

# Establishing a Positive Emotional Climate in an Early Years Setting

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PhD

Submitted 2012

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the University's  
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

Submitted 2012

The University of Worcester

## **Abstract**

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### **Establishing a Positive Emotional Climate in an Early Years Setting**

This qualitative study provides new insight into how the sensitive management of the emotional climate of an early years setting contributes to a beneficial context for child development by focusing on enhancing the emotional well-being of the workforce.

This action research centred on the experiences of staff employed to care for young children and explored the wide range of skills and responsibilities that are required of managers and staff teams in settings that provide day care and early education. It also considered the extent to which the needs and best interests of children are being adequately addressed. This enquiry contributes to the ongoing debate over how well young children are served by the use of early childcare and education settings and whether some young children may be at risk of emotional neglect if relationships and interactions in the setting are not sensitive and responsive to the emotional needs of the children and their carers.

This research approach provides insight into how management actions and organisational practices in early years settings can impact on children's well-being, learning and development, and draws on many viewpoints using a variety of research tools. After an initial survey of early years staff and managers of a range of settings in the East Midlands, the focus moves to data gathering activities arising in one main setting based in the region. The findings from the preliminary survey and the main setting raise important questions about the experiences of young children.

Reflective management tools have been developed and successfully piloted in the main study setting. The findings demonstrate a significant link between the implementation of beneficial organisational practices in early years settings and the development of a positive emotional climate through addressing issues affecting the staff and children's well-being. Although this study is located in one region with data collected from one main setting in particular, the research tools and findings have relevance to the organisational practices in other early years settings



Personal well-being and team morale of early years staff are shown to contribute to the quality of interactions that impact on children's well-being. The issue of 'being valued and appreciated' is revealed as a key factor to be addressed in order to raise and maintain staff morale. Practitioners in the main setting identified positive leadership and management behaviours as contributing to feeling valued and appreciated. The development of a management style that empowers and motivates staff, is recognised here as compensatory in overcoming the inherent low pay and the sense of being undervalued often associated with early years work. A nurturing management style is shown to contribute to a positive emotional climate by improving staff retention and team stability.

A positive emotional climate is described as an environment that supports children's emotional development, cognitive development and subsequent educational achievement and social integration. The task of providing early years care and education at a level that promotes children's emotional well-being is one that requires training in an holistic approach to care and development and high professional standards for those with a leadership responsibility. A young child's positive emotional well-being is identified as a major factor in helping children to establish themselves as life-long learners and this study concludes that the development of critical reflective management skills is essential if early years settings are able to provide an environment in which children can thrive. The concept of a beneficial childhood is defined and the study recommends that a focus on child emotional well-being is the top priority that underpins local and national policy.

The teamwork skills of staff are extended to include the child's parents or main carers such that the adults collectively take responsibility for creating a coherent and consistent community of practice within which the children can thrive. The development of an identifiable and supportive group culture is regarded as the responsibility of the most senior person involved in the setting and this research identifies that this role requires assistance and support from others internal and external to the setting.

The overall conclusions and recommendations focus on the following areas:

- Recognition of the impact of adult well-being on children's experiences;
- Description of a beneficial leadership style for early years settings;
- Clarification of specific organisational practices to be developed;
- Consideration of parental involvement and shared responsibility for childhood;
- Proposal of specific training activities to support development of practice.

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# Chapter 1

## RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

### 1.1 Introduction

The aim of this research process was to identify and explore issues arising in the practical operation of an early years setting such that the possible benefits for emotional well-being of young children in group care can be secured, and the potential for emotional neglect can be minimised. I relate my findings to the literature of emotional literacy, and to the relatively new field of relational leadership. The research is qualitative, and insofar as it focuses on my own setting, it is a case study. However it is interventionist, so I further define the study as action research operating at an institutional level, as in Kurt Lewin's original definition of action research (Lewin, 1946). The data collection took place over several years, but it is hard to view aspects as separate cycles so I have divided a single cycle over time into phases. I explore this methodology further in Chapter 3.

This pursuit of new knowledge to improve practice is rooted in the Aristotelian philosophical concept of *phronesis* in that it draws on a value-base to provide meaning to the reasoned analysis of data and embeds a search for practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2001). At its heart, this research is a qualitative case study concerned with the provision of a *positive emotional climate* where early years managers, practitioners and parents collaborate constructively to support young children in early development, through a focus on creating an environment that supports emotional stability. This chapter provides the background context of the enquiry and identifies an overview of the approach taken. It also introduces the main scope of each chapter and identifies the boundaries of the study.

The main setting of the study is an independent day nursery located in a busy town, operating on a not-for-profit basis for the benefit of students and staff at a college of Further Education and also for families within the local community. The setting is registered with Ofsted for eighty day-care places and comprises a baby unit for twenty children from six weeks to two years, a 'rainbow' unit for twenty children two to three years, and a double pre-school unit for up to forty children between three and five years. During the period of the action research phase, I was employed by the college in an education management role which included directorial responsibility for the main early

years setting. This unique position provided valuable access and opportunities to investigate the operational issues arising, but also presented ethical issues for the research processes that needed to be resolved due to the power and status relationship between researcher and staff team. These issues are considered within the methodology.

The overall aim of the research is to understand practice, to augment benefits to children, and through dissemination, to inform practitioners about factors contributing to a *beneficial childhood*. This research focuses on the experiences of early years practitioners during the expansion of early years services in England between 1998-2008. The underlying argument of this study is that, in addition to its parents, a young child's healthy emotional development is dependent on the quality, continuity and consistency of its early interactions with the various carers it encounters. The nature of these experiences and interactions in an early years setting will potentially affect children positively or negatively. As the young child's social community is widened, the responsiveness of the staff team will contribute to the child's development. The practitioners involved in providing early care and education are variously trained and experienced, and as a result, staff commitment and turnover affects continuity and quality of provision. The challenge facing providers is to ensure that a consistently positive emotional climate can be established and maintained so that this sensitivity and responsiveness by practitioners is given the highest priority possible in the setting despite the many pressures on the staff team. The emotional stability of members of staff coping with externally imposed change is also of relevance to this challenge.

It is further argued that the emotional climate in an early years setting is greatly affected by the leadership of the setting, in particular, through the role-modelling of positive interpersonal skills. This research identifies ways in which competent leadership of early years practitioners can support the development of healthy staff relationships. The concept of a *beneficial environment* is developed, in which training, provision, practice, and staff relationships are interrogated using the concept of emotional positivity. This is problematised as a concept, and polyvocal in that many voices and opinions contribute to it. The research constructs from the data the concepts of positivity, benefit, and emotional climate. It develops the metaphorical model of *emotional climate thermometer* and a *pro-nurturative leadership* approach that is based on development of an understanding and conscious use of *value indicators* within professional relationships.

The main research question focuses on interrogating organisational practices and staff team building from the point of view the quality of interpersonal interactions and emotional care rather than as a straight forward study of leadership and management. It seeks to understand how to develop practice in an informed way to establish a positive emotional climate in an early years setting. To this end, consideration of leadership and management issues are therefore implicated in the exploration but are not the focus.

For clarification in this study: use of the term 'early years' will relate to the period of child development from birth to five years; use of the word 'parent' includes anyone who has legal parental responsibility; the terms early years 'carer', 'care-giver' or 'practitioner', 'workforce' will be used generically to refer to members of staff at any level whether qualified or not. Early years 'provision' or a 'setting' will refer to any statutory or independent registered early years group experience in accommodation offering early education and childcare.

The focus of the literature review in Chapter 2 is on identifying the factors that impact on the emotional climate of an early years setting so that this understanding can be used to influence practice and bring about positive interventions. The complex nature of this research topic potentially spans a very broad area of study over many interwoven disciplines. To maintain the focus, the review of the literature has been considered from the viewpoint of the practitioners and managers who work in early years settings. The literature has therefore been selected for its contribution to understanding issues of adult and child emotional well-being and emotional literacy in an early years setting. The literature draws on data that identifies the current context of early years provision as taking place with a national workforce that is largely under-valued, under-paid and under pressure to meet the high expectations of others.

Chapter 3 explains the practical methodology selected to gather the primary data. In brief, an Action Research approach has been used which begins with a preliminary local survey of settings used to provide an overview of the issues. This initial reconnaissance survey includes the views and experiences of managers, staff and parents in a variety of early years settings; day care, infant and primary schools, childminders, neighbourhood nursery, independent settings. Three of the central themes underpinning the study relate to the changing nature of expectations of early years, such as:



- a) what early years settings are for, as viewed by the government, the staff who work in them, and the families that use their services;
- b) what the roles and responsibilities of the early years practitioner are, as perceived by employers and by the staff themselves, and
- c) what the job of an early years manager entails, as viewed by the staff team and the manager of the main setting.

The Action Research approach drew on questions arising from these themes and was then employed to examine micro-organisational relationships and developments in the main setting. As the focus for this research is on establishing a positive emotional climate and the development of circumstances that support child 'emotional well-being' rather than the whole area of well-being, this study fully recognises but does not directly research the contribution of physical health and other developmental factors that apply to all areas of health and well-being.

Data for the preliminary survey is presented and discussed in Chapter 4. The data arising from investigation of the main setting is presented and discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 with each chapter focusing on a particular aspect of the action research cycle and the outcomes from it. The primary research focused on specific issues, staff activities and personnel records of one setting in particular as it coped with the change process. Although the rate of national change has now slowed down, establishing a positive emotional climate and ensuring best practice to support child well-being, remains a key feature of early years provision.

Chapter 8 draws together issues arising from the discussion of the primary data and looks at the relationship of the findings to the well-being and emotional climate themes explored in the review of the literature. This is followed in Chapter 9 by the proposal of several recommendations for practice within the main setting and suggestions for consideration by other settings. A critical issue impacting on the findings is the fact that the primary research data for this study was gathered during a period of rapid national growth in the development of early years provision. By the end of the research period, the early years sector was very different to the start and the history and pressures of that period had a very real impact on practice. This continues to be ongoing work and with changes in governments, it is always possible that further early years policy is initiated

and new strategies will be needed for maintaining workforce well-being. Finally this last chapter also offers some reflections on the study as a whole.

## **1.2 Rationale for undertaking this research**

This research was undertaken over a number of years and the following background information will now seem historic. However, the context was an essential aspect of the backdrop in which the study was undertaken and is given here to provide understanding. At the end of the 1990s three key challenges set the scene for a programme of extensive change to the duties and responsibilities of early years providers and practitioners.

Collectively, these represented a major reconsideration of the early years sector.

**1996** The introduction of government funded nursery education offering up to 12½ hours a week of early education for 4 yr olds within independent as well as statutory settings through the *Nursery Education Grant (NEG)*.

**1998** The introduction of an unprecedented expansion of childcare provision with the DfEE Green Paper outlining the intention for a 10 year strategy: *Meeting the Childcare Challenge*.

**1999** A national concern about the emotional well-being of children and young people highlighted in the Mental Health Foundation publication of the *Bright Futures* report.

These three challenges are outlined below and explored further in this chapter. The first of these challenges, the Nursery Education Grant, heralded a fundamental change for independent settings. It introduced national Desirable Learning Outcomes for four year old children and a requirement that all statutory and independent early years providers claiming the government funding, should have equivalent levels of skill and responsibility in relation to childcare and early education. This was matched by a requirement to ensure provision of the same standards and inspection for nursery education by Ofsted. This radical change had significant implications for the early years workforce by impacting on expectations of leadership, understanding staff motivation and introducing an urgency to raise knowledge, understanding and skills.

The second challenge came following a change of Government in 1997 and a new policy of supporting more parents to take up or return to employment. The 'Meeting the Childcare Challenge' green paper in 1998 set out a policy that would considerably increase places and ensure that expanded early education and childcare arrangements would become effective by being accessible, affordable and of high quality. This policy

eventually progressed to become the Childcare Act 2006. However, the provision of effective childcare and early years education is entirely dependent on establishing a competent and stable workforce of staff who have a range of skills, knowledge and the understanding of how to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of babies and young children and this presents a significant training and development challenge. This competent and stable workforce did not exist in the required numbers at this time.

Two large workforce research projects, referred to in the next chapter, identify the lack of stability of the early years workforce as a major concern. Any continuing instability undoubtedly has an effect on a settings' ability to provide early years care and education to an acceptable standard. Any expectation of fulfilling this vision of effectiveness includes a thorough analysis and understanding of the nature and attitudes of staff, their training needs, and factors affecting their well-being in the workplace. It is also dependent on developing a good understanding of the management and leadership skills necessary to promote a positive and beneficial environment. It is this search for understanding that contributed to the formulation of the action research approach used.

The third challenge focused on the emotional needs of children in a changing world. Alongside major national changes impacting on the early years workforce, the Mental Health Foundation had been researching the issue of child well-being. Its 'Bright Futures' Report in 1999, recognised a range of negative effects on children's well-being which have implications for those who work closely with young children, as well as their leaders and managers. In Chapter 6 of the Bright Futures report, there are recommendations for Improving the Mental Health of Children and Young People (Mental Health Foundation 1999:114). Within the section of 'all ages' is a recommendation for undertaking an impact analysis on all government policies. This section acknowledges that such policies are experimental and need reviewing in the light of actual long-term outcomes for children. A more specific recommendation places child emotional well-being at the heart of provision:

"In developing pre-school provision, the importance of children's emotional well-being, their ability to learn and to take risks should be placed centre-stage. This will require a common framework of training and practice developed for all those professional engaged in pre-school provision to ensure that children have access to an environment that actively promotes their resilience. The variable quality of services should be addressed and standards set and monitored. ....This will require training for all staff in the skills and knowledge to promote children's emotional well-being...

(Mental Health Foundation *Bright Futures* report 1999:146)

In the light of this report, the search for best practice is at the heart of this PhD study. By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was evident through workforce survey research explored in the next chapter, that more needed to be done to support the early years sector in order to secure positive outcomes for children and contribute to provision of a beneficial childhood. The main lesson to be learned from debate in the literature and from professional experience was the imperative to find out more about how to develop and maintain a stable and competent workforce. This PhD is concerned with how the staff experiences and interactions in early years settings contribute to the emotional climate – in particular with how the leadership and management relationships and workplace factors impact on the quality of care provided by adults who are not the child's parents. My study investigates whether young children's experience of group settings can be enhanced by positive interpersonal practices. This rationale also recognises the challenge of evidencing child and adult emotional well-being and establishing causal relationships. The research data is therefore drawn from accounts of real workplace experiences extracted through staff focus groups, interviews and questionnaires.

Parents of the under-fives are now encouraged through government policy to share parental responsibility with others and every aspect of the impact that this can have on the developing child needs to be constantly evaluated to increase our understanding of the child's needs and ensure that no long-term harm is being done. The methodology section of this study explains how these conflicts and tensions were explored and looks at aspects of the reality for the provision of early childcare and education today.

Studies on the benefits of early provision for children draw differing conclusions and some of these are reviewed in the next chapter. For an individual child, benefits depend on their age and individual temperament, the nature and resilience of the child, combined with the quality of provision at the setting, the number of weekly hours and how many years are spent in the setting. Therefore, records of child interactions and parents' views have also been investigated.

For clarification, this study does not seek to revisit the broad issue of whether, or how children benefit from day-care and early education in general. It is accepted that settings do exist as a modern social necessity. The focus of the research sets out to look at establishing and maintaining a positive emotional climate by identifying key aspects of support relating to the development of consistent and continuous care by non-parental

adults. It is this passionate search for effective practices and the prevention of emotional harm that is the driving force behind this study.

### **1.3 Childhood and outcomes for children**

To support the focus of this study, three important broader themes are used to underpin the wider context:

- i) Childhood as a distinct phase in human development on which successful adulthood is built,
- ii) the responsibility of parents to provide a positive family experience, and
- iii) community responsibility to support the development and well-being of children.

(United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989:preamble)

Without a suitable understanding of young children's emotional needs and training in how to provide for these needs, there is scope for inadequate provision by secondary carers and the risk of potential long-term harm for children. These three broader themes are therefore considered within the literature review in Chapter 2.

Early years settings are a social phenomenon contributing to a child's experience of childhood but Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) point out that there is no collective agreement of what an early years setting is actually for, only to serve differing functions according to the needs of society e.g. education, safeguarding, childminding. Without clarification of the nature of early childhood and without a clear purpose to early years provision, any early years team will struggle to interpret their job roles. The various arguments that are used to validate or question the benefits of early years provision tend to be inconclusive due to the complexities of the justification for provision and the likelihood of the proponents holding differing views on the nature of childhood.

It is only when these issues are addressed that it becomes possible to consider what staff characteristics are needed to be able to support emotional well-being in the setting and meet the needs of the families using early years settings. After these matters have been explored, the subsequent issues of how to attract, motivate, retain and manage such suitable staff can be resolved. The underlying characteristics, values, well-being and motivation of early years staff have therefore been investigated as part of the primary research of this study. Also considered is the way that the relationships in an early years

settings are managed in order to take account of the needs of children and their parents as well as the needs of staff and supervisors.

If the interests and well-being of the child are regarded by professionals as paramount, then the term 'well-being' needs to have a common meaning amongst professionals and politicians. The term well-being is widely used in health contexts, particularly in the field of mental health and social care of elderly or disabled people. A full generic definition encompasses a sense of holistic achievement across the key domains of a) emotion - contented, b) physical - healthy, and c) social – successful, with 'welfare' defined here as "health, happiness, prosperity and well-being in general". As the consideration of responsive relationships and interactions are a focus of this study, the concept of well-being for staff as well as children, is central to this study and will be explored as part of the literature review. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UN CRC), clearly indicates that supporting children to achieve a state of well-being is desirable, yet the need to enshrine this in international law suggests that it can be an elusive state. The question then becomes one of how providing an "atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding" (UNICEF 1989) can be achieved for the children that are the responsibility of people other than the child's parents.

Working with others to enable children to thrive requires a vision of supporting inner harmonisation of mental, physical, and social optimisation as a desirable goal for all parents, child carers and educators. In this study I explore ways in which to influence and manage this beneficial childhood in an early years setting.

Well-being is not considered here to be a permanent state of being, but rather a desirable state to achieve as well-being can be jeopardised by instances of emotional instability, physical pain or discomfort, social exclusion or feeling of failure. Achieving a positive emotional climate with optimum conditions for healthy mental, emotional, physical and social development, will be a factor in maximising children's educational progress. Carers create the emotional climate that children experience and any adult or carer can thoughtlessly provide negative experiences. Within a day care setting, children are in contact with many adults, therefore, a mature understanding of the factors affecting a child's development will be needed if an early years setting is to be able to work in partnership with parents to provide the appropriate conditions for a child to thrive.

The interpersonal interactions between staff, the relationships the staff members have with individual parents, the social groupings of the children, the routines of the day, the play equipment and opportunity for self-expression, the very fabric of the building all contribute to the child's sense of well-being and are collectively key influences during early childhood. All these aspects are worthy of separate research but this study primarily focuses on issues affecting the ability of the staff team to provide an emotional positive climate.

The Children Act in 1989 set out to safeguard children from potential harm and this means the whole child (physical, social, emotional, psychological, spiritual) that is in need of protection. This has subsequently been developed through legislation to establish a Children commissioner and a co-ordinated raft of Local Authority safeguarding powers embodied in the Children act 2004. And strengthened through the Every Child Matters agenda detailed in the Childcare Act 2006. I identify in my literature review that, while research into child well-being continues, the experiences and development of well-being within the early years workforce receives little recognition. My research contributes to knowledge and understanding of workforce well-being issues and identifies practical wisdom to give confidence to improving practice.

In order to place the contribution of this research within a contextual time-line, it seems helpful to give a brief overview of key changes that have affected the parents and early years providers investigated within this study. As with any review of recent history there can be no purely objective account of the impact of events. Reflections over time are by nature, personal, subjective and limited in what can be considered relevant. As these changes provide the complex backdrop to the action research aspects of the study, it is relevant to provide the detail here.

As a practitioner since the 1970s to the present day, I have experienced many changes at first hand, through working as a residential childcare provider for children placed in the care of the Local Authority, foster parent for ten years, early years teacher, head of post-16 Early Years training in a college of Further Education, and director of pre-school provision. During the past thirty years, I have spoken to many practitioners and trainees about their experiences in their workplaces and have visited various types of early years setting to see practice at first hand. In this time I have become aware of wide variations in provision - the good, the bad and the unacceptable. This collective experience has

been sufficient to stir me into action to research the issues and ensure that where provision does exist it must be of the highest quality if it is to be of benefit to the children placed in these settings. It is also recognised that members of the early years workforce should feel confident about their roles and feel valued in the workplace such that their expertise can be retained and nurtured for the benefit of all.

I acknowledged that my own background may be evident within the underlying themes selected for discussion and that these arise from having lived continuously in England with a home life based on Christian and Humanistic values with no strong political views. This study does not seek to support or criticise the policies of any particular political party, only to comment on how realistic a policy may be in developing parental responsibility and thereby providing the best possible circumstances for the healthy emotional development of young children so that a positive outcome can be achieved in adulthood.

#### **1.4 The Changing Context**

Externally imposed change impacts on the organisational stability of every early years setting by challenging the whole staff team to adopt new approaches and implement revised working practices. These transition periods can have a significant impact on staff morale and the team's ability to provide sensitive developmental support for very young children. This study focuses on the experiences of the main setting during the ten year period following the introduction of the initiatives outlined in the rationale section. This constantly changing context has impacted significantly on i) the purpose and ethos of the setting ii) on the practices of the early years workforce and iii) on the leadership behaviour of the manager. Within the literature review, key workforce development and management issues are highlighted and discussed in conjunction with research into the issue of promoting child and adult well-being.

The task of supporting and promoting child well-being has become particularly relevant in recent years for the main setting of this study. Jamieson and Owen (2000) have charted national developments showing a clear move towards increasing government intervention in family life-style. The use of intervention strategies has been seen by successive governments as a key factor in overcoming disadvantage at an early age. As a result, practitioners working in the setting have become more aware that the social, educational and emotional outcomes for the majority of the next generation of young adults now have their roots in current early years practice. Such large-scale social change carries a heavy



duty of responsibility on the early years providers and places an obligation on all involved to pursue best practice with integrity. In order to inform providers and local policy makers of the issues arising and potential improvements to practice, this study investigates key issues for practitioners in the main setting which contributes to developing practice and encourages staff reflection of their changing roles and responsibilities.

This research identifies that, although the experiences of parents and providers will vary around the country and as the government funding and regulatory requirements increased, the support role of the Local Authority also changed and created a greater sense of collaboration amongst settings within the region. This in turn, provided a local workforce development network for practitioners and managers which raised expectations and encouraged dependency on the Local Authority. The tension between Local Authority regulation and its provision of support is therefore an issue that is considered in the literature review as a contributory factor impacting on staff well-being and pressure on the manager of the early years setting.

This ten year period also saw considerable change in attendance patterns of children in the early years settings studied. Settings varied considerably from providing the Nursery Education Grant (NEG) offer of 2½ hours per day, from one to five sessions a week for three and four year olds, to integration with childcare through fee-paying five full days of ten hours a day which equates to fifty hours of full day care during week days all year round for children from 6 weeks old. The manager of the main setting therefore embarked on supporting new practices and needed to learn new ways of working whilst ensuring practitioners were operating in a suitable environment. Despite support available, the practitioners in this study reported that the introduction of these changes placed them under great pressure to develop new competencies and this pressure had the potential to be counter-productive by lowering team morale and impacting on the care provided.

The introduction of the NEG changed the purpose of the main early years setting from a social, play-based setting to a more goal oriented educational-based provision. This transition was soon followed by ambitious national government plans for expansion of the sector due to recognition that many more women wished, or needed, to return to work and were unable to do so due to lack of childcare. One key effect of this drive was a

policy on increasing the provision of childcare places so that more parents could work. This combination of factors led to the introduction of the Ten Year Strategy (1998) and was brought together following an important and far-reaching consultation process initiated by the Green Paper 'Meeting the Childcare Challenge' 1998:

"To improve provision, we are creating more than 50,000 childcare places this year, and making available £300 million in England – including £170 million from the Lottery to set up new out of school childcare places. From this September, every four-year old will have the guarantee of a free education place."

(Blair 1998:3)

"Meeting the Childcare Challenge" (1998) set out a proposed strategy that focused on 'good quality, affordable and accessible childcare' for all families with children from birth to fourteen years. Early years staff who had previously been encouraged to view early education as a distinctive type of activity were then advised to amalgamate childcare and early education into holistic provision. Once again, staff teams faced new challenges and demands arising from changes in purpose. The main setting of this study responded to this policy by accessing funds to develop new, purpose-built premises. This new environment also contributed positively to a sense of the workforce feeling valued but also added further pressure to change practices.

The 'Childcare Challenge', spoke of quality of provision but in reality, promoted quantity as its priority. The need to employ and train large numbers of staff was recognised, and this led to promises of considerable government investment to support the training of childcare practitioners. It was this ambitious proposal that raised concerns by early years managers as there was no clear indication of who these additional staff members would be and what level of skills and training they would be expected to have - particularly in relation to sensitive provision that supported emotional well-being. The regulations still permit untrained employees to work with children, which perpetuates the misconception that the work is unskilled. As it is important to understand staff motivation, this research investigates reasons for staff choosing to remain in early years work and reasons for staff leaving.

The early years setting went through the process of merging the separate concepts of 'nursery education' - short sessional attendance supporting the child's educational progress, with 'childcare' - longer hours spent in day care for the benefit of working parents. Until that time, there had been a clear distinction between what is provided as 'Early Education' through the Nursery Education Grant, requiring the input of someone

with education training and qualifications; and what is regarded as 'childcare', that is the provision of care tasks and the development of relationships by people who may (or may not) have early years training. In 1999, there was recognition that a major weakness of existing provision was its fragmentation, and that the division between day care and education was artificial and unhelpful.

By January 2005, there were 13,570 children's day nurseries in England and Wales (Laing and Buisson 2005). The training challenge was grasped through the Ten Year Strategy for building a world-class childcare workforce and a further funding of £52 million for training Early Years Professionals announced in 2006. Expansion also presented the main setting with major training issues. Without proper training, there can be little expectation of meeting children's emotional development needs, therefore staff support and training are reviewed within Chapter 2 and reflected in the discussion of the primary research relating to the main setting.

The Children Act 2004 acknowledges in its provisions that society has changed over the past thirty years. Staff at the main setting have identified increasing pressures on family relationships arising from factors such as family breakdown, poverty, isolation, and consumerism and other factor that contribute to a lack of emotional stability, such as no sense of belonging to a social group and, for some, no positive role-models. The issue of how best to provide a positive emotional environment and a beneficial childhood for every child clearly needs urgent investigation and attention to ensure early years practices have the desired impact on child well-being. This study contributes to knowledge of best practice.

The Children Act 2004 and the Childcare Act 2006 also place a clear responsibility on the main setting to work collaboratively with other services to ensure children are safeguarded and that the Five Outcomes are pursued for all children: safety, health, enjoyment, eventual economic independence, and making a positive contribution to the community. This is intended to support families using the provision and does not replace the primacy of parental responsibility. The staff team thereby acquired a statutory duty to report any indications of potential child abuse and practitioners are placed in a day to day monitoring role as far as safeguarding the well-being of all young children using its services.

This ten year period placed many early years settings, including the main early years setting, under considerable pressure to expand and change what it offered. This in turn led to a requirement to rapidly improve the skills and training of the workforce and to encourage the workforce to reassess their main roles and purpose. The combination of these factors focused the spotlight on the competence and responsibilities of those with leadership and management roles. These new roles and responsibilities have been investigated within this research as they hold the key to ensuring provision of a positive emotional climate for young children.

### **1.5 Change in the purpose of early years settings**

At the time of considering undertaking this research, the settings involved in both the initial survey and in the main focus of the study, were all operating within the national early years context as identified at the end of the 1990s. During the implementation of the action phases described in the methodology chapter, the external situation was evolving and by the end of the research period, the national context had moved through its transition. This aspect of the study proved to be both challenging and fascination to experience. In particular, the managers and practitioners of all the settings were experiencing aspects of change and upheaval that united their focus on surviving a rocky and uncertain period for the sector.

Prior to the start of this research, the main type of statutory intervention in 1996 focused on the education of four year old children in school reception classes and independent settings approved to claim the NEG. Once the national agenda moved towards the statutory provision of childcare in 1998, it became necessary to address the care and development needs of ever younger children. The publication of the *Birth to Three* resource pack in 2002 meant that for the first time, children under three years were included in national guidelines with the initial guidance made compulsory for all registered day care and education settings. Ashton (2002) in *The Birth to Three Matters* foreword highlights the government's commitment:

“Since 1997, childcare and early years education have been central to our vision of a better start for all children and their families. Children's experiences in the earliest years of their lives are critical to their subsequent development.”

(Ashton 2002:3)

With the move towards provision for children younger than four years, the focus changed from that of early education to early child development. The work of early pioneers such

as Steiner, Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Winnicott, Bowlby and other research into early attachment experiences and cognitive skills, contributes to our current understanding of child development. The elusive relationship linking early experiences to adult behaviour remains of interest to practitioners, as the interplay between individual genetic inheritance characteristics and social circumstances continues to fascinate researchers and is still to be fully understood. What is clear is that the likelihood of developing into a resilient, competent, functioning member of adult society will be greatly increased through the experience of a stable, loving, happy childhood supported by the provision of developmentally appropriate early activities. (UN: CRC 1989, Mental Health Foundation: Bright Futures Report 1998, Sure Start: Birth to Three Matters 2002-4). Significantly for this study, the Birth to Three Matters provided a distillation of what was considered to be the best practice of the day, though still an evolving set of guidelines.

There seems little doubt amongst today's educationalists, psychologists and politicians that a child's early experiences between birth and five years are critical to its future development and social outcomes. Despite the valuable knowledge that is now available from studies such as the Perry Project (High/Scope), the Effective Early Learning project (EEL 1997-2003), the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education project (EPPE ongoing), along with the work of the National Children's Bureau and university departments around the country, practice in early years settings has been shown through Ofsted inspection reports to be variable – due mainly to the level of competence of the staff team. This is why this study places such a high focus on role-modelling and the example set by leadership of early years practice, and is concerned to find improvements to practice that can be shared with others.

The main setting also had to respond to changes in the Inspection regime. Since 2001, the Quality Assurance of childcare provision ceased to be the remit of the Social Services departments and changed to be monitored by the re-formulated Early Years Ofsted Inspection regime which had been created to provide reassurance to parents and also in readiness for schools to play a much larger role in the provision of combined education and day care services. For the different settings in this study, the prospect of Ofsted inspection represented parity of inspection regime without parity of terms and conditions and this generated anxiety which needed careful management to prevent it becoming a negative influence on the emotional climate.

The common factor now is that all statutory and independent settings must be registered and inspected by Ofsted in order to meet established national standards of childcare and early years provision. The quest for beneficial provision comes in many formats and in addition to Ofsted inspection, early years settings are urged to undergo some form of Quality Assurance process leading to an approved 'Investors in Children' certification. The requirements and guidance for evidencing quality continue to be amended and it is this constant revision of expectations that needs patience and support for the workforce.

## **1.6 Change for families**

During the period of this study, child well-being has increasingly become the responsibility of adults other than parents. The *Bright Futures* report (1999) identified a growing recognition of the role that early years settings, schools and communities have in contributing to a child's upbringing, social inclusion and general emotional stability. The increasing number of children diagnosed with anxiety disorders and depressive illnesses was highlighted as a concern. The high figures could be an indicator of better diagnostic techniques or they could reflect higher levels of stress in children arising from family breakdown and the demands of a changing society. The recognition of the potential for emotional harm arising from changes in family experiences places considerable responsibility on early years providers to understand and support families in crisis. The main setting became aware of its support role and, practice arising through this study, identifies many of the factors influencing the positive emotional climate of a setting.

This rapid increase in the use of early years provision and the change in the expectations of parents using the main setting, reflects the fact that many more children under the age of five years are now experiencing an increasing number of adults carers during their formative years. How well a child is likely to fare in this context is dependent on the complex interplay between several factors. These factors are considered further during the literature review section. Supporting child development and emotional well-being is being placed in the hands of a workforce which only requires 50% trained carers. This situation places a burden on the leadership of a setting which is why community support mechanisms for managers have been considered in the summary section of this research. Dissemination of good practice has also been considered within the recommendation section in Chapter 9.

As a result of the changes, the concept of a curriculum and related national guidelines has been introduced into the early years setting. Educators and carers are now tasked with providing the foundations for educational progress as well as working towards creating an emotionally sensitive environment for all children under five. Alongside varied attendance patterns of children accessing the setting, the need for differing staffing shift patterns and holiday periods, creates quite diverse experiences for young children with regard to consistency of approach and continuity of care. These attendance patterns have a direct impact on the way children experience continuity of sensitive and responsive relationships with care providers and have been considered within the primary research.

### **1.7 Change for the Early Years workforce**

During the ten years of this study it is evident that traditional boundaries have been changing. Childcare had previously been considered to revolve around a range of domestic tasks provided by, or as a substitute for parenting activities such as feeding, toileting, washing, resting, providing play activities, entertaining, keeping safe, befriending, practising skills. Cognitive development had been predominantly the domain of trained educators. As such, childcare employment had, and still has, a lower remunerative value than education. The differing types of early years employment are regarded by many as having differing social status according to how much domestic activity is included and relating to how young the children are. Working with young children is largely considered to be 'women's work' due to the fact that personal characteristics considered to be appropriate reflect a clear female stereotype - kind, caring, patient, competent, multi-tasking, un-ambitious and so on, and this appears to perpetuate the acceptance of lower pay as the norm. The staff teams in the survey settings and in the main setting are predominantly female and this is reflected in the views they express.

With the introduction of the Nursery Education Grant and Desirable Learning Outcomes (1998) adults with child care experience and qualifications were required to quickly develop expertise in educational skills. It also created a requirement for nursery teachers to learn much more about child development in order to take classes of younger children less able to manage themselves independently. Both groups of practitioners continue to work to the same 'curriculum' but have very different training routes. Whilst the job roles have been merging, the pay rates and staffing ratios have remained quite different. In some areas, maintaining financial viability has led schools and independent settings to

develop competitive strategies to attract staff and children. Self-reflections of workplace value and differing interpretations of job roles and responsibilities are issues that contribute to the primary data collection of this study.

