



WHAT DOES “SCHOOL READY” REALLY MEAN?

A research report from
Professional Association
for Childcare and Early Years

September 2013

Executive summary

The Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), a standard setting professional association for everyone working in childcare and early years in England and Wales, has published a research report into what the term “school ready” means for childcare professionals, parents and primary school teachers. The key findings of this report are as follows:

- 1) Childcare professionals, parents and teachers interpret the term school ready in a way that is in stark contrast to that often stated by policy makers and regulators in England and more reflective of the approach taking by policy makers in Wales. The majority of each group of respondents, including 97% of childcare professionals, agree that the term should be defined as children who:
 - have strong social skills
 - can cope emotionally with being separated from their parents
 - are relatively independent in their own personal care
 - have a curiosity about the world and a desire to learn.
- 2) For a child to be considered school ready, respondents stated that cognitive and academic skills such as reading and writing are not as important as children being confident, independent and curious. Teachers were the least likely, at 4%, to rate understanding of reading, arithmetic and writing (RAW skills) as key importance to being school ready. Only a third of childcare professionals and a quarter of parents believe that a definition of school ready should include a child having a basic understanding of RAW skills.
- 3) Both teachers and childcare professionals (58% and 40% respectively) stated that they felt there needed to be greater emphasis on play in England. They, echoing evidence from international research, recognise that play best supports children’s social and emotional development, as well as their creativity. The report shows concern that the importance of play in the early years is being neglected and risks being eroded even further by current government proposals in England. This erosion may lead to the “schoolification” of our early years, moving England’s approach further away from countries like Finland which are internationally recognised for high quality early years provision and, indeed the play based approach of the Foundation Phase in Wales which supports children from 3 to 7 years.
- 4) Almost half of all respondents – childcare professionals, parents and teachers alike – identified a lack of communication and common expectation between each other as a barrier to preparing a child for school. Starting school is a time of transition. It requires cooperation between individuals, families and systems. PACEY believes it is crucial to overcome this barrier.
- 5) Respondents agreed that being school ready is about more than just the child being ready for school. This transition needs the support and cooperation of all individuals involved, to create a holistic approach so a child has an enjoyable and positive experience. Schools should be ready for the child as much as the child be ready for school, helping smooth the transition between play based early learning and more formal classroom based teaching. Parents recognise that they are key to preparing their children for school, but need more information and support in achieving this. Key to this successful transition is positive cooperation between parents, childcare professionals and teachers.

The results of this study lead PACEY to make the following key recommendations:

1. Government should do more to promote play in early education.

England's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) provides a solid framework to support play. It has a strong evidence base and sector-wide support but there is growing concern that this focus on play is being eroded. Almost half of the childcare professionals surveyed felt that the EYFS could benefit from the inclusion of even more play. PACEY believes government needs to do more to promote child-led as well as adult-led play. The tools and expertise for this are already in the sector – this isn't about needing more money. It's about communicating the importance of play via policy, best practice sharing, qualifications and training.

PACEY will work with childcare professionals and its partners including qualification awarding bodies, to ensure that there is an increased emphasis on the importance of play for children's learning and development incorporated into planned new early years qualifications, professional development and best practice sharing.

2. The early years sector must commit to reducing the communication barriers that hinder children's transition from childcare to school.

These barriers are not costly to overcome and can be addressed by sharing good practice and reinforcing positive relationships between childcare and teaching professionals to identify the common expectations they share in the EYFS and Foundation Phase.

PACEY and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) will work with their members to facilitate increased understanding between these professionals.

3. Parents need to be provided with the information and support they require to help children move from childcare to school.

PACEY is going to work with early years stakeholders to develop resources to provide parents with the information they need to support children through this important transition.

Part 1) Introduction

In the past 20 years the term “school ready” has climbed the political agenda, not only in England and Wales, but internationally. And in the last few months, the subject has been at the top of the news agenda. Preparing a child for school is no longer solely considered an individual responsibility for their parent or carer – it is now framed as a social responsibility in which parents, childcare professionals, teachers, other children’s professionals and importantly government must play significant roles. The multiple measures and extensive investment that have been put into improving quality childcare is evidence of this. In particular attention has been paid to investing in programmes which hope to increase school readiness of young children from low income families, such as the current 2-year-old offer.

However there is no clear agreement on what the term “school ready” means, both in terms of what is expected from the child and in terms of what is expected from those involved in the transition, including childcare professionals, teachers and parents. This ambiguity has not only caused confusion but has also led to criticism and even controversy about the use of the term. Some interpretations are narrow and focus on children’s cognitive, educational development. Other interpretations are pedagogical and focus on children’s social and emotional development as being more important than their cognitive, educational development at this early stage.

