.

'I think experience counts for a lot.' (Mrs Hill)

'I think definitely experience of having done it before.' (Mrs Croft)

Interestingly, this view is somewhat reminiscent of the playgroups of the 1960s and 1970s which relied heavily on untrained but caring and experienced mothers as providers and educators of young children.

FS Leaders were all of the opinion that parents of FS1 children would put caring qualities before formal qualifications, reinforcing the notion that their children's happiness and well-being is the parents' priority in FS1. Interestingly, FS Leaders did not use the word 'mothering' in relation to the type of care parents want. However, the FS1 Leader extended this by saying

'If children weren't happy, then parents would start to look for reasons why and be more critical. Then they may start to look at and ask about qualifications.'

However, many parents do feel there is a need for keyworkers to undergo training,

'That satisfied me that they've obviously all had quite a degree of specific training for this age group. They know what they're doing.' (Mr Jacks)

'..I think keyworkers need to have some training. I don't think it needs to be as intense as maybe teacher training, but they need to know what the teacher expects and how to deal with different types of children.' (Mrs Hurst)

'It's more important they should be trained in school in the methods to support children and they are good with children. They need to know the correct way. They need to know the right way themselves to make learning clear.' (Mrs Campbell)

....some knowing that many were undergoing training, predominantly NVQ 3, at that time. They felt this method of training whilst gaining experience was appropriate and an excellent opportunity.

'They work towards their qualifications while they're here, don't they? I think that's fine.' (Mrs Baynes)

It's an excellent idea that people can come into a setting and do 'on the job' training through NVQ.' (Mrs Carver)

All FS Leaders confirmed that parents are kept informed of staff training, both non-accredited, provided in-house and by SCE, and the achievement of accredited qualifications, such as NVQ.

However, parents felt that qualifications should be encouraged and that the children would ultimately benefit.

'So if they're training, on-going training, it's got to be reflected back on the children automatically.' (Mrs Dean)

Yet two parents were clear that in an 'either or' situation, where a choice had to be made between a person with qualifications and one without, the personality and personal characteristics would take priority.

'I think personality is more important really than qualifications.' (Mrs Hill)

'So if I had to choose between a qualified keyworker who was harsh and an unqualified person who loved children and integrated with them well and got the most out of them, then I'd probably go for that.' (Mrs Carver)

Two parents felt it inappropriate for qualified teachers to be in F1, suggesting that teachers are for older children.

'...treated older than she is at this age and maybe a teacher who'd been find it harder to adjust to the little ones.' (Mrs Pollard)

Perhaps this also shows that some parents are unaware that there are teachers trained to work with children in the Foundation Stage and there are an increasing number of training routes for those wishing to specialise in the teaching of under fives.

Some parents saw the importance and value in having a qualified teacher in a F1 setting to make a significant input and have an overview of the setting.

'As long as they're monitored by people who have got the qualifications.' (Mrs Croft)

'I feel one person in the class ought to have qualifications.' (Mrs Twist)

One parent specified that the qualified teacher would hold a greater depth of knowledge and perhaps would be better in a more informed position to give explanations to parents.

'I do find if there's a particular question I have I'll direct that to S (FS Manager) rather than the others because she's able to give me more understanding of why things are, whereas the keyworkers are less able to provide me with those answers.' (Mrs Stone)

FS Leaders recounted examples of parents approaching them to ask questions which required a greater depth of understanding and knowledge or other practitioners who were either less confident or who did not have the knowledge themselves, referring parents to them for greater explanations.

Three parents put forward suggestions as to how the staffing and qualifications situation could be improved - firstly, in relation to qualifications....

'If money was no object, I'd love for M to be going to where there's a qualified teacher with each group. It would be wonderful but it's just not.....'(Mrs Diss)

and secondly, in relation to the difference in adult:child ratios between F1 and 2.

'I would just hope that there's sufficient adult to child ratio with support where necessary.' (Mr Jacks)

'Maybe F2 could do with more helpers like they have here.' (Mrs Smith)

These views would suggest that these parents see a good adult:child ratio as an important factor in their child's care and educational development and progress: thus implying that the better the ratio, the more personal attention their child will get and ultimately benefit from.

In conclusion, parents were generally aware of the differing roles and related qualifications of the practitioners in the Foundation Stage. They were almost unanimous in valuing personality and caring skills over qualifications in FS1 and seeing the need for qualified teachers in FS2.

7. Parental involvement

Parents were asked what they felt their role was in relation to involvement in their child's education at this time. A wide range of views were expressed, often contrasting. While one mother saw her role at the basic level of ensuring school attendance,

'...to make sure she comes to school.'(Mrs Pollard)

others felt they had a responsibility to be a part of their children's learning

'It's part of a parent's responsibility to help what they're doing.' (Mrs Croft)

These two contrasting comments serve as a reminder of Fitzgerald's belief that

'It is important to accept and understand that each family will be able to commit to different levels of involvement.' (2004, p25)

A large group of parents, particularly of FS2 children, acknowledged the teacher as the professional and leader and felt that their role to be one of support - this being facilitated by reinforcing, following up or extending at home, the activities and themes taking place in the school or setting. Parents of FS1 children felt they were kept well-informed of what their children were doing but there was no pressure or expectation to follow up topics or specific skills. However, opportunities were available for those parents who chose to take on a supporting role. This view was confirmed by the FS1 and FS Leaders, who gave explanations of systems and documentation in use in their settings.

In contrast, FS2 parents felt there was a greater expectation for them to support what the teacher is doing out of school time.

'I think it's to work with what the teacher's doing. ...we just work with what he's doing in the class really.'(Mrs Hurst)

'..whatever his teacher gives. I'm not qualified in that.' (Mrs Fox)

Some parents gave examples of how this happened in practice...

'..last term they covered a lot of traditional children's stories....we were able to find some of the books in the library...So we do try to follow it up.' (Mr Jacks)

..and how settings encourage parents to become involved and are informed as to what their children are learning.

' ..a quick look and read through the planning things that are outside the classroom...I'm sure I could ask for a copy if I wanted one.' (Mr Jacks)

Parents explained that in F2 the expected parental support tended to be facilitated by the teacher setting specific tasks and sending home appropriate materials.

'Go through his letters, his reading books, whatever his teacher gives. I'm not qualified in that.' (Mrs Danvers)

'At the moment we're doing the words in the book.' (Mrs Diss)

Perhaps this is partly due to the frustration teachers feel as Edwards and Warin found

'I want the children to do more than I have time for. I want them to hear their children read every day.' (1999, p236)

Most parents gave the impression they were comfortable with their support role, as in following the lead set by the teacher, but some felt frustrated and wanted their role to be extended and more effective in relation to the amount and quality of support they could offer their child. This was largely related to their lack of knowledge, expertise or confidence in the specifics of how subject areas are taught and how children learn. Some felt that teaching methods had changed since they were in school as pupils themselves and consequently are unfamiliar to them. Many are concerned that they could be confusing their child by using the methods which are known to them.

'We try to help as much as we can...she comes home with a load of maths and says we do it like this... It's a bit difficult at times.' (Mrs Baynes)

'I'm not a qualified teacher and it's understanding about sounds, phonetics, that kind of thing.' (Mrs Stone)

...or pitching work at an inappropriate level.

'I like to understand what they're doing so I can do the same, because I don't want to be doing things that are too advanced.' (Mrs Stone)

These comments reflect the study of Newson and Newson in which parents lacked the confidence and skills to support their children. –

'I found out that we were doing the wrong thing teaching him a different way, you see, so it's best to leave it alone.' (p145, 1997)

Some parents felt the pressure on them and their children was too great for their child at such a young age,

'I don't like putting too much pressure on him at the moment because he is only five and I don't want to turn him off doing things so we don't force him too much.' (Mrs Fox)

'I get little letters occasionally on things to work on, but I mean, four books is a lot.' (Mrs Diss)

...while other parents felt the pressure on them and experienced feelings of guilt if they were unable to dedicate what they perceived to be an appropriate amount of time on reading or some other task. The FS2 Leader detailed examples of parents approaching her with apologies if the child's reading book had not been read the previous evening, due to family events and other commitments. She had formed the opinion that for some parents sharing the responsibility was too great a burden and they would prefer the teacher to take total responsibility for their children's progress. For others, she felt the task was just too difficult due to lack of skills and strategies. This was sometimes the case with parents of boys, whose concentration levels may be shorter, especially when expected to be still for extended periods.