The unsettlement created by this process of externally imposed change of expectations, contributed to the initial scenario presented by the main setting. As rapid change was creating a negative emotional climate, considered action was needed, hence the action research methodology for this study was devised. This is explained further in Chapter 3.

The introduction of higher levels of training for people working with the under fives has created an expectation of increased pay rates and national pay scales that, in some cases could affect the long-term viability of provision such that government subsidies for setting or for parents will be needed to sustain settings at an affordable rate. If parents and settings become dependent on subsidies, providers will be at risk if the economy falters and these become unsustainable in the future. Local employers' views were therefore investigated in this study to assess their expectations of early years staff.

An unforeseen adverse effect of competition on independent settings may arise by some employers attracting staff through offering higher wages and attracting children by offering parents lower fees with an ultimate consequence of closures rather than expansion of provision. Such potential local conflicts can lead to job transfers and adverse effects arising from loss of relationship continuity for young children. Avoiding a negative impact of such competition make it vital for all early years providers to understand the necessity of maintaining a loyal and stable workforce. This study contributes to understanding of factors that generate workforce loyalty.

The early years workforce is being asked to fulfil a critical function in contributing to the upbringing of the nation's children. Adults other than a child's parents are playing an increasingly more formative role in the childhoods of ever greater numbers of young children. Ensuring that the contribution of early years staff is a positive influence in the lives of very young impressionable people cannot be a task that is underestimated. Special characteristics, e.g. skills and organisational understanding are needed if potential damage to children is to be avoided. If confusion is to be avoided, the Government and the childcare workforce will soon need to reach agreement, or at least enter into a debate, on what an early years setting is really for:



“Early childhood institutions are socially constructed. They have no inherent features, no essential qualities, no necessary purposes. What they are for is not self-evident – they are what we make them. What we think early years institutions are determines what they do and what goes on within them.”

(Dahlberg, Moss and Pence. 1999:62)

The differing political perspectives identified have led to a major shift of government funding priorities towards the early years. It is this rapidly changing national context and the confusions arising that form the backdrop to the period covered by this study. They have been explained in this chapter in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the many factors that emerge within the data in that the main setting was not in a static situation during the period of study and this added to the complexity of the research process.

Professor Al Aynsley-Green, appointed as Children’s Commissioner in March 2005 had a mission to ‘improve the lives of one quarter of a population.’ His first stated priority was to “raise serious debate in society about childhood – the influences shaping it and the value that is given to children and young people in society.” Obtaining this information was an essential step in ensuring that services were targeted and properly developed as there could be a danger of the early years sector suffering from collective stress due to an overload of change initiatives and the subsequent loss of more staff through exhaustion and disillusionment. This potential for staff turnover will not contribute positively to child or adult well-being. Factors cited by staff leaving the main setting of this study over a ten year period have therefore been investigated and the results are given in Chapter 5.

## **1.8 Summary**

It is evident that the fast changing socio-political context and subsequent emerging strategies continue to have a direct impact on the provision of a *beneficial environment* for children. Early years practice is not a long-term established phenomena but one that is responsive to the prevailing socio-political climate with regard to the way that roles and responsibilities of parents are understood and promoted. The underlying drive to combat the disadvantages of financial poverty may be inadvertently leading to *emotional poverty* for some children if their needs are not met by the practitioners in early years settings. It is clear from reading the research findings given in the *Bright Futures* report (1999), that the management of adult relationships in a setting can make a significant contribution to the development of child emotional well-being and a *beneficial childhood*. The following

chapter will explore selected relevant literature on factors affecting child and adult emotional well-being.

My research highlights issues affecting the early years workforce and introduces new knowledge relating to the emotional well-being of the workforce. It concludes that, in order to make best provision for young children's well-being, the development and maintenance of a *positive emotional climate* is essential. To support the application of new knowledge to practice, a number of tools and strategies have been developed. The concept of the *emotional climate thermometer* arising from this study has been formulated as a discussion model to aid settings in reflecting on organisational practice. As a model, it describes features of settings against categories of emotional warmth linking observable adult behaviours with child behaviours. The key aspects for exploration in this study are emotional literacy for managers and practitioner, new knowledge arising from the primary research identifies a *pro-nurturative* leadership and management style that supports staff emotional well-being to locate them in the best circumstances for responding sensitively to the children. Reference is made to the use of positive psychology and examples of application of positive approaches have been extracted from the data and drawn together in the summary. The features of this proposed leadership style are linked to adult interactions and relationships that consciously adopt the use of work place *value indicators*, which are also explained.

My research is important because every young child is a vulnerable person, wholly dependent on the interpersonal skills and knowledge of the adults who care for it. Experiences in the first five years of a child's life are critical to its emotional development and well-being, and lay the foundations for cognitive development and long-term human functioning. As more non-family members are involved in caring for young children, this knowledge and set of skills is required from a wider group of people working consistently together in partnership. If we as practitioners and parents can collectively have a better understanding of the benefits arising from a positive emotional experience in the early years, as well as clarity about the features of a positive emotional climate, then we can consciously master and influence the factors that impact on the emotional environment to ensure settings provide the best possible start for children. Changing expectations will continue to be a feature of early years provision and it is essential that realistic solutions and accessible organisational development tools are researched and made available to practitioners to ensure these changes are made in an informed and considered way.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

Young children need the continuity of positive, loving, stable relationships during their early years in order to develop the emotional well-being necessary to enjoy and achieve during childhood (Kraemer, 1999, Gerhardt, 2004). Rapid social change has extended this responsibility from being a primarily family role to include a variety of non-family members. Since the turn of the 21st century, early years provision has simultaneously moved from a social welfare 'childminding' role to an educational one. The primary concern addressed in my research is that if the child's early relationship needs are not fully understood and met collaboratively by parents, practitioners and social policy makers then we have collectively failed in our duty of care to our children and risk creating a legacy of psychological and behavioural issues in later childhood. This theme is central to the recent Good Childhood Enquiry (Layard and Dunn, 2009). It is further considered that poor regard for child emotional needs will also impact negatively on their adult relationships and contribute to the development of disengaged individuals and dysfunctional communities.

The focus of this PhD is the search for organisational practices that establish a positive emotional climate in an early years setting. The central argument is therefore, that early years managers are recommended to appreciate the significance of emotional well-being as the principal feature of early childhood provision and are proactive advocates of practices that support practitioners in providing an appropriately positive emotional climate within which young children can thrive.

The review of literature is explored in this chapter in four sections.

**Childhood** is considered within the three broader themes, taken from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. These are used to underpin the wider context considered in the first section of this review:

- i) Childhood as a distinct phase in human development on which successful adulthood is built,
- ii) The responsibility of parents to provide a positive family experience, and
- iii) Community responsibility to support the development and well-being of children.

**Emotional well-being and emotional literacy**, is explored here as an aspect of holistic child well-being and the literature refers to influences on child development and relationships.

- i) What do we understand by use of the term 'well-being' for adults and children
- ii) What do we understand about healthy emotional functioning in social environments
- iii) What does best provision look like in practice when working with young children

**The nature of early years provision** is investigated using the three central themes, based on questions raised by Dahlberg Moss and Pence (1999). These relate to the changing expectations of early years provision and are considered in turn through the subsequent sections of the review:

- i) What early years settings are for, as viewed by the staff who work in them, and the families that use their services;
- ii) What the roles and responsibilities of the early years practitioner are, as perceived by employers and by the staff themselves, and
- iii) What the job of an early years manager entails, as viewed by the staff team and the manager of the main setting.

**Leading, managing and developing the early years workforce** are aspects of organisational practice reviewed in the light of the literature findings.

- i) What early years setting are like to work in
- ii) Consideration of leadership and management issues
- iii) Developing positive communities of practice

Through these themes, the literature develops an understanding of 'emotional well-being' and its role as a pre-requisite for optimal social and cognitive functioning for children and people of all ages, and specifically for the practitioners who work with very young children. There is also an exploration of the literature on the key terms of 'emotional intelligence' and 'emotional literacy' as they relate to the provision, staff relationships, leadership and management of early years settings. Throughout this review of literature, the themes

provide structure to the discussion about current thinking, primary theorists, recent research, contradictions, and the relationship or implications of these issues to the concepts of *positivity*, *benefit* and *emotional climate* investigated in this study. There is a considerable range of additional literature that would prove interesting and relevant to this study but it is acknowledged that it is not possible to explore everything here but only to give a sample of the materials that underpin this research.

The issues raised in the literature review are used through the many varied primary research activities to inform the search for new knowledge about the views, experiences and skills of frontline practitioners and managers in early years settings. This new knowledge and these views are then used to formulate recommendations for improving future practice in early years settings in a way that contributes to a common understanding of the development of a beneficial childhood.

## **2.2 Childhood**

### **2.2.i Childhood as a distinct phase in human development on which successful adulthood is built**

The foundations for a successful and happy adulthood are laid during human growth and development from pre-birth to maturity (Gerhardt 2004). In the United Kingdom, adulthood is recognised as occurring from the age of eighteen years, though this can vary in other cultures. If this period in a person's life meets their developmental needs in a way that integrates their genetic potential with positive emotional, physical, cognitive, social and cultural opportunities that enable them to eventually lead a self-determining life then, for the purpose of this study, it can be said that a person has had a good and beneficial childhood. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) represents current British thinking on the four principles based on a positive environment in the early years and therefore presents the first part of a desirable childhood by being the most influential phase in determining responses to opportunities in later life (DfES, 2007:9).

Childhood is an internationally accepted stage of a person's development but there is no collective definition of how children should be supported through their childhood to enable adequate functioning in adulthood. For Cunningham (2006), healthy and well educated

children would become responsible members of society and workers. Although there are common characteristics, views of childhood reflect individual family circumstances and wealth. The period from birth to young adulthood is characterised by measurable changes in physical growth and cognitive development due a combination of inherent biological determinants and personality traits interacting with individual nurturing and socialising influences. Interpretation of the ways in which these various factors impact on the child's pathway to independent adulthood continues to fascinate researchers and their work contributes to ongoing theories of development and learning. Theories of child development are briefly considered here but this area is not the primary focus of this study.

Although the biology of childhood has altered little, our understanding of the nature of childhood is constantly changing and this leads to revision of child-rearing and educational practices. Sharing childcare duties with a widening circle of non-family members has led to the increasing dependence on paid provision and subsequently, a wide variety views on how to ensure best practice by non-family adults. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence point out that there is no sense of *one child* or *one childhood* but 'many children and many childhoods each constructed by our understandings of childhood and what children are and should be' (1999:43). When reviewing the development of early years provision it can be helpful to be reminded of some of the differing constructions of the young child that may underpin social policy and can affect the interpretation of the role of the early years practitioner.

The first four constructions below represent traditional views proposed by philosophers and educationalists, whereas the final construct identified by Dahlberg Moss and Pence, is a more contemporary proposition that takes account of post war social changes and increased understanding of social development. To assist the discussion, I have summarised and paraphrased these five constructs below, taken from "Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care" Dahlberg, Moss and Pence. (1999 Ch.3);

**The Child as Knowledge, Identity and Culture Reproducer (Locke's child)**

Starting with nothing, an empty vessel to be filled, a clean slate.

The challenge of early childhood is then to have the child ready for school and for learning.

The child needs to be filled with knowledge, skills and the dominant cultural values which are already pre-determined. The child needs to be trained to conform to the fixed demands of compulsory schooling, early childhood is a foundation for an economically productive adulthood.

**The Child as an Innocent in the Golden Age of Life (*Rousseau's child*)**

Childhood is seen as an innocent period in a person's life, a golden age of self-regulation seeking out virtue, truth and beauty before its 'goodness' is corrupted by society. Childhood should therefore be a period of freedom to play, to be expressive and creative. The child needs to be sheltered from the surrounding exploitation and violence of the world by being offered security and continuity.

**The Young Child as Nature/ Scientific Child of Biological Stages (*Piaget's child*)**

The young child is seen as having universal properties and inherent capabilities and therefore development in childhood is viewed as an innate process that is biologically determined. There is an assessment of what children can or cannot do according to their age and stage which is seen as a natural and automatic process abstracted from the social context they are in. Development is described in separate, measurable categories rather than complex and interrelated functioning.

**The Child as Labour Market Supply factor**

This view recognises the child as being biologically determined to have a need to be cared for by its mother in its earliest years and that mothers are biologically programmed to provide this care. One-to-one care should be provided in order to avoid undermining this attachment and prevent emotional harm in later life. Provision of quality childcare is therefore seen as a key factor in the employability of parents and the maintaining of a stable, well-prepared workforce. For as long as governments and employers require workers, the provision of substitute parents becomes a national interest.

**The Child as Co-constructor of Knowledge, Identity & Culture (*post modern child*)**

Children are seen as social actors, participating in constructing and determining their own lives, and also in the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live. They have a voice of their own and should be taken seriously being involved in democratic dialogue, decision-making and power sharing. Children are seen as social contributors and not as a cost or burden to society.

The different positions identified above are not exclusive but represent a range of underlying views that will influence each of our individual motivations and the decisions taken in respect of beneficial early years practice. The prospect of differing views of childhood becomes particularly relevant where there are potential tensions arising from the differing views of parents, practitioners managers and children. For example, a parent may consider that their child attends a pre-school setting in order to be prepared for schooling (*Locke's child*), whilst the practitioner may interpret their role as providing opportunities for creativity and freedom from any pressure to achieve (*Rousseau's child*). The manager may consider that their primary role is to provide what the parent (or government grant) is paying for. Taking the view of the '*Postmodern child*' would require the adults to put aside their expectations and involve the child in dialogue about their wishes such that the child can make meaning out of their experience of the setting and a contribution to how their time is spent. Each would have a differing focus and expectations which could lead to new ideas or to disappointment and the introduction of emotional negativity in the setting.

Whether these simple summaries give an accurate portrayal of the works and writings of Locke, Rousseau and Piaget would be interesting to explore further, however, they are included here to illustrate a selection of possible views which may affect the underlying philosophies of providers and the tensions that could arise from the expectations of practitioners and parents. These differing interpretations also become threads that underpin successive government philosophy and policy such that every new initiative has its supporters and detractors.

The search and development of understanding about childhood is thoughtfully explored by contributors within "Whose Childhood is it Anyway" (ed. Eke et al., 2009), and Bailey and Barnes in Chapter 8, discussing suitable spaces for children's activities, recognise the impact of underlying philosophies about the nature of childhood:

"Provision for children appears to be 'top down', based on adults' views of what children ought to do, of where they should play and of what is good for them. We would all agree that 'every child matters' but are we in the United Kingdom, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, ensuring there is space for children to have a childhood?"

(Bailey and Barnes in Eke et al. Ch. 8 2009:175)

If Bailey and Barnes' view that provision for children is based on adults' views of what childhood should consist of, then it is relevant to also consider which adults are responsible for such provision and to question whether they are clear in their understanding of what is important and how to provide a suitable and beneficial childhood. As children's experiences are dependent on adults understanding their needs, there is a weight of responsibility for these adults to ensure they have access to the best research and advisors available.

### **2.2.ii The responsibility of parents to provide a positive family experience**

The history and concept of parenting and changing attitudes to the care of children has been studied by many, including Sebastian Kraemer of the Tavistock Clinic (1999). He documents the changing concept of parenthood and child-rearing practices over the past 250 years and identifies key contributions from twentieth century researchers such as Watson 1928, Robertson 1952, Bowlby, 1953 & 1981, Spock 1968, Newson & Newson 1974. Kraemer points out that:



"The most powerful influence on our capacity to manage life's hurdles is the quality of care we receive in childhood, especially the earliest years. ... As the history of attitudes to children demonstrates, we are only at the beginning of a child-centred culture. Resilience based on secure attachment is essentially generous and open minded, and is of little value in an unjust or oppressive society."

(Kraemer 1999:1)

Kraemer makes an important link between the child, its parents and the community he or she is living in. He highlights the fact that family relationships and the development of parenting skills do not occur in isolation to other activities in society. What is most important here is the recognition of the importance of the quality of the earliest relationships and the link between the secure attachments formed in childhood and a person's capacity 'to manage life's hurdles'.

Whilst it is possible to give a description of the features of a good childhood based on the meeting the needs the developing child, the reality for many parents, professionals and children is that this is a complex process within which tensions and conflicts of interest invariably arise. The strategies instigated by adults and children for the resolution of these tensions can be varied in their success and all resulting interactions will contribute to the emotional experience that the child has. Some parents lack the skills and temperament to nurture adequately. Some practitioners have little emotional awareness and some professionals are poorly focused such that the environments that are intended to be caring and supportive, may actually be detrimental, with adults unaware of the damage that is being done. In some extreme cases, adults with responsibility for children intentionally inflict harm. Children of all ages are vulnerable members of society and may also be at risk of intended or unintentional harm from others such as their peers or from older children.

So, what are a child's emotional needs and what should be provided to meet those needs? Research into child development has been the domain of health care experts and psychologists for over 200 years with the identification of significant milestones through which children pass in their early years. The stages of emotional development have been recognised and documented by early researchers and practitioners. Peter Barnes' text on *Personal, Social and Emotional Development of Children* (1995) comprehensively draws together the threads to conclude that early relationships have a vital role to play in all areas

of development. Woodhead (1995) focuses his summary on the work of Paul Harris and Judy Dunn. Harris undertook experimental studies and viewed children's emotions as an aspect of their developing cognitive abilities (1989) whereas Dunn conducted observational studies within family relationships and concluded that children experience an emotional power within close family relationships which moves the child towards social understanding (Dunn 1988).

"... we have emphasized interrelationships between emotion, cognition and social development. We have argued that the newborn infant's capacities for expressing and recognizing emotional states soon become regulated within early relationships."

(Woodhead et al., Chapter 4 1995:177)

Although approaching the subject from differing viewpoints, Dunn and Harris both consider that the key to developing happiness and well-being in childhood is dependent on the quality and consistency of the early relationships they experience. For the majority of children their first experience of a close relationship is through the bonds that are formed with one or both of their biological parents and this is the start of life's journey of integration into society.

One of the underlying threads for this research study is that parents are deemed in British law to be responsible for their own children, as given in the Children Act 1989 and consolidated in the 2004 Children Act

**3.—(1)** In this Act "parental responsibility" means all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property.

(Children Act 1989:2)

This enshrines in law the responsibility to provide an adequate home, health, education, discipline, religion, and if necessary, to seek legal representation on a child's behalf. The intention of statutory services is that professional activity should be geared towards supporting parents in fulfilling their responsibility towards their children such that services are provided through partnerships with parents. It is therefore ultimately the parent's responsibility to manage and access the necessary services to help them to improve and maintain their own child's well-being. The Local Authorities do have legal powers under the different Children Acts to intervene or remove and transfer parental responsibility in extreme circumstances such as neglect or abuse.

Adult life choices have always been governed by the financial constraints inherent in earning a living and providing for a family. Whether the struggles of parents are any greater or less than in the past is difficult to measure but it is clear from the *Bright Futures* report (1999) that pressures do exist to the extent that relationship difficulties and family breakdown is increasing. Changes in family stability are evidently impacting on child well-being and this was internationally surveyed in a study on childhood covering the period 2000-2003 using 40 indicators. The resultant table put the United Kingdom at the bottom of 21 industrialised nations (UNICEF 2007) which prompted the Children's Commissioner for England at the time, Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green to say: "We are turning out a generation of young people who are unhappy, unhealthy, engaging in risky behaviour, who have poor relationships with their family and their peers, who have low expectations and don't feel safe" (Eke et al., 2009:24).

In conjunction with the increase in pressure that parents feel to return to work due to pursue of a career, mortgage and rising cost of living, the opportunities for developing parenting skills are diminishing due to spending less time with their children (Reynolds, 2005) and less time in the company of peer group parenting role-models. The prospect of increased parental disengagement does not create an optimistic picture for the development of stable loving relationships within the home or for role-modelling social behaviours.

As well as the broad spectrum of social problems highlighted by UNICEF (2007) the mental health of young children is a specific ongoing concern as there appears to be worryingly large numbers of children experiencing mental health problems. The Bright Futures Report (1999) raised the scope of the problem:

"It is calculated that, at any one time, 20% of children and adolescents (aged 4 -20 yrs) experience psychological problems....diagnosable anxiety disorders affect around 12% of this age range, disruptive disorders around 10%, attention deficit disorder, perhaps 5%, specific developmental disorders, enuresis and substance abuse up to 6% dependent on age group. Psychotic and pervasive developmental disorders such as autistic disorder are very rare, affecting less than 1%."

(*Bright Futures* report 1999:6)

It is difficult to establish whether the apparent increase in child difficulties is because diagnostic methods and understanding have improved or that more children are genuinely unhappy or unwell than was ever the case in the past. Quite how this situation has arisen is difficult to track and is not within the scope of this study. However, as a general

consideration, the *Bright Futures* report indicates that changes in society may be putting children at risk of emotional neglect. Emotional neglect is described here as a failure to provide the support or affection necessary to a child's psychological and social development. It includes a failure on the part of the parent or carer to provide the praise, nurturance, love and security essential to the child's development of a sound and healthy personality.

More recently, The Children's Society report *A Good Childhood* (Layard and Dunn 2009) also conducted research into the prevalence of child emotional disturbance and concluded that approximately one in ten (9.6%) children aged 5-16 years are experiencing emotional issues and disorders such as Behaviour disorder, Anxiety disorder, Eating disorder, depression and similar difficulties with an increasing number of young children being prescribed Ritalin for behavioural disorders.

The same study researched the experiences of children across the country and highlighted increasing percentages of three year olds suffering from poor conceptual development and behavioural difficulties (Layard and Dunn 2009:23). Helpfully, but unsurprisingly, the report identifies the need for children to have 'loving families' as a central to being able to grow and flourish throughout childhood, with a recognition that parenting is an 'awesome responsibility' (p155). Whilst the background factors leading to the development of these problems in childhood will be open to discussion, this information does highlight the need to ensure thoughtful practice in the early years, particularly if practitioner are to be meaningful partners with parents – some of whom may not understand their responsibilities.

In situations of concern, the inability of primary carers to adequately provide for emotional development may be due to a number of reasons such as: parental abdication of responsibility, misunderstanding about children's needs, lack of skills, ignorance of the significance of emotional stability, inability to show affection, inadequate communication between parents and carers or simply under so much pressure themselves they have little time or energy to pay attention to their child's needs. Where other adults share early years care and learning, this responsibility to provide for emotional needs requires appropriate communication in order to be addressed, though still remains the responsibility of the parents whilst becoming a shared duty of care.

When parents are under pressure, this in turn puts children under pressure. Workplace stress is now more widely recognised and regarded as a contributory factor in adult mental health issues (Coryton and Birkenhead, nd). In addition to considering the development of child emotional well-being there is scope for another study into parent coping skills and parents' understanding of their role in providing for their own child's happiness. The whole concept of modern parenting is changing from a 'nurturing' role to a 'service purchasing' role. This involves parents, usually the mothers, spending time seeking services provided by others, then balancing the scheduling and settling children into the activities identified, with less focus on providing activities and spending time with their own children. Whether such purchased services are an adequate replacement for parental time will depend on individual circumstances and the expertise of the service providers.

Bowlby's work on maternal deprivation (1953) and attachment theory subsequently developed by Ainsworth (1978) and others, raised important questions about the long and short-term significance of a child's secure attachments to sensitive adults and potential implications for periods of separation before the age of three years. Although such theories are subject to review, they do raise important areas for research when considering the nature of childhood and the purpose of early years settings.

Providing an environment that develops a positive state of emotional, physical, social and mental functioning becomes the primary task of all who contribute in any way to the care and education of young children. The recognition of the importance of a child's well-being is implicit as the sum of experience for every child and is the basis of a national concept of childhood, now embodied in the Children Act 2004 which legislates for five outcomes for every child through the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES, 2003).

The research into early years will no doubt continue, as will policy development and the debate over best practice for the youngest members of our society. Whether these discussions and developments reach a coherent outcome remains of interest. The various sources identified above do all acknowledge that the early years is a critical period for emotional stability and capacity to thrive. It is clear that anyone responsible for the care of

young children should have an understanding of the central role of emotional development for children and adults and how it links to all other areas of development. The importance of consistently high quality relationships and communication amongst all adults cannot be underestimated if appropriate provision is to be made available.

Within the broad social changes that are taking place, traditional employment patterns are also changing and assumptions about childcare responsibility are widening from being regarded as the duty of a mother, to that of both parents (if the two are in contact) or other, usually female, relatives. Yet, with the increasing need to involve others in childcare and early education duties, children are also being left for longer hours in the care of non-family members or combinations of care providers with 80% of children aged 3-6yrs and 25% of under 3yrs experiencing childcare by adults who are not their parents (Pearce, 2010). Whether this extension of childcare responsibilities is a beneficial or detrimental arrangement for the child will depend greatly on a wide range of circumstances and in particular, on the individual and collaborative skills of all the adults involved.

If parents are under financial and social pressure to return to work whilst their children are very young this also requires them to review and revise their own understanding of parental responsibility and acknowledgement of their greater dependency on the skills of others. Ensuring effective communication and collaboratively work with others can be quite a challenge for parents and not always one that is recognised as requiring the use and development of new skills. This scheduling and management of time with one or more young children can greatly add to the pressure on a parent. Parental training is not yet considered to be a requirement of parenthood so the majority are likely to become dependent on the support of others such as the early years practitioners and managers of early years provision and services.

One aspect important to the current situation is the increasing flexibility needed over working arrangements with shift-work, short-term contracts, anti-social hours all needing to be juggled. Munton (2000) points out that to get childcare provision right 'you have to push for serious changes in the work world too'. This requires the whole of society to place paramount importance on supporting family relationships and also on employers to

understand how to make 'child-friendly' decisions. Whether employers take onboard this responsibility will depend on their perception of the benefits of doing so, such as the prospect of improved staff retention.

The Children's Society survey (2009) also reports on the changing nature of family make up and changes in parental employment. One consideration arising from such a survey is that if parents spend less time with their children, are young children experiencing less love? and if so, are early years practitioners expected to provide that missing love? Early years literature currently considers love within family relationships but has little to say with regard to any expectation that love is provided by practitioners or other non-family members, yet from the work of the Children's Society, it seems to be the core input into child emotional well-being.

### **2.2.iii Community responsibility to support the development and well-being of children**

If initial support for child development and well-being arises primarily within the home through loving family relationships then secondary support is provided by a range of statutory, voluntary and private health, social and educational organisations. Tertiary support for children and parents arises from a rich culture of neighbourhood and community social experiences. The social context and its contribution to child development and early learning has long been a focus of research study. During the last century, the work of psychologists and educational theorists contributed to a body of knowledge on how children develop and learn. A key theme of Vygotsky's work considered the link between a child's social behaviour and their capacity for cognitive development. He proposed that "All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals". (Vygotsky, 1978:57). Early relationships experienced within a community are therefore presented as critical for effective socialisation.

Vygotsky also demonstrated that appropriate adult guidance or peer collaboration can support a child to attain at a greater level than could be achieved alone. From this he developed his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which introduced the idea that, with careful observation and intervention by sensitive adults, a child can be supported through the use of language and imitation, to move into new areas of understanding if this is

within their reach. Vygotsky's (1978) further work on the significance of the role of the community in early childhood development has since been recognised as a key factor in contributing to a child's sense of 'belonging' to a social group which underpins a holistic sense of well-being.

Bandura (1997) proposed a Social Learning Theory based on the notion of learning through observation, imitation and modelling the behaviour of others. Bandura's theory varies from the different views of the behaviourist and the cognitive learning theorists and includes consideration of human motivation, memory and attention span. Although Bandura was initially concerned with researching social influences generating aggressive behaviour in children and young people, his findings have been used to develop effective approaches that support behaviour modification through building self-control and self-regulation. Such a pro-social approach provides a significant insight into the way that group care and adult-adult, adult-child and child-child interactions could all be successfully influenced and modelled in order to develop a consistently positive environment. This Social Learning Theory also supports the development of new staff skills through the explicit use of particular adult behaviours in the workplace to model caring relationships.

An interesting perspective on how child development is influenced by community experiences has been developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) whose Ecological Theory highlights a socio-cultural view of development in which all interactions with social agents contributes uniquely to the child's view of themselves and their world, as well as acknowledging that the child also contributes to the construction of their social setting. As young children in today's society become exposed to greater numbers of people at earlier ages, this is an interesting theory as it also highlights the prospect that young children have an influence on others too. From this viewpoint, young children have become of greater interest to their local community because they interact with others and form peer group bonds as well as relationships with a range of adults. Bronfenbrenner's theory makes the distinction between child interactions within different levels of social systems from what he calls the immediate microsystem and mesosystem to the more distant exosystem and macrosystem. This socio-cultural view considers that the environment has a major influence of child development thereby both shaping and being shaped by, the interaction and experiences with others. On the basis of



this theory, the national move towards more group childcare rather than personalised childcare is likely to have longer term social consequences with regard to family and peer group bonding.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, this work and that of others such as Piaget who proposed a Theory of Cognitive Development (1951) with biologically determined stages of child development, and Bruner with his concept of 'scaffolding' (1986), has led to the central importance of providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum for our youngest children. Although theories and aspects of practice may differ, early years practitioners now have access to an array of guidance materials based on the works of various educational and developmental theories – not all of it consistent.

Ryan and Deci have long argued that self-motivation is a core aspect of human experience. Their Self-determination Theory (SDT) is a theory based on the proposal that people are biological entities that have an innate drive towards psychological growth in a way that integrates their experiences and establishes a sense of self (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000). The experience of feeling in control of one's own life through 'self-determination', will therefore be a contributory factor in generating a sense of well-being and will be a positive outcome of a beneficial childhood.. The SD Theory recognises that the social environment plays a vital role in the fulfilment of this sense of self as it offers support for the basic psychological needs essential for well-being and the ability to make reflective choices. Within SDT, it is also the case that if the social environment fails to provide adequately for the basic human needs then the outcome is more likely to be 'ill-being' and non-optimal functioning. This theory clearly has major implications for anyone with the responsibility to provide a positive social context for the development of our youngest children.

Self-determination Theory takes a similar position to Rogers' (1961) view that "... man has a tendency to actualize himself", and Goldstein's (1934, 1995) view that a person is an organism that has a basic drive "to actualize itself as fully as possible." Maslow (1954, 1987) brought this concept to a wider audience through the development of his Hierarchy of Needs where 'actualisation' represents the final level of development of a person's potential after all other more basic biological and psychological needs have been met. For these theorists, the

social environment and the development of social well-being through trusting relationships are pre-requisites to becoming fully human with well-being rooted in an early sense of safety and belonging.

In practice, there has been and continues to be, a search for understanding about the links between early experience of pre-school and later adult outcomes. Various UK projects, such as the PEEP project (Roberts, 1998), have not only focused on developing the quality of early attachment and adult outcomes for social and educational well-being but have considered a community approach to be the best way to enhance educational impact for individuals. Educational researchers, Pascal and Bertram from the Centre for Research in Early Childhood, contribute to the search for best early years practice - Effective Early Learning (EEL, 1997) and Accounting Early for Life Long learning (AcE, 1997-9) projects, as well as the EEL project resulted in the publication of 'Case Studies in Improvement' (1997) which provides a helpful reflection on the issues that can arise when undertaking research in early years settings. The DfES funded longitudinal Effects of Early Education on Children's Development (EPPE) project, ongoing since 1997, led by Kathie Sylva is systematically shedding light on the relationship between good early years practice and long-term positive adult outcomes for the children in the study. Whilst it must be recognised that in any longitudinal study there are research variables that are unable to be controlled, the data arising from Sylva's work is still helpful within the greater debate.

The focus of the research projects above has been to establish the best circumstances to support child well-being yet despite all the recent research, governments across Europe are still divided about best practice for young children and in particular, the best age for children to start formal schooling. European provision is based on the 'Kindergarten' model where children do not begin formal education until they are six or seven years old. In Britain, although compulsory education does not legally begin until the term after a child's fifth birthday, schools in England have been required to take children from younger and younger ages with a reception year prior to formal starting now being the norm with many schools offering a nursery class for three year olds. This practice raises the question of what sort of provision is suitable for our youngest children and opens up the debate of whether educational progress is improved or impeded by the introduction of an outcome-based

'curriculum' at such an early age. Bigger (1999) highlights the moral duty of the education system to nurture human spirituality as well as cognitive skills, considering that a school curriculum is more than a set of subjects to be studied and does also include professional responsibility for transmission of social culture by offering continuity of daily experience as a way of internalising the principles underpinning relationships:

"Schools deliberately promote their core values - generally expressed as tolerance, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, cooperation and commitment. They try, not always successfully, to put these values into practice in daily routines."

(Bigger 1999:5)

In Wales, there is a different approach to the current National Curriculum Key Stage 1. As a new emphasis, the Welsh education bodies clearly believe that early childhood should be a time of freedom to play, make friends and gain confidence. The implication of the Welsh stance is that fostering a child's social and emotional development through exploration in the early years, is an essential foundation for later educational achievement and takes priority over formal learning processes until the child is aged seven years.

Having considered aspects of childhood in the context of the roles and responsibilities of parents and the contribution of the social community to support parents, the following section takes a closer look at what is understood by a general sense of well-being, factors contributing to emotional well-being, and features of positive emotional functioning.

## **2.3 Emotional well-being and emotional literacy**

### **2.3.i What do we understand by use of the term well-being for adults and children**

Well-being is a broad term that is used in a variety of contexts. In order to understand the scope of this research topic, it is helpful to consider some of the language used and issues arising from a consideration of the term 'emotional well-being' in an adult context. Defining general, holistic well-being continues to generate debate. Hird (2003) considers that there is "no accepted definition of wellbeing". The Social Development Research Network (SDRN 2006) cites Easterlin's (2003) "I take the terms wellbeing, utility, happiness, life satisfaction and welfare to be interchangeable", and Huppert, et al. (2005) view that;

“Well-being is more than pleasant emotions, it is a positive and sustainable condition that allows individuals, groups or nations to thrive and flourish. ... Well-being, by its very nature, requires an integrated approach, one that embraces mind, body, society and the environment.”

(Huppert, Bayliss and Keverne 2005:preface)

This latter definition proposes that at the level of an individual, well-being refers to psychological, physical and social states that are distinctively positive. This serves as an adequate general description of well-being for the purpose of this study. Well-being is clearly a desirable state for an individual or society to be in, but quite how this develops in individuals from birth to adulthood and contributes to the social integration of communities, has been occupying UK government policy makers for some time, with a stated commitment that was given in the SDRN briefing three (2006) that:

“ ... by the end of 2006 the government will sponsor cross-disciplinary work to bring together existing research and international experience and to explore how policies might change with an explicit wellbeing focus.”