In England, there has been an increasing focus on cognitive, educational development in early years (through the development of new qualifications for childcare professionals, proposed changes to how children are assessed at age 5 or younger and a focus on structured learning and how it is delivered in countries like France).

This approach is in contrast with the “social pedagogic” approach which stresses the need for a broad preparation for life that goes beyond school-based curriculum. This

tradition is found in some Nordic countries and, to an extent in Wales, where early education is more focused on preparing children’s confidence and social skills. Early years curriculums in these countries are not prescriptive, in terms of providing a checklist of skills a child must have before they enter school, or even what they should learn. Instead they are statements of purpose, outlining the values of early education. They provide guidelines for those involved, including parents, about the values and purposes of early education and care.¹

This broader framework is of course more difficult to measure and translate into the inspection and regulation framework that operates in England, looking to assess progress towards an agreed set of child outcomes (as described in the EYFS). It is also more challenging to translate into the attainment measures that primary schools focus on beyond the reception year. Recent proposals to remove the broader EYFS Profile assessment (developed for every child at the end of the year in reception) and replace it with a narrower assessment before they start school, is evidence of the conflict between these two interpretations of school ready that still remain in England. Examining different international interpretations of the term school ready can only achieve so much. Analysing interpretations of those involved in children’s transition into school – childcare professionals, parents and teachers – will go far in providing clarity on what to include in a definition of being school ready. Importantly, sharing experiences and understanding what being school ready means, will provide insight into how best to ensure children are ready to enter a primary school reception class² and how this can be improved.

¹ OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Education and Care*, OECD Publishing (<http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/37425999.pdf>)

² The EYFS is compulsory until Key Stage 1 however most children in England begin reception class at age 4, and for most parents and carers this is when school life begins. Therefore for the purpose of this report the start of ‘school’ is defined as Reception.

In this light the research for this project focused on three interlinked questions:

1. What does the term school ready mean?
2. How do childcare professionals, parents and teachers prepare children for school?
3. What challenges do they face?

Part 2) What does the term “school ready” mean?

At the age of 4, when most children begin in a primary school reception class, they arrive with a host of different experiences, skills and expectations. They have come from different families, different environments and, often different childcare settings, whether these are nurseries, pre-schools, childminders or nannies. Most children in England and Wales will have benefitted from some early education through the free entitlement that all 3 and 4 year olds can access in registered childcare settings such as nurseries, childminders or pre-schools. Children all arrive at school at different stages of development.

As early years education experts Whitebread and Bingham put it, “they come through the gates of the institution with a bundle of diverse previous experiences, a bank of knowledge and skills already mastered, a brain wired up and eager to absorb masses of new information and, most importantly, a disposition towards learning.”³

The term school ready therefore can be interpreted as an attempt to measure this diversity, to capture what skills and abilities children should have as a minimum before they start reception class. However this has not been straightforward. Most definitions are multi-faceted, with variations in terms of the amount of importance placed on different qualities. For example the Accounting Early for Lifelong Learning (AcE) project uses government recommendations and initiatives to provide a programme for parents and practitioners to review and assess a child’s development in the three prime areas of the EYFS.⁴

³ Whitebread, D. & Bingham, S. (2011). *School readiness: a critical review of perspectives and evidence*. TACTYC Occasional Paper No. 2: TACTYC.

⁴ Bertram, T and Pascal, C (2002) *Early Years Educations: An International Perspective*, Centre for Research in Early Childhood, Birmingham

In brief, the AcE Programme recognises the international evidence that children’s long-term attainment is crucially shaped by their development in four key areas:

1. Language development and communication skills
2. Attitudes and dispositions
3. Social competence and self esteem
4. Emotional wellbeing.

However Pascal and Bertram, leaders of the programme, are clear that “school ready” should be synonymous with “life ready”. They “feel that this term [school ready] is too narrow and underestimates what the role of early childhood education is about and what are central concerns in the development of the young child.” Pascal and Bertram’s (2009) definition therefore does not emphasise academic skills such as numeracy and literacy. Although they point out that these skills are in no hierarchy, they do specify that emotional wellbeing is the most critical.

To an extent Graham Allen MP agrees. In a highly influential report “Early Intervention: The Next Steps” Allen provides a framework for assessing early intervention programmes which target children from troubled families. In this report school ready is defined as “having the social and emotional foundation skills to progress in speech, perception, ability to understand numbers and quantities, motor skills, attitude to work, concentration, memory and social conduct; having the ability to engage positively and without aggression with other children and the ability to respond appropriately to requests from teachers”.⁵ Here, although emotional wellbeing is stressed as critical, social skills are given more priority, but academic skills such as numeracy are also included.