In marked contrast, a number of parents felt they wanted and indeed played a much larger and more prominent role. One explained...

'Obviously, parents are the first teachers, educators, whatever, that any child has. I think that will always be the case, even when they are teenagers.' (Mr Jacks)

While others said –

'..we have to put a lot of effort in..' (Mrs Twist)

'Settings, pre-schools and nurseries can only do so much. We're the ones without a doubt. (Mrs Carver)

' ..it's a quite big role. The thing I do is to copy ...things like crossing the road – it all comes down from myself and my husband really.' (Mrs Brady)

'If you want the best for your child, then you must put as much effort in as anyone else, if not more.' (Mrs Hill)

Some parents specified the types of things they do to support their children's learning and development -

'We're the ones to give the basics, teaches the manners and social skills...We're the ones that are teaching right from wrong, please, thank you... (Mrs Carver)

'..spending time with them to gain this extra knowledge about life itself.' (Mrs Hill)

'She has two stories at night before she goes to bed.'(Mrs Twist)

'Talk to her and get her to do things.'(Mrs Hardy)

'..I used to count the stairs with her – simple things like that.' (Mrs Smith)

Finally, one parent seemed to see school and home as separate and not part of a complimentary approach to education. She felt it was not her role to support what was going on at school, but to teach her child about other things when he was at home.

'....his school work. I don't feel it is our role to do that....but we try to teach him about other wider things that he's interested in....he's a typical boy – likes planets and stars and things like that.' (Mrs Fox)

In sum, parents held widely differing views on the issue of the level and type of parental involvement in their children's learning. Parents of children in

FS2 generally recognised there were greater expectations of them by the teachers and the school, when a more structured approach to the teaching of reading was put into place. This divided parents into two distinct groups -those who wished or did not wish to support their children's learning for some reason and those who did. Many who wished to support felt they needed further guidance in how to do this effectively.

8. Further involvement

Parents were asked whether they wished to be more involved in their children's education at this point in time. Many parents interpreted this question in terms of their involvement inside the school or setting in operating hours, rather than in their child's education in the wider sense.

More than half of the parents interviewed, mostly those of FS1 children said they did not want to be further involved, giving a number of reasons. Perhaps this response is a reflection of the findings of the SCE NFER survey in relation to

'support provided by the school to enable parents to support their child's learning at home. Although more than three-quarters of parents (77%) were fairly or very satisfied with this support, a notable minority of parents (14%) were dissatisfied.' (2005, p15)

Some said they were very happy with the current situation and saw no need for any change, making very complimentary comments about the schools and settings.

'No, I think they're great. I think they give you as much chance asand certainly more than the UK.' (Mrs Carver)

'I think I feel involved. Anything that happens at nursery or school, I try my best to be there, helping anyway.' (Mrs Brady)

'At the moment I'm really happy with how it's working.' (Mrs Croft)

Some added that there were many opportunities to become more involved if one wanted to take them up,

'They want you to help with swimming; they want you to help with beach trips.' (Mrs Carver)

'...help on trips when they ask for it.' (Mrs Fox)

and the benefits for the child.

'I just think it makes your child feel special. 'My Mummy comes to help' or 'My Daddy comes to help.' (Mrs Carver)

Other parents gave a range of reasons for their decision. Two parents spoke of their satisfaction with the current situation with their sons needing time away from parents in order to become 'more independent' and 'to socialise with peers' (Mr Jacks)

'His school is his world...that's his little thing that he does.' (Mrs Hurst)

Another mother questioned the wisdom and effectiveness of helping her own child

'I don't think a parent coming in to help their own child would actually work because ...she'll stop what she's doing and come straight over to me.. I think helping other children is fine.' (Mrs Smith)

The half of parents who expressed the wish to be more involved focussed on consolidating the work of practitioners after school. This reflected Davie et al comments from as long ago as 1984 in relation to the necessity to

'boost the parents' own sense of responsibility and confidence in their ability to contribute to their own children's education.' (p142)

The most common way they felt this could happen was if they were given more information about how the curriculum, largely reading and maths are taught and consequently, how they can best follow up and support their children's learning at home. This view was more common among parents of F2 parents than F1, where a higher level of specific support is expected or perceived to be expected.

'I'd like to be more involved as much as I can....but I don't feel I know enough.' (Mrs Pollard)

'I like to understand what she's being taught in school so I can do it at home.' (Mrs Stone)

'Maths is the one that stands out...because it's totally different to the way we did it.' (Mrs Baynes)

Some were very specific and gave examples as to what they would find helpful.

'Just send a little letter home to say when you're supporting your child doing maths homework, we'd like it set out such and such a way, rather than the way we've done it. They like us to support with their homework but if we're not getting the whole picture....' (Mrs Baynes)

'I would like more information about what all the different bags and books are for. Hey have library books and other books and it's never been explained what we are meant to do with them.' (Mrs Campbell)

'More information on the levels children should be at at certain times...You need set out in plain English in general what sort of things they should be learning or should know within that year.' (Mrs Dean)

'I suppose it might be nice to hear what the class is doing for that term and what goals they hope to achieve.' (Mrs Hill)

One parent made a comparison between the two FS years and settings.

'At pre-school, we used to know what project they were doing. We don't get that at all.' (Mrs Fox)

One mother saw the opportunity to spend time in her child's class as a training opportunity for herself in learning through observing 'experts' and developing a range of strategies for maintaining and increasing her son's concentration.

'It does get frustrating because we can't keep his attention....so it would be useful to get some tips.' (Mrs Diss)

The FS2 Leader expressed surprise that parents wanted more information and some training in how best to support their children's learning in the areas of reading and maths. She said she had never been approached by parents on this issue. The FS Leader explained the programme of workshops and training sessions that were in place in her school for FS2 parents, but attendance

had been disappointing, perhaps indicating that only a small group of parents want or are able to take up this opportunity. It may be for the reason that Edwards and Warin suggest

'The poor rate of attendance at workshops in some schools could certainly be attributed to parents' unease at being told how to work in teacherly ways with their children. Those schools that had good take up.....recognised that some parents had loathed their own schooling.'
(1999, p234)

Which, in turn, would reflect Fitzgerald's view that

'Although practitioners can take many steps to maintain effective partnerships, it is likely that there will be occasions when barriers either exist or develop.' (2004, p69)

In sum, the responses of parents fell into two main groups. Those who were content with the current situation and did not wish for further involvement and those who would welcome further involvement but require support and training to enable them to do it.

9. Long term aspirations

The final issue explored with parents was whether they had any ultimate aims or expectations for their children. I am aware that parents' own level of educational attainment is likely to impact on their views, perhaps for two reasons. Firstly, parents who themselves have successfully completed further or higher education are likely have greater depth of knowledge of what is available and what is required and involved in studying at that level. Secondly, I would suggest that this same group of parents are more likely to see the value in terms of opportunities for career and life which a high level of academic achievement provides, and thus would be more likely to express hopes for their children to attend university or achieve high level qualifications.

Two parents did not have any aims or views, but a number of themes ran through the remaining responses, many related to personal qualities and characteristics, rather than specific qualifications or levels of education. The most common theme was that of children working hard, 'doing their best' and achieving their full potential. Some parents make specific mention of 'not pushing' (Mrs Danvers) their children.

'...as long as they've tried their best, I'm not going to push them.' (Mrs Dean)

'As long as they do their best. If they do wonderfully, then that's great but if they don't, then it doesn't matter.' (Mrs Hill)

A number of parents placed their child's happiness ahead of specific academic achievements or careers.

'..it's whatever makes him happy in the long run.' (Mrs Diss)

' I just want them to be happy in what they're doing and in what they can achieve for themselves. (Mrs Brady)

Many parents felt the priority was that their children decide for themselves what educational or career path they wished to take. Parents said they would not make decisions for them or try to impose their wishes.

'I can't live their life for them. Just support what they decide to do.' (Mrs Smith)

'We'll just go where their talents lie or where they feel comfortable.