(Securing the Future, 2005:23)

The development of policy related to well-being continues. Well-being is closely linked to research interest in human happiness, and the term ‘subjective well-being’ (SWB) is also used by psychologists as a substitute term due largely to the self-assessment processes used and the lack of object criteria. Interestingly, research by Ryan and Deci (2001) into an individual’s assessment of their own subjective well-being has identified two distinct approaches that need recognition but still open up a similar argument over what is understood by the term ‘happiness’ in the following explanation:

“The first of these can be broadly labelled hedonism ... and reflects the view that wellbeing consists of pleasure or happiness. The second view ... is that wellbeing consists of more than just happiness. It lies instead in the actualization of human potentials. This view has been called eudaimonism.”

(Ryan and Deci, cited in Fiske 2001:143)

The pursuit of happiness, according to Ryan and Deci, though similar in its desire for positive emotional experience has a more hedonistic, pleasure-seeking purpose than the actualizing of human potential. For the purpose of this study, the concept of well-being reflects that personal well-being arises from the ongoing life satisfaction gained from being in an environment that allows an individual to thrive in an emotionally positive way. This is different to the hedonistic aspect identified by Ryan and Deci but reflects the eudemonistic

view of well-being as a holistic sense of personal coherence which includes social belonging and purposeful activity. It avoids the direct link to health or absence of illness as it is the subjective assessment of life experiences that are more relevant here, but it does imply a sense of mastery over one's situation whatever that may be. In other contexts such as the Health sector, well-being is more closely related to aspects of illness and wellness to the extent that well-being tends to be used in combination as a single phrase relating to a person's 'health and well-being'.

The concept of well-being also has relevance in psychology and mental health to the child 'resilience' debate. Over the years there has been growing interest in describing 'coping skills', with investigation into issues of resilience in children and factors to support its development as a 'good thing' for future survival. Rutter (1985:598-611) points out that resilience involves several related elements and identifies three particular aspects: "firstly, a sense of self-esteem and self confidence; secondly a belief in one's own self-efficacy and ability to deal with change and adaptation; and thirdly, a repertoire of social problem-solving approaches." Using the term 'resilience' has helped to provide some common language for use amongst health and education professionals.

Roberts (2005), explored the foundations of resilient well-being in children through the PEEP project which focused on working with parents and significant adults using a weekly meeting that is structured to support child development. She identified attributes in children that help them to 'bounce back' when faced with challenges and difficulties in life and referred to this as 'Zing!' based on "eating properly, getting enough sleep, exercising, getting fresh air, singing, dancing, laughing – and ... not getting ill". 'Zing!' therefore seems to be a reflection of the underpinning physical contribution related to a child's general well-being. The description Roberts gives here is equally applicable to adults and provides a desirable and seductively simple target set of circumstances for all adults who have responsibility for providing beneficial early childhood experiences.

Roberts's subsequent work on defining, determining and ascertaining child well-being has been formulated into a workable model for use by early years professionals. In *Wellbeing*

*from Birth* (2010) she explores the concept of 'resilient wellbeing' and identifies protective features relating to a child's experience of their family:

- "competent parenting
- a good (warm) relationship with at least one primary caregiver
- networks of informal relationships

... a young child needs enough consistent nurturance to trust in its availability. ....

Children need an organised and predictable environment that combines warmth and caring with a clearly defined structure and established explicit limits that are consistently enforced."

(Roberts, 2010:20-21)

If a child's capacity for resilience is considered to be a necessary and desirable condition for survival in a fast changing world, the promotion of all aspects of well-being and emotional stability are desirable as they contribute to a child's coping skills. Many other adults also develop relationships with children, for over the eighteen year period of child-rearing, parents will need to access a considerable number of services.

Experts from different disciplines use language of child development differently and when developmental difficulties arise there are a variety of interpretations about the sort of intervention and therapy needed to improve a child's general well-being – such as psychological therapy, medical intervention, social worker support. As there is no multi-disciplinary description of well-being, definitions are will be affected by professional background. Most commonly, the perception is that child well-being is a mental health issue and for these reasons, it has historically been a less commonly used term within the early education profession unless the exhibited behaviour has reached 'referral' status. This situation has the potential to become a barrier to understanding and collaborative working.

David points out that

"Early childhood education research in the UK has, to an even greater extent than other sectors relating to the education of older children, been dominated by child development research and the traditions of psychology."

(David 1998:157)

The research into child mental health problems comes from a medical viewpoint and can seem less accessible to the education and early years professions due to differences in training. Unlike health terms, use of the concept of child well-being by education and early

years practitioners is more likely to be described on a general sliding scale of low to high rather than something specific diagnosed that a child may have or not, such as illness or wellness.

Research into early learning has extended into finding out more about the development of the brain. We now know more about how the structures are formed before birth and during the first 8 years of life. Bruce (1998) summarised the position in her paper delivered on this subject at the Pen Green Centre and offered:

“It seems that emotion etches things into our memory. It seems that rich experiences which use several senses at one time and more than once and which are of emotional impact, aid memory.... Feelings and relationships matter and should be central to the way we approach the early childhood curriculum”

(Bruce, conference paper 28.11.98)

Although controversial, a current scientific stance about the development and functioning of the brain provided by specialist researchers such as Blakemore and Frith (2005) proposes a biologically rational approach to creating and providing a ‘developmentally appropriate curriculum’. Such scientific enquiry would seem to confirm that the experience of sensitive, loving, affectionate, relationships must be at the heart of all good early years practice if young children are to develop high levels of well-being, emotional and general. Studies investigating responses to stress have led to theories promoting a much clearer understanding of the role of emotions in learning. Negative emotions such as feeling anxious, humiliated, fearful or angry have been shown to trigger a ‘shut down’ in areas of rational thinking. Weare (2004) relates this knowledge to the role of teachers but it is equally applicable to early years practitioners:

“We need to recognize and help prevent the emotional states that can block learning. We also need to promote the emotional states, such as calmness, a sense of well-being, and feeling safe and valued, that make it easier to learn.... For example, environments that induce a sense of optimism can make a learner approach a difficult task with a ‘can do’ attitude and thus see it as a welcome challenge rather than a source of stress... So all the emotional and social competences we examined .. turn out to be essential for effective learning.”

(Weare 2004:93)

A young child’s ability to thrive and learn seems therefore inextricably linked to its emotional well-being. And conversely, emotional neglect and dysfunction can lead to poor conditions for learning. It must also be recognised that human experiences can range to varying

degrees along the continuum of well-being, between the two extremes of pathological mental, social and physical dysfunction to high levels of health, happiness and social integration with individuals affected positively or negatively by the circumstances, life events and social environments that they experience.

Significantly, for the youngest members of our society, the majority of their life experiences arise from decisions and circumstances generated by the adults who have the responsibility to provide care and support for their development. From the literature referred to above, these loving relationships require nurturing and supporting, and must be conducted with considerable interpersonal sensitivity to prevent circumstances leading to neglect or harm. These early relationships do not exist in a vacuum and are rooted in the culture and values of group social experience such as in families, schools, religious communities, and neighbourhoods.

Laevers, working at the Research Centre for Experiential Education at Leuven University, has extended his work on child involvement to the development of a child well-being scale based on observations of child behaviour that demonstrate the following characteristics: enjoyment, relaxing and inner peace, vitality, openness, self-confidence, and being in touch with oneself (Laevers et al., 2005). He considers that low levels of child well-being indicates that a child may not be succeeding in fulfilling his/her basic needs. This is an important development as having such practical observation tools and a measurement scale help to bring awareness of child well-being to practitioners. Although helpful, it should be recognised that this method of assessment is affected by subjective factors as interpretation of the scale is dependent on the skills and previous experiences of the observer so should be used as a guide rather than considered an objective interpretation of a child's engagement. The prospect of finding ways to support practitioner understanding of how to develop the emotional climate of the setting in ways to contribute positively to child well-being and engagement is a compelling one.

### **2.3.ii What do we understand about healthy emotional functioning in social environments**

It is clear from the literature above, that experiencing trusting and sensitive relationships plays a central role in adult and child well-being. It also becomes evident that provision for



emotional well-being requires all adults within a child's immediate community to have specialist skills and knowledge to be able to form these positive and sensitive relationships. Consideration of the implications of child emotional well-being as a factor contributing to healthy child development also links closely to the literature behind the Emotional Intelligence/Emotional Literacy debates. As has been touched on, the concept of well-being has its roots within the health disciplines of psychology and psychiatry with a key, though not exclusive, element of individual well-being being good mental health (*Bright Futures*, 1999). Recognition of the skills that can be developed to promote well-being comes from the more recent and related concepts of reflecting upon and managing interpersonal behaviour.

Having briefly explored ideas on resilience and factors contributing to emotional stability, the introduction of discussion amongst psychologists about multiple intelligences and, in particular, 'emotional intelligence' (EI) has enabled non-psychologists to gain an insight into the complex workings of the human mind. The construct of emotional intelligence originally emerged out of studies of intelligence in psychology. Although emotional intelligence is popularly attributed to Daniel Goleman (1996), the foundations for the concept were laid by Gardner's (1983) ideas of *intrapersonal* (the ability to know one's own emotions) and *interpersonal* (the ability to understand other individual's emotions and intentions) intelligence. The term Emotional Intelligence was first used by researchers Salovey and Mayer in 1990 when they initially proposed three categories of measurable emotional ability from which a revised model was formulated in 1997 where four specific aspects are identified:

"The revised model consists of the following four branches of emotional intelligence: (basic processes) perception, appraisal and expression of emotion; emotional facilitation of thinking; understanding analysing and employing emotional knowledge; and (complex processes) reflective regulation of emotions to further emotional and intellectual growth."

(cited in Shutte et al. 1998:168)

The concept and application of emotional intelligence has generated mixed reviews in Britain due to the claim that it is measurable in the same sort of way as cognitive intelligence and also, that it is superior to measures of IQ – neither of which has been proven. Goleman (1996) also raised greater awareness of using emotions positively in the workplace through the idea of 'Managing with heart' and this concept has been extended to encompass the

proposal that managers should demonstrate emotional intelligence in the workplace. Jobs that are based on working with others require high levels of interpersonal skills and the introduction of the concept of emotional intelligence has caused some interest amongst employers.

It is the fact that using the emotional intelligence approach is intended for use in business, education and other services that this initial caution includes a sense of it being considered a 'bandwagon' by many. Murphy (2006) helpfully draws on the work of academics in the field to highlight the controversy over whether emotional intelligence can be considered to have a scientific basis for its claims. It is evident that further research may need to be undertaken before the status of EI claims can be accepted or rejected. Yet in other circles such as management consultant work (Hay/McBer, 1999), professional management training now includes activities that involve reflecting on one's own level of interpersonal and emotional intelligence skills in order to improve leadership style. This has been extended to educational professional development (Sector Training 2005, Institute of Education 2005, Network Training, 2006), the findings of research into emotional intelligence have generated excitement and enthusiasm for its principles yet the basic claim of scientific measurement of EI (or EQ) remains a controversy (Murphy 2006).

Despite mixed reviews, Goleman usefully raised the profile of emotional maturity and created a climate in which personal sensitivity and the value of developing interpersonal relationships can be more widely acknowledged. By taking Goleman's accessible information, trainers and practitioners in the education world have been able to grasp the practicalities of using the concept of emotional intelligence skills to improve students' experiences and staff management techniques through recognising the crucial role that emotions play in learning. This has changed the perception of utility from one of dealing with mental health issues (specialist) to dealing with improving interpersonal skills (everyday use).

In 2003 the DfES formally recognised the potential of emotional intelligence by launching a £5 million pilot programme called the Social, Emotional and Behavioural Skills strategy (SEBS) with 250 schools across twenty-five local authorities taking part in initiatives to "encourage schools to study emotions as well as equations, and to explore feelings alongside facts."

(Hastings 2004). The DfES strategy was based on Goleman's five key areas of emotional intelligence and focuses on developing all the areas below:

*Self-awareness* - capacity to recognise your feelings as they happen

*Managing emotions* - the ability to control impulses and recover from life's upsets

*Empathy* - emotional sensitivity to other people's feelings

*Motivation* - the ability to use emotions to pursue a goal, hopeful despite setbacks

*Communication* – social skills, confident in handling relationships, teamwork

Although debatable, guides now exist to explain the concepts and provide information on how to become emotionally intelligent and how to apply emotional intelligence techniques (Corrie 2003). In some cases, writers prefer to use the term Emotional Literacy (Weare, 2004). Corrie draws on the work of Salovey and others to demonstrate how using the interpersonal and intrapersonal techniques of emotional intelligence can help with classroom management and personal coping skills:

"Developing Emotional Intelligence improves self-awareness, motivation, empathy, recognition of choices and accountability. Developing skills in these leads to greater esteem, higher motivation, optimistic thinking, less violence, more responsibility, and strong and supportive communities, including classrooms and schools."

(Corrie, 2003:4)

Interestingly, Corrie (2003: 137) also refers to emotional intelligence as providing the link between intellectual intelligence (IQ) and spiritual intelligence (SQ) by explaining that it is the latter that gives purpose and meaning to our lives and enable humans to reflect on whether they would wish to change a situation and move beyond the immediate boundaries. This opens up the scope to explore the concept of spiritual well-being and the 'values education' touched on earlier. Just as there may be many forms of intelligence it is possible that being human means we may have many forms of well-being.

For anyone working with children, the contribution of the emotional intelligence approach holds the promise of improved ways of working and, if shown to work in practice, must surely be a good thing. Some Local Authorities have shown an interest and there has been staff training in the approach. In the Health Department at Southampton University, the preferred term in general use is Emotional Literacy. Emotional Literacy is taken very seriously in

Southampton and it is the first city in the world to establish emotional literacy as one of the top three priorities in its education plan. In one of its primary schools, the first two emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs) in the country were appointed, their role was to act as short-term support for specific children with emotional difficulties. The school reported remarkable improvements in the number of children who leave the school being able to read, write and able to handle their emotions.

Dr Katherine Weare from Southampton University also advised the Government on emotional literacy and considers that promoting understanding of emotions and improving communication skills can help to make young people more resilient (Weare, 2004). Weare supports the use of the term emotional literacy rather than emotional intelligence and acknowledges that the term was first attributed to Steiner in 1997. She also recognises that the two are very close in definition as her definition is given as:

“the ability to understand ourselves and other people, and in particular to be aware of, understand and use information about the emotional states of ourselves and others with competence. It includes the ability to understand, express and manage our own emotions, and respond to the emotions of others, in ways that are helpful to ourselves and others.”

(Weare 2004:2)

The main reasons given for using the term ‘literacy’ are that it recognises the skills being developed and used rather than focusing on measurement and puts distance between the British interpretation and the commercial thrust of the American EQ approach. Developing emotional literacy is therefore considered more meaningful in education contexts and is now popular with education authorities, educational psychologists and schools as it supports the concept that the skills can be identified and learned rather like verbal literacy. The thrust of her book – *Developing the Emotionally Literate School* (2004), takes the concept of individual emotional literacy and applies it to the way the whole organisation interacts by considering that internal operations can be managed more helpfully if the school becomes emotionally literate. Her definition of organisational emotional literacy is given as:

“the extent to which the organization takes into account the role of emotion in dealing with the people who are its members, and in planning, making and implementing decisions, and takes positive steps to promote the emotional and social well-being of its members.”

(Weare 2004:3)

Use of the term Emotional Literacy captures the practical application of the concept rather than the measurement aspect so is more appropriate for use in this study. Interestingly, the education world is now dispensing with the initial caution shown as work in Southampton and other Local Authorities (Hastings, 2004), and is demonstrating that developing emotional literacy/intelligence skills amongst staff and learners can lead to positive educational outcomes as measured in conventional achievement terms. With the claim that the science is available to back up the stance that emotions affect learning (Weare, 2004, Huppert, 2006) and the fact that the government is taking a positive interest (Hutchins, 2004), the concept has entered mainstream thinking and could be included in teacher training and Professional Development programmes.

The three critical threads that emerge from the research and the application of the Emotional Literacy concepts are summarised (Goleman 1999, Weare, 2004, Hastings 2004).

- i) that it supports the individual development of learners and contributes to personal coping skills and higher achievement
- ii) that it enables staff to conduct themselves purposefully and support their students behaviour in a more constructive way by reducing aggression and focusing on positive interactions, and
- iii) that the whole organisation can learn to develop positive interpersonal communication amongst staff such that the working climate becomes more rewarding

Along with the resilience debate, the emotional intelligence debate has opened up discussion about children's mental health and there is now a greater willingness in education circles to view children's undesirable behaviour as 'troubled' rather than 'naughty'. This changing climate promotes a greater comfort in education circles of talking about emotional needs and a search for appropriate provision rather than containment or sanctions. The links between emotional instability and under-performance at school has generated particular interest in mental health issues amongst children and young people. The extent to which emotionally related behaviour problems are developed during the early years before school has yet to be fully researched but the *Bright Futures* report (1999) and schools data shows that many children are experiencing difficulties by age five years.

In Scotland, Weare's work has been used to support a major research project in 2004 commissioned by the Pupil Support and Inclusion Division of the Scottish Executive Education Department. For almost a year the study explored the links between mental and emotional well-being and behaviour in schools, identifying perceptions, policies, resources and successful interventions that support inclusion. The final report by the University of Aberdeen (Shucksmith et al., 2005) focused on three key areas: promoting mental health and emotional well-being

- i) through school ethos and environment,
- ii) through the inclusive curriculum, and
- iii) through professional partnership.

Of the many main findings, the following three are particularly interesting to reflect on for the purpose of this study:

- "Unfamiliarity or reluctance to engage with the language of mental well-being results in a failure to explicitly address the issues in some cases
- Successful implementation of the ownership model has considerable implications for the training and support of school staff to develop new approaches to pedagogy, ethos and behaviour management which addresses the mental health needs of all the children in their charge.
- Building teachers' morale and confidence has clear knock-on benefits for the children's welfare."

(Shucksmith et al. 2005:89, 91, 93)

Claims are made that developing the use of emotional intelligence skills can be used as a management tool to raise performance in staff colleagues (Goleman, 1996) and there has been a recognition of the need to develop a whole school or organisation approach rather than just training individual managers or staff in the use of emotional intelligence/literacy approaches. For the purpose of this study the over-arching term of emotional intelligence is used to reflect interpersonal and intrapersonal skills with the recognition that it includes the skills of emotional literacy. The concept of healthy emotional functioning used in this research is integral to being able to manage oneself socially and emotionally and relate appropriately to others.

### **2.3iii What does best provision look like in practice when working with young children**

So how could understanding of emotional intelligence and emotional literacy contribute to improved well-being in young children? Possibly in the three ways identified above – improving individual child well-being, improved individual staff well-being and improved organisational well-being, and an additional aspect that should be recognised, that of contributing to local community well-being through the interactions and support that an emotionally intelligent early years setting can offer to its parents.

There is now some recognition that the use of emotional intelligence concepts can have a role to play in nursery (school) experience. Polly Dyer (in Nutbrown 2002:67) summarises her personal research in an article called 'The Box Full of Feelings' where she researches as a participant observer in a nursery school, and reports on the use of emotional intelligence materials in a nursery context.. She points out that a 'well developed sense of morality' and 'personal integrity' are part of being emotionally intelligent. These aspects of intrapersonal and interpersonal imply the need to have a clear values-base and a whole ethical framework from which to interact with others and Dyer cites evidence that suggests there is continuing concern, amongst practitioners and within government, that the utilitarian approach to raising standards is 'distorting traditional early childhood values' and 'the development of children's emotional well-being' (Dyer 2002). In her conclusion, Dyer highlights that her research has helped her to identify how much adults have to learn about relationships from young children:

"Learning to be emotionally intelligent is a life-long process, and cannot be done in isolation: parents, staff and children learn most effectively when they learn from each other in relationships characterised by openness, trust and warmth. Children have so much to teach adults about morality, generosity, intuitive kindness, moral courage and an ability to play with emotional ideas in a way that adults may find harder to access."

(Dyer in Nutbrown Chapter 6 2002:75)

If it is possible for an organisation to operate in an emotionally intelligent way, it should be possible to identify the interpersonal and intrapersonal management practices that contribute to staff development and experience of the early years working environment. With the increase in demand for childcare and early education places, and the issue of staff retention referred to earlier, and exploration of factors affecting relationships can be considered by

using Goleman's five aspects given above. As one of the factors affecting staff retention is identified as management style (Rolfe et al. NIESR, 2003) the effective support and management of early years staff has led to issues of valuing employees and this is something that can be researched further. To date, there is no national programme using emotional intelligence strategies for management training in early years settings and this leads to the question of whether it is relevant and if so, how can it be made accessible. Irrespective of the use of Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Literacy strategies, there would certainly seem to be a need to undertake further research into what it means for early years staff to feel valued so that tools and strategies could be developed for use in the workplace.

## **2.4 The nature of early years provision**

### **2.4.i What are early years settings for?**

The expansion of early years provision and the integration of child care with education creates an interesting debate on what functions an early years setting is supposed to provide and in whose interests it exists. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) argue that the purpose of early years settings is not self-evident. They are a social construct performing different functions for different people. These writers challenged the status quo by suggesting that our understanding of the very nature of childhood is worth examining for if we cannot be sure about this fundamental aspect, our ability to provide for children's well-being will be hindered. On the one hand, early years settings exist to support and enhance a young child's development with child attendance being the decision of the parent; yet there is a clear message given by the raft of new policy and huge amounts of investment, that children should be regularly in some form of childcare and education setting for longer hours and for more weeks than previously the case – almost to the stage of non-residential institutionalisation. Rodd (2006) highlights the key concern previously raised by Hennessy:

“Considerable research evidence reveals a connection between young children's development and the stability of care in early childhood settings. Instability of care, be it a result of frequent changes in a setting or frequent changes of staff within the setting, can have negative effects on children's development (Hennessy et al., 1992).”

(Rodd 2006:146-7)



Understanding the factors that create constant change and lead to instability in the early years environment, is crucial to the identification of appropriate practices that prevent or reduce the instability that impacts negatively on children's development.

The expansion of early years provision generates many questions about the extent to which they exist to meet parents' need for childcare or for making a positive contribution to child development. An important question to consider is how parent-child relationships are affected by the use of non-family childcare. The relationship between parents and children is the subject of many 'cause and effect' type studies which link adult outcomes to factors of their childcare in early life. For example, development during the last century of a branch of child health relating to 'Attachment Theory' arising from Bowlby's studies in the late 1950s makes the issue of childcare a serious matter for the nation as the evidence from studies indicates implications for poor early experiences by children. The whole attachment theory and 'maternal deprivation' concepts informed the debate over child-rearing practices and the benefits or harm generated by use of differing forms of childcare service. Elfer commented:

Is day care harmful to children? Despite the weight of evidence that good quality day care is not harmful to young children this question is still persistently asked, perhaps because of quite deep anxieties towards any care arrangements that are not seen as 'natural', that is exclusive care by mothers. ... However, research is shedding light on the very poor care and learning experiences many young children may have in nurseries that are not well organised to support intimacy in relationships between the children and the adults, for example through the proper implementation of a 'keyperson' system.

(Elfer 1997:2)

Studies undertaken in other countries also address similar issues and their findings are of interest - particularly longitudinal ones such as Andersson (1989) who studied 119 Swedish children from their first year to the age of eight. The Early Childhood Research and Practice paper (ECRP 2002) summarises the findings of Andersson's work as:

"Children entering day care at an early age performed significantly better on cognitive tests and received more positive ratings from their teachers in terms of school achievement and social-personal attributes than did children entering day care at later ages and those in home care."

(ECRP 2002: np)

The apparent conflict of interest identified by Elfer – that of simultaneously meeting the needs of the parent/s and the needs of the child, generates anxiety and guilt for responsible parents who wish to do their best for their child. As there is no accepted orthodox

description of what a 'good childhood' is, parents continue to resolve the dilemma for themselves in whatever way they can. This uncertain situation is fuelled by the media, and newspaper articles tend to sensationalise the findings of studies in order to maintain the unresolved debate on the issue of whether small children are better cared for by their parents or in a nursery. This was very evident in the flurry of articles such as 'Working mothers harm children's chances at A-level' headlined across various newspapers reporting on the findings of Ermisch and Francesconi (2000) who concluded that

"... a causal interpretation can be given to the association between childhood parental employment and subsequent education of children. (P1)  
There is a negative and significant effect on the child's educational attainment as a young adult of the mother's full-time employment when the child was aged 0-5."  
(p25)

(Ermisch and Francesconi 2000:1,25).

The quality of early years provision is an important factor. The situation has become more politically polarised by all the government policy decisions and, as outlined in the last chapter giving context, it is clear that government policies at the turn of the century favours the view that young children benefit from day care and early education before compulsory school age.

Researching all the influences on a child's emotional development would not be possible in a single study but from Bowlby's work on attachment theory (1957-1980) and that of others such as the Robertsons work on child distress through separation from their families whilst in hospital (1967-1973), Ainsworth et al. who looked at parental bonding and children's reactions to strangers (1974-1985) and Cicchetti et al., who studied child bonding and resilience factors (1990), it is important to recognise that young children's experience of relationships is interlinked with how they develop cognitively. The identification of organisational factors that contribute to child emotional well-being in an early years setting and the responsibility of parents, educators and child carers to work together to provide a coherent early childhood, remains the focus of this research study.

In addition to child well-being and attachment, differing theories of child cognitive development abound and the long-term effects of differing styles of early experience have been the subject of a number of interesting studies. David (1998) has tracked the start of

interest by UK educationalists into early education to a paper by Douglas and Ross in 1965 which claimed:

“ .. that children who had attended nursery provision gained cognitively and emotionally in the long run and with the publication of the Plowden Report (1967) interest in early childhood grew because policy makers were looking for 'best practice' attempting to measure effectiveness, in the hope that early 'inputs' would remedy any underachievement caused by disadvantage.”

(David 1998:158)

One of the most influential longitudinal studies has been the High/Scope Perry pre-school Project which was initiated in 1962 by David Weikart in the Ypsilanti public schools in a disadvantaged area in America. The project was based on a preventative early education program and the study tracked the impact of this positive strategy on the lives of a group of children at varying stages in their development from childhood to young adulthood. The study provided information showing significant long-term personal and financial benefits of specific good quality early educational experiences. This has developed into the High/Scope philosophy and can be directly linked to research by early educators and the National Curriculum:

High/Scope philosophy	<i>Examples of supportive theorists</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children learn through their own actions and interactions</li><li>• Children learn through their own talk</li><li>• Children learn through inter-related key experiences</li><li>• Children should have control over their own learning</li><li>• Observations and evaluations by teachers form the basis for planning children's progress</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Piaget, Froebel</i></li><li>• <i>Vygotsky, Bruner</i></li><li>• <i>Weikart, Sylva</i></li><li>• <i>Dalton, Smilansky</i></li><li>• <i>Macmillan, Pollard</i></li></ul>

(HighScope and the National Curriculum, teaching notes:nd)

These links between the HighScope approach and supportive theory and research indicate a strong sense that early years settings are predominantly about presenting an environment in which educational activity and 'learning' is taking place whilst acknowledging that that the beneficial ethos of the environment needs to be established first.

Since 1999, UK provision has been based on the recommendations arising from observations by practitioners and researchers who have created a Foundation Stage to the National Curriculum with key underpinning guidelines for practice. The related guidance is very clear in its recognition of the role of emotional development. Promoting emotional development successfully is likely to have an impact on all others areas of the child's development and

early years practitioners are tasked with considering this as the central theme for all work with young children (DFEE, 1999).

With many types of statutory, voluntary and independent settings now having a responsibility for nurturing young children's personal, social and emotional well-being, the way that early years care and education experience is provided is crucial. The research studies cited above all contain conclusions showing that the quality of the provision is a key factor. However, they focus to a lesser extent on how that can be achieved by practitioners and this has implications for the training of managers and staff in these settings.

Munton (2000) concluded that high quality experiences are essential to child development, and three elements ('the iron triangle') consistently have a major effect on provision: i) Staff qualification, ii) adult to child ratios, and iii) group size. Across the range of early years settings, staff qualification will vary; there are different legal requirements on ratios of children to staff in education-based settings to childcare settings, and group sizes are likely to reflect these ratios. Qualifications and ratios are key factors in determining staff pay levels.

The purpose and expectations of early years settings is constantly being reviewed. The only justifiable purpose to an early years setting is if it provides a beneficial environment in that it offers a positive balance of social, emotional, physical and educational experiences for children and their families. Much has been learned from the various attempts at partnership working but the frequent changes of focus and different funding streams cannot disguise the fact that good quality, affordable and accessible early years provision is very difficult to achieve without huge investment and ongoing long-term subsidies.

The Sure Start programme provided intervention strategies in disadvantaged areas. An evaluation study of Sure Start progress was undertaken by a team from Birkbeck College which concluded that the implementation of Sure Start had had little effect (Melhuish, 2005). This is rather a concern considering the amount of financial investment and effort by partnership groups. This also surprisingly reports that whilst the relatively less disadvantaged children benefit to some degree, other children who were more disadvantaged were actually

worse off. The study reports emerging evidence to indicate that where health agencies took the lead on strategies, there appeared to be evidence of more beneficial outcomes (2005).

The role of early years settings within communities appears to be complex with no single model meeting the needs of all families. The ambivalence between focusing on the health and well-being of the child and the need for affordable childcare seems inherent in any system however much money is allocated. The *Bright Futures* report (1999), came unequivocally from a child-centred, health-focused point of view, makes many recommendations about the type of provision that will best serve our young children with the underlying message that high quality childcare requires a community approach.

In the meantime, research into the effectiveness of intervention initiatives raised important questions on leadership skills and responsibilities in early years. Biddulph (2006), referring to research by the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) in the US, paints a very bleak picture of the effect of using childcare for children under the age of three years claiming that placing children younger than three in nurseries risks damaging their mental health, citing the NICHD research of 2006 that claimed that day care leaves children more likely to become aggressive, depressed, anti-social and with difficulty in developing close relationships in later life.

Research outcomes generate some confusion over the use of early years settings and findings have become wrapped up in the lack of distinction between aspects of an early years setting that are primarily for education purposes i.e. shorter attendance hours, for children over the age of 2+ years for the benefit of the child, or the use of early years settings to provide childcare i.e. longer hours, for children from six weeks for the benefit of parents.

The critical issues for researchers are around:

- i) the age of the child when starting at the setting
- ii) the number of hours per day and week that the child spends at the setting
- iii) whether the parental motivation to use the setting is mainly for the child's social and educational development or to support parental employment
- iv) the quality of the setting in all its social, educational and welfare provision

Unless these factors are made clear in every research report then the findings cannot provide comparison or helpfully contribute to the debate. The benefits of early education research (David 1998, DFEE 1998, DfES 2005) cannot be used to justify childcare provision neither can criticisms about childcare provision (Glass, 2005, Biddulph, NICHD 2006) be used to cause alarm over early education provision, yet reporting on both as if they are the same thing can raise more questions than it answers and adds to confusion for parents and practitioners.

To summarise the purpose of early years settings, they can have many functions but to be of real and lasting benefit for young children, settings are most effective when they focus on providing highly sensitive social, emotional and developmental support within a positive environment for children and families. This is an important distinction from seeing the use as primarily in preparation for schooling or as a child-minding service for the benefit of working parents.

#### **2.4.ii What are the roles and responsibilities of the early years practitioner?**

According to Moss and Pence (1999), the role of the early years practitioner is socially constructed. Their work and training is based on differing models of health, education and social pedagogy reflecting different philosophical stances about the nature of childhood. Are settings primarily focused on addressing family disadvantage and promoting social equality, or progressing children through their developmental stages in readiness for schooling? Is the practitioner role to protect children from the dangers of the adult world or to liberate them from its constraints? Should the practitioner be instilling discipline and social manners or opening up a world of creativity and fantasy?

These constructs and considerations are integral to an understanding of job role and job satisfaction and create an underlying philosophy about childhood that governs decisions and actions taken in the workplace. All such approaches will be sincere in their intention to mean well but the question then becomes one of whose needs are really being served – the needs of society, the parents, the education establishment, the child. And can serving these different needs be managed harmoniously or will there inevitably be tensions and compromises. Are the hours of attendance that meet parental needs really in the best interests of the children?

Some years ago, the influential Early Years Curriculum Group (EYCG), described as 'a nationally recognised body of early years specialists', produced a guide to parents and school governors. A summary of their beliefs reiterates the role of well-informed staff:

"A distinctive early years curriculum exists in the UK ...this curriculum is dependent on clearly defined goals ... to achieve this, highly trained staff, well versed in child development and clear in their own thinking, are necessary."

(EYCG 1992:4)

At this time, the role of the nursery staff was seen specifically as the promotion of a curriculum with goals. In the same publication, is a set of underpinning principles which were considered fundamental to good early years practice, the last of which also emphasises the fact that the quality of relationships between adults and children is of 'central importance' to all provision. Although written prior to the national early years expansion programme, it is this emphasis on the developing the quality of relationships that remains a focus and a challenge for early years practitioners.

In more recent years, this emphasis remains and has been developed into the concept of relational pedagogy. Papatheodorou (2009:14) in 'Exploring Relational Pedagogy' in the edited book *Learning Together in the Early Years: Exploring Relational Pedagogy* reminds us that pedagogy is more than curriculum, but a social relationship between child and adult requiring informal guidance as a balance to prescribed curriculum content.

"In general, relational pedagogy is understood as the empowering force for knowing ourselves (in whatever capacity: learner, teacher, policy maker and implementer) and others; for making sense of others and making sense of ourselves because of others. Relational pedagogy is about individuality and the collective consciousness that is shaped and transformed in time and place. Relational pedagogy is about understanding and appreciating local and cultural imperatives and conditioning, and about developing global communicative competencies. It is about relationships which leave room for 'not knowing' so that those involved in the learning process come to know without loss of self-esteem".

(Papatheodorou 2009:14)

Understanding and making use of such relationships demands self-awareness and openness among staff and cannot be a paper exercise. For all staff to act within a culture of positive relationships as a matter of course requires a collective journey to be made in which assumptions are examined, practice examined, and professional understandings challenged. Relational pedagogy is contested (Papatheodorou, 2009) since the English National

Curriculum and inspection system look for outcomes rather than processes; so resisting the hegemony of government is revolutionary, a grass-roots critique, of which critical theory has important things to say.