In the USA, school readiness is defined in a similar way, with importance placed on social and emotional skills but matched with a variety of other skills, including academic, which are seen as just as

⁵ Allen, G (2011) *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*, HMG

important. High (2008) provides the most representative US definition⁶:

Readiness in the child is defined by:

- Physical wellbeing and motor development, including health status, growth, and disability
- Social and emotional development, including turn-taking, cooperation, empathy, and the ability to express one's own emotions
- Approaches to learning, including enthusiasm, curiosity, temperament, culture, and values
- Language development, including listening, speaking, and vocabulary, as well as literacy skills, including print awareness, story sense, and writing and drawing processes
- General knowledge and cognition, including sound-letter association, spatial relations, and number concepts.

What do experienced professionals and parents think?

We asked childcare professionals, teachers, and parents what they consider the most important skills for children to have in order for them to cope with the demands of school, and make the most of the opportunities provided.

Social skills

As Figures 1, 2, and 3 show, the majority of childcare professionals, teachers, and parents believe that it is important to include strong social skills in the definition of being school ready. There is of course an extensive list of social skills which children will need to master before starting school. High (2008) describes social and emotional development as turn-taking, cooperation, empathy, and the ability to express one's

own emotions. There are many ways that children can pick up good social skills, including playing with other children and learning from their parents and childcare workers.

One childcare professional felt that the term meant:

"Children who have the necessary interpersonal skills to be part of a large class and play and learn with other children. It does concern me that others mean something more formal when they refer to school readiness."

Childhood social skills are closely linked to learning abilities. Research presented at the 2007 meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development by a team of Michigan State University researchers indicate that a child's social skills at age 3 could predict his or her future academic performance.⁷ For example, being confident in interacting and talking to other children will make the child's experience of school much more enjoyable and will enable them to learn other skills, such as numeracy and literacy at school.

As one teacher agreed:

"Social interaction skills are key to future success in learning, whatever a child's academic and creative potential may be in the future".

Independence and self sufficiency

The majority of responses indicated that independence and self sufficiency are important both in terms of personal care and confidence. This will cover many things from a child's willingness to be separated from their parents for a number of hours, to being able to use the toilet independently.

These skills are crucial for children to have when they start school. Without them, the transition will be stressful and upsetting –

⁶ High (2008) *Early Learning and Benchmarks A Guide to Young Children's Learning and Development: From Birth to Kindergarten Entry*
<http://www.k12.wa.us/earlylearning/pubdocs/earlylearningbenchmarks.pdf>

⁷ Society for Research in Child Development (2007)
<http://srcd.org/publications/child-development>

damaging their confidence and enthusiasm for learning. However independence and self sufficiency are not something that you can simply give to children.

As early years expert and PACEY President Penny Tassoni says:

*"It is something that children develop inwardly as a result of a range of experiences. It takes ages to build up and is something that we should focus on in the years as well as months before children start school. To build up in a child the sense that they are 'capable', they need plenty of experiences of managing things for themselves as well as making their own decisions."*⁸

Curiosity about the world and a desire to learn

Given that the compulsory age for children to start school in England is young compared to other countries (including Wales), it is understandable that childcare professionals, teachers and parents feel that for a child to be school ready it is not just what they *have* learnt but that they have the *desire* to learn. This fits in well with the concept of the foundation years – preparing children for school is about laying the foundations so that they are enthusiastic and excited about learning.

This is clearly evidenced by the fact that only a third of childcare professionals, 13% of teachers and a quarter of parents felt that a good understanding of reading, writing and literacy was important to include in the definition (See box 2). If children are pressurised to achieve academically at an inappropriately young age then this will actually be detrimental to their future outcome.⁹ Being school ready is therefore about igniting enthusiasm – allowing the child to explore ideas and concepts.

⁸ PACEY (2013) *The Childcare Professional*, Proletariat Ltd

⁹ Kern, M. and Friedman, H. (2008) *Early educational milestones as predictors of lifelong academic achievement, midlife adjustment, and longevity*. J Appl Dev Psychol. 2008; 30(4): 419–430.

One parent agrees:

"It is important to talk to children about the world around them, joining in with their enquiries and igniting curiosity. Children should be provided with opportunities so that they become engrossed in activities of their own choice."

Table 2.1

Only a third of childcare professionals believe that a definition of "school ready" should include a child having a good basic understanding of reading, writing and arithmetic.

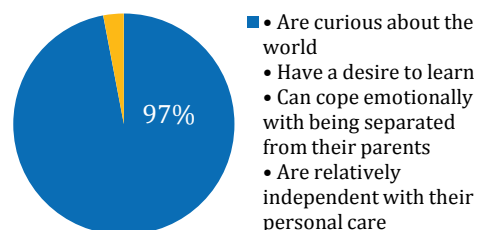
Only 4% of teachers felt that it was most important for a definition of the term "school ready" to include a child having a basic understanding of reading, writing and arithmetic

Only a quarter of parents agreed that a definition of "school ready" should include a child with a basic understanding of reading writing and arithmetic.