We can't force them.' (Mrs Carver)

'I want him to do a job that he really likes.' (Mrs Fox)

Some parents spoke of what they felt their role was in relation to their children's educational and career choices. Most used words such as 'support', 'advise' and 'encourage' (Mr Jacks, Mrs Pollard) One parent explained that the advice she would give would be:-

'Don't go off and do this, stay and do your education first'. (Mrs Croft)

Several parents felt the best advice they could give was that education is important and opens up more career opportunities (Mrs Campbell, Mrs Croft)

Several parents mentioned university,

'I want him to be as capable as he can and maybe go to university.' (Mrs Fox)

'We would like them to go to university and beyond, but I think my aim is that they are able to achieve the best they are able.'(Mrs Stone)

'We'd like them both to go to university but we'd never push them.' (Mrs Baynes)

but all put this as a lower priority than other issues.

One parent mentioned a stable education for her child – perhaps not surprisingly, given the regularity of school moves and breaks in education most children of service families' experience. (Mrs Hurst) While another parent hoped for a private education for her child on the return to UK, giving the reason as her wish for the smaller class sizes for her child than in most state schools in the UK. She went on to comment that the class sizes with SCE were acceptable but she knew this was not always the situation in state education back in the UK and the larger the size of class the more stressed the teachers were likely to become. (Mrs Twist)

FS Leaders admitted that this was an issue which they had no real evidence for and had never discussed with parents. However, they had 'gut feelings', based on parents level of emphasis on either social or academic progress at this time. The FS1 and FS Leader felt that parents would give priority to their children being happy and doing their best rather than academic goals or a specific career. The FS2 Leader felt the responses would have been mixed but a large proportion would be hoping for a university education for their children.

While some parents were 'put on the spot' by this question, some considering carefully before answering. The consensus was that parents gave priority to their children being happy and doing their best.

The implications and recommendations related to these issues explored in this chapter are detailed in chapter 6.

Chapter 6 – Discussion and recommendations

This chapter is presented in two parts. The first part – **Discussion** - discusses issues from the findings in Chapter 5 and, secondly, as a result of the findings and discussion, a series of **Recommendations** has been made.

Discussion

In the light of the findings of the study described in Chapter 5, a number of what I felt were the most significant issues have been picked out and are discussed below. In many cases, from the discussion a series of new questions emerge.

The issues discussed are:-

1. Parents' knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage
2. Parental expectations
3. Teaching and learning methods
4. Gender issues
5. Parent\practitioner relations
6. Practitioner qualifications
7. Parental involvement

1. Parents' knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage

Although the Foundation Stage of education has been in existence since 2000, parents' level of knowledge about the Foundation Stage and the age group and classes it covers was found to be very varied, with some parents having clear and thorough knowledge and understanding. In contrast, others had scant knowledge. Due to the mobility of the military and, in turn, the school population, SCE schools understand the importance and, in fact, place a high priority on producing good quality and comprehensive documentation to keep parents

informed. This incorporates relevant information of a general school-based nature, with child- and class-specific detail. It could perhaps have been expected that due to the amount and quality of that written information given to parents before their child starts in the FS1 setting, parents' knowledge may have been greater.

I would also suggest another, and perhaps more cynical explanation of this issue. It may be that parents place less value on their children's education in their early years, especially in the non-statutory FS1 year, where provision may be considered care rather than education, than they do in their later education in primary school, or in secondary school, where children take public examinations.

For many families, their children start part way through the FS. In this situation, when they arrive in or are preparing to move to Cyprus, they have many other stressful domestic issues to deal with, such as packing and unpacking, travel arrangements, leaving family and friends, settling into a new house and job. The need to concentrate on these practical tasks may suggest parents pay minimal attention to written information received, other than such essential information on the locations, start and finish times of schools and settings.

In marked contrast to a typical community in the UK, the parents in my study live in a very close, and somewhat closed military community, where all children go to the same school with parents speaking to each about their children as well as other issues on a daily basis, and where knowledge is passed on and shared. I would perhaps have expected this factor to have resulted in a greater and more consistent understanding.

It must also be noted that due to the high level of mobility of the service community, parents interviewed had been living in Cyprus for varying amounts of

time. Of the parents most recently arrived, their previous postings and educational experiences were in different parts of the UK, such as Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, which do not operate the Foundation Stage. This would inevitably impact on the amount of knowledge they would have and perceptions expressed at interview. However, there were other parents who had arrived from England, who still had scant knowledge and commented that they'd never heard of FS back there. There could be number of reasons for this, such as:- slow implementation, or poor publicity and communication at local level, or lack of interest in accessing or reading materials provided.

However, in SCE Cyprus, in spite of the amount and quality of information on the FS given to parents and the fact that the whole FS is under the line management of the headteacher of the school, many parents still view the two types of provision as separate. Not surprisingly, a combination of factors, emphasising the differences between the two parts of the stage, serve to work against parents' perception of the FS as a 'joined-up' and discrete stage of education. These factors include the siting of the two parts of the FS in different locations and environments, different hours of entitled provision, and different staffing requirements and ratios.

Parents interviewed appeared to have varying or patchy knowledge of the FS curriculum, with its six areas of learning. However, one interpretation could be that they spoke only of the areas which they felt were of importance to them or most relevant to their children at that particular age. Perhaps not surprisingly, when referring to their children of only three years old, parents of children in FS1 referred to the personal and social skills as being priority, and cited examples of playing with others, sharing, taking turns and independence.

There was a marked difference in parents of children in FS2. Most of these parents spoke of learning to read, write and do maths. It is unclear whether the change in emphasis, away from the acquisition of social skills and towards the learning of the 3Rs, comes from the parents or from the FS2 teachers, or a combination of the two. Perhaps, the move from keyworkers to teachers perpetuates the notion in the minds of parents that the real business of learning starts in the reception class. However, comments made by parents at interview lead me to believe that the change in focus also comes from school. Parents spoke of the changing expectation on the level and type of regular support in reading and maths, they felt they were expected to give, which in turn, conveyed the message that these were the priorities for the teaching of children in school.

In sum, the above serves to illustrate that at the present time, the achievement of the aspirations related to the creation of the Foundation Stage is still a long way off. While most practitioners would agree that its creation is indeed

'a significant landmark in funded education in England.

many parents have yet to believe and understand that

'it gives this very important stage of education a distinct identity.' (QCA, 2000, p3)

2. Parental expectations

Parents were largely found to have contrasting expectations for their children in the two parts of the Foundation Stage, perhaps a further indication that parents see the two parts of the stage as separate. Largely, parents of three-year-old children in FS1 gave priority to the care of their children and aspects of Personal, Social and Emotional Development and the acquisition of social skills.

They were satisfied that this priority was being met, through the structure of the day, variety of activities on offer, the favourable adult:child ratios and keyworker system in operation.

Although the views and expectations of parents of FS2 children fell into two main groups, they agreed on and many had expected that there would be a shift in emphasis away from care over education, towards more formal and structured learning. As discussed above, this change in expectations is likely to be due to a number of factors, related to the differences between the two parts of the stage. These include the start of statutory education, the physical move into the primary school building and the accompanying perception of a more 'educational' environment, full-time attendance, the change in adult:child ratios, classes led by qualified teachers and finally, recollections of experiences of older children in the family and of themselves at this age.

Parents expected this change to take the form of learning to read, write and do mathematics in particular - upholding the Times comment back in 1995 before the creation of the FS that

'the reception class can begin the proper process of education.' (p17)

However, many parents had not expected the change to be so marked and sudden. Some parents, largely those whose expectations were being met, welcomed the changes taking place. Parents gave some reasons - an eagerness for their children to make progress in the 3Rs, the belief that an early start in basic skills of reading, writing and maths and accelerated progress will improve later achievement in end of KS1 tests and beyond; preparation for the move to year 1 and starting the National Curriculum. It may be that there is a real belief that their child is ready emotionally and intellectually to cope with a more structured approach, but I would suggest that the opinions expressed related more to

parents' wishes and aspirations for their children rather than what was appropriate in meeting the needs of their child at his time and at this stage of their development. Responses from many of these parents also implied they placed value on the visible achievement and measurable progress in reading, writing and mathematics, over the other areas of learning. Comments also suggested that they view mathematics and measure mathematical progress at this stage in the narrow context of counting, number recognition and performing simple number operations such as addition and subtraction, rather than the wider range of mathematical concepts specified in the curriculum, namely investigative number and shape, space and measures. This again poses questions related to parents' detailed knowledge of the curriculum requirements, and also teachers focussing teaching on and dedicating a disproportionate amount of time to reading, writing and mathematics.