If the role of an early years practitioner is considered as equivalent to the role of teacher, as proposed in the concept of the Early Years Practitioner role, then the assumption will impact on the development of relationships between adults and children in the setting. Frank Margonis (1999:105) critiqued Paulo Freire's assumption that the superstitious uneducated could be improved by dialogue in that the teacher came into the dialogue with an agenda; but he saw strength in Freire's general view of an emphasis on creativity, transformation and knowledge [understanding] (Freire, PO:53) and a humble relationship between teacher and taught (Margonis, 1999:105):

"By focusing our concern upon the dynamics of the educational relationship, a social ontology asks teachers and students to assume a humble attitude of adaptation, rather than an aggressive attitude which seeks to remake students in the teacher's image."

(Margonis 1999:105)

This 'social ontology' consists of the teacher-learner relationship being social, or in other words *relational*, consisting of a free exchange of ideas in both directions, the teacher having a "humble attitude of respect and sympathetic understanding" (ibid.). In this context, the early years practitioner may also be expected to respond in dialogue with the young child and also as an informal educator to parents of the children such that the relational aspect includes the child's family.

The English National Curriculum Foundation Stage (EYFS) is not the only available framework providing guidance for early years practitioners, a number of settings base their more spiritually based approach on the philosophies of early pioneers such as Montessori, Froebel and Steiner. In Auckland, New Zealand the concept of 'Educare' has been developed as a combination of education and care. It is an adaptable, secular programme which promotes a philosophy based on developing five Human Values – truth, right conduct, peace, love, non-violence "to teach young people to think beyond themselves, to value others and to really feel for the environment." As part of its rationale its guidance identifies one of the benefits of group singing activities is that it "helps us associate learning with pleasant emotions."



Perhaps the development of emotional well-being in children is less related to a curriculum with goals that are taught and more to one that is experienced through contact with others who demonstrate education through human values. The term 'educare' has now entered use in the UK in a much more functional way to describe the integration of care and education within the EYFS, though not based on any specified Human Values '... for young children, care and learning happen together and are indivisible' (DCSF 2007c Annex D:167) – there is no mention here of associating learning with pleasant emotions.

From 2.4.i, this study takes the position that a beneficial environment is one that actively promotes emotional well-being to ensure positive outcomes for children. Children are not all born the same nor do they start life in the same circumstances. Potentially poor experiences and outcomes for young children may occur for three main reasons: i) through naturally disadvantageous tendencies arising from their genetic inheritance – physical and/or psychological, ii) the unsatisfactory quality of family nurturing and early socialising experiences within their community, or iii), a combination of both. Consideration of reducing any inherent disadvantages calls for the implementation of two important strategies by staff who work in early years settings: a) adopting a preventative approach - how can families be helped to provide a beneficial childhood that reduces the likelihood of problems developing in the first place? and b) adopting a 'curative' approach - once identified, how can these families be helped to improve their child's level of well-being? Is the primary role of an early practitioner to work towards improving life chances and creating equality of opportunity for children, if so, does the current training support this?

As well as the health, social and emotional well-being considered earlier, there is now emergent information exploring a form of spiritual well-being and a willingness to consider 'happiness' as a definable concept and goal in childhood. Vardy (2003) argues that the task of ethics and of human life should be to help people become fully human. In his chapter on living an accountable life he raises an important theme:

"...the argument that human beings cannot be defined simply in physical terms and that what it is to be human transcends any mere physical or genetic description: it is to do with a spiritual side of human beings which, whilst difficult to define is nevertheless common to all. This ... is closely tied to the search for wisdom and a perspicuous understanding of what it is to be human."

(Vardy 2003:168)

This broader concept can raise new issues for consideration about the role of the early years practitioner and their responsibility to support parents in developing spiritual and moral behaviours in young children. A contribution to emotional well-being may include recognition of spiritual well-being and an interpretation of the whole meaning of life. Zohar and Marshall (2004), consider achievement of a meaningful life to be based on qualities they refer to as 'Spiritual Intelligence' (SQ) which they differentiate from the rational thinking measured by IQ, and the ability to moderate emotions (EQ), with their concept of SQ as a model of 'what I am'. The role of the early years practitioner may well be to focus on providing an environment where a child can thrive and become 'fully human' rather than to provide an environment where the child can make educational progress or simply be happy. Though this study acknowledges the potential for a spiritual dimension, this suggestion would require further discourse on the spiritual nature of childhood which, although interesting to pursue, is not an area being explored here.

To summarise, defining the role of the early years practitioner presents many challenges due to the complexity of the role and the differing viewpoints. A practitioner has combined responsibilities of being an employee - fulfilling the requirements of the setting, a community representative - role-modelling appropriate social behaviours and values within the prevailing society, and a professional advocate for meeting the holistic needs and interests of the child. There is also the need to acknowledge a responsibility to the wider community of early years practice as a developing body of professionals. Quite how these roles are interpreted and combined will depend on individual training, reflective awareness and the personal philosophies on the nature of childhood embodied in the ethos of the setting and the community. The role may be constructed by society through EYFS guidelines, but it is also individually constructed by the practitioner.

#### **2.4.iii What is the job of an early years manager?**

It is only when the purpose of early years settings have been established that the role of an early years manager can be considered. Once again, the different underpinning disciplines will have an influence on role interpretation. Nursery education has long been the preserve of qualified nursery teachers with management provided by head teachers with a similar professional background. Whereas the traditional day nurseries have their roots in health

and welfare training, staffed by nurses and nursery nurses. The introduction of the childcare strategy went some way to provide a transition from the two types of provision to one integrated service (David et al. Ch. 3 in Pugh ed., 2010). However, there is still confusion over the boundary between early education and childcare – as the new Children’s Centres are open all year round (as in Day-care provision) but still require the input of an early years teacher to support the Foundation Stage Curriculum aspects, yet are now Ofsted inspected against all aspects of the EYFS at any time of the year.

Different types of provision exist and the underpinning operational philosophy will vary greatly from setting to setting. This is not just dependent on whether there is a stated ethos such as a Reggio Emilia, Steiner, Montessori or High/Scope philosophy, but through the collective use of internal policies and procedures. The interpersonal skills of supervisory staff and the attitudes and values of the senior staff will be evident in the management of any school or early years setting. This may provide a positive or a negative experience for parents as well as the staff and children. The extent to which individual parents become involved and engage with the staff and manager at the setting will reflect their own levels of comfort about the match between expectations and provision.

Where there is mutual agreement about the purpose of the setting and roles of practitioners then it is more likely that a positive partnership will develop. However, a mismatch will lead to tensions and dissonance for the relationship and will lead to a less productive or negative partnership. Similarly, partnership working within the setting will be affected by unresolved views about purpose and roles. Rodd refers to the 'tone' of the early years environment and identifies research that indicates an undesirable state relating of affairs to the skills and responsibilities of the manager:

“The tone of the working environment can produce a lack of responsiveness and sensitivity among some staff which can lead to high staff turnover. Effective leadership and teamwork are considered to be factors which contribute to increased self-esteem, job satisfaction and staff morale, reduced stress and a decreased likelihood of burnout (Schiller, 1987). The end product of teamwork is an improvement in the quality of care and education for children.”

(Rodd 2006:147)

Effective leadership is deemed here to be evident through the benefits of teamwork, though this is desirable, it is often difficult to implement due to differing levels of understanding and

training. It is the role and responsibility of the early years manager to lead the team in a positive way that establishes stability despite all the difficulties that arise. It is this overall issue of 'tone', responsiveness, sensitivity, work culture and staff morale that all contribute to the emotional climate of a setting and is established by the leadership approach of the manager in conjunction with the senior team.

The use of appropriate management techniques and decision-making styles will largely depend on the training and experience of senior staff. Yet early years staff may not feel comfortable using the management language and behaviours of, largely male, business ventures as described in traditional management texts such as Handy (1993). Guidance on good people-management skills is available for adaptation in various contexts in education and business but less so for the teamwork and emotional focus of early years.

Early years management structures and styles vary greatly with differing levels of accountability in the private, voluntary and independent sectors to that of the Local Authorities. In a local authority nursery or Children's Centre the person with day to day supervisory responsibility for children will often be accountable to a more senior member of staff such as a head teacher, or to a committee of governors working within statutory guidelines. Therefore, some aspects of management may be outside the supervisor's control for example, policy development and employment conditions. This may also be similar for managers of independent settings that belong to a group chain. However, for a large number of individual settings, all management responsibilities including employment conditions will fall to a single person, committee or small group of partners or to deal with. In these situations this has the potential to place an enormous burden on the skills and energies of managers of individual settings, making 'effective leadership' very difficult to establish.

With the rapid expansion of early years provision there has been more research into the 'curriculum' and less direct research into the leadership and management of such settings. It is only very recently that the training issues for managers have begun to be addressed as it has become evident that this is needed to ensure the long-term stability of the settings. Early childhood leadership has been researched by a team from the Childhood Research Unit

at Warwick University with details given in their End-of-Award Report (Aubrey, Harris, Briggs and Muijs, 2006). They identified that there is a lack of Early Childhood leadership development and indicated that "leaders could have been significantly under-prepared for their complex leadership role." (2006:16)

Managers of early education and childcare settings now require an increasing multitude of skills in business operations, change, and people management yet there can often be little relevant training available at a local level. Whether the person with overall responsibility for a setting has arrived at that position through a level 3 nursery nurse route or a teaching route, they will find that their qualification did not contain management information nor would it have specifically developed leadership skills. For nursery nurses, it would only be by attendance on a management module of an advanced level qualification such as the (now discontinued) Advanced Diploma in Childcare and Education (ADCE) awarded by the Council for Awards in Childcare and Education (CACHE) or through the Foundation Degree route. The National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL 2005) is a post-degree level programme, designed to support and develop good leadership skills in the managers of statutory provision. These courses are few and far between, they are devised separately and there may be scope to create a 'common core' of training for managers of early years settings.

The recommended literature for management programmes contains many texts on school or general education management but there appear to be very few books that focus on the management of early years settings – particularly of settings that operate outside the statutory system. For some years, this lack of available access to guidance compounds the difficulties for novice managers and leads to a dependence on their own interpretation of the role of a manager coupled with the use of magazine articles and newsletters for updates on new initiatives. The role of the manager includes recognition of the people-focused nature of the work and the personal resource needed to deal with the emotional demands of others.

From this understanding, the manager will clearly need to focus on maintaining the well-being of the team members if they are to be in a fit state to focus on the needs of the

families they provide services for. Rodd explores the interpersonal skills of the manager and concludes that:

"The effective leader .... will understand the need to accept the emotional responses of other people. The emotionally intelligent leader will respond to these on a genuine and professional level and be aware of personal biases, resources and skills for managing personal feelings in the workplace. This is the point where the connection is made between meeting others' needs and meeting our own needs is made."  
(Rodd 2006:78)

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the role that relationships play in good management practice and the term 'relational leadership' has appeared in leadership literature over the past decade. For example, Brower, Schoorman, and Tan (2000) combined leader-member exchange with interpersonal trust. The idea had already emerged through feminist studies (Regan and Brooks 1995). Drath (2001) sees leadership as not an individual status but a community function, a way of integrating effort. Mary Uhl-Bien summed up a potential dilemma:

"an *entity* perspective that focuses on identifying attributes of individuals as they engage in interpersonal relationships, and a *relational* perspective that views leadership as a *process of social construction* through which certain understandings of leadership come about and are given privileged ontology."  
(Uhl-Bien 2006:654)

The term relational leadership is not generally used within early years studies, however, it does seem to be appropriate to consider it within the context of this research topic. My research encapsulated the latter of Uhl-Bien's alternatives and in times of rapid change, use of relational pedagogy, and relational leadership is a strategy to be embraced and not an attribute that the teacher or leader happens to have. As such it is open to all who understand its importance. Bond, Dent, Gitsham and Culpin (2010:np) spoke of the 4Cs (Change, Context, Complexity, Connectedness), 'A relational perspective' which:

"assumes that sustainable, healthy leadership stems from ordinary people who have the courage and resilience to tap deep into themselves and harness the support of others in extraordinary ways."

(Bond, Dent, Gitsham and Culpin 2010:np)

There will be issues of what is meant by emotionally mature/well balanced, why, and according to whose models? The early years setting may be seen to have contributed to emotional literacy through good relationships, or to have disabled it through neglectful or dysfunctional relationships. The leader has to find a way of encouraging staff and parents to be more emotionally well-balanced. Children at home and nursery do not always see

emotional maturity in action. Can staff be trained to be more emotionally secure? or do they have to be selected? Or does a positive set of relationships become a feature of an approach to leadership that nurtures and values the contribution of team members.

There are useful ways of considering this. Transaction Analysis (Berne, 1964) focuses on particular interactions ("transactions") between people, seeing people acting (metaphorically) as though child, parent or adult. When adults relate to pupils like child to child, control is missing; or as parent to child, the child's freedom and autonomy is missing. Addressing children *as adult to adult* produces a mature relationship. The psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1961) applied person-centred methods to his counselling and the concept of 'unconditional regard' for people: we can extend this to early care and education, emphasising treating young children as real individuals rather than as heads which need to be filled. None of these insights is new, but we have to make progress from the current situation in which past insights have been lost. Similarly, if manager and staff relationships are based on the mutual respect of *adult to adult* exchanges rather than a more disempowering *parent to child* exchange, then this will impact positively on the ethos and emotional climate of the setting.

The role of the early years manager is multi-faceted and involves the use of a range of management skills relating to goal achievement, combined with the interpersonal influence of leadership (Taylor 2005, Davies 2005). All undertaken to move the team forward yet maintain stability for young children in fast changing times.

## **2.5 Early years leadership**

### **2.5.1 What are early years settings like to work in?**

With the introduction of integrated provision (1998) came the blurring of the boundaries between early education and childcare. The DfEE took the lead in setting up the 'joined-up' services for families (Sylva and Pugh, 2005) and brought its educational background to the task. The question arises of what attributes, skills and approaches of staff and managers are deemed appropriate to undertake the highly responsible role of providing the positive emotional climate necessary to ensure beneficial early years care and education. Are the skills and styles of childcare leaders the same as those of educational leaders? If early years provision is integrated, do managers need to work in new and different way? Before answers

to these questions can be considered, it is helpful to understand the experiences of the workforce.

In 2001, The Thomas Coram Research Unit undertook a detailed study to investigate issues of entry, retention and loss for this group of early years workers. Despite childcare students and workers reporting high levels of commitment and satisfaction, the report found that they repeatedly claimed their work was not valued sufficiently. One key indicator of this is low pay levels. Another interesting finding to emerge was due to the fact that the workforce was predominantly female (98%) and that combining childcare work and parenting proved to be a factor in whether to continue working - with only 9% favouring working full-time if they had their own children. "This reflects a widespread belief expressed by childcare workers, involved in the focus groups component of the study, that mothers should be available to children and that children should not be cared for by others." (Thomas Coram Unit 2001: summary).

With the rapid expansion of childcare places, recruitment and retention became critical issues for the sector. Despite all the training available and the emergence of a coherent career path it was evident, through a major study by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (Rolfe, NIESR 2003), that recruitment and retention of early years staff remained a challenge. One of the key findings sheds light on a critical factor behind the high turnover rate:

"Providers reported high turnover rates. They were generally aware of how good human resources practices can help to retain staff, but their practices were often poor, particularly in relation to induction, staff appraisal and development. .. Many providers had regular staff meetings, which staff were usually required to attend outside of work time and unpaid. This may lead to excessive working hours and to resentment."

(NIESR 2003:1)

For many years, the requirements for day nursery staff qualification levels have been low, with only 50% of staff needing to have any qualification at all. Debate continues about the most appropriate type of training for the people caring for young children – depending on which discipline is dominant - education, social welfare or the relatively new concept of 'educare' as a combined discipline. Qualification reviews highlight the need for new training content and invariably lead to the creation of new qualifications and potentially new roles. As



an example, the recent development of a new category of staff to be called the Early Years Professional (EYP). The new practitioners have graduate level qualifications and must demonstrate a range of practitioner and leadership skills in order to be awarded the EYP status (EYPS). The guidance documents indicate that this is intended to be recognised as equivalent to teacher status for someone working with children from birth to five years (2006), although, this has not formally happened so far.

The Daycare Trust identified that low-pay and training issues continue to impact on staff recruitment and retention with recognition that in 2008, average pay was £6.80 per hour and only 7% of the workforce has a post-secondary qualification (Cooke and Lawton, 2008). Pay and training issues remain relevant as a context to maintaining staff well-being and job satisfaction. For a staff team, dissatisfactions over pay and conditions can contribute to low morale and impact on staff retention - a crucial issue for child well-being.

Staff to child ratios of 1:3 for babies, and 1:8 for 3-4 year olds, place a high demand on recruitment. This is coupled with opening hours generally between 8.00 am and 6.00 pm for fifty weeks of the year so that settings have a constant struggle to find staff willing to work for low pay and hours that can be difficult for families. Anyone with recognised qualifications is likely to expect, and deserve, higher pay. The Daycare Trust Annual Report (2004) found that the cost of childcare in Britain was rising at over three times the rate of inflation and nursery fees in inner London had increased by 17% over the previous year. The average rise in the cost of nursery places during 2004 was 5.2%. The goal of universal, affordable and high-quality childcare cannot become a reality without greater direct government investment to fund expansion and better pay for higher qualified staff.

Whether a setting is Local Authority supported or independent, developing and maintaining affordable childcare provision is a constant compromise between attracting and retaining well qualified staff and being able to afford to pay them a reasonable wage from whichever source the fees are paid. Only once the quantity issue has been addressed can providers start to focus on the quality of staff and provision yet the quality of early years provision is directly linked to staff training and development issues as has been shown through the EEL, EPPE and other projects referred to earlier.

One feature that does not seem to change is that childcare and early education provision remains a predominantly female responsibility (98%). Despite efforts to encourage men to enter the childcare workforce, changes in attitude to parents accepting men working with the under-fives will take some time, as will changing men's attitudes to working with under-fives – particularly if the pay rates remain low. The research on pay and conditions throws up an irony in the situation in that expansion is dependent on more women and men working in the childcare sector, but in order to do so, many will need to be able to afford childcare fees out of their low pay for their own children, so that potential childcare employees with their own children cannot afford childcare and therefore cannot take up the jobs available. The other related curiosity is that people are paying others to look after their children so that they can be paid to look after someone else's children. The result is that young children can end up on a 'merry-go-round' of childcare within their community.

The concept and benefits of a 'contented workforce' has been researched from a productivity angle but staff morale and its impact on the relationships and development of young children would seem to an issue worth exploring.

"Educators must also be responsible for their own psychological welfare. They are emotionally vulnerable, their work involves them in repeated cycles of relationships with and commitments to young children. The demands of parents can drain the emotional and physical resources of the adults. If educators are to maintain the levels of communication and intimacy needed for effective practice, with both children and their families, then this commitment and involvement must be respected and cherished."

(Sellick and Griffin, in Pugh, 1996:168)

The characteristics of work in early years settings are primarily: female, underpaid, undervalued, under pressure, emotionally demanding, constantly changing requirements, has high expectations, is socially team-based, and can be very rewarding. Levels of self-belief in the workforce can be variable and the development of greater reflection skills will have an impact on how early years practitioners view their career choice. It is therefore no surprise that leading a setting well will require a wise and effective manager.

### **2.5.ii Consideration of leadership and management issues**

Research into early years provision has previously shown that, however well trained the staff members are, good provision is entirely dependent on good management. An evaluation by Pascal and Bertram (1999) of the forerunner to the present Children's Centres - Early

Excellence Centres (EEC), highlighted a number of management issues that can arise when working across multi-disciplinary boundaries. Amongst the various quality indicators they looked at under 'Ethos, Culture and Climate', particular aspects for review were 'integrated participation, respect and mutuality in relationships, sensitivity and responsiveness' as these were deemed to provide valuable insights into the way the organisation worked to deliver its brief of providing a positive experience using a multi-agency approach.

The early years environment is constantly changing and the interpersonal style of leadership used to manage the work of the staff team is clearly a critical factor in motivating and building commitment to a common purpose. The impact of constant change adds pressure to the workforce and to the management of any setting such that adult energy may be directed inward towards maintaining organisational and personal equilibrium with the result of leaving emotional resources depleted. Such an environment, if allowed to continue, would lead to a reduction in available sensitivity towards the children and should therefore be understood and managed very carefully.

The big question for managers is whether the negative outcome for under three year olds spending long periods of time in day care identified in America by NICHD (2006) is inevitable or whether some organisational practices can be implemented that mitigates the potentially detrimental effect. Finding creative ways to provide a coherent range of services for parents that live up to the rhetoric, remains a challenge yet there are examples of success that give hope, such as the Old School House Day Nursery, which was featured in a Nursery World conference (22.11.05) looking at practical way to improve quality in early years provision and concluding that the key is to provide a suitable working environment to enhance staff retention. The presenter, Linda Baston-Pitt, considered that pay, training, appreciation and staff support were all critical factors that required careful management.

The retention of staff on low pay has become a major challenge to providers, whether independent or statutory, particularly as the simple solution of increasing pay to suitable levels is not feasible in voluntary or independent settings without also increasing fees to parents or through large grant subsidies.

Although the inherent rewards of working in and managing an early years setting are sufficient to retain the majority of supervisory staff, the constant pressure and challenge for managers will continue until there is a period of stability in which the early years world agrees it has reached a satisfactory balance of expectations. This may take some time. Jones and Pound (2008) identify the complexity and demands of early years practice and conclude:

“ As a consequence, leaders and managers play a significant role in enabling other practitioners to develop the necessary capabilities in a climate of significant change and developments. Early childhood leaders are in the unenviable position of needing to develop high levels of expertise in order to empower and influence others to enhance the quality of provision, while at the same time meeting a number of legal requirements.”

(Jones and Pound 2008:1)

To provide insights and support to early years managers, it may be productive to reflect on the extent to which early years leadership and management is similar to, or different from, that of other types of organisational management responsibility. Analysis of leadership and management styles is an area of activity that has generated a plethora of texts and promotional ‘gurus’ for the development of a wide range of settings – notably business, health and education. In this study, the review of the changing early years context in Chapter 1, and the literature covered in this chapter, identifies three key areas of leadership expertise and practice that are worth further consideration here:

- Practices to ensure the best possible early years provision for children and families;
- Practices to attract, motivate and retain effective members of staff;
- Practices to effectively manage organisational change during a period of conflicting priorities.

These are complex areas that represent a very different culture to the growth and sales targets of a business organisation yet are similar, though not the same, as a school environment which is focused on educational outcomes. British school leadership and management styles have been described theoretically using a variety of terms to reflect the different ways in which head teachers project their authority within the organisations.

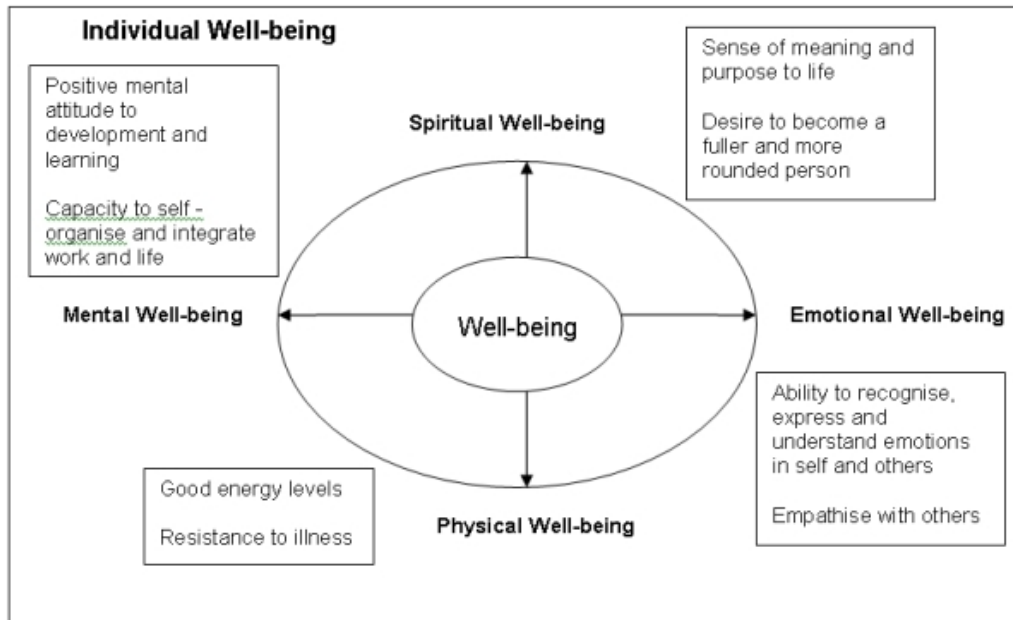
Attempts at defining school organisational climates, their leadership, and their management as separate aspects of activity have occupied theorists for many years. Examples of such

research are Weber's description of three major kinds of educational authority and legitimisation: the legal/rational power inherent in position; the charismatic/affective power of personal character and expertise; and the traditional legitimisation of leadership through roles and behaviour patterns that are largely unchallenged (in Henderson and Parsons 1947). Halpin's work describes six types of 'open' and 'closed' organisational climates (1966) in which issues of morale and head teacher example are critical features. Ball gives descriptions of four leadership styles as: interpersonal, managerial, adversarial and authoritarian, (Ball 1987:83). These aspects shed light on the many facets of organisational power, culture and style.

More recently, Bush and Coleman highlight a correlation between school effectiveness and being well managed, they discuss definitions in an effort to describe separate 'leadership' and 'management' activity (2000:19) with a distinction between the inspirational function of a leader and the practical organisation function of a manager. Helpfully, Goleman et al. identify six positive leadership styles as: visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pace-setting, and commanding (2002:55) with the real benefit of understanding the application of these styles as a tool-kit to draw on depending on the circumstances rather than as a fixed approach.

Coles and Southworth (2005) extend the concept of leadership by recognition of good leadership as an inclusive activity involving staff and pupils working together rather than the work of one person as a leader. All these, and many other contributions, shed further light on the complex nature of leadership and management and our changing understanding of the skills and qualities necessary for effective activity. It is acknowledged that different attempts at definitions exist but, for the purpose of this study, the two terms are largely used in an interchangeable way and both have implications for leadership responsibility to support staff in addition to setting the pace for undertaking workplace tasks.

Tina Rae proposes a simple model to recognise and place staff emotional well-being in schools within a context of overall individual well-being.



(Rae in Teaching Expertise 2010)

In a similar way to schools, early years settings are also concerned with establishing an appropriate climate, promoting the use of interpersonal styles, integrating leadership and management activities, but less likely to be focused on establishing authority and power structures. Rather than attempting to summarise the many different definitions of educational leadership and management, it is sufficient here to accept that the responsibilities of early years leadership and management are similar to those in an educational setting but may have differences in emphasis of what is regarded as 'effective'. Effective settings do not arise by accident and this study investigates the practical reality of creating a positive climate and explores the development of leadership and management skills in a real world setting. To this end, a staff team that is able to review its provision and reflect on the way the team works together and with parents will have a valuable strategy for developing effectiveness.

Whilst texts on care and education extoll the benefits of reflective practice, Eraut (2004) points out that there is no clear definition of the concept and that attempting to define reflection as a recollection of thoughts is problematic. He helpfully explores different aspects of reflection as an individual activity and as a group process in which reflection could be

undertaken on both past and present events, and suggests that a specific workplace climate is required for the group reflections to be meaningful.

Establishing such a positive learning climate will be dependent on the application of specific leadership skills and the presence of a strong team morale. Eraut (2004:4) considers '... there is still a personal and social risk to be overcome by every participant' in that reflective discussions require considerable openness and responsiveness to change. The continuing focus on developing reflective skills in all early years practitioners therefore favours the conscious use of the more distributive and inclusive leadership and management styles in order to avoid creating vulnerability through self-doubt and judgemental approaches. Eraut highlights the notion of good leadership fostering new and beneficial relationships:

"Without any close colleagues, difficult experiences are likely to wear people down and erode their confidence. This impinges on our learning focus because feelings, and especially self-confidence and self-esteem, play a major role in a person's readiness to learn. Worse still, bad relationships and/or weak leadership constrain learning and elicit self-protecting survival behaviours rather than a collective search for improvement."

(Eraut 2006:2)

The creation of a suitably supportive climate is dependent on the right kind of leadership and the Coles and Southworth (2005) view has much to offer in promoting the concept of leadership and management as a community activity that includes the collective responsibilities of the staff and children. However, for leadership to become a community activity, a clear example and consistent role-model is required.

### **2.5.iii Developing positive communities of practice to ensure teamwork and productive partnership with parents**

Early years provision is a multi-skilled and multi-faceted activity. In conjunction with a high national focus on expanding early years provision, there have been attempts to link the various types of training into a coherent set of professional training pathways and working practices undertaken by those who work with young children. Each early years setting is a unique entity that reflects an interpretation of the task with the combined contribution of skills and understanding of the workforce involved. Yet no setting operates in isolation, nor is it free to interpret the task of early care and education entirely through the contributions of its members, as it also embodies the fulfilment of legal guidelines and workforce norms at

both a regional and national level. Wenger et al. (2002) describe the benefits of collaborative learning through a workforce group as a 'community of practice' and defines such collaboration:

"Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."

(Wenger et al. 2002:4)

It is this whole community of practitioners at both at workforce and leadership level that benefits greatly from the ongoing development of a collaborative outlook on their roles. Smaller, local communities of practice therefore have a sounding-board for their reflections and development within a wider community of practitioners. Such groups are not necessarily limited to the staff team of a setting but may also be part of organisations that support practitioners such as the Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA) or the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), and these groups foster collaborative best practice through training and social events.

Support and awareness of practice can be enhanced through both actual and 'virtual' interactions with members of these groups. Wenger's definition of a community of practice relates primarily to a group of members who are actively seeking to increase their knowledge, understanding and practice through research and discussion about the issue. This is a much more focused set of interactions to that which normally takes place in the work environment and represents a specific cultural attitude to deepening understanding rather than simply finding solutions to problems arising in the workplace.

Prior to 1998, the lack of joined-up thinking relating to early years provisions was already evident to practitioners and discussion by the Early Years Training Group of the Early Childhood Education Forum led to an examination of the (then) current training situation and changing climate of provision with the conclusion that there was much to be done. Abbott L. and Pugh G. (1998) proposed a 'climbing frame' concept for qualifications which was, and continues to be, developed so that there is flexibility for staff to progress in their skills and expertise as well as being able to move across the traditional boundaries. The training dilemma is one that has dogged the early years sector since the early 1990s. The expansion of the provision of childcare and nursery education places meant that there had been a rapid



rise in the need for more staff in order to maintain the necessary ratios. During the late 1990s and 2000s the predominant issue was that of insufficient *quantity* of people (whether suitable or not) that were required to staff the new or expanding settings. Resolving the quantity issue remains a challenge.

The ten year Childcare Strategy identified that “the single biggest factor that determines the quality of childcare is the workforce ... skills and qualifications of staff are directly linked to developmental outcomes for children, with a strong impact when practice is led by a qualified teacher” (DfES, 2004). Inherent in this presumption is an expectation that this quality can mainly be achieved by qualified teachers, rather than by qualified Early Years Practitioners. In reality, good practice can also be led by managers with a variety of backgrounds if they have developed appropriate skills and knowledge, and have a good understanding of interpersonal behaviour. Achieving sufficient quantity and quality of staff can only be possible if early years managers are good at attracting, retaining and developing the workforce. These skills are not the exclusive preserve of a qualified teacher but do require an appropriate training programme and a framework for continuous professional development.

If quality of provision is dependent on appropriate training, this leads to the question of what should be included in that training. During recent years, there have been many varied research projects that continue to extend our understanding of child development and how children learn, so much so that qualified staff members require ongoing training and updating which takes them away from the setting and places pressure on others to provide cover. This is in addition to ensuring that qualifying programmes take account of the new knowledge and increased responsibilities arising from government policy changes. Until recently, all early years qualifying training had been brought together by the Children's Workforce and Development Council (CWDC) into a single suite that removes the confusion over parity of qualification status. In doing so, the CWDC has made progress with creating a coherent set of professional training standards opening the way for greater recognition of the status of early years practitioners. However, this organisation has now been disbanded, leaving Awarding Organisations to continue the development of qualifications

The need to greatly increase the number of people joining the workforce generates the question of who the right sort of people may be. Should they have a natural emotional literacy, do they need training in early education, child mental health and well-being or is it enough to simply have somebody to meet the requirement to make up the ratios? The majority of new applicants to this employment will be women and the reasons for women taking up or returning to employment can be various depending on what the work situation is offering. If the childcare employment situation is not chosen for its high pay then there are possibly other human needs and work satisfiers that do not appeal to male staff. This predominantly female domain of childcare and early education employment may inadvertently be generating a particular style of organisational climate which suits women well but feels less comfortable to male employees. Indeed, there may be collusion in a setting that might make male staff feel that they don't belong to this rather exclusive female world. The early years community of practice is largely, but not exclusively, led by females and therefore has a distinctly female approach in provision, leadership and management.

One essential aspect of that leadership will be to provide the right kind of nurturing environment to help children grow and develop. The Bright Futures report considers that training to support children's mental health should be essential knowledge for everyone and that this is an essential component of a high quality child care environment:

"Recommendation: all agencies, statutory and voluntary, working with children and young people, and particularly those working with children and young people at risk, should develop programmes of emotional and social learning within all aspects of their work."

*(Bright Futures report, 1999:29)*

To this end, a body of knowledge has been established through the EYFS and a set of core skills identified: The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce arose through extensive consultation and it outlines the skills and knowledge needed by all people who work with children and young people. The purpose of the Common Core is to ensure that everyone is clear about their own responsibilities and those of other professionals so that there can be effective communication by all service providers. The Common Core comprises:

- *Effective communication and engagement with children, young people and families*
- *Child and young person development*

- *Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child*
- *Supporting transitions*
- *Multi-agency working*
- *Sharing information*

(Common Core leaflet, DfES 2005)

Specialist training is an essential feature of good early years practice. Qualified nursery practitioners and other trained childcare staff have the skills to observe child development and may be better placed to initiate simple curative and preventative approaches in order to maintain and improve children's well-being before other professional intervention becomes necessary. Adequate funding is essential to support training and development as early years staff could not afford to pay training fees themselves from their low wages. In order to ensure high quality provision, attracting, retaining and developing good staff continues to be the focus of much management activity in early years settings.