Childcare professionals' interpretation of the term "school ready" is in stark contrast to that often stated by policy makers and regulators in England.

Figure 1

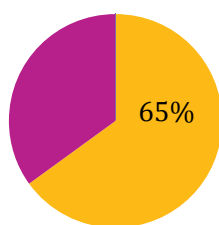
97% of Childcare Professionals agree that the term "school ready" should be defined as children who:



Teachers' interpretation of the term "school ready" showed that

Figure 2

65% of teachers believe that it is important for the term school ready to be defined as children who:

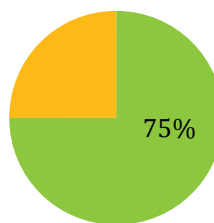


- Are confident and happy to be in school for a number of hours without seeing parent or carer
- Are curious about the world and have a desire to understand more/learn
- Have strong social skills to interact well with other children and adults

Parents' interpretation of the term "school ready" showed that

Figure 3

75% of parents agreed that the term school ready should be applied to children who are:



- Independent with their own personal care
- Confident and happy to be in school for a number of hours without seeing parent or carer
- Strong social skills to interact well with other children and adults

Policy implications

PACEY's research shows that social skills, independence and curiosity are more important than academic skills. This is reinforced by numerous research reports that show that, "(T)he prescription of detailed learning goals linked to formal teaching may place children in a situation where they experience prolonged feelings of inadequacy, and may impact negatively on their self-esteem and motivation to learn".¹⁰

The OECD made a recommendation that early education and primary education should be more joined up in order for the transition not to be challenging for the child. However it is careful to specify that this should not mean adoption of "schoolification" policies and that there must be equal respect for early years and primary education traditions. "A more unified approach to learning should be adopted in both systems, recognising the contribution that the early childhood approach brings to

fostering key dispositions and attitudes to learning."¹¹

Early years education should be seen as a separate institution in itself, where children are supported to develop broad skills such as social confidence, independence and a willingness to learn instead of curriculum based skills. Rather than "schoolifying" early years education in this country, the government should consider incorporating early years style learning into Year 1, as is the case in other countries to ensure that early and primary education are more joined up and the transition is smooth.

10 Sylva, K. et al (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)* Project: Findings from Pre-school to end of Key Stage 1

¹¹ OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Education and Care*, OECD Publishing (<http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/37425999.pdf>)

Part 3) How to prepare children for school?

Early education policies and curriculums vary from country to country, depending on which approach to early education is favoured. This will influence the way in which childcare professionals, teachers and parents prepare children for school in that country.

However the effectiveness of various curriculums around the world are disputed, with some using a narrow educational perspective and some using the more broad social approach. The former stresses the need for literacy and numeracy skills, so for example, a child would be considered ready for school if they could count up to 10 and spell their own name. This is favoured by France and English speaking countries (with the exception of New Zealand)¹².

In contrast there is the 'social pedagogic' approach, which advocates the need for a broad preparation for life that goes beyond a school-based curriculum. This tradition is found in some Nordic and central European countries, where early years education is very play-based and focused on encouraging a child's confidence and social skills. This approach considers a child ready for school if they are confident in large groups and can display independence.

Bertram and Pascal (2002) highlight that despite this variation in policy there is almost universal agreement amongst early years experts that an active play-based pedagogy which encourages independence and self management is the most effective approach. In some countries, such as Finland, Sweden and Wales, a formal educational approach to early years education is actively discouraged.¹³ These countries follow the social pedagogic

approach which, "places trust in young children as agents of their own learning, as competent persons who desire to engage with the world and sees learning not only about the development of individual potential, but also how children successfully express themselves and interact with others."¹⁴

Supporters of this approach are wary of the "schoolification" of early years, fearing that by focusing too much on academic preparation for school, the importance of reading and writing overrides the importance of social skills and development. In the previous chapter we highlighted that childcare professionals, teachers and parents consider social skills, independence and curiosity to be highly significant for children when starting school. It is therefore important that we examine this approach in more detail, and look to countries whose policies are influenced by a social pedagogic approach.