One group of parents felt their expectations were not being met. They felt that the change had been too sudden and the structure too rigid and formal, and was inappropriate for their children at this time. These were largely, although not exclusively, the parents of boys and the younger children in the year group – perhaps the least mature children in the class – and, consequently, those perhaps least able to cope with more structure and formality, coupled with full-time attendance. This raises the issue of whether the needs of all children in the FS2 classes are being met and whether their levels of maturity and intellectual development have been taken into account. I would suggest the perceptions of this group of parents reflect the beliefs of Adams et al (2004) ‘

‘If the purpose of the Foundation Stage was to extend to four and five year olds in primary/infant schools the best practice in the education of three and four year olds, then it has not succeeded.’ (in Sylva and Pugh, 2005, p23)

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that FS2 teachers in school often have pressure put on them by KS1 staff to send children up to Year 1 having reached set standards in reading, writing and mathematics. In practice, this is often achieved through lengthening the amount of time children spend sitting still and listening to the teacher, completing worksheets and other paper-based activities, as opposed to more active forms of adult-led and independent learning, indoors and out.

Since the introduction of the FS, there has been an effort to encourage Year 1 teachers to take on the approach of the FS rather than the opposite ie. FS2 classes operating as a watered-down version of Year 1. The importance of a smooth transition into Year 1 has been recognised and has necessitated a focus for training for Year 1 teachers across England and similarly, within SCE. The focus of this training has been firstly, for Year 1 teachers to become familiar with the FS curriculum, assessment requirements and teaching and learning methods used in the FS2 class in particular. Secondly, the application of this knowledge and understanding to enable a smooth transition to occur whereby routines, systems and teaching methods are initially similar to children's recent previous experience. However, there is the possibility that the less confident and experienced FS2 teacher may find 'top-down' pressure hard to stave off and have difficulty in upholding the principles and practice of the FS.

A number of additional factors are likely to influence and impact on the practice of early years teachers in the coming years. Firstly, the rewriting of National Literacy Strategy (now part of the Primary National Strategy - PNS) framework is currently taking place with the result likely to be a less rigid model, offering more flexibility and professional judgement alongside a more cross-curricular approach, resulting in more active and creative teaching and learning for

children. Secondly, the change in assessment arrangements at the end of KS1 in Summer 2005 has restored Year 2 teachers' professional judgement in assigning end of key stage levels to children. Previously, children's performance in NCTs (or SATs) was the sole indicator of the level a child reached. Under the new system, children still take NCTs but teachers decide on the level awarded, in the context of their performance throughout the year.

The above factors should go some way towards giving year 1 & 2 teachers the 'permission' and confidence to use their professional judgement as to what is appropriate for children at a particular time. In turn, this may result in the lessening of pressure being pushed down onto FS2 teachers and their children.

Thirdly, the creation in 2003 of the post of National Director for the Foundation Stage, within the PNS, which acknowledged the FS as a stage in its own right, ensuring also that the FS was represented and had a voice, when decisions about the curriculum for young children were being made. Lesley Staggs was instrumental in bringing together the FS curriculum with Birth to 3 Matters (QCA, 2003) - the curriculum for children aged 0-3 years, which will become the Early Years Foundation Stage. This move implies that children aged 3-5 are part of a group of children younger than themselves, and this should move them further away from being 'dragged up' into the National Curriculum.

While the creation of a single framework for this age group has been a 'long cherished aim of many in the early years sector.' (Vevers, 2006, p10)

it remains to be seen when the new stage comes into being in September 2008, whether Lindon's hopes of

'a coherent, child-friendly framework which creates firm foundations'

or her fears of

'even less realistic expectations for very young children and an atmosphere of educational bullying'(2006, p11)

are realised.

However, there is the possibility that the above factors may give teachers in FS2 additional ammunition to resist pressures from the teachers of older children and use the principles and practice of the FS to meet the needs of children aged 3-5 years old.

In contrast, the publication in December 2005 of the Interim report of the Rose Review, into the teaching of reading in early years' settings, is likely to impact and bring additional pressure on practice in learning and teaching in the FS2\Reception year. It is expected to bring about the introduction of more rigorous teaching of phonics to children. There is a worry that an inappropriate amount of time will be dedicated to this area due to the increased expectation of achievement by the end of the FS2 year. The teaching and learning of phonics would be at a faster pace than previously advocated, or adhered to, in the Reception year of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). This change could work against the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum and meeting the needs of all children.

3. Teaching and Learning methods

All parents were found to have definite views about how their children learn and are taught, and what they feel is appropriate for their children at this stage in their development. Parents gave the general impression of having some knowledge about the methods of teaching and learning used in the Foundation

Stage settings, in FS1 in particular. I would suggest that in FS1 this knowledge base is the result of combination of factors:- practitioners' real belief in play as a means of learning and consequently, the structure of sessions centred on that belief; good communication and relationships with the FS1 setting and its practitioners; a relaxed start to the session whereby parents are encouraged to and feel comfortable to come in and bring their children into the setting and spend a few moments sharing a first activity. This in turn results in parents offering help, and as volunteers spending time with their children, joining in sessions and sharing activities with them.

FS1 parents were in full agreement that the provision of a variety of fun, hands-on, active, play-based activities was right for their children of 3-4 years old. This upholds Hughes et al's findings from 1994 which showed that parents preferred practical and fun approaches to learning, (p100)

However, while many parents used the phrase 'Learn through play', the FS leaders were in some doubt as to whether this concept was fully understood. They wondered if the extent of learning, which could take place through play, when translated into everyday practice, was recognised. This was highlighted by parental responses, which cited only children's development of a personal, social and emotional nature, in reference to the value of play. This limited understanding contributes to their misconception that because mostly informal, play-based learning takes place in FS1, this does not constitute progress in learning, for example in reading, when in fact, FS1 children learn such things as to recognising their own names and those of the other children in their class.

Parents of FS2 children recognised that children's development had progressed in the preceding three, four or five terms spent in FS1 and, therefore,

their needs and capabilities had changed. For some parents, they were keen that a balance of types of teaching and learning was taking place – still wanting active learning and play, but also a start made on the slightly more structured and formal teaching related to the acquisition of early reading, writing and maths skills. They had some recognition that continuity yet progression was right for their children.

However, in marked contrast to FS1, parents had a varying amount of knowledge on how their children's day was structured, and what teaching and learning methods were used. This would suggest that, some parents had not been offered or taken advantage of the opportunity to attend meetings prior to transfer, to actually read written information given or to spend time in school during a working session. I rejected the idea that the parents interviewed take less interest in their children in the FS2 year than in FS1. This was indicated to me by the fact that they had, of course, given up their time to speak to me about their child's education. However, it caused me to consider such questions as:- Are parents given enough information, verbal and written, on continuity and progression in learning, on transfer to FS2? Is there some reluctance on the part of parents to spend time in the classroom? If so, what are the reasons for this? Is it because of the quality of the relationship with the teacher? (I intentionally say 'teacher' here rather than 'practitioner' as parents know that the teacher is in charge and sets the tone and makes the decisions for the classroom) Do parents have more confidence in the teacher's professionalism, and presume she knows best and 'she will do the right thing'? Do parents feel less welcome? Are parents actually invited in? Is it solely because many parents do not take their children to and collect their children from school on a daily basis? Is it due to a more formal start to the day than was in place in FS1? These questions warrant further exploration to gain a clearer insight into parents' perceptions and their reasons for having formed them.

Many parents felt that progress in the 3Rs required more formal teaching, more concentration, sitting still and listening, and more one-to-one working. The most common examples given were related to the teaching of reading. Some parents felt there was too much formal learning taking place and that pressure was being brought to bear on their children to achieve in the areas of reading and maths in particular. However, it may be that the perceived pressure was not so much related to the formality of the teaching methods being used in school, but rather to the level of expectation in parental support. The issue of the formality of teaching posed a number of questions. Do parents actually know what is happening? Are teachers considering continuity as well as progression? Is teaching indeed more formal than it needs to be for the age of the children? Are teachers exploring and using the most active and interactive teaching and learning methods for young children? Or is it that the parents' notion of how 3Rs are taught is out of date? This notion is likely to remain unless parents are able to gain an insight into how reading, writing and maths can be taught in large and small groups in an interactive way.