The issue of effective training for practitioners and managers will continue to dominate the debate on appropriate practice and will remain constantly evolving to reflect the underlying philosophies of the policy-makers and the new knowledge gained from reflection and research. However, such an approach presumes that training is an activity undertaken externally to the setting either before employment or by a training provider as part of a structured CPD programme. Training for early years managers is less readily available or affordable than that of teachers due to the traditions of the work culture. What is very evident is the need for leaders to establish a climate of learning such that any effective setting will to remain responsive to change.

Aubrey et al's (2006) research into early childhood leadership identified a 'distributed leadership' as an important property within relationships for early years settings and their interview data led to a recommendation that all early years staff should have access to leadership programmes to help develop an understanding of conjoint leadership and teamwork. This theme reflects Eraut's work in a school context when he refers to Eraut et al's (2000) research into mid-career learning of managers found that;

"...most of the learning that occurred was informal, neither clearly specified nor planned in advance. It arose naturally out of the demands and challenges of work, .... and out of social interactions in the workplace with colleagues, customers or

clients. Responding to such challenges entailed both working and learning, because one could not be separated from the other.

(Eraut 2012:22)

These insights into the collaborative nature of leadership and management are in contrast to the more bureaucratic and power-oriented styles of leadership described by earlier management theorists and represent a greater appreciation of the interpersonal aspects of management rather than the task-focused goal-setting approach of the business world. We do not yet know a great deal about early years leadership and management experience from the practitioner's point of view. Further understanding of workplace practices will therefore be gained through the close study of the staff team in a specific setting and this exploration will contribute to a growing body of understanding on the matter.

## **2.6 Summary**

In a rapidly changing world, our youngest children are vulnerable to the attitudes and decisions of the adults who have responsibility for providing them with a stable and secure experience. At best, an early years setting can make a valuable contribution to child emotional well-being and the development of a positive outlook. At worst, an early years setting can compound a sense of emotional neglect and undermine the likelihood of a young child developing an inner sense of well-being. The primary issue impacting on the difference between a 'best' and a 'worst' setting is the relationship competence of the manager and their ability to establish a positive emotional climate within the team and the setting.

The main focus of this study is to explore the experiences of staff within an early years setting alongside the factors that impact on the emotional climate of the setting and how these factors are managed and developed in a positive way. A review of a sample of the available literature has identified a number of factors that may contribute to a child's likelihood of benefiting from early care and educational experiences. There is a clear need to gain greater understanding of how to master such factors so that practitioners in a leadership role can become more informed about how to manage those factors identified and implement appropriate workplaces practices. In order to investigate and separate out the various factors, it has been necessary to devise a suitable methodology – given in the next chapter.

As more young children are spending longer periods in day care and early education settings, it is evident from the review of current literature that their experiences will have a significant effect on their future. From the work described above of Ryan and Deci, Huppert et al, and Roberts, comes greater understanding of the concept of well-being as a desirable state for adults as well as children. Attachment theorists such as Bowlby, Ainsworth and the Robertsons have shown that young children are sensitive to the interpersonal interactions of adults and that separation from primary carers can impact on a child's emotional well-being and development. The work of Vygotsky, Bruner and Bandura demonstrates the importance of adults understanding their responsibility as guides and role-models particularly in the way they behave towards and relate to others in an interpersonal way, and in the way they frame the language used with children.

This study seeks to interpret these concepts in a way that will identify factors contributing to social cohesion and underpin management relationships that can positively contribute to a child's well-being in order to avoid inadvertent emotional indifference or neglect.

From the information considered in the literature review, it can be concluded that for optimum readiness for learning there is a combination of factors that is likely to be required as a pre-condition to any curriculum content and planning consideration. With a greater understanding of emotional literacy skills, as identified by Goleman, Weare and Corrie, such as self-awareness, management of emotions, empathy, self-motivation and good communication skills all seem quite elementary and not surprising though highly desirable skills to find in an early years staff team. Yet without an organisational policy that recognises the impact of emotional literacy skills as contributing to the emotional environment as pre-condition to learning, much educational effort may potentially be wasted. For optimum readiness for young children's learning, the conclusions of the literature review are that the optimum pre-conditions would be:

- i) The child is emotionally stable - i.e. has high social and emotional well-being
- ii) The child's family life is stable and functioning coherently with good coping strategies
- iii) The early years setting operates consistently within an emotionally positive climate
- iv) All members of nursery staff have high levels of personal morale and feel their work is valued and appreciated

If these factors are true for all early years settings, the task of leadership is one of considerable responsibility. Time spent in an early year setting will shape a child's attitude towards themselves, their peers and their learning during later years. A child's early experiences will confirm a positive or negative approach to self-confidence and learning from an early age which will underpin the way he or she relates to others. From Bronfenbrenner's socio-cultural theory, early experiences of relationships with others will have an impact on well-being, attitudes, personal confidence, resilience and life-long learning. Yet it must also be recognised that the provision of optimum experiences for children potentially has a human cost for the adults responsible due to the emotional demands inherent in the caring relationship.

What seems to be missing from the literature is real world research exploring quite how the human resource of early years provision can be supported, nurtured, valued and enriched such that stable, sustainable relationships between adults and children can be established and are able to flourish for the benefit of everyone involved. Finding out more about what motivates and satisfies the early years workforce will have important consequences for the future of our next generation of young children and this research sets out to shed some light on the situation and make recommendations for future practice.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

A constantly evolving context for early years provision in England has left the workforce at risk of being overwhelmed by changing expectations and this is impacting negatively on provision of a stable emotional environment in which young children can grow and develop. The problem being researched is complex, important, and overdue for investigation and can be defined as a 'real world' issue (Robson 2002). As such, it echoes the challenge of "seeking to say something about a complex, relatively poorly controlled and generally 'messy' situation" (Robson 2002:4).

My initial research idea concerned emotional well-being and a quest to understand the factors that affect the emotional well-being of children and practitioners in the workplace. Staff morale and retention have also been identified within the literature review as key quality factors in a staff team's ability to support young children's emotional well-being. The purpose of this research is therefore twofold: a) to increase understanding of the situation so that sensitive dialogue can take place and b) to develop support strategies and identify beneficial organisational practices in order to secure the benefits of a stable emotional environment for young children and practitioners. This approach draws on a desire to contribute practical wisdom to the development of desirable practice by use of a *phronetic approach*, explained by Flyvbjerg as an intellectual virtue regarded by Aristotle as "reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man." (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This chapter sets out the strategy for the enquiry.

To research these issues, it was important to identify a methodology with capacity for beneficial intervention whilst also considering applicability to a wider audience. The final recommendations from this study are also to be incorporated into a new, integrated learning centre and will contribute to the design of the building and the underpinning philosophy of practice. My findings on promoting emotional well-being in the workplace are of practical relevance to my own setting and are applicable to other types of early years, health, social and educational organisations.

Initial methodological considerations for this study focused on the extent to which the aspects under observation could be controlled, whether the study is replicable, and whether the data arising would be scientifically experimental from a *positivist* view, or based on involvement, dialogue and subjective accounts arising from an *anti-positivist* approach to the enquiry (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). It was clear from the outset that, although some statistical information would undoubtedly emerge, a study of human well-being is, by its focus on interpersonal reporting, unique and based on real personal experience as well as subjective accounts arising from working practices. A qualitative approach is therefore a more meaningful approach to the core subject of enquiry. Many voices and experiences have been sought, analysed and presented in the following chapters to give a multi-dimensional picture from which to extract meaning and create development opportunities.

My reconnaissance involved detailed discussion with colleagues in the region about this issue, as well as scrutiny of activities in one setting. This dual nature of the regional and local experiences led to the study being undertaken in two integrated parts i) a reconnaissance phase which surveys my concern in the local East Midlands region where I work; this prepares the ground for ii) an action research approach undertaken within a specific early years setting. Other methodological approaches were considered and the possibility of a case study was initially attractive due to having ready access to the main setting and the opportunity to describe aspects in detail. However, early responses by the practitioner team indicated that the nature of the task called for a more interventionist approach.

### **3.2 Action research**

Action Research as an approach, is a non-experimental methodology that provides information using aspects of both the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms and draws on a variety of data-gathering methods (Cohen et al., 2010). For this particular research study, the methodology is based solely within the qualitative paradigm as it seeks to investigate the views and experiences of the early years workforce. The qualitative aspects include naturally occurring meetings, interviews, and observations. Other supporting data has been drawn from surveys based on specially constructed questionnaire formats. Action research is distinguishable through its concern with "... the emancipatory purpose of research" through influence or change (Robson, 2002:215) with



the identification of *improvement* and *involvement* as being central features. When explaining Action Research as a method, Robson noted:

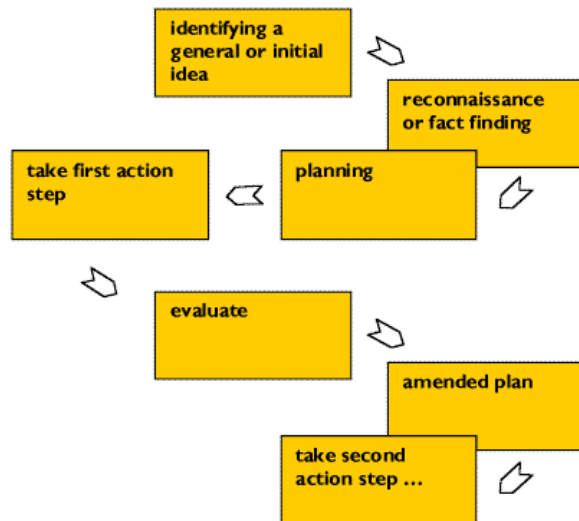
"There is first, the improvement of a *practice* of some kind; secondly, the improvement of the *understanding* of a practice by its practitioners; and third, the improvement of the *situation* in which the practice takes place."

(Robson, 2002:215)

The introduction and management of these changes also provided an opportunity to evaluate and reflect on the outcomes of the actions as well as explore aspects of staff empowerment during the latter part of the study through the use of an Impact Assessment process. In addition to securing practical improvements within the main setting of the study, considerable knowledge and understanding was gained in relation to practice in other settings.

In addition to the process of making improvements, the underpinning intention of an action research approach, as described by Robson (2002), is to ensure that the process engages the participants in a fair and collaborative way through consultation and with integrity. This life-enhancing approach is one of the main attractions for the choice of method used and has been an important factor in overcoming many of the initial considerations given later in this chapter. The use of such a personal and collaborative approach was appropriate as it contributed to development of a positive emotional climate by building individual confidence, team cohesion and empowerment.

Action research was selected for use in the study as it is a methodology which engages with change and intervenes rather than describes. Kurt Lewin's original focus when he proposed action research as a method (Lewin, 1946) was on institutions in which people learnt and researched together, and this has been the spirit of my inquiry, researching with my colleagues rather than attempting to judge them. Lewin's cycle of action research begins with selecting a topic to investigate collaboratively, fact-finding, planning, taking action, and evaluating finds then applying new knowledge to the next cycle of planning and action as follows:



A similar interventionist approach, based on the Marxist insight that *research should be socially beneficial* (Horkheimer, 1982) is the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School from 1929 which was critical of traditional status quo and promoted equity, equality and social transformation (Stanford Encyclopaedia, 2005). The rise of the Nazi party in Germany prompted these scholars to move to America in the 1930s, though the name 'Frankfurt' remained. These two agendas were combined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as 'critical action research', and this has informed my thinking. I have also been informed by the participatory forms of action research promoted by Reason and Bradbury (2006) and Wicks, Reason and Bradbury (2008).

I link Lewin's work with Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Kolb advises that reflection on experience is a key aspect to applying ideas and concepts to new situations and he proposes a four-stage model. Here the *professional experience* is studied by *observation and reflection*, leading to *generalisation and conceptualisation*, leading to *active experimentation*. This action model is viewed by Rolfe (2011) as truly reflexive, from which he develops Rolfe's framework for reflexive practice with detailed questioning around the broad questions *what? so what? and now what?*.

Action research is an attractive approach for application in educational contexts due to its focus on collaborative learning, leading to changes in practice. The qualitative research found in educational action research generally has a vast range of forms. Researchers are themselves centrally located in the research (rather than being outside observers) and this has to be formalized. Quicke (2010:239) viewed himself as a "critical reflective

practitioner" writing an "autoethnographic story of 'resistance' and 'hope without illusions' through narrative strategies". Enthoven and de Bruijn (2010) review studies in which public practice-based knowledge is created by professional practitioners. Kemmis (2010) emphasizes transformatory actions: the happening-ness of action research means that it has the potential for shaping and making history, by changing what is done. Titchen and McCormack (2010) offer critical creativity as a methodology for human flourishing:

"a new methodological framework for action-oriented, transformational practice development and research that is concerned with human flourishing for those who engage in such work, as well as those for whom the work is intended. Through interplay of story, metaphor, poetry and critical dialogue, we present our methodological development approach for critical creativity and the evolving methodological framework."

Titchen and McCormack (2010:abstract)

Originating from Lewin's cycle (1946), action research is most commonly undertaken in a cyclical manner within a 'spiral of planning, action and fact-finding about the outcomes of the actions taken' (Cohen et al. 2010:305). The primary action research element of this study explores issues in one main setting and is described here as 'a single-cycle institutional action research over time' and has been devised and undertaken from choice within my role as a practising early years director. This study sought to empower the community of practitioners within the setting to influence the emotional climate of the setting through development of greater understanding and insight into how roles and responsibilities contributed to the ethos and values of the setting.

The use of action research as a development strategy is a recognised method of bringing about change in the form of practice, policy and/or culture within an organisation (Booth and Ainscow, 2004). It is recognised as "a fairly complex and time-consuming approach to research" (Roberts-Holmes, 2005:44, 45) as, by its nature, it is a methodology that uses practical means to change an issue within the working environment through improving the researcher's and colleague's knowledge and practice. This has certainly been the case for this study.

I use a range of data collection and interpretive strategies to examine early years practice in order to understand and suggest better ways of managing and influencing the emotional climate in early years settings. Together, these research activities have illuminated the factors affecting organisational practices in an early years setting for which I have responsibility, and have contributed to enhanced management and

operational practice that, when applied consistently, positively influences the emotional climate of the setting.

One initial problem arising from the concept of this study was the extent to which the enquiry and findings would be personal to the one setting. Although this research has focused on the experiences of one main setting I have had the assistance of external collaborators from six other settings who undertook piloting activities within their own, and within each others' settings in order to contribute to the initial local survey. This process has helped to provide comparative data and reflections on validity of the findings. An additional justification to undertaking some form of pilot study is that it is recommended research practice, as this process will highlight any problems within the data gathering activity (Robson, 2002) and particularly to increase reliability when designing the wording of the questionnaire (Cohen et al. 2010:341). Feedback from a variety of contributors has impacted and shaped the design of the action research aspect and shaped the tools of this study. The preliminary regional survey was therefore used within the reconnaissance phase of the research as both a scoping activity and a consultation on research design element.

This initial activity consisted of: meetings with focus groups comprising participants external to the main setting, observations carried out by practitioners in other settings, and a parental questionnaire piloted in the six other settings. The selection of these focus group participants was undertaken on the basis of convenience sampling of captive audiences (Cohen et al. 2010:114) due to existing relationships developed through i) local networking and ii) current adult student group. The findings from the various preliminary survey activities offered background information from focus groups and questionnaires from staff and parents unrelated to the main setting. Use of existing relationships and professional proximity did raise ethical implications and these are considered later in this chapter.

The action research process has contributed to the development of the main setting over a period of five years. Application of Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) proved to be a particularly helpful model of reflection which contributed to methodological adjustments as the study progressed along with an early recognition that objectivity would be compromised due to my dual roles as researcher and director. It was this experience of

working more collaboratively with the staff team that highlighted the need to make changes to my own directorial style as well as to organisational practices.

It had not been obvious to me at the start of the process that this study would result in recommendation for changes in my own practice but this realisation arose during reflective activity and was a humbling realisation. The whole experience has brought the participants in the main setting closer together in a positive way. This type of outcome is discussed by Rowan (2006) speaking from a humanistic psychology viewpoint, who identifies the action research process as a very human activity in which "we do not hide behind roles' but 'take reflexivity seriously; and ... that what we find out in research may be applied to us too. It also means we do not exclude ourselves from the research process." (Rowan Ch.9 in Reason and Bradbury 2006:114, 115).

### **3.3 Reflective considerations on the research design**

Honesty, objectivity and conflict of interest are key considerations for any research study. This enquiry was conducted using a reflective style with every effort made to ensure the findings are reported as honestly and objectively as possible in recognition of the potential for conflict of interest arising from having personal responsibility, but not day to day management of the main setting. Anderson and Herr (in Noffke 2009) identify a distinction between the practitioner as researcher seeking to improve their own practice, and education leaders (NB. *directors are referred to here as Administrators*) undertaking educational research in their own schools.

"... we think there are unique barriers to administrators trying to research their own practices .... there are unique ethical challenges that must be taken up, due to administrators' hierarchical roles and power, that will influence the methodological approaches taken to carry out the research.

Anderson and Herr (Chapter 12 in Noffke (2009:155)

My professional relationships and responsibilities within the preliminary survey group of students were identified early on as ethically problematic and have required careful handling throughout the action research processes to ensure maintenance of their comfort levels and willing participation. All aspects of involvement were explained at every stage, and all findings shared openly.

In the main setting, the difficulty of a director being able to undertake objective observation of others in practice is acknowledged here, in that the hierarchical roles can affect staff perception of the situation (Anderson and Herr 2009). The risk of bias and of

data interpretation using other personal knowledge has a potential impact on the validity of the analysis. This potential for conflict was recognised and was the subject of much personal reflection, this has been acknowledged through modifications to the data gathering processes and in the discussions. One particular change of methodology involved data methods reliant on direct observation of children and staff within the setting and have been avoided to ensure that the data collection methods selected were not compromised.

Having had several years of experience with the main setting prior to undertaking this study proved to have advantages and disadvantages, in particular, maintaining the existing relationships with the manager and staff members whilst undertaking a programme of change as a researcher. As the reader will be new to the situation, it is entirely possible that an objective reviewer will identify missed considerations and new insights within the data and the discussions. Taking a reflective approach recognizes that I am also part of the social world that I am researching and acknowledges that I will bring my own attitudes, beliefs and values to the situation and that participants will behave in particular ways in my presence – both as director and as researcher (Cohen et al. 2010:171). In addition to the roles identified, further reflection acknowledges that other factors such as my age, gender, culture and previous personal and work experiences will also impact on the issues I consider to be significant in my reporting.

As a participant researcher working within a variety of existing professional relationships: colleague, tutor, director, it was evident from the outset that undertaking an action research approach would require some caution due to a range of ethical considerations including those of 'roles and power' identified by Anderson and Herr above. There are various sets of ethical guidelines that could be helpful to the research process (Robson 2002:65) and to ensure this study was undertaken appropriately, the Revised British Educational Research Association Guidelines (BERA 2004) document was selected to establish ethical principles of conduct that maintained the integrity of the research and ensured the well-being of all participants. The revisions to the original 1992 Guidelines were particularly applicable to this study as they i) seek 'more fully to recognize the academic tensions that a multi-disciplinary community generate when dealing with the complex research issues that characterise education contexts' and ii) seek 'to include the field of action research' (BERA 2004).

In addition to these BERA guidelines for education research, the statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association includes in item 13 '...responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected ...' (2002), and the Code of Ethics and Conduct provided by the British Psychological Society provided a helpful framework for ensuring the ethical principles of 'respect, competence, responsibility and integrity' (BPS 2009) were used to underpin the research activities by ensuring trust and integrity within the relationships.

Whilst all aspects of this research were undertaken with sensitivity to ethical considerations, differing ethical issues were present in both the preliminary survey phase and the main setting action research phase. (NB. italics are used here to indicate recognition of issues given in the BERA Guidelines 2004). Specific issues arising from both research phases related to ensuring *voluntary informed consent* of all participants and reflection on the explicit tensions that can arise from *dual roles* and the avoidance of *deception or subterfuge*. All participants were also informed of their *right to withdraw* from the research and none chose to do so. Where the research activities had implications for young children (e.g. observations), these were undertaken in the *best interests of the child* (UN CRC Article 3) and in compliance with *legal requirements* i.e. the adults involved all had clear CRB checks and had sought permission to carry out the activity

Specific important considerations relevant to the survey phase included:

- Maintenance of relationships with colleagues and co-professionals within the focus groups in a way that ensured professional standards of conduct were upheld and the college, as host organisation, was not compromised in any way.
- Maintenance of relationships and role-modelling of research activity within the (employed, adult) Foundation Degree student group in a way that did not create conflicts between the tutor and researcher activities or place the students at any risk of tensions within their own organisations.
- Awareness and avoidance of 'steering' or over-guiding the student group during the focus group discussions and formation of the pilot questions.
- Maintenance of relationships with the heads of the settings surveyed and management of the risk of generating dissatisfaction amongst their staff teams by the nature of the survey questions.

In accordance with the BERA Guidelines for compliance purposes, it was necessary to "... weigh up all aspects of the process of conducting education research within any given context ... to reach an ethically acceptable position in which ... actions are considered justifiable and sound." (BERA, 2004:4)

Reflecting on ethical issues arising from the action research activity within the main setting led to further considerations and potential risks that could compromise the research. The initial research risk factors were identified and explored in order to ensure the validity of the findings. Risk factors initially identified include a risk of:

- Anxiety by staff that poor practices may be highlighted and negative judgements may be made by the director/researcher - leading to a more self-conscious approach to work
- Staff awareness of findings being shared by director/researcher so wishing to please by giving 'desirable' rather than 'genuine' responses to questions. Though no *incentives* were offered, the need for honesty was stressed to ensure participants did not feel obliged to respond in any particular way.
- Operational manager perceiving research interest as greater (unwanted) interference by director with the resultant introduction of low-level sabotage tactics.
- Staff becoming distracted from their work with the children and parents through the *bureaucratic burden* of the research, which could lead to a negative impact of the children's well-being which would be counter-productive.
- It could give an opportunity for staff to pursue their own agenda and, if wished, anonymously display underlying negative feelings about director/researcher or operational manager, and therefore provide unhelpful feedback.
- Levels of training may be insufficient to enable all staff to participate adequately due to lack of understanding the language or concepts used in the survey questions.
- The possibility of introducing new practices that may inadvertently make a situation worse by decreasing morale or increasing the rate of staff turn-over.
- Initiation of a process that results in unforeseen/unintended consequences which, by definition, are as yet unknown.
- By introducing more democratic practices, individual staff may perceive themselves to have more authority or to have acquired the right to make further demands without responsibility.



- Empowerment of staff and families could shift the current power-base and generate changes to the future decision-making processes and senior staff may need more support to adapt to this.

These risks initially appear to be rather daunting and if any one of them was considered a high likelihood, then this could be sufficient to invalidate the whole research project.

Thankfully, experience of the circumstances and existing relationships with the participants in the setting led to a judgement that each of these risks was under control or within tolerance, though all were kept in mind throughout the study and are addressed as 'issues arising' within the discussion of the data. Later in this chapter there is further discussion about the ethical issues of this study, and information about the steps taken to uphold *researcher responsibility* to ensure *respect for all participants* (BERA 2004).

In order to proceed cautiously, a consultative management style was employed to ensure that trust was maintained and developed throughout the period of the study. By offering greater involvement and consultation to the staff team this showed 'a commitment to genuine participation in the research to the extent that it is seen as a collaborative effort between researcher and 'researched'. (Robson 2002:70). This had implications for the adjustment of the balance of power within the setting and resulted in the introduction of a more democratic approach to management of the setting by the end of the study. It was therefore important to balance this with an increased sense of staff responsibility for any decisions taken and such ownership was always an intended outcome of the whole research process. Although every early years setting is individual, each operates within the same national guidelines experiencing similar issues of staff motivation and retention therefore the management concerns arising in one setting are largely representative of those in other independent settings. This is evident through the 2004 NIESR study and the assumption was tested within both aspects of the research processes.

The responsibility to bring about a cultural change in the main setting initially occurred separately and in parallel to the early stages of the study but an awareness of a range of operational difficulties raised by the staff team prompted the need to initiate change in the setting through consultative means so that the team took some ownership of the process and the outcome. The primary focus of this study was therefore to inform and develop practice in one setting through use of a participative collaborative style, to conceptualise this in management terms, and to generate tools for dissemination to other settings. The findings may stimulate an interest in further research. To this end, it has

been necessary to constantly modify the approach to include testing in other settings as a way of providing some outcome or understanding that could be beneficial to others.

One of the specific intended benefits of this action research activity was that individual staff in the main setting would experience a sense of personal development through greater involvement in all aspects of the provision and that this will contribute positively to the setting, raising staff morale, improving quality and promoting children's well-being so that individual child development and learning could ultimately be enhanced. Fuller and Petch (1995), (cited in Robson 2002) highlight that involvement of participants in the action research cycle generates greater commitment to completion of the study and to implementation of the recommendations arising from it. Robson himself argues that adopting " ..a participative collaborative is more important than sorting out the complexities of various feedback loops in the cycle" (Robson 2002:217) and it is clear from the various strands of data arising in this study that unravelling the complexities would be time consuming though still beneficial for establishing meaning.

At the end of the action research process, individual interviews were used to explore staff views on the whole research and development process and to test out whether the risks identified above were sufficiently managed or avoided. In accordance with the BERA Revised Guidelines (2004), on a number of occasions the findings were reported *honestly and accurately* to the participants within the setting in order to keep them informed and involved in the process and to ensure that the data had not become misunderstood or inadvertently *distorted* in its analysis. The final interviews also raised a small number of other potential risks that had not been initially considered and this contributed to my own awareness arising from the reflection of the process.

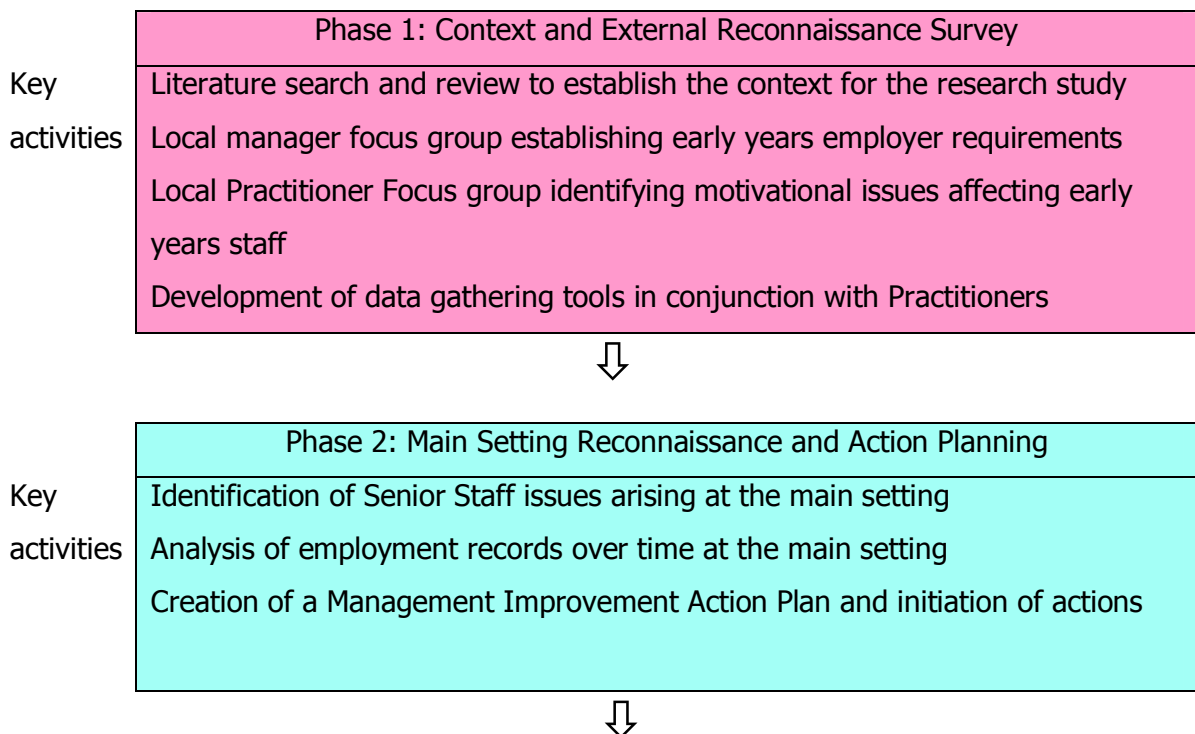
### **3.4 Developing the research strategy**

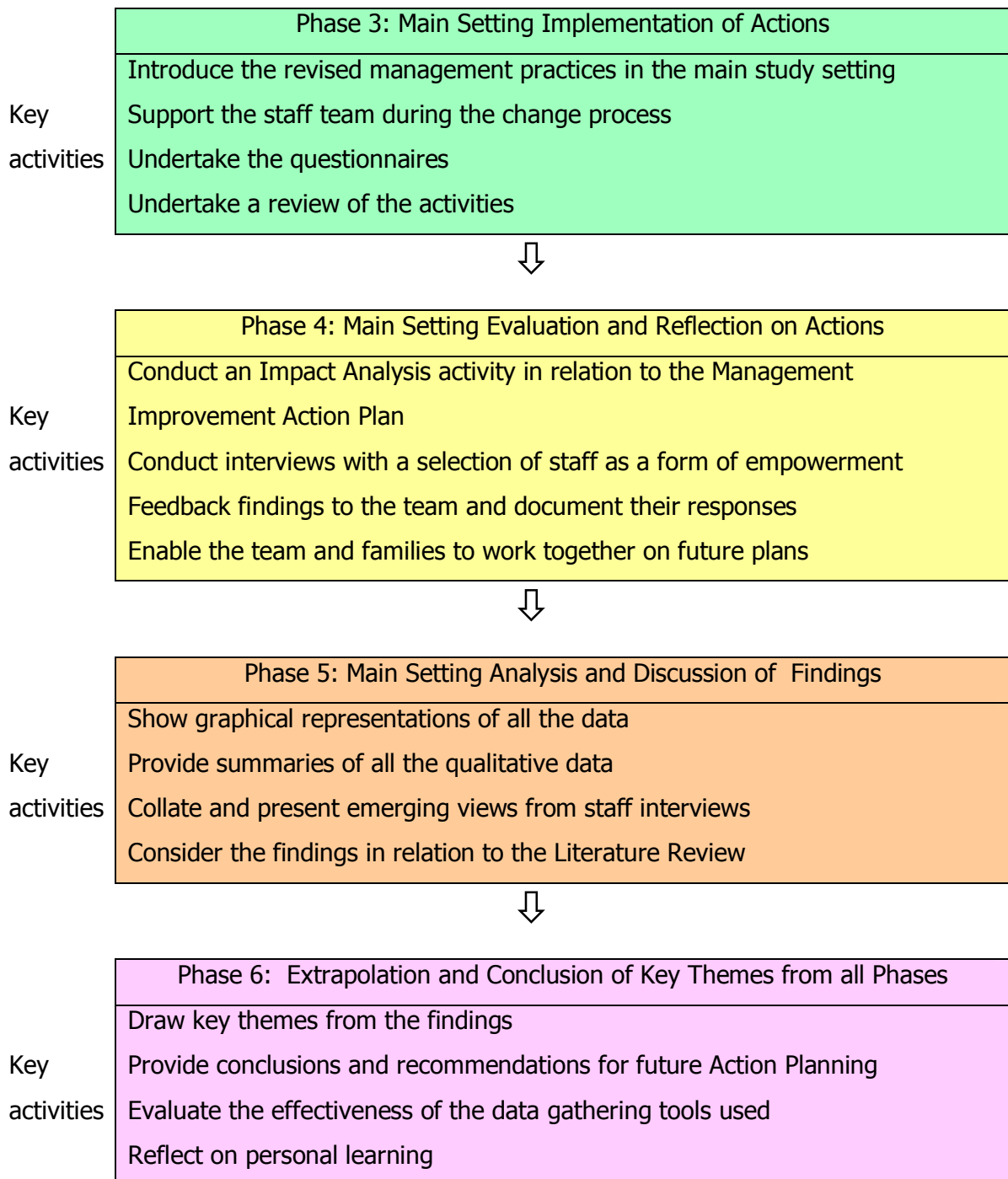
This study seeks to hold an investigative 'magnifying glass' to complex organisational and interpersonal issues. After initially scoping the topic, a variety of tools were devised and used to contribute different elements of information. The overall strategy employed was intentionally responsive to the collaborative nature of the action research approach so that emerging themes could be incorporated and developed. In reality, the practical issues of undertaking an action research proved to be more complex to overcome than the ethical issues. (Roberts-Holmes, 2005).

In addition to use of the main setting, four focus groups were established. In the preliminary survey phase of the study, a group was drawn together that comprised nursery managers and head teachers in the local East Midlands region in order to examine three key questions relating to desirable personal qualities in early years employees and ways to attract and retain suitable nursery staff. Also in the survey phase of the study, a group of experienced practitioners from a variety of local settings undertaking an Early Childhood Studies Degree assisted in a review and pilot of the research tools prior to their use in the case study setting. Their findings proved useful for assessing validity and representivity by providing comparisons with the main setting.

During the action research phase in the main setting of the study, a focus group of supervisory staff from the main setting met to identify issues of particular concern to them as they considered staff morale was being affected. Also during the action research phase, the staff focus groups contributed to the data collecting processes. During the latter stages, staff interviews took place, the staff and parents of the main settings were surveyed and staff and parents focus groups were formed. The use of external contributors enabled some comparisons between the main setting and other settings in the region so that generic conclusions were considered on the basis of similarity of issues.

**Diagram 3.1 Outline structure for the research design**





### 3.5 Phase 1 Preliminary survey

The term 'survey' has been used here to distinguish the reconnaissance activities which were external to the setting in which the main actions took place. Whilst the main setting remained the key focus of the research, six other settings were involved with the parents' questionnaire and three others with the staff morale questionnaire. To explore the general context at a primary level, core questions were devised for exploration along with

identification of the methods to be used to investigate. The data arising has been included in Chapter 4 to support the general context and applicability though not explored in depth as they are not the focus of the study.