Early childhood education and care in Sweden is known throughout the world to offer exemplar practice.¹⁵ In examining the Swedish pre-school environment, Lewis (2010) notes that in most environments there is very little labelling to promote numeracy and literacy, and the environment is designed to allow for free-flow play, including large amount of open floor space (rather than tables and chairs).¹⁶ In Wales, a Scandinavian-style 'learn through play' curriculum (the Foundation Phase) has been introduced for 3 to 7-year-olds. Following the launch of the Foundation Phase, the Education Minister in Wales, Jane Hutt, stated "Having drawn on international practice from countries such as Denmark, New Zealand and Sweden in

¹² OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Education and Care*, OECD Publishing (<http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/37425999.pdf>)

¹³ Bertram, T and Pascal, C (2002) *Early Years Educations: An International Perspective*, Centre for Research in Early Childhood, Birmingham

¹⁴ Ellyat, W (2008) *International Perspectives on Learning* <http://openeyecampaign.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/early-learning-international-perspectives.pdf>

¹⁵ Korpi, B. (2007) *The Politics of Pre-School-Intentions and Decisions Underlying the Emergence*. The Ministry of Education and Research

¹⁶ Lewis, A (2010) *Making sense of Swedish practice: is it that different from practice in Wales?* <http://www.tactyc.org.uk/pdfs/Reflection-Lewis.pdf>

introducing the Foundation Phase, we believe that the pay-off of this radical new way of learning will be long term and its impact will be felt for many years to come".¹⁷

Adopting this practice for the Foundation Phase has meant that instead of bringing early years education in closer line with primary education, the importance of play in early years education is emphasised and formal education does not commence until the child reaches 7.

Play is central to Wales' policy for early learning and development and although the terminology of school ready is very rarely used, play is seen as vital in preparing and supporting children into school. This is clearly highlighted by the fact that the Welsh Assembly Government, stated in a policy statement that "play is so critically important to all children in the development of their physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills that society should seek every opportunity to support it and create an environment that fosters it."¹⁸

The Welsh Government is adamant that decision making at all levels of government should include a consideration of the impact of those decisions on children's opportunities to play. It is viewed as a vital component of a child's life and crucial for the child's capacity for positive self-directed learning and development. Free flow play is seen as particularly important; "It is the very freedom and child centeredness of play that makes it such an effective and comprehensive learning process".

In contrast, preparing children for school in England and in France has focused more on cognitive development in the early years, and the acquisition of skills that children should develop as a result of classroom

experiences. The methods used to prepare children for school in England, France and the USA are aligned more closely with the methods used in primary education, in favour of teacher-centred and academic approaches. Although the EYFS in England was originally created as a play-based curriculum, in reality the early education approach is quite different from that of Sweden and Wales in that play is usually positioned solely as a method for learning numeracy and literacy.

As one teacher feels:

"I do believe the current curriculum has a lot to offer the children, however I still feel there needs to be more focus on life skills in the early years as opposed to always focusing on how well they can read and write. Of course these areas are important, but are they necessary at this age? Look at Scandinavian countries – they don't learn to read until they are 7 but this has had nothing but a positive effect on the child's development. I think Scandinavian way of schooling is certainly worth looking at."

For example, in France play is often confined to table-top games, with little focus on outdoor discovery play nor the provision of a wide choice of activities that are features of the Nordic pre-school.¹⁹ The natural learning strategies of young children – play, exploration of the outdoors and freedom of movement, relations and discussion with other children within the classroom – are not always encouraged as much as they should be, particularly as children move closer to beginning school. This is worrying given that evidence shows that when the learning experiences flow from the children's ideas, there is more likely to be a good match between what the children are ready to learn and activities offered in the classroom than in a more adult-led approach.²⁰

¹⁷ Ellyat, W (2008) *International Perspective on Learning* (<http://openeyecampaign.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/early-learning-international-perspectives.pdf>)

¹⁸ Welsh Assembly Govt (2008) <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/publications/guidance/3291781/?lang=en>

¹⁹ OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Education and Care*, OECD Publishing (<http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/37425999.pdf>)

²⁰ Lewis, A (2010) *Making sense of Swedish practice: is it that different from practice in Wales?* <http://www.tactyc.org.uk/pdfs/Reflection-Lewis.pdf>

It is also a concern, because PACEY's research shows that how professionals and parents think children should be prepared is in stark contrast to what the government recommends. 40% of childcare professionals and 56% of teachers think that the EYFS should include more emphasis on play (see 3.1).

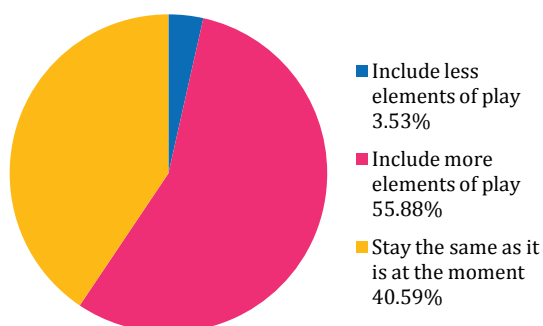
As one teacher commented:

"For children to be sat down doing 'formal' learning at far too young an age is very pressurising for us and them. Children need to be learning through play and concentrating on social skills and creative development".