As mentioned above, the publication in December 2005 of the Interim report of the Rose Review into the teaching of reading in early years' settings, is likely to impact on practice in learning and teaching in the FS2\Reception year. While the report acknowledges the importance of the development of speaking and listening, and active and interactive learning for young children, it praises the effectiveness of the teaching of synthetic phonics in a rigorous daily and systematic way. Critics such as Ann Nelson, reported in Nursery World, find the notion that 'young children are going to be drilled first and fast' very worrying. Similarly, Pat Broadhead, worries that...

'Synthetic phonics had as strong sense of experimentation on our youngest learners.'

And -

'this national and formalised approach, with little associated research evidence, conflicts with a theoretically informed position in policy and practice, born of substantial research.' (2005, p11)

There are real worries that the prominence of phonics teaching in isolation, and the move away from a balanced combination of learning and teaching methods, such as the four strategies of the 'Searchlights' model of the NLS (1998, p4), could shift the emphasis away from the sharing and enjoying of books – a truly motivating force in promoting reading.

4. Gender issues

Parents interviewed were unanimous in saying they would want the same thing for their child should it have been the opposite gender, citing specific examples of what this issue meant for them at this time. Many parents chose to focus on and to acknowledge that all children are different regardless of gender; and alongside this, their needs and preferred learning styles may differ - these being important factors which should be taken into account when providing for children as groups and individuals. Emphasis was put on practitioners knowing a child well and as an individual. These views reflect the findings of the SPEEL research which concluded that good practice is provided by practitioners differentiating

'practices that ensure each child is treated equally but differently, in order to match the teaching to the child and to the curriculum.' (2002, p4)

It could be a significant factor that most parents interviewed were mothers. This invites the question:- 'Would comments and opinions have been different had the parents interviewed been predominantly fathers?' I felt that the

issue of gender, more than any of the others explored, could produce answers which may be 'politically correct' and what parents felt would be expected, rather than their honest beliefs. I would suggest that the contribution by FS Leaders, based on a series of incidents and conversations with parents over time, was of particular value, in qualifying and verifying the views of parents on this issue. A comment by a FS1 leader was significant in that it demonstrated the strength of belief in the professional viewpoint:-

'They've built up trust with us over time. They know that we wouldn't give them anything inappropriate.'

However, this question still left me with most doubts, perhaps being mindful of comments made and conversations previously conducted with parents, often fathers, over a number of years, particularly when I was a class teacher of FS-aged children. I also wondered whether their real or expressed opinions would be likely to change as their children grew older. I felt their own school experiences of boys and girls being offered different subjects and opportunities, especially at secondary level, could provide a major influence here.

5. Parent partnerships

Parents were unanimous in their views on the type of relationship they wished to have with their child's practitioners and used the word 'approachable,' perhaps working towards what PPA described as

'an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect' (1989, p39)

and capitalising on practitioners having

'a unique opportunity to establish relations with parents at the start' (Davie et al, 1984, p142)

as this sets a precedent for strong links in later stages of education.

They were generally very satisfied with their current relationship; especially in FS1 where many parents had twice-daily contact with practitioners and keyworkers had responsibility for a small group of children. This mirrors Fitzgerald's belief that

'A keyworker system is useful in supporting a child's adjustment to the setting.,,,, parents can find having a consistent practitioner to chat issues over with useful and supportive.' (2004, p52)

I would suggest that three main factors are instrumental in facilitating this regular opportunity for informal conversations, enabling the development of a warm relationship. These are:- an informal start to the FS1 session, a willingness and commitment by practitioners to be available to speak with parents, and SCE's high staffing levels.

Among parents of F2 children, there was a perception that the relationship changed on transfer from F1 to F2 and they acknowledged that this was expected for a number of reasons. Many parents had an understanding of the time limitation for teachers and the change in pupil\adult ratios. Most parents showed an appreciation of the regular, often daily, contact in building relationships and valued informal short conversations and exchanges of personal information. Other FS2 parents had less daily contact with the teacher than they had in F1. The reason for this were several including children travelling to school by bus, the promotion of greater independence for children, a more formal start to the school day, different adult:child ratios. Consideration must be given to additional factors; that parents were less willing to approach the FS2 teachers in general because of the higher-status role, or individual teachers, because of personality.

It was found that especially in F2, some parents still held the traditional and formal view of the teacher as a highly qualified professional, taking the lead. This would involve parents waiting to be invited into the classroom for specific

reasons, such as reporting on pupil progress at parents' evening, and parents only approaching teachers if there is a problem. This raises the questions of whether some parents prefer to retain the traditional view and relationship with their child's teacher, and what the reasons are for this. Perhaps teachers must accept the fact that in spite of measures taken to communicate with parents and the offer to establish a partnership of shared responsibility for a child's care and learning, some parents will make the decision that they do not want a partnership with their child's teacher and that they prefer minimal involvement with the responsibility for their child's education resting with the teacher.

Parents were found to favour more frequent informal parents meetings over traditional formal parents' evenings. Perhaps, not surprisingly, parents liked to meet with their child's practitioner more than the customary twice or three times per year, preferring to meet more regularly but still to talk about their own child's progress. Whilst acknowledging that meeting more regularly on a one-to-one basis is very time-consuming, especially in FS2 where there may be 25 children per teacher, this would provide another excellent opportunity to develop the relationship between parents and practitioners.

6. Practitioner qualifications

Most parents expressed their views as to the qualifications of FS practitioners and whether they felt this was appropriate for their children at this time in their education. However, many parents were unclear as to the qualifications of the different types of staff working with their children, and also the national requirements regarding qualifications and ratios imposed at higher levels. Many were unsure who were teachers and who were keyworkers and teaching assistants. This would suggest that parents had not been informed of the different

roles of the FS practitioners in the two parts of the stage, with the required or desired qualifications. This can be interpreted in more than one way. There is the possibility that schools, and more specifically headteachers, do not feel it is necessary to inform parents, and therefore, do not include it in their school prospectuses. This could be because they believe that parents are already aware of the school structure and staffing requirement. This may be true for FS2 as part of the primary school, but staffing structures and differences between FS1 and FS2 perhaps need further explanation. Verbal reinforcement, by using the correct terminology on a regular basis, would help to consolidate this knowledge and understanding, as well as emphasising the notion of a FS team.

Parents were unanimous in their knowledge that in FS2 children were taught by qualified teachers and they felt this was the right thing to happen. This perception suggests that they felt the nature of the work of a FS2 teacher, with the support of a teaching assistant, is different in some way to that of keyworkers in FS1. This notion seems to persist in spite of the promotion of the FS curriculum running through the whole stage by FS practitioners and in written material provided. Another factor which perhaps help to influence the continuation of this view is that statutory schooling begins for most children during the FS2 year and takes place within the primary school building. This is yet another indication that parents do not see the Foundation Stage as one seamless stage of education, but that a big change takes place when the transition to the school site and statutory schooling begins.

Many parents implied that they believed it is in the FS2\Reception class where the 'real work', especially in the areas of learning to read, write and do mathematics, begins. However, parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of children being taught by qualified teachers is born out by the findings of the

Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) report, which stated that

'the most highly qualified staff.....encouraged children to engage in activities with higher cognitive challenge' (2002, p3)

and furthermore, that

'trained teachers were most effective in their interactions with children, using the most sustained shared thinking interactions.' (2002, p1)

Similarly, in the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) report –

'Level 5 qualifications were consistently associated with better provision when compared to Level3\4 and Level2.' This supports recent initiatives to ensure that those who manage and lead early years settings should be trained teachers.' (2004, p11)

A number of parents held the view that the role of teachers is to teach older children. This perception was also evident when some parents felt it was inappropriate for a teacher to be in FS1. This would suggest that many parents are unaware that teachers can be, and indeed are, trained for working with children in the non-statutory age group. This serves as another example of information, which would be useful for parents to have access to, perhaps in the school booklets or through personal profiles displayed in the setting. It would also highlight the fact that they are unaware of teachers' high level of training and expertise which influences practice, as found in the REPEY report:-

'less well qualified staff were significantly better as pedagogues when they were supervised by qualified teachers.' (p3, 2002)

In marked contrast to their views on FS2 practitioners, parents felt the personality and experience of having and bringing up their own children was far more important than formal qualifications and Qualified Teacher Status in the employment of practitioners in FS1. There is a perception that FS1 practitioners play a more 'motherly' role with the emphasis being on care and the acquisition of social skills, rather than education. This would reflect the findings of Grace (1998) in that parents are looking for 'safety, happiness and love' for their children.