For research purposes, there are several types of survey used in a variety of contexts and categorised by the extent and scope of their purpose. Cohen, Manion and Morrison describe the function of a survey:

“Typically, surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions, or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared, or determining the relationships that exist between specific events.”

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2010:205)

### **Core questions and the selection of data collection techniques and instruments to address the issues**

#### **Survey Phase used as external reconnaissance**

	<b>Core questions to investigate</b>	<b>Methods used</b>
1	Who are the 'right kind of people' to work in early years?	Regional focus group forum
2	How are the 'right kind of people' attracted and retained in early years?	Regional focus group forum
3	How do staff in early years settings perceive 'being valued'?	Student focus groups
4	Which issues affect staff morale in early years generally?	Questionnaire to staff (mixed)
5	How involved are parents of children in early years settings?	Questionnaire to 100 parents (various)
6	Can staff reflect on practices in their own and other settings?	Observations in various settings

The survey aspect of this study was used to 'gather data at a particular point in time ... describing existing conditions', and comprised a group of activities external to the main setting that identified the views of regional managers, practitioners, parents of children, and a small group of early years settings. These activities were used to provide an overview of the issues covered by the study and also acted as a consultative forum through which ideas were generated and tested as preparation for development of the research tools. The findings from the context activities are presented in Chapter 4 as separate from the main action research to aid clarity for the reader but in practice, there

was some overlap with aspects of the main action research study due to the integration of activities over a period of time.

The various methods employed for gathering the regional data were the use of:

Focus Group RM: Regional managers of early years settings, including primary school heads – discussion about attracting and retaining suitable staff

Focus Group EYP: A group of regional early years practitioners undertaking advanced study at degree level – discussion about their experience of feeling valued at work

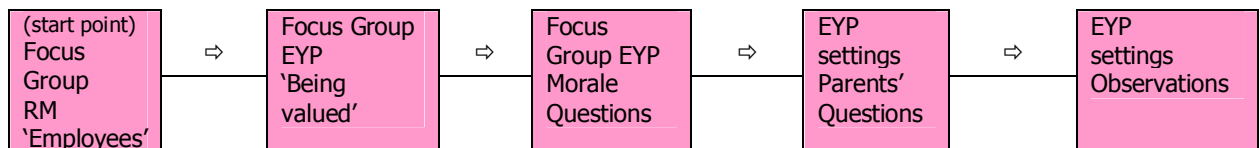
Questionnaire: Staff Morale with questions devised in collaboration with Focus Group EYP

Questionnaire: Parental views devised in collaboration with Focus Group EYP

Observations: Undertaken in various settings by Focus group EYP

The sequence of these events is shown in diagram 3.2 below;

**Diagram 3.2 Preliminary survey activities:**



Focus groups were used early on in the research process as a way of listening to the views and experiences of a cross-section of the early years workforce. The use of group interviews and focus groups has traditionally been used as a format for collecting data within business and political circles and their use has more recently been growing in educational research (Cohen et al. 2010:376). In a marketing context, the strategy is most likely to be used to gather a cross section of views from participants who would be selected as a sample reference group and who may also be potential consumers.

In an organisational context, the purpose of focus groups would be to generate project ideas, team-building and alternative action strategies (Steyaert and Bouwen 2004:141,142). In this research study, both types of focus group have been used. The regional managers group (RM) was drawn from a known network of potential early years employers, and the EYP group were experienced senior staff in other settings; these both functioned as a marketing and reference group element. The use of a survey can be considered 'more like a research strategy ... than a tactic or specific method' (Robson 2002:228,229). Where a survey is commonly undertaken in the form of a questionnaire, there are many approaches and Robson (2002) concludes in his explanation that it is,

difficult to give a concise definition, due to the wide range of studies that have been labelled as surveys.

The proposed use of visitor observations undertaken by the EYP group provided some challenges as this placed the group in the dual role of participants and co-researchers. The data collected from this exercise provided evidence of the sort of information that triggers interest in observers. Robson (2002:324) identifies the process of bias in observation and points out that 'Our *interests, experience* and *expectations* all affect what we attend to'. He considers observers to have 'selective attention.' It was this selective interest that was being sought, as the points noted by the various EYPs gave an indication of the interests and expectations of the different observers through use of the observers as research representatives.

The survey phase of this study employs a range of methods including the use of questionnaires. Such an approach generates statistical information and is generally considered a data collecting strategy for a quantitative approach. However, in this study, the populations sampled by questionnaire are local parents and early years staff - selected for being representative of the target groups as they are users and employees of a variety of settings. Their responses are included to indicate the diversity of views in relation to the questions asked within the qualitative approach taken. The same questionnaires were used to gather views from parents and staff within the main setting.

### **3.6 Phase 2 Action Planning**

Action planning for exploring the main setting centred on establishing a set of core questions to investigate then identification and selection of the methods to use. Many questions had arisen through consideration of the context and rationale for this study and the literature review was used to refine the range of questions for investigation.

To some degree the purpose and outcome of this particular study is twofold as it contains elements of both 'action research' and 'research action'. The former developed from its first origination by Lewin in the 1940s as a complex methodology for introducing organisational change and is described by Heller (2004) (in Cassell and Symon 2007:349) as a 'family of methods distinguished by having several identifiable objectives and characteristics.' Heller clarifies the distinction between Action Research (AR: *action to*

*bring about change*) and Research Action (RA: *change as a consequence of research*)

then identifies the core attributes of both AR/RA as:

- 1) "The core element of AR/RA is the close relationship between knowledge acquisition and action. Knowledge and action derives from research and diagnostic. Action ... differentiates AR/RA from traditional methodologies.
- 2) Knowledge acquisition and implementation is for the benefit of the client and participants as much, or more than for the researcher and her/his community.
- 3) Validation is through the learning-action process itself and, whenever possible, through co-interpretation of outcomes with the participants.
- 4) The knowledge-action or the action-knowledge process may be contingent on specific circumstances, but must not exclude a degree of generalizability within similar contingencies.
- 5) The results of the AR/RA process must be available and widely shared between clients and researchers. This differentiates it from many forms of consultancy.
- 6) There is always an ethical dimension to the AR/RA process with a degree of shared values and reflexivity between clients and researcher.
- 7) AR/RA tends to call on more than one scientific discipline and more than one knowledge acquisition method."

(Heller: Chapter 28 in Casell, Symon, 2007:350)

At a basic level, the stages within an action research cycle described by Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998:21), and by Bassey (1998) (cited in Robson 2002:217) includes moving through the processes of reviewing a problem situation/having an initial idea, to diagnosis/fact-finding analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring and reviewing/revising to help plan further actions. For the purpose of this research design, these processes have been reflected in the flow diagram 3.1 above showing the outline structure of the research design.

### **Core questions and the selection of data collection techniques and instruments to address the issues**

#### **Main setting: Reconnaissance and Action Planning**

7	Which issues are of concern to staff at the main setting?	Staff focus group (no manager)
8	Which issues have greater impact on staff at the main setting?	Prioritising exercise [A] and Self-assessment exercise [B]
9	What are the reasons given for staff leaving the main setting?	Employment records over 10 years
	<i>Details and rationale of Management Action Plan to be implemented in the main study setting</i>	

#### **Main setting: Implementation of Actions**

10	Which issues affect staff morale at the main setting?	All case study staff questionnaire
11	How involved are parents of children in the main setting?	Questionnaire to 20 parents (eve)



12	Can staff at the setting recognise the impact of their practices?	Use of 'temperature check' questionnaire in main setting
13	How many adults does a young child form bonds with during a week in an early years setting?	Child tracking diaries in the main study setting

### Main setting: Evaluation and Reflection stage

14	Which management actions increase sense of being valued and appreciated?	Impact analysis Questionnaire with main study staff
15	In the light of feedback from the research so far, what does the manager now consider to be the purpose of an early years setting?	Interview with the manager of the main setting
16	In the light of feedback from the research so far, how can the staff team and setting manager work well together?	Interview with a senior supervisor continuing at the main setting
17	In the light of feedback from the research so far, what factors may impact on a staff member's decision to remain or leave an early years setting?	Interview with a senior supervisor at the main setting following her resignation

18	How do staff members respond to feedback about the research findings?	Discussion with staff team in main study setting following feedback of initial findings
19	How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?	Focus group staff from the main study setting
20	How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?	Focus group parents from the main study setting

### Concluding activity

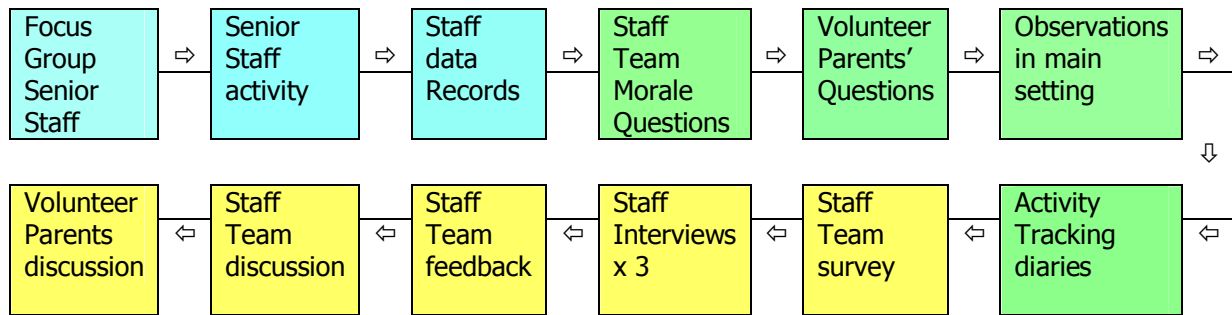
21	What is the manager's reflective view of the transformation within the setting?	Semi-structured interview with the manager of the main setting
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The main line of enquiry for this action phase, focused on the issues and experiences of managers, practitioners, parents and children of the main setting. The various methods of enquiry employed for gathering the data from the main setting were:

- Focus group SS: Senior staff at the main setting
- Focus group ST: (Whole) Staff team at the main setting
- Focus group VP: Volunteer Parents at the main setting
- Activity: Issues affecting Focus group SS
- Activity: Issues affecting Focus group ST
- 3 interviews: The setting manager, senior staff member (continuing in the setting), senior staff member (leaving the setting)
- Activity Tracking: Diaries for 5 children
- Data Records: natural evidence arising from personnel records.

The sequence of events is shown in diagram 3.3 below

**Diagram 3.3 Action research activities:**



Issues arising in the main setting affecting morale and retention were identified by members of the senior staff group and these formed the reconnaissance phase for the main setting at the start of the action process. These are explored further in order to draw out key factors and create an in-depth description of how the interactions impacted on the situation. This became the planning phase for identification of the actions to be taken to address the issues, and the study thereby evolves into a long-term single cycle Action Research approach. Action research is variously described as 'the sheer diversity of ideas and practices that make up the family of action research' and '... not so much as a *methodology* but as an *orientation toward enquiry*' (Bradbury and Reason, 2010 preface). It has "... also become increasingly accepted as a legitimate research strategy for the doctoral degree." (Noffke, 2009:13).

### 3.7 Phase 3 Implementing actions

An action research approach is primarily focused on bringing about change. This is potentially a curious methodology to select due to the fact that the underlying problem identified within the context and literature review is that too much change in the early years sector is potentially affecting emotional well-being. If too much change is a problem then there will be a tension in using further change as a solution. The challenge for actions required engaging the practitioners willingly in democratic participation without contributing further to a sense of overwhelming activity.

Whilst holding these thoughts and being minded to develop positivity, a variety of participative qualitative data gathering tools were devised and used in the main setting – mainly focus groups, questionnaires, observations, diaries and interviews. The focus groups comprised the senior staff team and also the whole staff team who contributed to internal organisational development. This variety of tools was used to collect a rich interwoven tapestry of information from differing sources and viewpoints. The evaluation

of these methods in the later chapters includes a reflection of their effectiveness with recommendations for modification.

This multi-faceted approach began with a basic structure and subsequently developed in an emergent way with recognition of the likelihood of being unconventional in this undertaking due to the nature of the enquiry. As this study sought to shed light on aspects of human behaviour and the issues that impact on children's well-being, it was essential to explore attitudes, feelings, motivational factors, changes in personal circumstances, responses to authority and the like. This type of data provides qualitative information that can be analysed for meaning and the results are of an interpretive nature rather than an experimental, positivist approach.

Using the main setting as the basis for this approach has provided a variety of rich data from a relatively small group of people but this, by the very individual nature of the main setting and the participant involvement of the researcher, does mean that the research cannot be repeated. Efforts have therefore been made to ensure that the findings can be considered within a wider context through the involvement of collaborating staff from a range of local settings.

The three interviews involved staff at the main setting and were semi-structured using open-ended questions. Cohen et al. consider that:

"Open-ended questions have a number of advantages: they are flexible; they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up any misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondent's knowledge; they encourage co-operation and help establish rapport; and they allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes."

(Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2010:357)

The open-endedness of the questioning was an important feature of the interviews as they were used to seek honest personal opinions that would contribute to the collection of rich qualitative information about the context of the study.

The whole research approach was designed to implement the process of self-evaluation and thereby lead the team to a more structured form of reflective organisational analysis by the members of that organisation using a facilitated critical framework. This in turn has led to a valuable exploration by the staff team reviewing the core purpose and aims of the setting and has established an improved level of staff morale resulting in greater

stability and a common working ethos that brings benefits to the families using the setting as well as the staff who work there. The use of consultative and collaborative techniques proved to be a powerful and satisfying strategy for all participants.

The research process includes the leadership and practitioners in an exploration of issues are impacting on the early years workforce and what sort of a management approach makes a difference to the experiences of the children and the staff. The methodology used in this investigation, teases out whether these factors above can be influenced by those responsible for supporting and developing early years settings and, if so, how can this be done.

### **3.8 Further ethical considerations**

Any research involving people will bring up ethical considerations as well as issues of confidentiality and consent that need to be explored before the start of the project (BERA 2004, Robson 2002, Cohen et al. 2010). The inclusion of young children and their parents in this study has increased the need for sensitivity in the approach (Roberts-Holmes, 2005) and also has implications for the dissemination of the findings. It is therefore vital that all contributions or attributable data are written in such a way that does not jeopardise the honesty of the findings but that is also instructive and constructive for the reader. Where sensitivities were recognised, the information was shared with participants and the specific wording agreed prior to presentation. Indeed, this checking process proved to be a valuable contribution to the collaborative involvement process woven through the study.

The methodology was constructed in such a way as to minimise ethical dilemmas. However, they are not entirely unavoidable given my responsibility for the setting and the initial potential conflict of loyalties to the staff team and manager evident during the early stages of the project. It was the invitation by senior staff at the setting to 'do something', that required a methodological shift from the observational study initially envisaged, to a genuine action research and subsequent collaborative processes. Using the BERA Guidelines (2004), the BSA Statement (2004) and the BPS code (2009), a number of relevant research issues were considered. Where it was deemed necessary, the actions explained below have been taken to overcome potential difficulties:

***Informed consent:*** The willingness of all participants to take part in the questionnaires and focus groups was a key assumption at the start of this study. The whole thrust of the project was to find ways to make improvements for staff and users of early years settings and as such this does not appear to be a contentious starting point. However, once the prospect of investigating interpersonal relationships and management styles emerged, it was evident that there was scope to identify and reflect on work place practices that may generate insecurities and anxiety amongst the team members. In the light of this, a more cautious approach to gaining co-operation was adopted such that the introduction of the morale questionnaire was administered in a more controlled way than had been originally intended. Also, the initial research plan included the proposal to undertake direct observations of the interactions between staff, children and parents in the setting but, in the light of the Anderson and Herr's (in Noffke and Somekh, 2009) insight into roles and power, early attempts to gauge the potential difficulties of such an approach led to the conclusion that alternative data gathering would be more objective.

Having directorial responsibility for the setting meant that impartial observation proved elusive due to subtle changes in the behaviour of staff when the observer entered the building. All formally recorded observations of the children would also require the written permission of a parent who would be the person giving consent as the children are under the age of five years. As the lack of direct observations would not significantly impact on the procedure of the study, this aspect was reviewed. If the direct observations had been vital, the problem could have been overcome by the use of a few impartial co-workers trained to make notes against the criteria to be used.

***Access and acceptance:*** The use of naturally occurring groups of people for the focus groups proved to be helpful in avoiding any cumbersome access and acceptance strategies. Wherever possible, I have attempted to make efficient use of events and activities that are primarily established in order to fulfil the personal agendas of the participants (e.g. Employers Forum and early years study group in FE college) and thereby reduce the possibility of artificial responses. The participants of all the focus groups knew me prior to their involvement in the study and these positive relationships contributed to acceptance of the questioning process and also to co-operation with the piloting of the questionnaires. It is possible that at this willingness to co-operate has been more advantageous to the researcher than the participants but it is hoped that all participants gained something from making their contributions. No obvious resistance

was identified although during the evaluation phase, staff did report on the process being time-consuming. This aspect of *bureaucratic burden* is recognised in the BERA Guidelines and is one area of concern where the research process did impact to some degree, though not excessively, on normal working and workloads of participants (BERA 2004).

***Overt research:*** As the study is focused on seeking improvements there is little to be gained from taking a secretive or deceptive approach to the data gathering. The only occasion that this became a real ethical dilemma was with the formation of the first staff focus group who wished to raise relevant issues in private and without the knowledge of the manager of the setting. This activity led to finding a way to gather staff concerns in a manner that was constructive and would have the cooperation of the manager (see findings section). At all times, I was aware of the need to operate within *an ethic of respect for all persons* and actively encouraged and supported senior staff to raise issues through the established communication channels and to take positive steps or suggest ways to improve communication and feedback. This proved to be a positive strategy for the whole study and allowed for control over the issue of potential organisational role conflict.

***Ethics of Social/Educational Research:*** The use of focus groups, surveys and interviews involves direct and indirect contact with a range of people throughout the research period. The importance of maintaining sensitivity to the impact of the questions should not be underestimated and it is entirely possible that raising questions about working practices may inadvertently raise expectations of solutions to perceived problems in the main or other settings. Some of the people involved in the focus groups are employees at the main setting and when the director of a setting is enquiring about management practices that could contribute to a greater sense of being valued and is looking at ways to enhance staff morale there may well be the possibility of disappointment if the opinions and suggestions do not appear to be recognised and implemented.

To ensure that expectations remained realistic, opportunities were created to *debrief participants* about any actions or outcomes arising. With such a study, there is the risk of appearing to be hypocritical if no real improvements are experienced. There is nothing in the methodology of this project that would intentionally contravene sound ethical

principles but when other people are involved, it is essential to be open to the prospect of inadvertently opening up sensitive areas of experience.

**Tensions:** Whilst the focus groups and activities were selected in order to maximise information on naturally occurring events, there are potential tensions that should be acknowledged between the researcher role and college employee roles and their concomitant responsibilities. The temptation to mildly subvert the lecturer role in order to carry out the researcher role has been recognised and, although uncomfortable at first was easily overcome by having a frank discussion with the study group of experienced practitioners and gaining their agreement to participate. Before moving into researcher mode, the group members were '*informed of their right to withdraw from the research*' such that participation was optional on each occasion. These events were kept to a minimum and were always introduced at the end of a teaching session - this was necessary to reduce another potential tension, which was that of using college time to conduct personal study. This too was acknowledged and permission to work in this way was given by the appropriate college senior director.

**Confidentiality:** Working within the setting there were three occasions requiring attention to privacy issues when collecting data. After the initial focus group with senior staff of the main setting, it was jointly decided that the nature of the discussion was too sensitive to share formally with the manager and a cover story of assisting in research was used to explain the reason for meeting and for the collection of priority issues that followed. Whilst this arrangement for a cover story could be interpreted as introducing *deception or subterfuge* it was considered carefully as a respectful and temporary device that would subsequently be explained to the manager during one of the debriefing sessions. The second occasion arose from the need to undertake the staff morale survey.

It was important to the debriefing discussion for the content of the questionnaire to remain undisclosed until the time for completion and it was also important to introduce it to everyone at the same time in the same way (hence devising the introductory script) so that the questions were answered individually in private. The third occasion was during the individual interviews following on from the issues raised in the questionnaire when staff members were able to contribute to the discussion in private. My *dual role* of director and researcher did create *explicit tensions* arising from the need to offer *confidentiality* for staff and were addressed in a considered and reflective way. Offering

confidentiality was appropriate for the small group staff focus meeting and for the personal content of the interviews. For all other data collection activities, permission was given to share the findings without naming contributors and for participants to be listed within appendices. The name of the main setting, names of staff, students and children have been changed or withheld to maintain confidentiality.

**Anonymity:** The majority of the data gathering did not require anonymous responses except for the staff morale survey which was conducted within a tight time-frame and all responses were unidentifiable. As I was not familiar with anyone's handwriting, the responses could not be attributed to any individual. However, reassurance of this fact would not necessarily have been appreciated by every participant.

**Betrayal:** All the data generated was shown in summary form to the focus groups and discussed with staff as part of the empowerment process. Opportunities to amend any misrepresentations have been given and acted upon. As this is a beneficial project, the concept of intentional betrayal does not seem applicable though caution has been used to ensure that no inadvertent betrayal has arisen. In the early stage of the data gathering there was recognition that the views of senior staff were withheld from the manager due to the sensitive nature of the issues raised. This was therefore discussed and resolved with her during the final reflection stage of the study to prevent any subsequent sense of 'betrayal' she may have felt by the researcher/director withholding such information.

**Debriefing:** Once the study moved into the evaluation phase it became important to involve the staff in the process of exploring the findings from the morale questionnaire and to unravel the implications of the 'Emotional Climate Thermometer'. Sharing the results of the various data gathering activities has given the team a sense of ownership of the data and has generated creative contributions for future consideration. As this has been a study over time, some of the original staff members have left and replacement staff members have joined the team. This has been recognised at each feedback opportunity so that newer staff can still feel able to become involved in the process, thereby perpetuating the benefits arising which could be at risk of being lost.

**Dignity of participants:** The range of research activities mainly involved working with consenting adults in a number of professional roles as a director, a tutor, a colleague and a researcher. At all times the methods and forms of communication were based on



equality of opportunity and avoidance of stereotyping so that everyone could participate to the best of their ability. Before any surveys were issued, checks were undertaken to ensure that the reading and written abilities of staff were adequate for the tasks, particularly for anyone with English as a second language (two members of staff). It is known that some participants have difficulties with their numerical skills and therefore none of the tasks involved numbers as this could have proved embarrassing for them.

***Protection of participants:*** Adults and children are entitled to protection from any harm and there were no obvious protection issues arising from the design or during this study. The only activity that directly impacted on the children was the recording process during the child tracking diary week. This was carried out by the regular staff so did not involve exposure to 'strangers'. There were reports of some staff distraction with the recording process but the team operated in a collective way to ensure that there was no loss of focus on the needs of the children during that week.

***Observations:*** For the reasons explained above, despite the original intention to undertake direct observations of staff or children, the methodology was amended to make use of staff members undertaking observations and notes during their normal duties and no direct observations were necessary. The activity was introduced with a team briefing and the resultant data was therefore dependent on the existing skills of the practitioners as no additional training was given.

***Withdrawal:*** I continued to be involved with the main setting beyond the period of the primary research of the study due to having directorial responsibilities. The benefits of the ongoing empowerment and action planning processes are evident in the conclusion and recommendations chapter. These positive processes have now be formed into a policy so that they continue to be used in a systematic way to develop the setting in the future. Continued focus on the well-being of the team has been an important aspect of maintaining relationships and ensuring a beneficial environment for everyone.

### **3.9 Summary**

The use of action research approach provided a supportive overall strategy for the enquiry and its inherently democratic stance contributed greatly to developing trust and authority to the research processes. The various activities generated a far greater range of data than needed for the purpose of this study and some selection has been necessary

in order to maintain the threads of argument. The remaining information has been retained for possible future use. After collation and analysis of the research findings, the information was shared with the staff team at the main setting so that they could reflect on and respond to the matters arising. Several months after completion of the data gathering processes, a final interview was also then undertaken with the manager of the setting and this is given as question 21. This final interview had not been originally planned but arose out of recognition for a final review once the findings were concluded.

In conclusion, the subject matter under investigation is complex and multi-dimensional as it involved working practices involving children and their parents, interpersonal relationships between adults, issues of staff morale, and the impact of leadership and management activities. The circumstances explored were unique but the issues contain matters of general concern therefore the methodology for this study needed to be interwoven in order to form conclusions about the interplay between all these factors so that practical benefit for others could be extracted from the findings.

Each research activity was designed to provide an insight into the greater picture emerging from the reconnaissance phase and, as such, any one thread of inquiry could have been developed to form a research project in its own right. Each phase of the action research process has generated a key outcome for applicability to other circumstances. Although early years recruitment issues have been studied, to my knowledge no other researcher has sought to investigate this particular set of features relating to understanding and influencing well-being and the emotional climate in an early years setting for the benefit of the staff and the children at the setting.

## Chapter 4

### FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION 1

#### Introduction and Preliminary Survey phase

##### 4.1 Introduction

The four-stage framework for presenting the data reflects the data collection techniques given in the methodology chapter to address the 20 questions identified through the literature review, and also the concluding activity. As this is a complex research project using a variety of evidence gathering tools, the initial data, data analysis, and discussion of the findings, are being presented in an integrated way using sections that reflect their stage of the study. A brief summary of what has been learned from the each activity is given at the end of each section and the main summary is given in Chapter 8. Chapter 8 also brings together information and discussion about the core themes arising within the literature review considered in Chapter 2. Recommendations for further action are identified in Chapter 9.

The outcome of the preliminary external context and reconnaissance survey is reported in this chapter. Separately, the findings arising from the main setting of the study are reported in the following three chapters relating to key elements of the Action Research Cycle (in Robson 2005:217) and are referred to as *Reconnaissance and Planning* – data given in Chapter 5, *Implementing Action Phase* – data given in Chapter 6, and *Evaluation & Reflection* – data given in Chapter 7. As an over-view, the core questions investigated for each phase are given below.

#### **The data in Chapter 4 covers phase 1: The Context and External Reconnaissance Survey.** Fact finding within the region

	<b>Issues arising from the Literature Review</b>	<b>Method used to investigate</b>
1	Who are the 'right kind of people' to work in early years settings?	Regional focus group forum
2	How are the 'right kind of people' attracted and retained in early years settings?	Regional focus group forum

3	How do members of staff in early years settings perceive 'being valued'?	Student focus groups
4	Which issues affect staff morale in early years generally?	Questionnaire to staff (mixed)
5	How involved are the parents of children in early years settings?	Questionnaire to 100 parents (various settings)
6	Can staff reflect on practices in their own settings?	Observations in various settings

**The data in Chapter 5 covers phase 2: The Main Setting Reconnaissance and Action Planning.** Formulating and developing the Management Action Plan for the setting

7	Which issues are of most concern to staff at the main setting?	Staff focus group (no manager)
8	Which issues have greater impact on staff in the main setting?	Prioritising exercise [A] and Self-assessment exercise [B]
9	What are the reasons given for staff leaving the main setting?	Employment records over 10 years

**Details and rationale of the Management Action Plan to be implemented in the main study setting**

**The data in Chapter 6 covers phase 3: the Main Setting Implementation of Actions.** Use of data gathering tools in main setting

10	Which issues affect staff morale at the main setting?	All main setting staff questionnaire
11	How involved are parents of children in main setting?	Questionnaire to 20 parents (during a parents evening)
12	Can staff at a setting recognise the impact of their practices?	Use of 'temperature check' questionnaire in main setting
13	How many adults does a young child form bonds with during a week in an early years setting?	Child tracking diaries in the main study setting

**The data in Chapter 7 covers phase 4: Main Setting Evaluation and Reflection on Actions.** Relating to research and actions in the main setting of the study

14	Which management actions increase sense of being valued and appreciated?	Impact analysis Questionnaire with main setting staff
15	In the light of feedback from the research so far, how does the manager now consider the purpose of an early years setting?	Interview with the manager of the main setting
16	In the light of feedback from the research so far, how can the staff team and setting manager work well together?	Interviews with a senior supervisor continuing at the main setting
17	In the light of feedback from the research so far, what factors may impact on a staff member's decision to remain or leave an early years setting?	Interview with a senior supervisor at the main setting following her resignation

18	Reflections on the enquiry process and responses to data on initial findings?	Discussion with staff team in main study setting following feedback of initial findings
19	How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?	Focus group staff from the main study setting
20	How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?	Focus group parents from the main study setting
21	What is the manager's reflective view of the transformation within the setting?	Semi-structured interview with the manager of the main setting

The various activities generated a far greater range of data than needed for the purpose of this study and some selection has been necessary in order to maintain the threads of argument. The remaining information has been retained for possible future use.

After writing up the summary and analysis of the research findings, the information was shared with the staff team at the main setting so that the team could reflect on and respond to the matters arising. Several months after completion of the data gathering processes, a final interview was also then undertaken with the manager of the setting and this is given as question 21. The interview had not been originally planned but arose out of recognition for a final review once the findings were concluded and formally closed the research process for the main setting.

## **Data and analysis of the context and external reconnaissance survey**

### **4.2 Research activities [1-6]**

**Research activities [1] and [2]:** The first Focus Group was formed during the preliminary survey phase of the study. This background context activity arose out of a naturally occurring work-place activity and the opportunity was used in order to gain a first hand understanding of the needs and expectations of employers of early years staff.

Twelve participants comprising head teachers and nursery managers (see Appendix a) for a list of participants) were invited to share their views in response to the two core questions prepared. The group contained 3 male and 9 female managers and head teachers.

Invitations were sent on college headed paper indicating a mutually beneficial opportunity to

share views in order to contribute to improvements in the training of early years staff. This activity was initially devised as an invitation on behalf of the College, to seek the views of student work experience providers so that training provision could be improved. Once in place, the potential value of the exercise to contribute to this study became apparent.

It was explained to the participants that the Focus Group session could have dual purpose and they were made aware that the information would potentially be of use beyond the immediate purpose of college data gathering. The participants were all known to me and were invited on the basis of my authority as Head of Early Years Curriculum at the local college of FE and under these circumstances, everyone agreed to the outcome of the discussions being used for personal research particularly with the assurance that individual contributions would remain anonymous.

This Focus Group met for one afternoon and, following refreshments and introductions, the group was divided randomly around three tables to discuss the core questions. One member of each team collated responses and these were eventually fed back to the whole group. The outcomes were then gathered up and produced in the format required for the college and also for this study. The findings to core question 1 are given in box 4.1 below.

**Research activity [1]** Summary of Focus group data on 'Who are the right kind of people' to work in early years settings?

**Box 4.1 12 Desirable Qualities and Characteristics of Staff in Early Years Settings**

- Having a positive/optimistic outlook on life
- Able to make secure attachments and delighted to be in the company of children & adults
- Having a strong sense of personal well-being - physical and mental
- Reliable, trustworthy and loyal to the setting
- Consistent in their approach to providing high quality care and education
- Able to make a positive contribution to team activities
- Having kindness, perseverance, resilience, flexibility and thoughtfulness
- Possessing a socially inclusive community-based value system
- Motivated by a desire to work effectively with children
- Having an awareness of the needs and feelings of others
- Able to give encouragement and inspiration to children and adults
- Actively engaged in seeking to extend knowledge and understanding in self and others

**Characteristics considered irrelevant**

Gender, age, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability, social class

## Analysis of data

a) **Gender issues.** Looking at the outcome from activity [1] the list is interesting in its ambition to portray the ideal early years employee. Although the employers stated that gender was an irrelevant factor in the conclusion, most qualities listed relate to caring and nurturing – whilst possibly attributable to men, are generally considered to be female characteristics. Other supposedly male traits such as ambitious, decisive, strong leadership are absent from the list. The list is the overwhelming 'wholesome' of the range of desirable qualities. It is as if the employers were using some sort of stereotype or an Ideal Mother (subliminal Madonna?) as their theoretical employee. Any employee, however well trained or experienced, would have some difficulty meeting the desired expectation of their role on a day to day basis. As a society, our collective expectation is that parenting and equivalent childcare employment is largely unskilled and considered to be a 'domestic task' that any untrained person can do with a bit of guidance. One view could be that mothers perform their duties because they love their children and this is therefore its own reward. Such a loving and rewarding relationship cannot be assumed as compensatory when caring and educating the children of others due to the difference in personal investment.

b) **Pay rates.** If the ideal member of staff is considered to match the description given in box 4.1, it is hardly surprising that 'the right people' are hard to attract and to retain when the expectation of them is so high and the recognition through pay rates generally so low. Low pay rates are inevitable in early years care as a consequence of the staffing ratios required for registration. It is only when the care of young children is linked to early education that the status of early years activity is raised and partially reflected in improved pay rates. As employers and managers, the Focus Group members are largely the same group of people that review staff posts and draft job advertisements for early years employees, so a further activity that evaluates early years employment against expectations would be helpful, though not undertaken here.

c) **Training.** Despite the high expectation and low pay, the list of desirable characteristics does seem to reflect a genuine wish by employers to provide the very best support for the development of our society's youngest members. If such desirable people do exist in sufficient numbers, they would be the ones that employers would like to make responsible for meeting the social, emotional and educational needs of the under fives. If this is the case, it

is a logical step to consider reviewing training programmes for early years staff to ensure that they are being adequately educated such that they fulfil the expectations of their potential employers by becoming the people with the appropriate skills and positive outlook on life. This focus on personal values and positive outlook has implications for the future training of early years staff. The desirable characteristics cited by employers are similar to those identified in the Emotional Intelligence section of the Literature Review:- having self-awareness, managing emotions, empathy, motivation & communication (Goleman, 1995) and it would therefore seem that employers are seeking Emotionally Intelligent staff. Current training schemes are designed to impart knowledge and practical care & early education skills to students rather than having a focus on developing their emotional well-being and capacity to understand the emotional needs of others. Perhaps Emotional Literacy training should be included.

There is scope to recommend greater development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills in the training of all early years practitioners as well as encouraging students to become more resilient and to take more responsibility for their personal well-being. Early years work remains one of the few careers that can be entered with no qualifications at all and, given the importance of early relationships in a child's development which are, according to Kraemer (1999:1) "The most powerful influence on our capacity to manage life's hurdles is the quality of care we receive in childhood, especially the earliest years." This continuing employment of untrained staff cannot be in the child or parent's best interest and suggests that early years employment is simply seen as an extension of the mothering role, whatever that role is perceived to be in today's society.