And one childcare professional:

"Play can help learning to be fun in such a way that the child does not realise he/she is learning anything"

3.1 Teachers: Would you like to see the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Curriculum:



Policy Implications

Findings from this project have shown that childcare professionals, teachers, and parents value the role that play has in preparing children for school. It is therefore imperative that policy reflects this. The EYFS is commendable in that it is play based but there is the risk that it is too open to interpretation, especially if childcare professionals are not trained to have a full

understanding of the importance of play and the theory behind this. For this reason childcare and early years qualifications must reflect this.

The development of the new Level 3 early years qualification, the Early Years Educator, must take into consideration the role that play has in preparing children for school. One of the main concerns identified on examining the criteria for this qualification is that it neglects to emphasise the importance of play for children's learning and development. The word, 'teach' is used a great deal in the proposed criteria. This implies that a child's environment is purely education based and doesn't acknowledge the importance of play in the early years in supporting a child's communication and language and literacy skills, as well as their physical, social and emotional development.

This is clearly a concern across the sector with the NUT stating:

*"Play is not a word to be ashamed of – it is fundamental best practice in terms of early years teaching and learning, and as such should have an explicit, central place within the criteria specifications."*²¹

Awarding bodies may recognise this and include play significantly in the development of the qualification, but this is not a given.

Policymakers in England can learn from countries like Wales and Sweden which have specific play policy statements. The EYFS is play based but it is open to varying degrees of interpretation. When combined with a greater focus on educational attainment in schools and potential changes to how children's development is assessed before they even start school, and it is clear that in England government needs to do more to promote the value of play to parents and professionals alike.

²¹ NUT (2013) *The response of the National Union of Teachers to the DfE Consultation on Early Years Educator qualifications* www.teachers.org.uk/files/EYE-Consult-Resp.docx

In the future newly trained childcare professionals may not realise the importance of play in supporting a child's development. This is because new early years qualification criteria do not include a strong focus on play.

Alongside this, the revised EYFS has been criticised for losing some of its original emphasis on play:

"The lack of recognition of the significance of play and playful learning in early childhood and the muddled attempt to pin down adult-led play rather than adults supporting child-led playful learning was noted as a significant weakness in the revised EYFS".²²

This is of concern given that recently the Department for Education has indicated that providers should use non-statutory guidance, *Early Years Outcomes*,²³ which provides no guidance on effective learning – such as the principle of play. Given the significance of play in the lives of children, both from their own accounts and from the brain sciences, as a minimum, policy makers in England should be promoting the value of play far more and could look to their counterparts in Wales or further afield as models of good practice.

²² Early Education (2011) *A summary of Early Education's response to the revised Early Years Foundation Stage consultation to the Department for Education*
http://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Revised%20EYFS%20consultation%20summary_0.pdf

²³ DfE (2013) *Early years Outcomes*
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-outcomes>

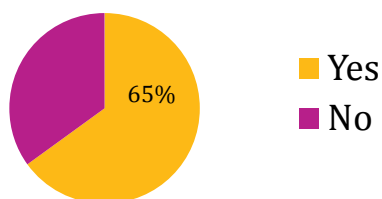
Part 4) More than just “ready children”

School readiness can be defined by more than just the different skills and abilities of the children. Some argue that it is more than just this one dimension and that it not only refers to how ready children are for school, but that it should also cover how ready schools and parents are to support children's transition.²⁴ Unicef (2012) provides a clear outline of this concept:

- 1) Ready children, focusing on children's learning and development
- 2) Ready schools, focusing on the practices of schools which foster and support a smooth transition for children into primary school e.g. parent engagement, and practice which advances the learning and development of all children
- 3) Ready families, focusing on parental and carer attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning and development.

However the fact that 65% of parents felt that for a child to be school ready it was necessary for them to attend a childcare setting before they start reception indicates that a fourth dimension should be added – ready childcare professionals.

Parents: Do you think it is necessary for children to attend a childcare setting to prepare them for school?



One parent's experience:

"I strongly believe that children who attend some form of childcare prior to starting

school are more likely to be 'school ready' than their peers who have had no experience of a childcare setting. My first-born did not attend a childcare setting until the term before she was due to start school and had a great deal of trouble settling in. My second child however attended a private day nursery from 8 months old and has always been very sociable and interactive and settled well when moving from her first nursery to the school nursery and is now very excited to be starting school in September."