'You want someone who will cuddle them....for a sense of security; someone you can trust.' (in Ball and Vincent, 2005, p565)

Once again this would suggest that parents view the roles of practitioners in FS1 and FS2 as fundamentally different, with the focus in FS1 being care, and in FS2, education.

Most parents saw the importance of training for all practitioners, and particularly practitioners without formal early years' qualifications attending training and gaining appropriate qualifications. They felt their children would derive benefit from the additional knowledge and development of skills which training would bring. This viewpoint was held in spite of the fact that parents appeared to be unaware of the ratios of qualified staff in FS1 settings required by Ofsted – another issue of which parents should be aware.

The specific nature of the training offered and received, both provided in-house and centrally by SCE, was not explored but it would be interesting to scrutinise the training to ascertain how comprehensive the programme was in terms of the range of areas effecting practitioners' work with parents and children and whether it included elements on working with parents and strategies for forming effective partnerships.

Alexander, of PLA, sees the issue of training for childcare professionals as likely to remain at the forefront in the years to come, and comments that

'The biggest challenge in the expansion of childcare is the need to recruit, train and sustain a qualified, integrated workforce.' (in Nursery World, 2004, p4)

8. Parental involvement

Parents responses in the areas of parental involvement were reflective of Hughes et al's findings of 1994 that

'parents, in general, are interested in their children's education and in particular with the progress made by their own child'. (p87)

Perhaps, not surprisingly, this seemed to take priority over involvement in education in the school setting, in the wider sense.

The majority of parents viewed their role in their child's education as that of supporting what was taking place in the school or setting and that they took the lead from the teacher or other professional practitioner. Perhaps parents need to have greater appreciation of the importance of their role as their child's first educators, and practitioners in the Foundation Stage should be even more proactive in promoting the notion of a parental partnership with their child's practitioner.

Perhaps practitioners and parents alike should be aware of SPEEL's findings that effective partnerships are created where

'Practitioners appear to understand and value parents' roles and contributions to their children's learning and development and this is reciprocated.' (2002, p2)

In FS1, parents were happy with the situation in which they were given opportunities to support their children, often in a general way, but knew that the choice was left to them. They felt that no pressure was imposed on them and they made the decision as to whether they would get involved, and how much and how often they would support their children's education.

However, in FS2, the issue was perceived very differently. In contrast, parents felt there was a greater expectation and pressure from FS2 practitioners and consequently, many experienced feelings of anxiety and guilt, if they could not commit the time or possess the expertise they believed was required - an acknowledgement that 'barriers to partnership can occur.' (Fitzgerald, 2004, p2) Most parents were very keen to support their children, in line with the need to conform to the perceived notion of a 'good parent' or, more specifically, 'good mothers.' (Vincent, 1996, p78) but many felt the expectation to conform to this ideal a challenge.

'mothers, especially in the early stages of their child's education, are subject to considerable pressure to conform to an idealized image of 'good mothering.' (p78)

It is unclear whether this notion came from messages spoken or more subtly conveyed by teachers or from elsewhere in the community or beyond, but parents implied that this failure to live up to the ideal and expectations left them feeling guilty and inadequate. (1996, p78) This would also result in teachers maintaining 'a position as dominant 'partners' in their relationships with parents.' (Vincent, 1996, p148)

For many parents, the task of offering support to their children became problematic due to the specific nature of the support requested. Some wanted to help but felt they had neither the in-depth knowledge of the FS curriculum nor of the methods by which their children learn and are taught. This was largely concentrated in the curriculum areas of reading and maths. They felt this knowledge was vital in enabling them to effectively support and consolidate children's learning at home. Many parents were aware that methods currently used were different to those they had been taught by, two or three of decades ago, but nevertheless did their best to help. I found most worrying the group of parents, perhaps the least confident and experiencing the most guilt, who were

insecure in their ability to help, and opted to offer no help rather than confuse children by using different teaching methods, ever mindful of the advice of the Warnock Report as long ago as 1978,

‘we recognize that many parents will be unable to bear this responsibility without help and we therefore recommend that reinforcement and skills should be provided for parents.’ (DES)

Yet also three decades later, the advice is just as valid.

For both these groups of parents, there was a sense of frustration and missed opportunity for themselves and their children. They were very keen for, and indeed some asked for my help in influencing, the provision of information and training sessions to enable them to better support their children’s learning. However, it would be interesting to know whether how far the request for parent workshops is perhaps a subconscious response to teachers’ high expectations of them and the wish to live up to the notion of the ‘good parent.’

It may be expected that over time the traditional parent\teacher relationship will slowly disappear in favour of a shared ‘partnership.’ However, it is possible that the reality may be very different, or, as Smith comments, that not all parents want to be involved and prefer the traditional teacher\parent relationship - ‘for every set of opportunities, there is often a set of obstacles.’ (1994, p79)

Currently the government’s 10 year Childcare Strategy and a number of related measures and developments are beginning to be put into place. There is a possibility that these could impact on, and may in fact work against, parents sharing responsibility for their children’s learning and development, thus reducing the level of involvement in their children’s education. These in turn could discourage the preferred development of partnerships, as described in the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage document -

'When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on the child's development and learning,' (2000, p9)

in favour of some parents moving towards abdicating responsibility for some aspects of their children's development, or as Smith urges,

'Parents need to acknowledge the importance of their role as a child's first educators and not automatically abdicate their responsibility once a child enters a pre-school or school setting'.
(1994, p77)

In line with the 2004 Children Act and its 'Every Child Matters' agenda (2003), schools and early years' settings are expected to take more responsibility for the well-being of the child. Practitioners are required to promote the five outcomes for children - being health, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic well-being. In addition, the extended schools programme, which by 2010 will be to offer care for children from 8am to 6pm daily, with such initiatives as Wales' free breakfast clubs, alongside an increased entitlement in funded provision for 3 and 4 year olds in 3,500 Children's Centres by 2010, is likely to result in young children spending more time away, with the accompanying responsibility removed, from their parents.

Recommendations

The purpose of my study was to try to make a difference to the quality of provision for children in the Foundation Stage of education. Always mindful of Fitzgerald's words :-

'It takes commitment, time and a range of skills for early years settings to establish effective partnerships.' (2004, p2)

the following recommendations, derived from the findings in Chapter 5 and resulting discussions above, are made in the hope of improving and enhancing FS provision for parents and children. Some recommendations will be very specific to and will focus solely on the two SCE Cyprus schools in the study. Other recommendations may have more general implications and could apply to a wider audience such as other SCE schools and possibly even those in England.

Recommendations made relate to:-

1. Parents' knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage
2. Teaching and learning methods
3. Gender issues
4. Parents' relationship with practitioners
5. Qualifications of practitioners
6. The role of parents in their child's education

1. Parents' knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage

The varying levels of parental knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage, the age range it covers and its curriculum would suggest that schools and settings should examine the written information available to parents on and before the entry of their children into one of the FS classes.

Information should be clear and comprehensive yet concise, avoiding any unexplained educational jargon. The information supplied needs to be of two types – national requirements and local provision. There should be relevant

sections from QCA's in 'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage ' (2000), followed by a clear explanation of what form the FS takes, and how and where it operates in the specific location.

This should be followed up by the opportunity to access further information, which should be on-going and presented in a number of formats. This should include the terminology used, line management and staffing details with ratios for each of the year groups, awareness of QCA Foundation Stage curriculum documentation and how to access it. Specific curriculum information, in the form of medium and short term planning, should be displayed and accessible for parents in FS1 and FS2.

Children either start FS1 as a group at the beginning of the term after their third birthday or when there is a regimental change, or enter into FS1 or FS2 at any time during the academic year according to when they arrive with their families in Cyprus. Different provision should be made for the welcome and induction of parents in these two groups.