**Research activity [2]** Summary of Focus group data on 'How to attract & retain the right kind of people?' (note: *originally there were two Core Questions for discussion but the Focus Group felt they were closely linked and that it made sense for them to be combined*)

**Box 4.2 Possible strategies for attracting and retaining staff (linked to staff well-being)**

The setting to have and develop:

- A credible, co-operative, collegiate managing style, based on mutual trust and respect that demonstrates a visionary approach and leads by example
- An explicit set of statements detailing the aims and philosophy of the setting



- An ongoing training programme to develop interpersonal awareness and provides support for the resolution of any personal issues that could create barriers to good early years practice
- A consistent interview and induction process that locates and appoints staff with many of the desirable characteristics given above
- The creation of a work team comprising women and men with a mix of ages, personalities, abilities and social backgrounds
- The allocation of a named supervisor with designated time for regularly scheduled meetings/discussions to recognise individual contributions to team endeavour
- An incremental salary scale to support increasing responsibility, experience and training and recognition of personal development
- The provision of staff group activities (work-based and social) to support team cohesion and thereby develop a sense of shared community values
- The sharing of positive feedback and good news from others in order to foster a belief that the work being undertaken is worthwhile
- Encouragement of appropriate cheerfulness and laughter with staff, parents and children
- Developing a reputation for being a rewarding place to work such that 'the right kind of people' (from box 4.1) are attracted to seek employment with like-minded colleagues

#### Analysis of Data

a) **Organisational culture.** Rather like the 'ideal person' arising from the first activity, the collated employer views about the setting seem to have a very 'user-friendly' notion of the desirable setting. Whether this reflects a predominantly female view of an early years setting is difficult and unnecessary to ascertain (the focus group was mixed, though majority female) but there is clearly a wish here for a collaborative teamwork approach that treats employees kindly and seeks to establish a democratic community within the setting on the basis that this would be attractive to likeminded people and would be sufficient to remain motivating despite the low pay levels. There also seems to be strong desire for the setting to provide the mutual support mechanisms and communities of practice that help to maintain the staff enthusiasm when the demands of sustaining ongoing interpersonal relationships with children, parents and colleagues can become exhausting.

b) **Management style.** Underpinning the list generated in box 4.2 is an implication of a particular management approach that is very much driven by quality issues and is people-centred rather than any references to efficiency and expressions of business-like behaviours. The preference is for a manager that will support and develop the team as a trusted leader rather than by directing, 'line-managing' and setting targets. In this desirable setting, it seems that the manager would need to be able to demonstrate good practice by role

modelling and taking responsibility for the morale of the team by recognising the work being done and valuing all contributions.

c) **Policies and practices.** In the desirable setting, the organisational culture and management style would be demonstrated through the policies and practices in use across the setting. Particular reference has been made to inducting new staff into the philosophy of the setting – this can only be possible if there is an explicitly understood philosophy such that the whole team is familiar with its values and behaviours. Organisational policies and practices can provide guidance in how to manage day to day operations by compliance, but working within a philosophy would require individuals to achieve internalisation of the belief system behind the practices.

d) **Reputation.** One particularly interesting comment at the end of box 4.2 is the notion of creating an organisation that has a culture, management style and philosophy that contributes to staff well-being to such an extent that employees in other settings become aware of it and also wish to be a part of it. If a setting is able to achieve this desirable state then rather than advertising for new staff, potential employees will actively forward C.V.s for consideration should a vacancy arise. Conversely, this would mean that if a setting inadvertently creates a reputation for being a poor employer through the absence of any of the desirable characteristics in box 4.2, it will have great difficulty attracting or retaining anyone of the required calibre. All four aspects given here link closely with established traditional theories of motivation and indicate that particular aspects of the work environment can be attractive to people with an interest in working with others. People are motivated by personal aspirations as well as different aspects of their working environment and employment conditions.

It is evident from the employers' views given in box 4.1 that working with young children is greatly centred on providing a service that uses relationship skills. The employee is likely to make an unconscious assessment of the balance between the effort put into the job and the rewards gained from it. If relationships with children and colleagues at work are felt to be rewarding in a way that meets the employee's needs and compensates for the lack of financial recognition, then the experience of work is more likely to be considered satisfying and therefore the employment will continue. The implication of this reflection is that it is important to study factors that motivate people to enter and remain in early years

employment in order to understand how best to attract, develop and retain them. The NIESR study into *Recruitment Retention and Loss* (2003) highlighted how early years providers acknowledged that good practices can support recruitment and retention yet could not recognise that their own practices were often poor. In order for providers to make use of identified good practices there needs to be i) a clear grasp of what good early years management practice looks like with key criteria and a training programme for all managers ii) a process of senior staff reflection to enable recognition of where there is a shortfall between self-perception and reality for others iii) ongoing external support mechanisms to enable senior staff to maintain, monitor and adjust their practices in an ongoing way.

From a consideration of employers views, Activities [1] & [2] above, are mainly contextual and are at the heart of all levels and layers of the enquiry. Assumptions about the personal skills and factors that motivate early years staff are fundamental to government policy and to provision in all types of setting. The Focus Group used to explore the questions was drawn from a representative range of employers who would be using such judgements and stereotypes whenever seeking to appoint a new member of staff. The results from the focus group indicate that the 'right sort of people' to work in early years would have a high level of emotional stability, well-developed interpersonal skills, and the sort of knowledge that comes from a relevant training programme.

It might be worth noting that in most other occupations, someone with these characteristics would also be able to expect a commensurate pay rate yet the employers did not appear to consider the reality that their preferred employees would have these desirable qualities but also be prepared to work at, or close to, the national minimum wage. The issue of pay is raised during later activities when considering 'being valued'.

Without testing the findings against views from other groups it is difficult to conclude from the focus group outcomes that the views of local employers would be similar to those of settings in other parts of the country. However, there is also nothing in the membership of the group to suggest that the views of this group of local employers are different to those elsewhere in the country in any significant way nor that the outcomes represent the specific culture of a particular locality in the East Midlands. For the purpose of this study, the

desirable characteristics from Activity [1] and the suggestions for attracting and retaining staff in Activity [2] will be regarded as a representative expression of views. From the literature review, the retention of good staff was identified as a national concern warranting larger scale research than this study, however, this research can go some way to providing valuable information and new knowledge about issues impacting on staff retention.

**Research Activity [3]** How do staff in early years settings perceive 'being valued'?

The third Focus Group activity came into existence by mutual agreement within my role as senior lecturer on a Foundation Degree in Early Childhood Studies programme at the College. Within the curriculum, the College offered a Foundation Degree to ten mature students who each have many years experience in early years settings. During the time of this research, the group was in its final year and working at pre-degree level 5. Within the 'Managing Early Years' module that was being delivered in the spring, the nature of the personal research project was explained and I demonstrated links to the module content before seeking agreement from the group to make use of the outcome from any relevant discussion. All expressed consent and some considered that the experience of being quasi co-workers to be beneficial to their development of research skills in preparation for their own personal projects still to be undertaken as part of the course. As this was a mutually beneficial arrangement to examine a theoretical concept, the group acknowledged and accepted the dual nature of the teacher as researcher.

Within this framework, the issue of staff motivation was raised and a discussion was initiated that explored what the experience of 'being valued' meant within early years employment. The purpose was to try to encourage reflective thinking by practitioners and gather critical issues by distilling common themes from the various observations, anecdotes and feelings arising from day to day working in early years settings. The opportunity to undertake the role of tutor and data collector was considered mutually beneficial and consistent with being able to fulfil both agendas as the students were examining management issues in early years settings and most had responsibility for staff teams. To a helpful extent this activity linked with the reflections arising from Activity [4] as the need for early years staff to feel secure and valued had been an issue raised by the senior staff team in the previous Focus Group.

The outcome from the Degree student Focus Group contributions have been summarised in box 4.3

**Box 4.3 Conferring 'Value' and recognition (Possible motivating factors)**

Management rewards to give:

- Spending time - showing interest, remembering details
- The support and proximity of 'influential others'
- Positive use of language - spoken, written, body language
- Financial - pay rates, bonuses, gifts
- Status - job title, special responsibilities, involvement
- Gestures - treats, events, letters, certificates
- Companionship - social belonging, team membership
- Challenge - projects, interesting new ideas, opportunities to teach others

Analysis of Data

It was felt by the group that there was scope for a wider investigation and understanding of 'Value Indicators' such that if these could be better understood they may contribute to specific management activities that could go some way to compensate for the low pay. This concept is explored further through the 'Impact Analysis' survey in Research Activity [14]. As the purpose of the discussion focused on management actions it is to be expected that the outcomes above are largely placing the onus and responsibility on a manager to behave towards staff in a particular way as viewed by the recipient or subordinate i.e. treat them with concern, caring and respect. This may or may not therefore be consistent with some management literature that focuses on management as establishing authority, leadership and compliance. But it does reflect aspects of the outcome from the employers Focus Group in Activity [2] as a style of management that would be attractive to early years practitioners. Whether early years settings and their staff have particularly unique requirements would be interesting to examine or whether this arises due to the predominantly female workforce or not, but such a diversion is outside the remit of this study so such a study would need to remain in the recommendations section. It is quite possible that female employees are motivated by different workplace rewards from male employees.

If being valued is so important for job satisfaction, staff retention and for providing stability for children, it is important to unravel aspects of what this means in practice to be able to formulate a leadership and management policy that will enable consistent application of strategies for staff support.

This PhD research activity identifies scope to create and develop a new '*Value Indicator (VI) Theory*' that can be applied to other circumstances beyond staffing in early years settings – for example if the simple task of involving a person deemed to have 'status' in carrying out an activity will give it more value, then it makes sense to designate such a person to particular tasks even if this were more as a figurehead than a role model. The sort of leadership factors that identify such a person may be based on i) their level of authority or seniority, ii) their social standing, iii) the respect shown to them by their peers through their level of expertise, iv) their natural warmth and charisma.

If a person regarded by adults and children as having 'status' is observed sitting in or tidying the book corner this proximity will confer greater value on books and reading activities. A person with 'status' placing a particular item of play equipment in the garden and remaining nearby will give this aspect of outdoor play a higher value. A person with 'status' spending time with a less popular child can make the child feel more valued and will give the child greater credibility with its peers. The positive social effect of a child having proximity to the person with 'status', also has the potential to last beyond the period of their presence. Whilst such an insight is not new and may generally be considered to be 'emotionally intelligent' behaviour, it is new to create a value Indicator (VI) Theory that can be taught and transferred to others as a body of understanding. It is therefore possible to develop an outline management Value Indicator (VI) Theory from the information in box 4.3. development of this VI Theory is explained further in Chapter 9.

Specific aspects will include:

**Use of language:**

- What is **said about** a person or group of people – words, phrases, tone of voice, emotions expressed, choice of positive or negative language
- What is **not said about** a person or group of people – no mention, little said, conveying a feeling of being forgotten or 'invisible'

- What is **said or not said to** a person or group of people, including the tone and the manner in which it is said
- What is **written or not written about or to** a person or group of people – quantity and quality of writing, praising or criticising, demanding or giving, controlling or empowering
- How well is the person or group **listened to** – in conversation, when expressing needs, length of time listened to, frequency and responses
- How well is **written material received** from the person or group – noticed or ignored, acknowledged and acted upon, retained or discarded
- What the speed and **level of response** is to the needs expressed by a person or group
- **Who** is saying, listening, reading or writing about a person or group of people – are they a person of great or little influence

#### **Use of body language:**

- What **unspoken messages** are given to the person or group of people – facial expressions, proximity of people with status or popularity
- How much **time is allocated** for contact with the person or group by a recognised person with 'status' – inclusion and acceptance, shunning and dismissal

#### **Resource allocation:**

- What **resources are available** for allocation – how much money is spent, who get what and why, Length of time **resources are committed** - pay levels, quality of environment, equipment allocation, gifts and awards

#### **Interest and effort shown:**

- What are the **levels of interest** shown in the person or group of people – trust and permission, control and suspicion, blame or support, attention over a period of time
- How is a person or group's own **circumstances and agenda treated** – recognised and followed, dismissed and ignored, discrimination or encouragement
- **Speed and quality of responses** to other non-verbal forms of communication such as email
- How are **opportunities for choice** expressed, no options presented, or all options available

This is clearly not an exhaustive list of considerations but it could be helpful for managers and practitioners to reflect on individual practices as well as organisational ones. Children,

parents and staff members will interpret all forms of communication in conjunction with their own self-concept and conclude whether they feel valued or not. This personal reinforcing aspect has parallels with the concept of 'life scripts' developed from 1964 within Transactional Analysis by Eric Berne (1961).

In order to demonstrate that people working in early years are valued it is not enough for managers or employers to simply state it. A staff development group exercise based on the outcomes from research activity [5] designed to generate responses similar to the one below, can be used to develop greater management understanding of motivating factors and would help managers to adjust their personal and organisational activities.

Development of the outcomes from the discussion in the group exercise of Activity [5], a representative outcome would be:

<b>Box 4.4</b> <b>I feel valued if ...</b>	<b>I do not feel valued if ...</b>
Friends & peers speak well of me, and to me Employer & people with status speak well of me Staff team members speak well of me and to me I receive encouragement verbally and in writing I am listened to and my ideas are acted upon Others behave politely & warmly towards me I am trusted and given choice & responsibility My environment is predictable and rational I receive good pay and rewards	People speak negatively about me to others Power or authority is used to dominate me My contributions are ignored or dismissed Correspondence is controlling or demanding Resources are unavailable or withdrawn Skills are not acknowledged or developed Options are unavailable or withdrawn My gender, age, or culture is considered a barrier Pay and conditions do not match those of others

Looking at the list in box 4.3 and the development on box 4.4, it can also be seen that there are similarities to human developmental needs of: physical, intellectual, emotional and social, and also big similarities with the upper levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Social needs/sense of belonging/love, Esteem needs/self-esteem/recognition/status, Self-actualisation (Maslow 1970). If Maslow's definition is used as a framework for the purpose of this task, this leads to the possibility that early years staff may view their employment as a move towards having their human needs met or indeed that they have an expectation and anticipation that they will achieve personal fulfilment through their employment. If these



needs are not satisfied by the employment situation then this can impact on their personal morale and well-being to the extent that they lose the desire to remain in the job.

Conversely, if all social and self-esteem needs are being met to the point that confidence and morale is good this could also trigger a move into the higher levels of Maslow's Hierarchy and lead to staff loss due to their wish to expand their horizons. Intentionally aiming to raise morale by meeting human needs may well not be the preserve of early years settings, but through this research task, addressing these needs has been identified as a factor that could be used to improve the working environment if deemed desirable. If the human needs above are perceived to be being addressed, would the issue of pay take a lower priority? From an employer's point of view it may make good business sense to use the behaviours identified in the Value Indicator (VI) concept outlined above, to 'value' employees as much as possible to increase self-belief and raise job satisfaction levels. But there is an ethical issue here too, as employers should not take advantage of this knowledge to exploit staff and keep pay levels artificially low if higher pay can be afforded.

**Research Activity [4]** Which issues affect staff morale in early years settings generally? Using the information gained from the reconnaissance activities in the context survey and main setting, the 20 factors affecting staff morale and motivation were drawn into a questionnaire format given in Appendix b), with options of response indicating a degree of personal agreement with statements at either end of the scale which respondents were asked to circle to indicate their views e.g.

*qu.1 I really look forward to going to work' 4. 3. 2. 1. 'I do not really look forward to going to work'*

The questionnaire was then used to conduct two surveys.

The students in the Foundation Degree group were able to review the questionnaire format in its preliminary stages and helpfully contributed practical suggestions for the questions and the presentation style that was eventually adopted. Some also undertook the exercise as a form of pilot in order to ensure that the questions were not ambiguous, unfocused or leading. Feedback from this group was valuable in the development of this particular tool and

generated further discussion on the importance of staff morale in the early years settings which led to the follow-on observation activities in Activity [6]

The draft of this questionnaire was amended following discussion and an additional question was added in order to avoid ambiguity in question 18 due to a double issue in the original: '*working conditions & holiday allowance*'. As far as possible, the questions intentionally ask for self evaluation rather than any assessment of the setting or the manager so that they can be regarded as a personal interpretation of morale, commitment and motivation. Whether the resulting data is a true reflection of an individual's personal morale and sense of well-being may be debatable as it is not an easy concept to define. One definition of 'morale' is given by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as "the level of individual psychological well-being based on such factors as a sense of purpose and confidence in the future". This seems to be a good fit with the intention of the survey and will be adequate to allow a level of confidence in the outcome.

All students in the group expressed interest in completing the questionnaire privately for their own benefit and it was agreed that the results were not to be revealed but could be used to contribute to their own studies by enabling them to complete entries in their reflective diaries as an activity of benefit for their programme. All the students considered whether they could obtain permission to carry out the survey in their work places and most concluded that although the results would be enlightening, they did not have the authority to carry it out and there would be insurmountable ethical considerations if they attempted to undertake it without permission due to ensuring use of proper procedures for practitioner-researchers and the potentially sensitive nature of the findings.

Data gathering in settings other than the main one therefore proved more problematic than first thought for this task as it was a very sensitive issue and too many ethical issues arose in relation to permission to carry out the survey in settings that were not the responsibility of the Foundation Degree student. For this reason, only two students were in a position to undertake the staff morale questionnaire and it was hoped that the findings from these would enable some comparison to be made to the main setting. These two students were the managers of small settings and felt confident that they had positive working relationships

with staff but this meant that the returns were limited in their number and scope as well as being less likely to identify contentious issues. Other students also expressed interest and a desire to carry out the survey but, for understandable reasons, were reluctant to generate potential difficulties in their own settings as they did not believe that the results would be entirely positive so undertaking the survey could raise follow-on issues in their settings that they had no authority to resolve.

<b>Table 4.1</b> student	Setting	Number of returns (percentage of possible total not known)
Felicity	Independent nursery school	6
Jane	Independent nursery school	3

Two simple graphs were developed and showed consistently high morale in both settings but as the numbers responding to the questionnaire in the two student settings were so low in comparison to the main setting it was concluded that, whilst reassuring to the managers, they shed little new light on the situation by raising no further issues and therefore the graphs have not been included here. These two students both reported that they found the process rewarding because the results showed high morale and this gave them confidence in their management style. Such a survey can clearly be of benefit to a manager when things are going well.

If the results had not been so positive there would be an issue of responsibility for how the subsequent support processes were initiated. With no structured follow-up scheme to assist a manager of a setting to work with the team beyond the survey, this potential for negative revelations raises a serious question about conducting such a survey in isolation. It is ethically necessary to develop a process for working through the difficulties and empowering the full team to find ways to address the situation. The particular findings from the NIESR study (2003) referred to earlier, also imply that the very settings that might benefit from a review of issues impacting negatively on staff morale, are unlikely to have sufficient self-awareness to recognise that such issues exist. For settings that report low staff morale, an external facilitator would be needed to take the setting through the change process. There may be scope for a follow up survey in the future and the staff morale questionnaire will be

included as an option on the Early Years Management support web-site - currently under consideration.

**Research activity [5]** How involved are parents of children in early years settings?

Within a separate Foundation Degree module on 'Working with Parents' the students of the Focus Group referred to earlier, were required to undertake a short piece of research into parental views as part of their module assessment and it was through discussion with the group that they agreed to act as co-researchers by piloting the main setting parents' questionnaire of this study whilst also being able to use their findings for their own assignments. This was a further example of the researcher undertaking a dual role and an activity that was also in the students' interests. The opportunity therefore enabled everyone to benefit from the collaboration without significant ethical issues to be addressed.

The parents' survey was formulated through smaller discussion groups and through input from the researcher as tutor. The statements were drafted as a list of twenty aspects of recognised good practice arising from the module reading and the pooled experience of the group. Note: question 5 was amended to 5a) and 5b) as it had a double aspect and when the results were collated this was transposed into two separate questions making the whole questionnaire 21 question for the purpose of the graphs and the analysis. Each set of data was collated such that the columns represent the collective views of the parents.

In settings that communicate and involve parents well, the expectation was that the resultant columns on the graph would show high levels of *blue* to represent 'agree/strongly with the statement' or *maroon* to represent 'agree/mostly with the statement'. This was not designed to be a competitive activity, only an opportunity to establish a range of likely responses. The individual approaches by the student researchers had the potential to influence the outcomes to some degree and consistency could not be guaranteed under the circumstances. The primary purpose of the task was to inform the dialogue about parental involvement rather than a comparison between the survey settings. This data is then of use when discussing responses arising from administration of the survey in the main setting

The parental questionnaire was undertaken simultaneously by the students across nine settings. This was carried out on a Tuesday morning in accordance with the teaching schedule in order to obtain responses from a random cross-section of parents. The number of responses was dependent on how many parents used the setting that morning and were willing to make the time to co-operate. Not all students forwarded copies of their parents' questionnaires, but responses from six different settings have been collated to provide a reference point which will enable comparison with the results from the main setting: A copy of the questionnaire is given in Appendix c) for reference and should be viewed in relation to the results given below.

### Parents Questionnaire

<b>Table 4.2</b> student	Type of setting	Number of returns (sample)
Gemma	School nursery unit	15
Karen	Local authority school year 1	10
Sandra	Sure Start Centre pre-school	15
Jackie	Independent pre-school	7
Helen	Independent nursery school	6
Jo	Local authority school year 2	8

Results of the parents' Questionnaire in activity [5] from various settings presented as graphs

Areas shaded blue indicate 'strongly agree' to the statement

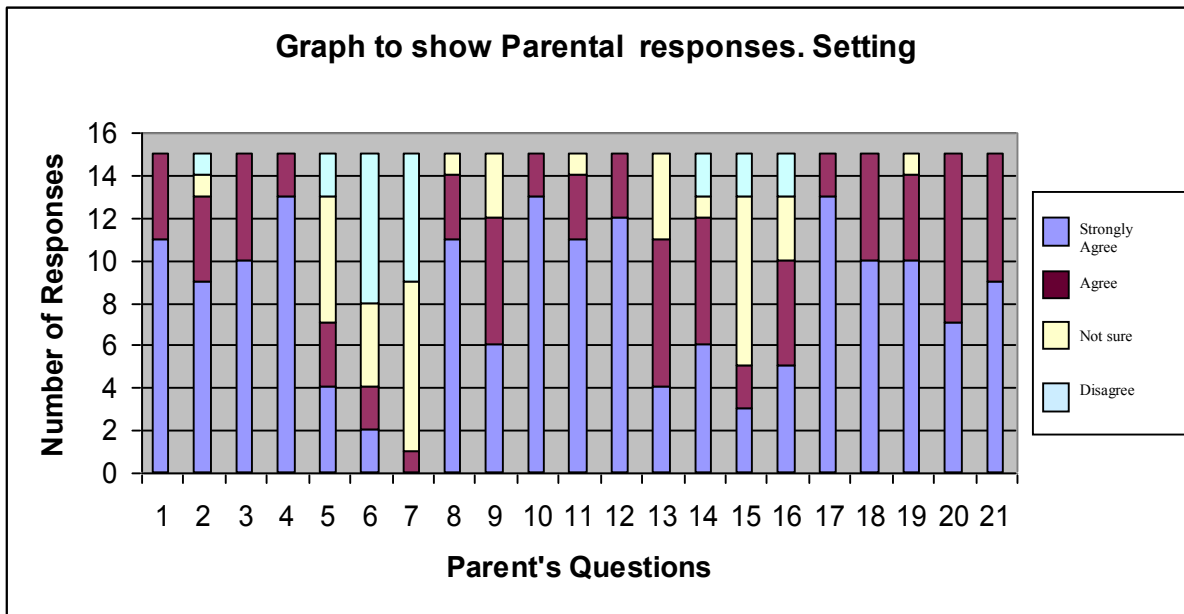
Areas shaded maroon indicate 'agree mostly' to the statement

Areas shaded cream indicate 'not sure' to the statement

Areas shaded aqua indicate 'disagree' with the statement

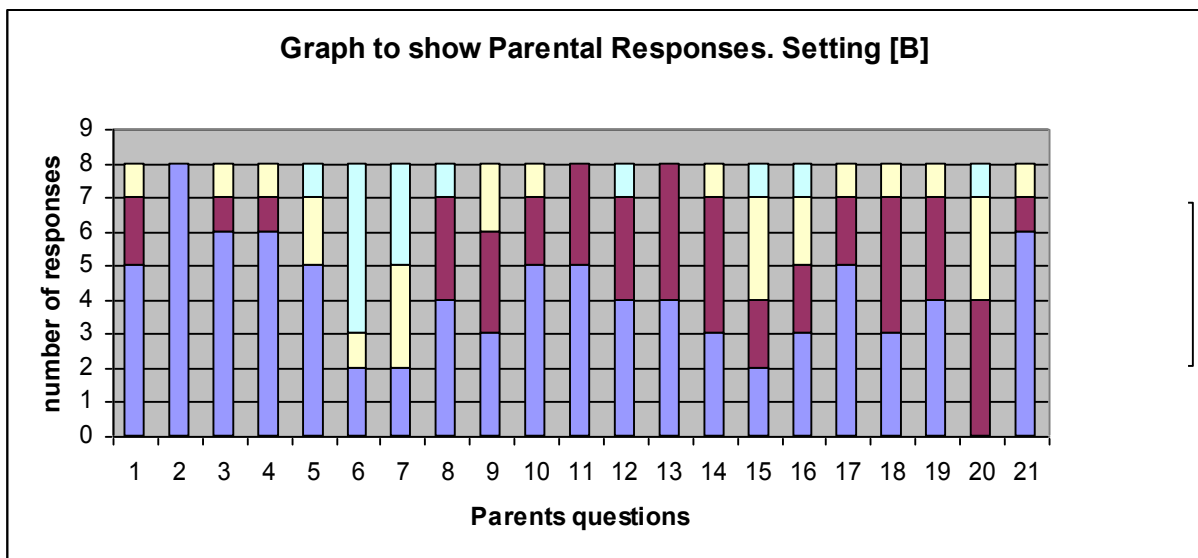
A simple column graph format has been chosen as a way of seeing responses to each question shown as a continuous line. This makes the visual representation of the 'strongly agree' and 'agree mostly' easy to add together and quickly identifies the responses where there is disagreement with the statement (cream and aqua).

**Gemma: Graph 4.1**



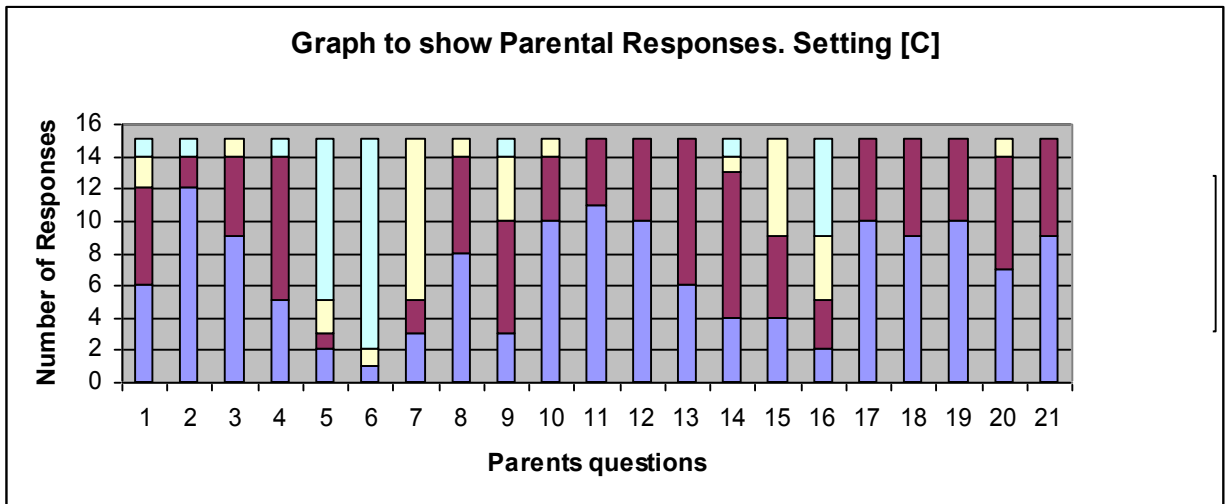
In setting A, the responses indicate that statements 7, 6, 15, & 5 have the lowest agreement levels – these relate to: parents knowing how often progress is recorded, reading a copy of the Ofsted Report, being encouraged to contribute to decision-making, and knowing where to obtain the Ofsted Report.

**Karen: Graph 4.2**



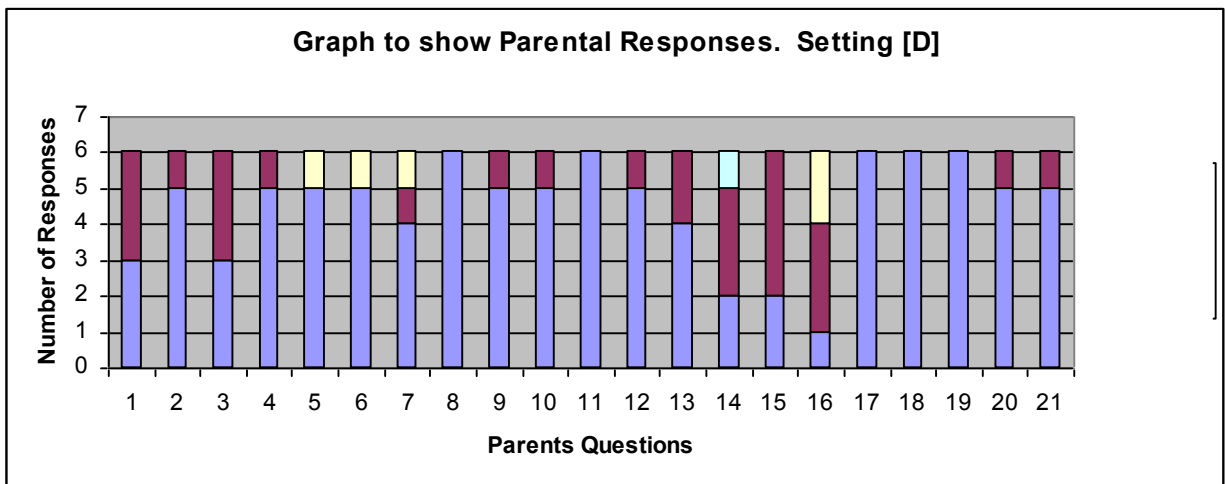
Responses for setting B show that the statements with the lowest agreement rating are 6, 7, 15, & 20. These are similar to setting A with the addition of not knowing enough about the activities that children had been undertaking during their day.

**Sandra: Graph 4.3**



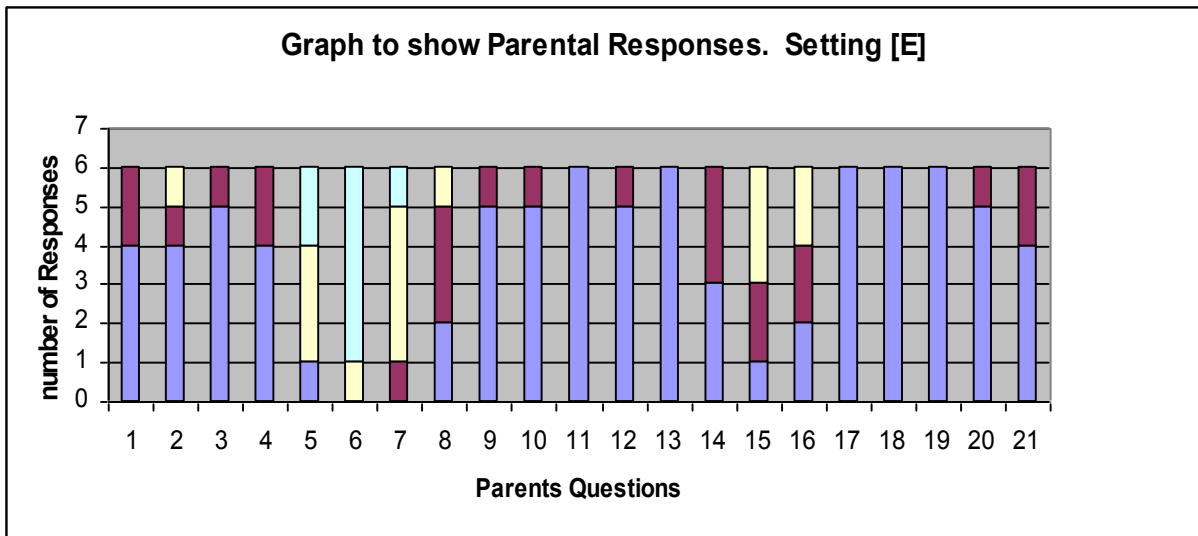
In setting C, the responses indicate that statements 6, 5, 16, 7, 9 & 15 have the lowest agreement levels – these relate to the same types of items as in A and B above but also include staff providing information on activities to do with children at home

**Jackie: Graph 4.4**



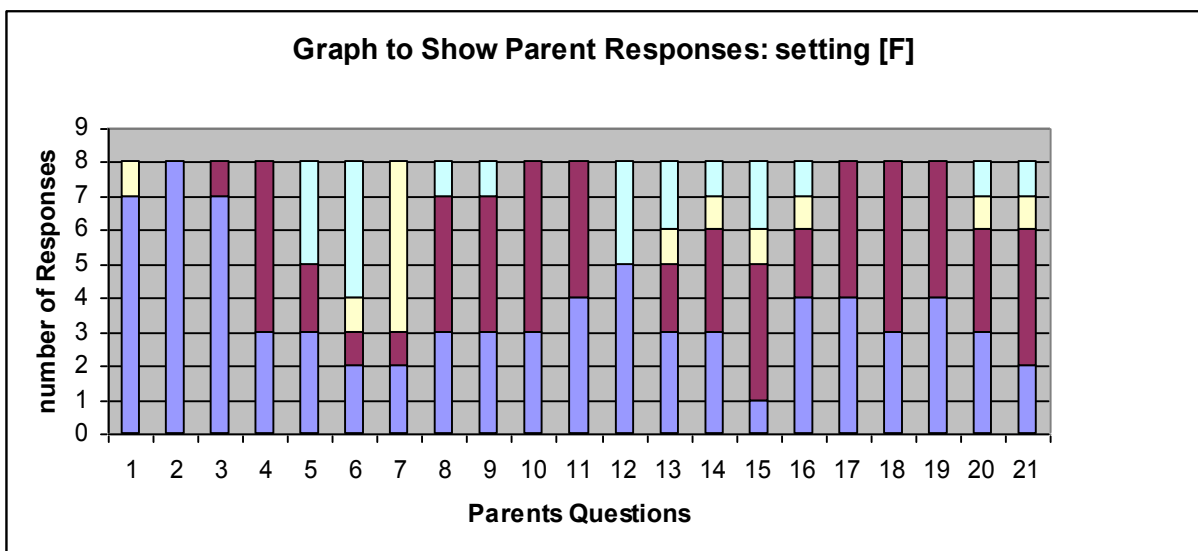
In setting D most of the responses are in the *blue* 'Agree strongly with the statement' range with lower scores again for 14 & 15 and the lowest score for no.16, relating to staff providing activities that parents can do at home with their children

**Helen: Graph 4.5**



In setting E, the responses indicate that statements 6, 7, 5 & 15 have the lowest agreement levels – these are again, similar to other settings above with no parents strongly agreeing with having read the Ofsted Report.