There is strong evidence that early education makes a positive difference to children's school readiness. A recent study by the University of Oxford and NatCen Social Research shows that 2-year-olds who attended high quality childcare made more progress than children from similar backgrounds that remained at home or attended lower quality provision.²⁵ Numerous other studies show that high quality early years education from qualified childcare professionals has a significant influence on school readiness. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study found that high quality early education has particularly strong impacts on the cognitive and social development of disadvantaged children, and that these benefits last throughout primary school.²⁶

However, this can only be effective if there is a close working relationship between professionals and parents and carers – it is a pre-requisite for ensuring that the developmental needs of children from disadvantaged families are recognised. As Tickell (2012) rightly states, "it is imperative that these professionals work together across organisational boundaries, respecting different professional perspectives, and with parents and carers to

²⁴ Unicef (2012) *School Readiness: A conceptual framework* [http://www.unicef.org/education/files/Child2Child_ConceptualFramework_FINAL\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/education/files/Child2Child_ConceptualFramework_FINAL(1).pdf)

²⁵ Sylva et al (2008) EPPE 3-11: Final Report from the Primary Phase: Pre-school, School and Family Influences on Children's Development During Key Stage 2 (Age 7-11) DCSF-RR061.

²⁶ Sylva et al (2008) EPPE 3-11: Final Report from the Primary Phase: Pre-school, School and Family Influences on Children's Development During Key Stage 2 (Age 7-11) DCSF-RR061

understand and respond to children's needs".²⁷

This may be referring to a broad range of professionals but the principle still applies to teachers, childcare professionals, and parents. They all have a responsibility to ensure that children are ready for school and this can only work if they work together. It is therefore crucial to emphasise that childcare professionals must be included in as a dimension to school readiness.

One teacher stated:

"Children need to interact with their peers and this is not always available at home, they learn through play and interactions and engaging with their surroundings. Children can do this at home but in childcare and nursery settings they offer different experiences and trained early years staff can provide planned learning experiences."

Unicef's interpretation of school ready highlights the importance of collaborative working between childcare professionals, teachers and parents, "all three dimensions are important and must work in tandem, because school readiness is a time of transition that requires the interface between individuals, families and systems".²⁸ Each role is crucial in its own right but it is collaboration and communication which will improve children's school readiness. For this reason the challenges identified from the survey responses must be overcome:

- Childcare professionals agreed that two of the main barriers to preparing children for school were a lack of communication with the school (51%) and lack of common

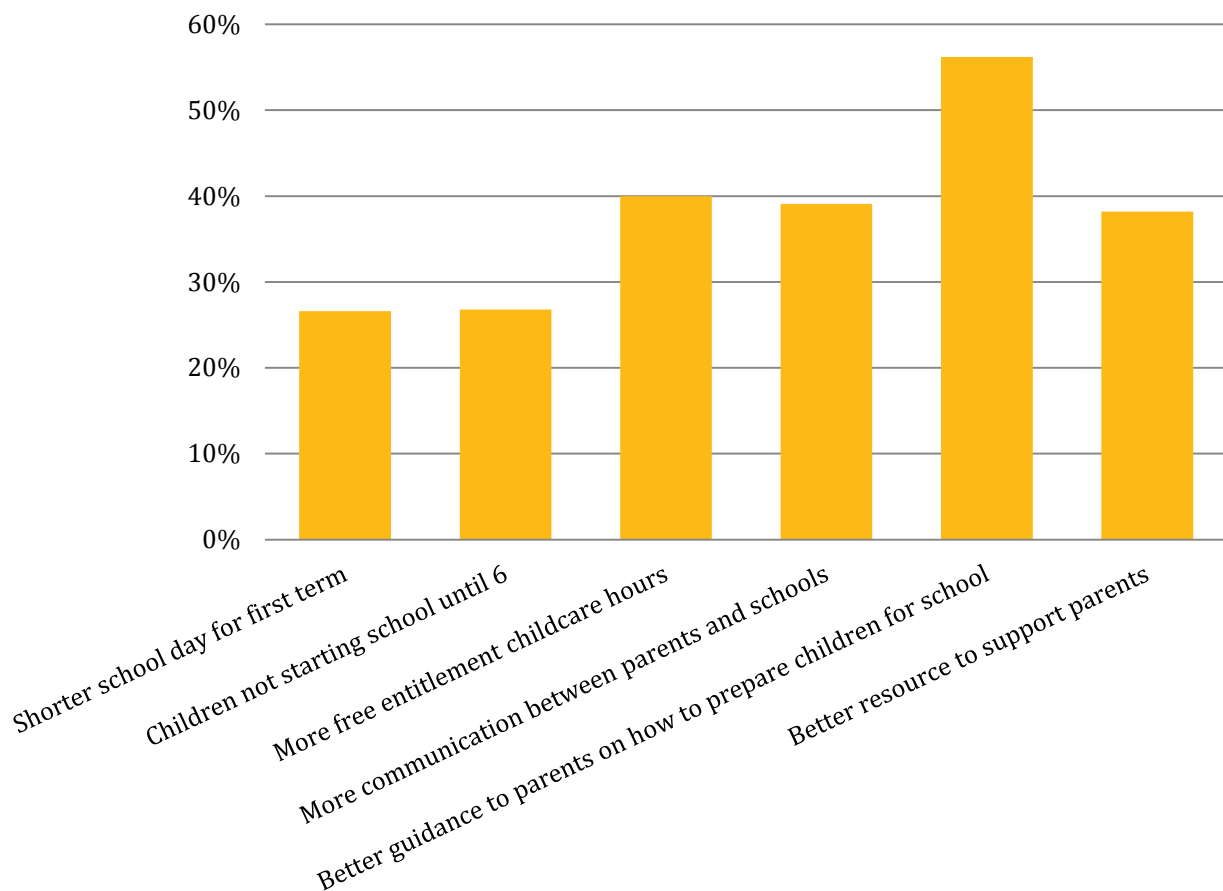
expectations across different children's professions (49%)