For a new cohort of children entering at the beginning of Foundation Stage 1, parents should be invited to attend a meeting and be given information, both verbally and in a written format, as described above, in advance of children starting. If possible, they and their child should then have opportunity to meet their child's practitioner, preferably before entry. This is currently in place and largely works well so these parents tend to be the best informed and consequently have the best understanding. This combination of verbal and written information, coupled with on-going contact and more formal meetings with teachers and keyworkers, generally seems to produce the best informed parents. This practice should be continued and extended.

Individual children and their parents arriving during the year rarely have access to a scheduled group meeting. These parents would benefit from more individual time and attention on arrival, and, as well as being given written and verbal information, should be made aware of the range of opportunities for involvement. Although this would increase the FS leader or teacher's time commitment, and cannot be planned for in advance, these parents have an equal entitlement to quality provision for their children including practitioners' time on arrival.

Holding parents' mornings or afternoons, at which one-to-one interviews take place to discuss children's progress, have been well-attended and valued by parents. They serve to extend parents' understanding of the curriculum and related assessment, when applied to everyday practice in relation to their own child. Although time-consuming to carry out, especially in FS2 with different adult:ratios, this programme of interviews should be continued and, if possible, extended to meetings on a more regular basis, allowing sufficient time for in-depth discussion. This measure would not only increase parents' understanding of the curriculum, as their child progresses through the stage, but would also serve to develop the relationship between parent and practitioner.

When explaining the details of the FS curriculum, practitioners must be aware of the need to, and have the confidence to, emphasise the requirement to teach all six areas of learning and explain the content and value of each of them. In FS1, parents are aware of and believe the focus should be on Personal, Social and Emotional Development, but in FS2, Knowledge and Understanding of the World, Creative Development and Physical Development should be emphasised and not be overshadowed by Communication, Language and Literacy and Mathematical Development. Furthermore, in practice, in order to provide a broad

and balanced curriculum for young children, time for teaching and learning across these six areas should be allocated appropriately. Pressure from KS1 teachers and others, inside and outside school, should be resisted in the interests of the needs of the children at a given point in time.

Parents need to be aware that the two parts of the Foundation Stage, although currently located on different sites, with different hours, different staffing requirements and ratios, and bridging the pre-statutory and statutory education, are in fact the same stage of education. While FS terminology is in place, more needs to be done to promote the nursery or pre-school and reception classes as the Foundation Stage. As parents still perceive a significant change when children move from FS1 to FS2, a smooth and stress-free transition must be planned for. Factors which could contribute to this are practitioners classroom layouts, daily routines and approaches to learning initially remaining the same; meetings and information for parents to keep them informed of local procedures and national requirements of curriculum and assessment; a planned programme of visits by the FS2 practitioners to the FS1 children, not only to get to know the children themselves, but also to have some knowledge of the types of routines and activities they have been experiencing; visits by the children to their future classroom to enable them to familiarise themselves with the classroom, playground, school routines and layout. FS2 practitioners will make changes to routines and practice during the academic year, in preparation for the transfer to Year 1, but these should happen gradually and in line with children's levels of concentration, confidence and development. They must be guided at all times by the needs of the children at that point in time, in relation to their social, emotional and academic achievement and must resist pressure from the Key Stage 1 curriculum and teachers, school targets, plus inappropriate and unrealistic expectations of senior management.

One of the schools in my study already has advanced plans in train to build a new self-contained whole Foundation Stage building. When completed, the physical siting of the whole stage in one building should provide a real opportunity for parents to view the FS as one complete stage of education. In addition, the FS Leader should then ensure that all practitioners work and plan together, children should interact in joint sessions and systems should run throughout the stage. It could provide the flexibility in staffing for practitioners to work with both age groups and address the issue of different ratios in the two years.

Over time, these measures may aid the acknowledgement of 'this very important stage of education' and recognise its 'distinct identity.' (QCA, 2000, p3)

2. Teaching and learning methods

The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (2000) promotes play as a means by which 'children learn with enjoyment and challenge' at this stage in their lives (p25). FS Leaders must promote, and practitioners must share, this common ethos, which runs throughout the whole stage, and, which in turn, must be reflected in the learning environment, planning and practice.

Although many parents are familiar with and use the term 'learn through play', there is still a need for practitioners to promote this philosophy for young children's learning and demonstrate what it means when put into practice on a daily basis. Schools and settings need to address this in a number of ways. Firstly, an open invitation should be issued to all parents to see an FS class at work, so that the theory of the 'Guidance for the Foundation Stage' document can be better understood, when put into practice. They would have the opportunity to see the structure and routine of the session, see how the curriculum is delivered

through the range of opportunities offered, see how practitioners interact with children, and consequently, understand what their children are learning.

Secondly, the provision of a series of workshops would enable parents to take part in typical FS activities across all six areas of learning, appropriate for children across the whole stage, thus showing not only a common approach but also the continuity and progression. The learning which occurs could be explained in the context of the 'Stepping Stones' (QCA, 2000) and related to past and future achievement. This type of session would inevitably include information and increase parents knowledge on how children learn at this time in their lives.

3. Gender issues

In a male-dominated military environment, the issues of equal opportunities and discrimination on the grounds of gender are ones which practitioners and others should continue to promote through any possible means and at every opportunity. However, this should be placed in the context of equal opportunities in its wider sense. This should include the promotion of anti-bias and anti-discriminatory practice relating to race, culture, religion and disability.

4. Parents' relationship with practitioners.

Headteachers and Foundation Stage Leaders must be mindful that for teachers and other practitioners,

'The idea of partnership with parents is for some an integral and essential part of their work, whilst for others it is a threatening prospect.' (Nutbrown, 1999, p132)

FS Leaders and practitioners should make every effort to offer opportunities to extend the parent\practitioner relationship and the notion of 'partnership' between

parent and practitioners, as outlined in and required by the QCA Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage document (2000, p9). However, it must be clear to all what the focus is to be and what this 'partnership' should look like, thus avoiding the possibility of a 'fuzzy rationale' which may produce a situation in which neither parents nor practitioners have a real understanding of what they are working towards. It is also worth asking the question whether the aim of developing the relationship is to go further than 'asserting school values over those of parents.' (Edwards and Warin, 1999, p232) While parents may wish to access information about the school\setting and make approaches to practitioners with this intention, this must not be confused with either 'dialogue' or partnership, but rather forms part of the induction of parents and children into school. However, it does provide an opportunity, a starting point in building a relationship, from which a future partnership may be established.

Practitioners must always be mindful that their role is to make the approaches and offer a road to partnership, while acknowledging and respecting the fact that some parents prefer to retain elements of a more traditional relationship, especially with their child's teacher, for their own reasons.

In order to establish and maintain an effective relationship, practitioners need to promote themselves as being 'approachable', and available to parents on a daily basis. This will most likely take the form of regular short exchanges or conversations about the child on more general issues, which helps the relationship to grow slowly over time. Once successfully established in FS1, FS2 teachers and teaching assistants should try to continue and built on those relationships. However, this can be problematic, as in FS2 there is less daily contact due to the promotion of age-related independence for children, with many children travelling to and from school by bus, and children coming into classrooms without support.

Teachers could perhaps do more, and look for ways to promote and facilitate this contact; by operating for example a relaxed start and finish to the session in line with FS1 practice, in order for the teacher or teaching assistant to be available to parents and have time to talk. In addition, teachers could encourage parents to strike a balance between promoting the independence of their child by travelling to school by bus, and meeting with the teacher weekly for an informal exchange of information. This could take the form of parents picking up their children at the end of a week, in order to spend a few minutes, reviewing the activities and main events of their child's week.

As mentioned above, practitioners could seek to extend the programme of informal parents' meetings and parents' evenings, and although time-consuming, should see this is an effective method of developing the parent/practitioner relationship.

5. Qualifications of practitioners

Parents need to be made fully aware of national requirements and SCE's provision in terms of the staffing of its Foundation Stages. This may take the form of written information in welcome booklets or schools brochures. It must be made particularly clear in the case of FS1, where some uncertainty has existed, perhaps due to the fact that there is a diverse range of provision in the UK. As FS2 classes are school-based, parents seem to expect and understand that classes are taught by a teacher with a teaching assistant. While it would not be viable to publish details of individual practitioners, due to regular high turn over of support staff, details of roles & required qualifications could be given out.

Parents need to be made aware who is the keyworker, teacher and teaching assistant in the room or setting. A uniform approach to informing parents of the specific personalities in a room and their roles and responsibilities should be adopted across the whole stage. One such method, projecting the impression of a personal and friendly approach, could be to display photographs at the doorway of each room, giving names, roles, qualifications achieved or working towards, and perhaps, a short personal resume.

Parents should to be made aware of training undertaken by members of staff, as all training is likely to benefit their children in some way. This may be individual or group training, in-house or by an external provider. Notification could take the form of notices in the weekly newsletter or a message written on school or class parents' notice boards. This is particularly important when practitioners achieve accredited qualifications. It serves to raise the status and credibility of practitioners and, in turn, that of the setting.

Although the workforce of the Foundation Stages in the two schools in my study exceeds the national requirements in terms of required levels of qualifications, further training and development is still needed. The range of training opportunities offered needs to be extended further to take into account the diverse range of roles and qualifications of practitioners working in the Foundation Stage. When planning its early years training programme, SCE should consider the findings of the Key Elements of Effective Practice (KEEP) which requires

'committed, enthusiastic and reflective practitioners with a breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and understanding. Effective practitioners use their own learning to improve their work with young children and their families in ways which are sensitive, positive and non-judgemental.' (2005, Introduction)

The programme must include training for all FS practitioners on the important of working together 'with parents, carers and the wider community,' (KEEP, 2005,

Introduction) and a range of strategies as to how partnership with parents may be achieved.

Currently, there is a small but decreasing number of newly appointed keyworkers with neither relevant qualifications nor experience of working in the FS, ranging through to teachers with many years' experience as well as NPQH and masters' degrees. All practitioners' training needs must be catered for.

As practitioners in Cyprus schools are more than two thousand miles from the UK, they have limited access to training opportunities on offer there. In spite of being in possession of all QCA documentation and training materials, FS practitioners, and teachers in particular, who are generally in Cyprus for longer periods of time, worry that they may get 'out of touch' with initiatives and developments in England. Consequently, FS Leaders and practitioners must look to maximise the use of other types of training in Cyprus. These could include working alongside colleagues in the same or different year groups within their own school, visiting other schools and settings, modelling of good practice by teachers and FS Leaders, attending joint school support group meetings and assessment standardisation meetings, networking and working on joint initiatives with other schools and accessing recent educational periodicals and other publications.

In addition, SCE (Cyprus) runs a training programme, which reflects UK initiatives, as well as addressing the needs of Cyprus schools. This targets two distinct groups of FS practitioners: firstly, a group of new and inexperienced keyworkers and teaching assistants, and secondly, FS teachers in management positions. For new and inexperienced staff there is an initial basic 3-day course, which is also open to parent volunteers, followed, after a settling in period, by the NVQ Level 3 in Early Years Care and Education. Other training courses offered in-

house are related to developments in the school's improvement plan and current initiatives. For teachers, courses on offer are in the management of current initiatives and issues related to the FS. This programme needs to continue, evolving in line with UK developments.

With an increasing number of keyworkers and teaching assistants either arriving from the UK with NVQ Level 3 or an equivalent qualification or achieving it during their posting in Cyprus, there is a real demand for a Level 4 qualification to be offered. SCE needs to be able to support an appropriate qualification, such as the foundation degree, or encourage practitioners to take responsibility for finding a course which they can access at a distance; such as those offered by the Open University. They must provide funding for this.

Similarly, a further group - teachers who do not hold management positions – have limited appropriate training opportunities. This group all have a degree, with QTS but no further accredited training is currently available. Some teachers in recent years have accessed master's degrees and other post-graduate training courses through UK universities, which SCE has supported with funding, but SCE could do more to promote and support the achievement of such qualifications, and thus, enhance the knowledge and skills of its teachers.

As a means of improving the level of qualifications and further enhancement of the quality of FS provision, SCE should seek to create more stability in its FS workforce. Teachers are employed from the UK on permanent contracts, while keyworkers and teaching assistants are dependants of military and MOD civilian personnel, who have no control over postings in and out of Cyprus. As SCE has no control or influence in these postings, and the disruption they cause it should look to other solutions. One solution could be to employ a

number of Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs), or create posts requiring a level 4 qualification. They would be recruited from the UK as MOD civilians, in the same way as teachers are and be employed on a permanent basis. Due to the additional costs in employing personnel in such posts, the number would be small – perhaps one or two in each school. However, this measure must be weighed against further reducing the number of jobs available in an already small pool of employment opportunities for dependent personnel. These posts could carry significant management responsibility and either act in a ‘deputy’ capacity in the FS1 setting, where there is currently only one teacher, or as a line manager for the teaching assistants in FS2. These posts and their related pay scale would also create a career structure and incentive to gain further qualifications for non-teachers in the Foundation Stage.

6. The role of parents in their child’s education

Foundation Stage Leaders and practitioners must promote the importance of the parents’ role as their child’s first educators and alongside this, the notion of parental partnerships with their child’s practitioners. As mentioned above, good communication and regular contact, daily if possible, between parents and practitioners, as epitomised by the keyworker system, is instrumental in developing this relationship over time.

Subsequently, a variety of opportunities should be offered to parents to enable them to establish a partnership and invitations to participate in supporting their children’s education should be extended. It must be acknowledged that parents will want to participate at many different levels according to their wishes or needs, and it is inappropriate that pressure should be exerted on parents.

Similarly, practitioners must take care not to promote the image of a 'good mother' – a role many mothers may feel they can never live up to. As Fitzgerald suggests

'Practitioners need to show acceptance for the choices each parent and family make in how to carry out their parenting role.' (2004, p15)

At the same time, practitioners could try to promote a move away from the traditional role of fathers solely providing financially for their family and acting as a good role model for their children, towards a more extended role of fathers taking an active and supportive position in their children's early education, with greater involvement in the social role of fathering. (Fitzgerald, 2004, p55)

In response to specific requests from FS2 parents, information in how to support their children in learning to read, write and do mathematics would be of benefit to all parents. Firstly, parents need to become aware that learning to read is a lifelong process starting at birth, that takes place at many different times and different contexts at home and at school, indoors and out. Secondly, parents need the opportunity to access information on the curriculum and current methods of teaching and learning employed in the specific school or setting. Parents could access this in a number of ways. One model could be

- Workshop sessions run by teachers to explain how reading, writing and maths develop from a very early age, through on-going and informal methods. This should be followed by an explanation of the curriculum requirement, demonstrating how reading, writing and maths are taught and the specific strategies and range of materials used. Guidance on the amount of time to be spent in support and how often would also be helpful.
- Parents sitting in and observing or supporting practitioners interacting with children in lessons or activities
- Written information with similar information to act as an 'aide memoire' and including further ideas for use at home. This would also be available for parents who have been unable to attend other types of sessions.
- For parents who are unable to access these opportunities, due to work or other commitments, sessions of a different kind could be offered - scheduled out of working hours. Perhaps, video material of their own child's class during the different parts of a typical session could form the basis for discussion and explanation.

These measures would serve as a contribution to

'boost the parents' own sense of responsibility and confidence in their ability to contribute to their own children's education.' (Davie et al, 1984, p142)

Appendix

Parental Interview Schedule

Background\factual questions

1. RAF, Army or civilian
2. Relation to child
3. Sex and age of child (F1 or F2)
4. Position in family
5. Did siblings attend pre-compulsory setting\what type?
6. At what age did you leave school\full-time education?
7. How long have you been in Cyprus?

Foundation Stage expectations

8. What can you remember of your own experiences at this age
9. What if anything does the term Foundation Stage mean to you?
10. Where did you get this information?
11. What do you feel are the most important things you want for your child in this stage of education?
12. Are these the same things as last\next year?
13. Are these the same things as you would want for a boy\girl?
14. What do you feel about how children learn at this age?
15. What qualifications if any do you feel staff, who work in the FS should have?
16. What sort of relationship would you like\expect to have with our child's teacher\keyworker?
17. What do you feel your role is in your child's education at this stage?
18. Would you like to be more involved? If so, how?
19. Do you have any long term aims or aspirations for your child?

HM (Amended May 03)

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