- 48% of parents felt that an important barrier was lack of communication or support from the school
- 46% of teachers felt that parents needed better guidance on how to prepare children for school.

²⁷ Tickell, D. (2011) *The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning An Independent Report on the Early Years Foundation Stage to Her Majesty's Government* (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180919/DFE-00177-2011.pdf)

²⁸ Unicef (2012) *School Readiness: A conceptual framework* [http://www.unicef.org/education/files/Chil2Child_ConceptualFramework_FINAL\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/education/files/Chil2Child_ConceptualFramework_FINAL(1).pdf)

Parents: What do you think would improve children's school readiness?



Implications for all

In conclusion, PACEY's school ready project has led to the following recommendations:

1. **Government should do more to promote play in early education.**

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) provides the best framework to support play. It has a strong evidence base and sector-wide support, but there is growing concern that this focus on play is being eroded. Almost half of the childcare professionals surveyed felt that the EYFS could benefit from the inclusion of even more play. PACEY believes government needs to do

more to promote child-led as well as adult-led play. The tools and expertise for this are already in the sector – this isn't about needing more money. It's about communicating the importance of play via policy, best practice sharing, qualifications and training. PACEY will work with childcare professionals and its partners including qualification awarding bodies, to ensure that there is an increased emphasis on the importance of play for children's learning and development incorporated into planned new early years qualifications, professional development and best practice sharing.

2. **The early years sector must commit to reducing the communication barriers that hinder children's transition from childcare to school.**

These barriers are not costly to overcome and can be addressed by sharing good practice and reinforcing positive relationships between childcare and teaching professionals to identify the common expectations they share in the EYFS and Foundation Phase. PACEY and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) will work with their members to facilitate increased understanding between these professionals.

3. **Parents need to be provided with the information and support they require to help children move from childcare to school.**

PACEY is going to work with early years stakeholders to develop resources to provide parents with the information they need to support children through this important transition.

Background

This report uses both primary and secondary research. For secondary research a number of sources were used to a large extent including the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project; Dame Clare Tickell's review of the EYFS; and OECD's report, *Starting Strong II: Early Education and Care*.

The primary research consisted of two stages:

PACEY's membership of 35,000 childminders, nannies and nursery workers provided excellent access to childcare professionals in England and Wales. The survey was open from 3 June until 17 June 2013 and received a total of 519 responses. The survey consisted of open and closed questions. In addition the first stage involved qualitative research with children starting school this September. Access was gained through PACEY's members and in partnership with Toad Hall Nursery. A total of 10 children were interviewed after parents had provided consent.

The second stage involved two separate surveys with parents and primary school teachers. To gain access to parents, PACEY worked in partnership with lead parenting website, Netmums, who hosted the survey. This survey was open from 6 July until 7 August and received 1474 completed responses. To gain access to teachers, PACEY worked in partnership with the National Union of Teachers who sent the survey to their early years and primary group members. The survey was available online from 29 July until 09 September and received a total of 168 completed responses.

All three surveys explored what each group felt being school ready meant by ranking a list of commonly used definitions and also ranking which skills they felt were most important for children to have. They were also asked to provide a statement defining their interpretation of the term school ready. This data has been used in the report for illustrative purposes. The surveys also explored what each group does to prepare

children for school, what challenges they face, again though ranking activities in terms of levels of importance, and where they see responsibility and room for improvement.

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About PACEY

PACEY is the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years. A standard-setting organisation, we promote best practice and support childcare professionals to deliver high standards of care and learning.

Since 1977 we have provided high quality support to our members and have worked with government, local authorities and others to raise standards.

Together with our members - childminders, nannies and nursery workers - we are working to become the professional association for everyone in childcare and early years and ensure our members are recognised for the vital role they play in helping children get the best start in life.

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