**Jo: Graph 4.6**





In setting F, the lowest responses are again to statements 6, 7, 15 & 5.

Responses to questions other than the lowest scoring, help to show that parental experiences vary considerably across the different settings, for example, question no. 1 asks about *'receipt of useful information prior to the child starting at the setting'*. Calculated as a percentage of parents who strongly agree that they received useful information; the settings vary from 40%, 50%, 63%, 67%, and 88%. Another example is given in question no. 2 which asks whether the parent strongly agree that they met with the staff that would be responsible for their child prior to them starting; the settings vary from 60%, 67%, 80%, 83%, 100%, 100%.

These and responses to the other questions provide a wealth of information about the policies and practices that demonstrate partnership arrangements with parents and could be used to generate a whole research study in its own right. As children's well-being will be affected by the strength of contact and confidence between the setting and the parent/s this will be worth further discussion and will be considered following research activity [11] reported in Chapter 6.

There is also a general message from this set of data in relation to parental knowledge of where to obtain a copy of the Ofsted report for the setting and whether they are particularly interested in reading it. This may reflect its perceived value as being lower than other factors is assessing the suitability of a setting, or settings may not be promoting the Ofsted Report adequately (because they also do not consider it of great value or perhaps are not happy with its contents?)

**Research Activity [6]** Can staff reflect on practices in their own and other settings?

During delivery of the Management module with the same Foundation Degree students, the Focus Group was also involved in undertaking a range of reflective discussions considering the three underlying questions raised in the literature research of this study.

- What is the nature of Early Childhood?
- What is an Early Years setting for?
- What is the job of an Early Years Practitioner?

The resultant thoughts have been collated and are given on charts 1, 2 & 3 below. As a follow-on activity, the focus group members were invited to visit each other's settings and make brief observations notes on the children, the staff and the supervisors/managers (depending on the type of setting). These observation notes have also been collated and are given on charts 4-9 below:

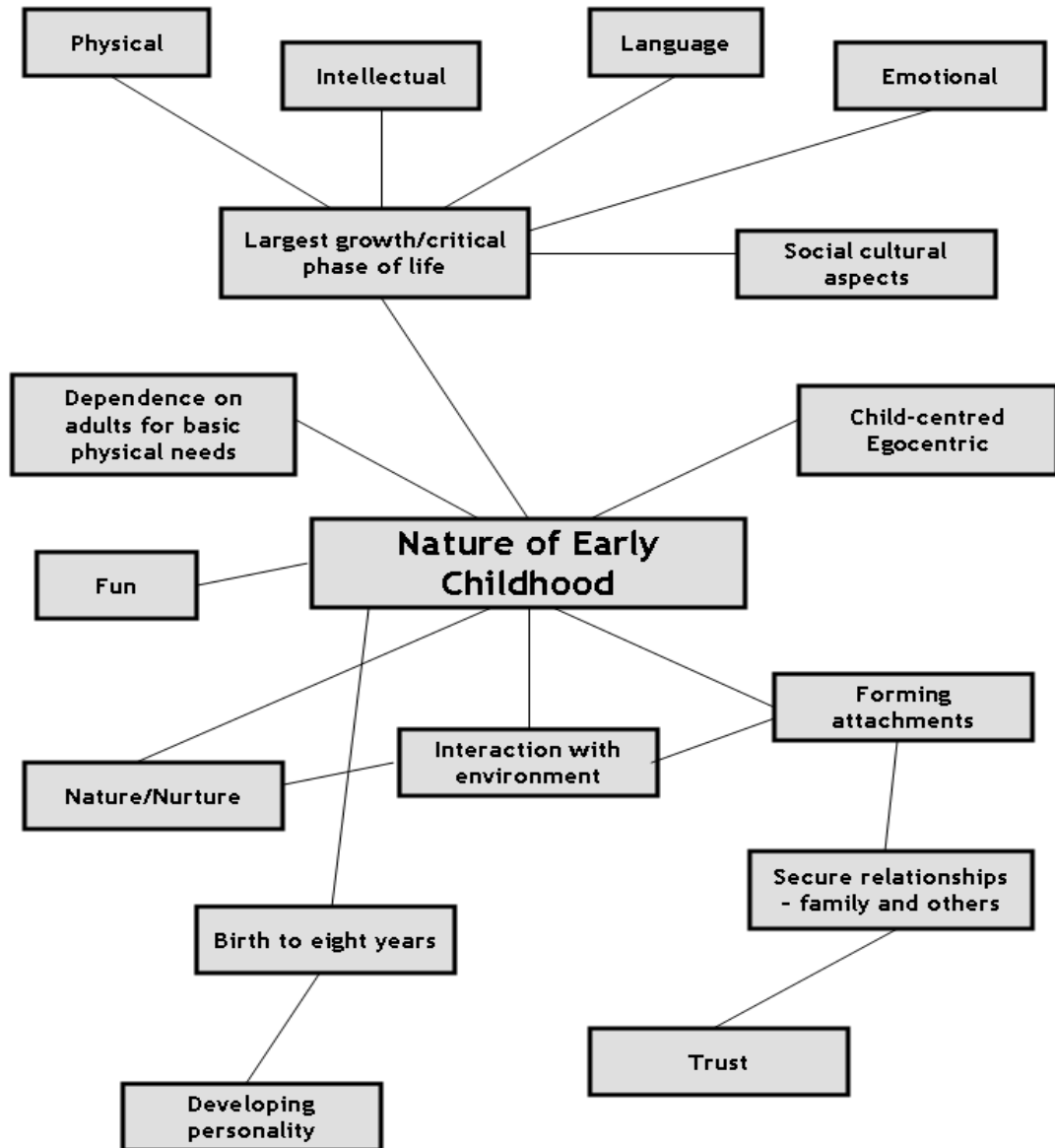
The purpose of this activity is twofold. Initially it is used as a way of testing the views of experienced practitioners using a largely free-flow thinking exercise in relation to the questions above and is helpful in determining a collective understanding of practice philosophy against which to establish the difference between good or poor practice supporting children's development and well-being. It is also a way of collating a record of the things practitioners are likely to comment on when observing new settings without a specific brief and not using an inspection framework.

#### Analysis of data

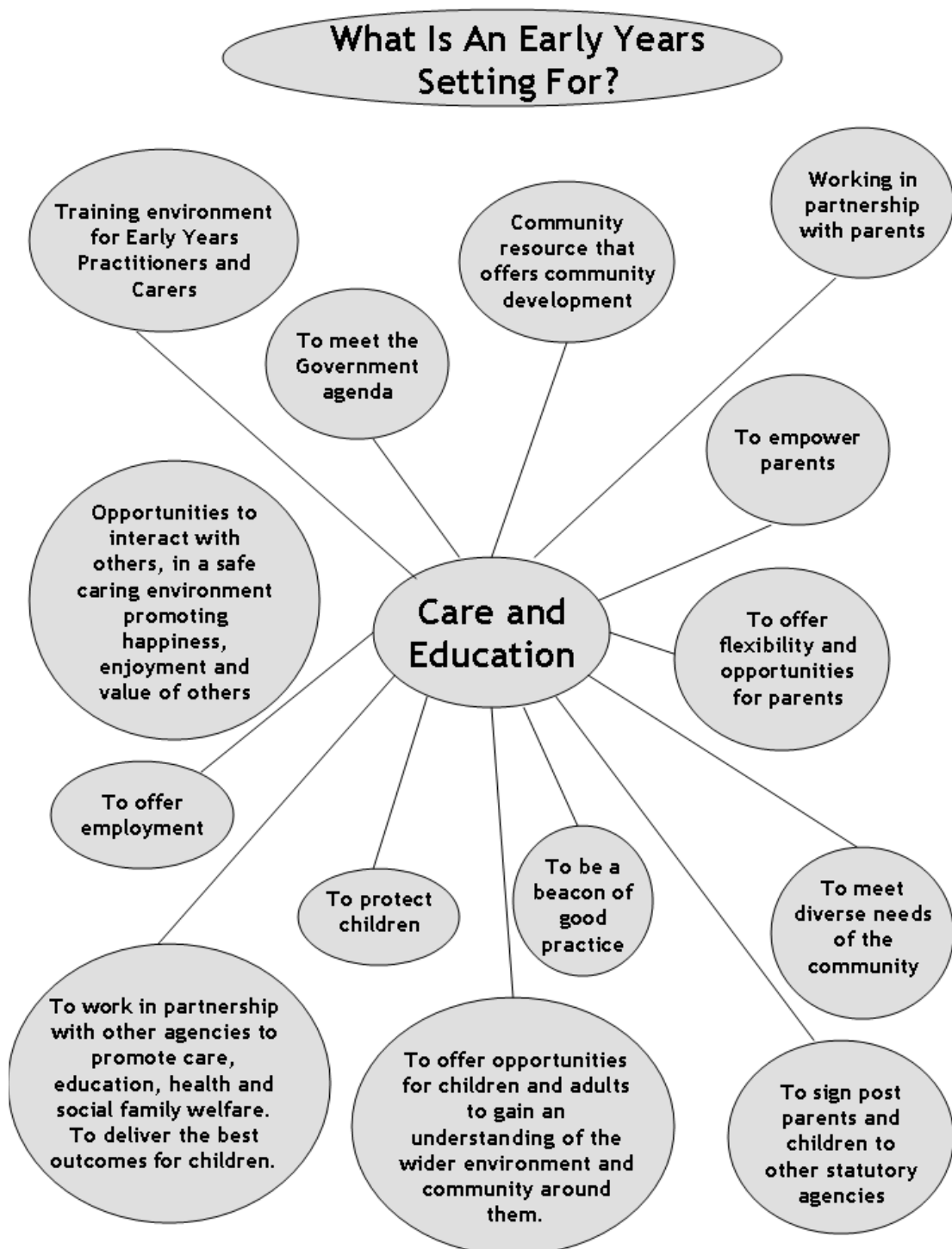
An analysis of chart 4.1 on the next page shows that the group used very brief descriptors which represent a distillation of understanding about all areas of child development, interaction with family, social & cultural experiences, psychological health. It is a very child-centred and idealistic summary and places the child at the heart of childhood - with an absence of negative judgements, no reference to health problems, faddy phases, developing discipline, training, work, control, unhappiness, sibling rivalry, coping with family breakdown or disadvantage, poverty, war etc. that is the reality for large numbers of children across the world. It is as if early years workers perceive early childhood as a period in life to be sheltered from unpleasant reality on the basis that the child is inherently good and needs protection to allow it to blossom. By working in early years, staff members themselves become part of that magical 'good world'. Consideration of the nature of early childhood can lead us to avoid unpleasant thoughts and denial of the fact that life can be difficult for young children and their families to cope with such that when child protection issues arise inactivity and avoidance may prevail.

Analysis of the rest of the charts will follow presentation of all of them in order to maintain the 'whole chart per page' layout

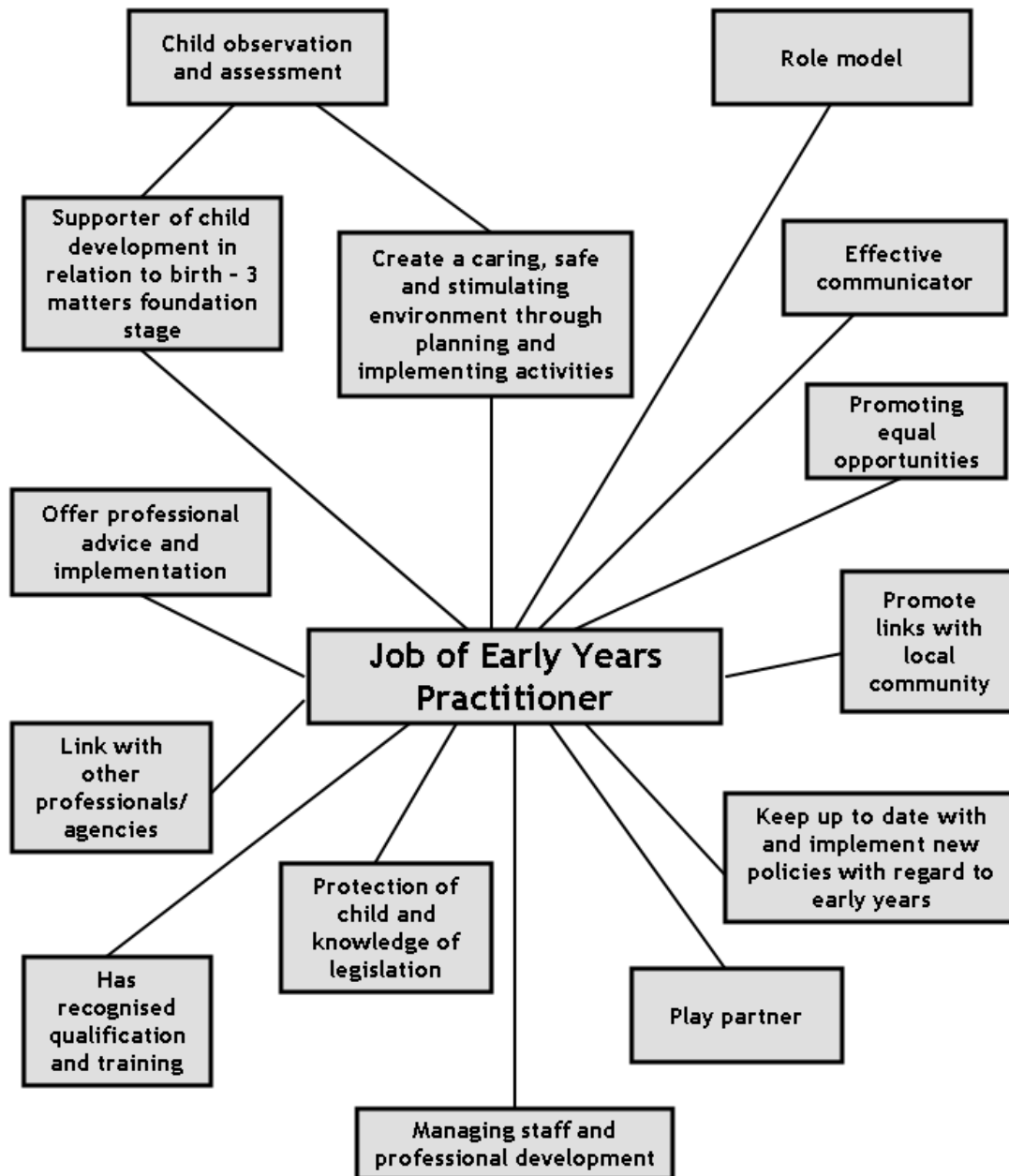
**Chart 4.1**



**Chart 4.2**

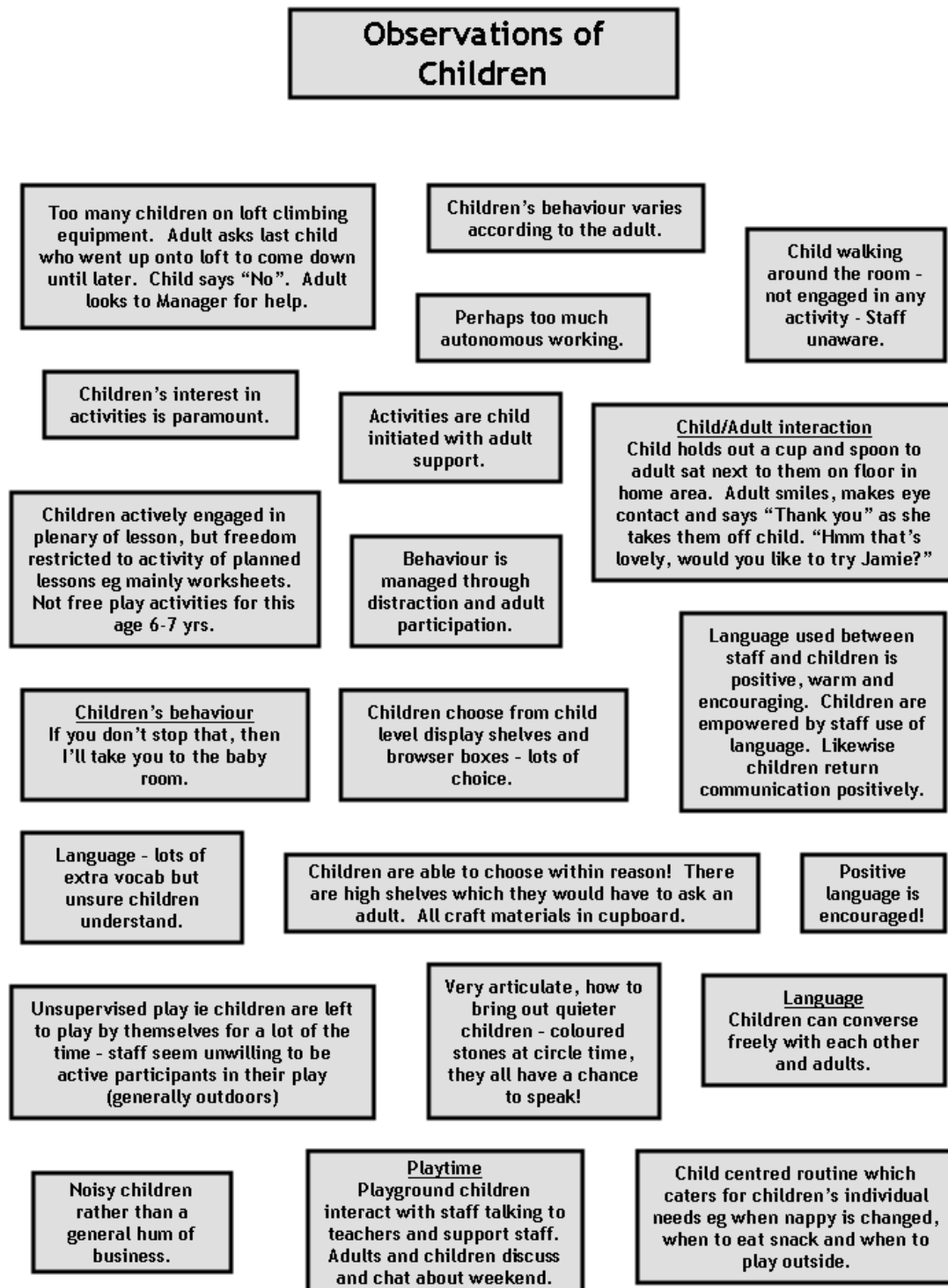


**Chart 4.3**



**Differences between Parents and Early Years Practitioners**  
 Parents may know needs of own child regarding health, safety, care etc, whilst Early Years Practitioner qualified (trained) and has a broader and more informed knowledge of holistic needs of children in general.

Chart 4.4

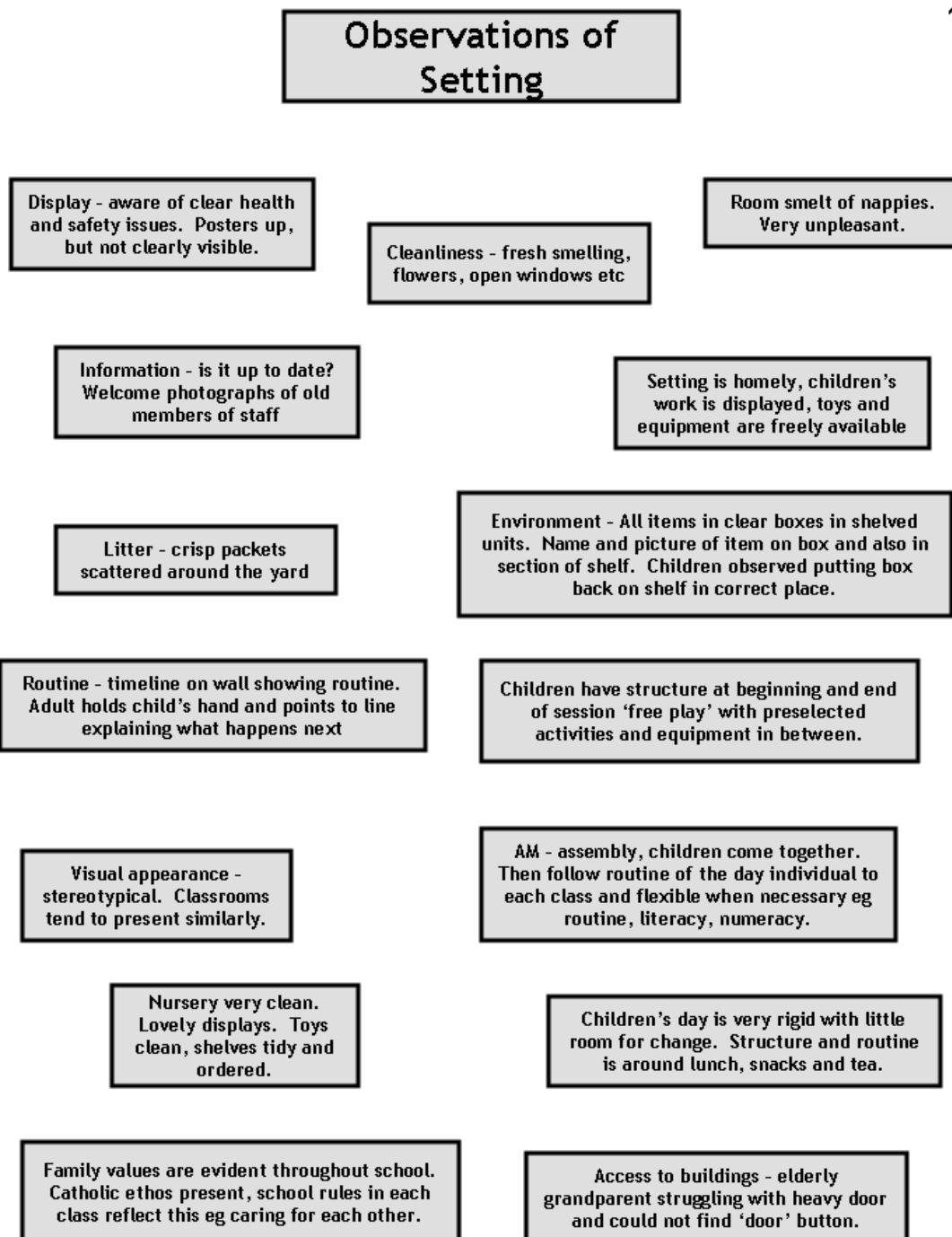


**Chart 4.5**



Chart 4.6

1





## Chart 4.7

2

### Observations of Setting

Visual appearance of setting - good quality equipment, light and airy, bright, well presented displays. Messy at lunch time. Free flow play between indoors and outdoors.

Classroom tidy, but not extensive. Displays provide a colourful environment. Each class take on the name of animals etc Yr 2 are frogs. Children and staff greet people entering classroom with Welcome.

Is it on display? Pictures/drawings include clocks so children can follow own routine. Time line.

Team meetings - monthly, helping one another, mentor system, suggestions book, good communication, staff organise regular events, willing to give up free time, help one another!

Very independent children - nursery ethos? In/out method. Children invite each other to one another's activities.

Clean, colourful, friendly, smells nice - displays at child height - not at adult height, good quality equipment.

New purpose built setting. As yet seems to have no 'feeling/atmosphere'. Should get better when displays are put up and children's work displayed.

Days are unstructured. Routines only involve meals/snacks and sleep times.

Behaviour policy for staff - also on display one for children which is regularly discussed, as much as possible. Children are encouraged to end own disputes amongst themselves, staff there to guide them, make suggestions!

Clear and well laid out family tree, staff can see clear pathway up to management. Manager attends regular management courses and puts into practice what's learnt. Time in office and classrooms, time spent observing staff and children.

Chart 4.8

## Observations of Staff

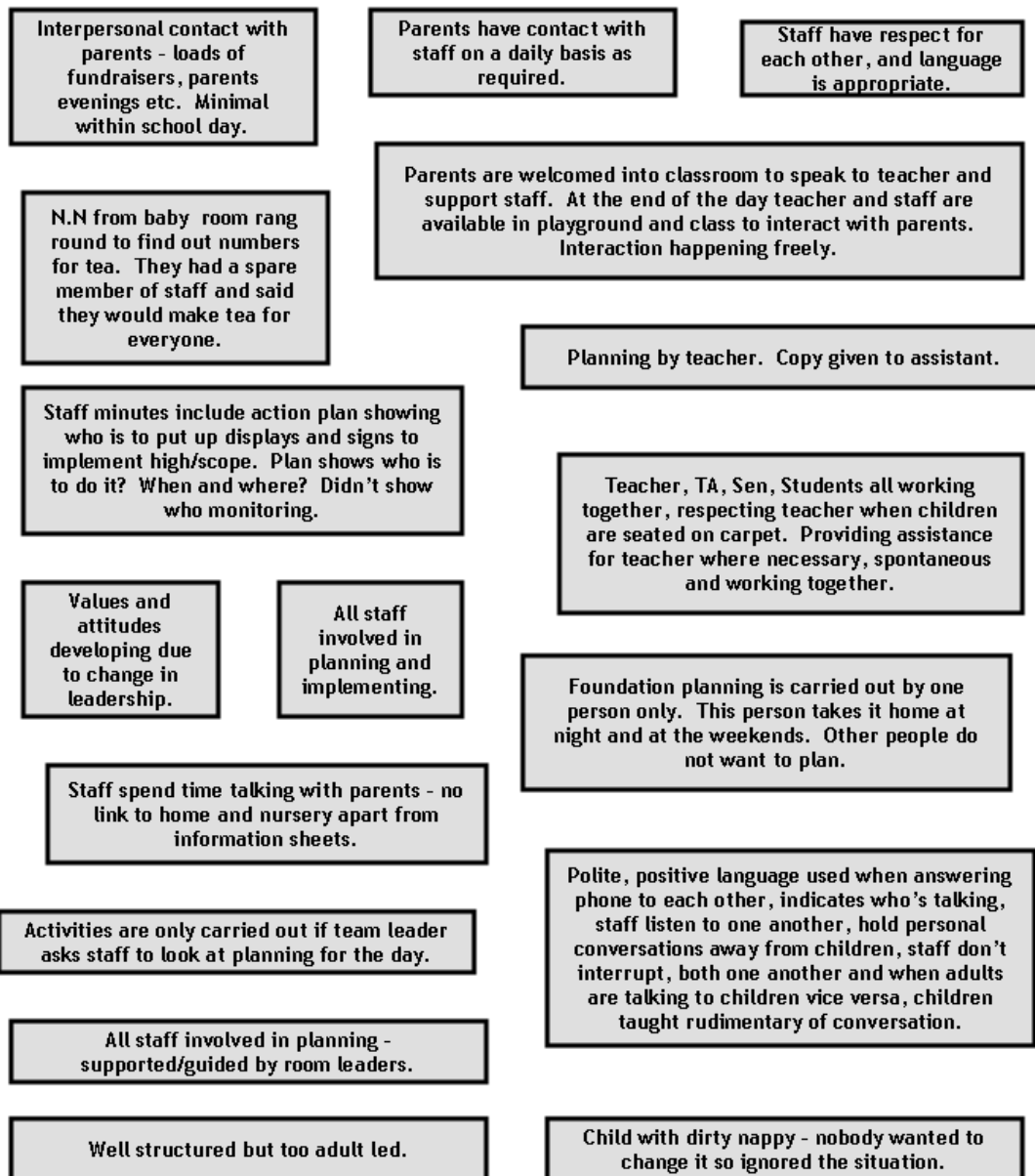
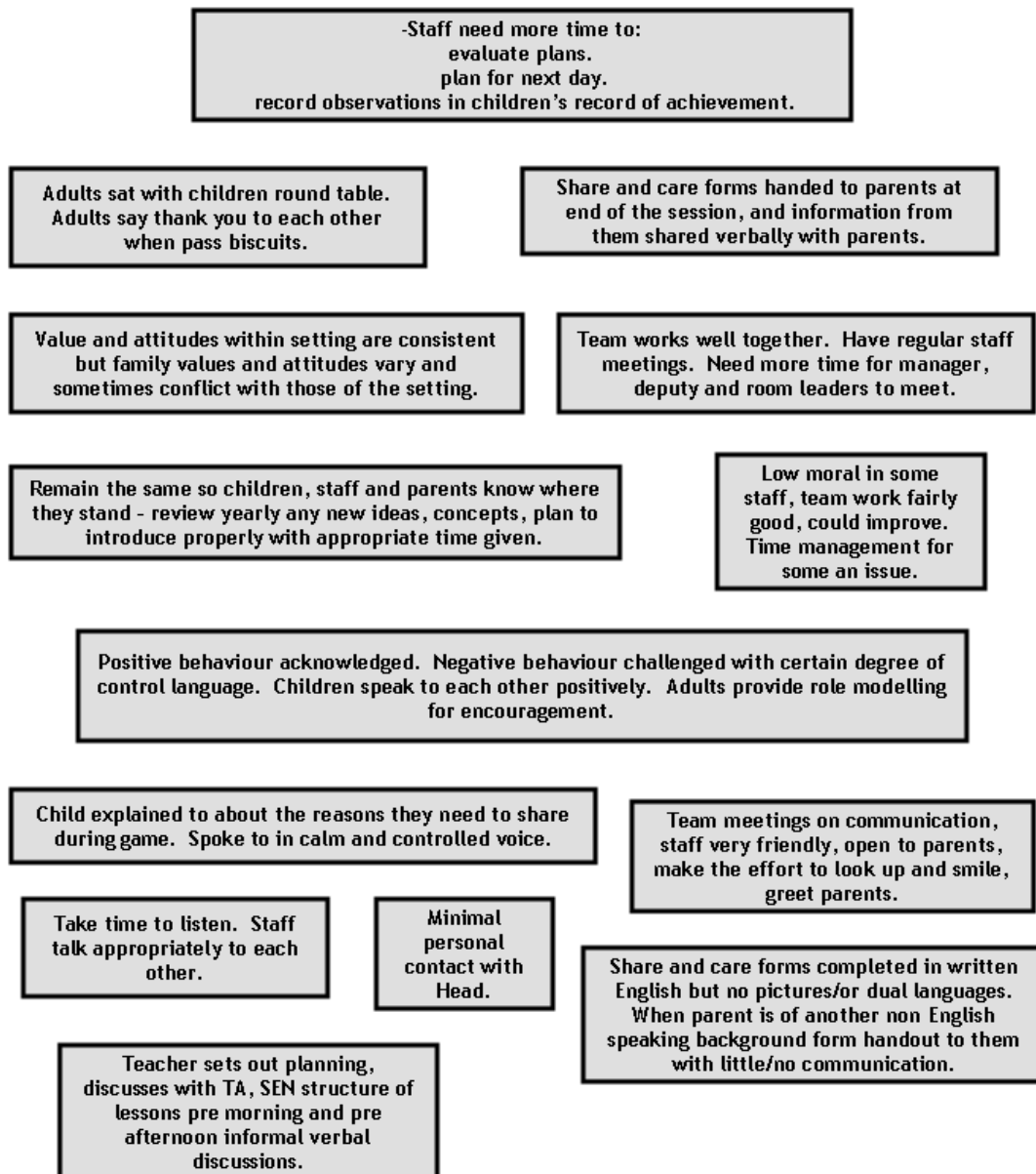


Chart 4.9

## Observations of Staff



An analysis of chart 4.2 further explores the collective views of experienced staff and their submissions focus less on providing an environment for the children (only 4 items) and more on the needs of the parents, staff, the community and the government. This is a much wider agenda for the purpose of an early years setting and highlights the way in which the growing nationalisation of childhood has become part of the orthodox viewpoint. Thirty years ago an early years setting would have mostly part-time attendance by the child and would either have been called a playgroup which would be set up almost exclusively to contribute to meeting the social needs of the children and to provide opportunities to meet with playmates, or it may have been a Nursery School with an education agenda. Some full day care nurseries did exist and their purpose was to provide adequate childcare whilst mothers went to work. Chart 4.2 shows that practitioners consider that all three functions have now been combined such that an early years setting is intended to provide for all aspects of development as well as a safe place to be for several hours whilst parents are at work and that this is also meeting a government need.

Chart 4.3 then becomes a presentation of the role of an early years practitioner as having a wide professional remit with the range of skills, knowledge and responsibilities that would be needed to fulfil the brief of a contemporary Early Years setting. Interestingly, none of the items refers to working with parents, which seems to be a surprising omission given that chart 4.2 does refer to parents on several aspects.

There may well be other viewpoints arising from an initial scanning of the charts but some caution is advised against reading too much into the content as this is a first attempt to gather views and would be refined if the activity had been reflected upon for a greater purpose.

Observations in the various workplaces focused specifically on children (chart 4.4), managers (chart 4.5), the setting environment (charts 4.6 & 4.7), and the staff (charts 4.8 & 4.9). In chart 4.4, observers took the opportunity to make notes and provide judgements about what they saw such that there are some positive and some negative comments made here. The way staff interacted and spoke to the children was recorded and also, how well children engaged in play activities seemed to be the two main aspects that were noted. Evidence of

good interaction and poor practice were presented with contributions made anonymously. As the settings were those that the students worked in as staff, it was important to discourage unnecessary criticism of the findings in front of other group members whilst still allowing interesting information to be presented. From the way the notes have been taken it can be seen that some students have a better grasp of how to make observations of children by using the present tense to describe rather than make judgements.

Chart 4.5 shows some confusion between observations of what the managers were doing during the visit and descriptions about the managers' workload and responsibilities were reported to be. These appear to be less confident notes with observers cautious about what to say or how to record observations about managers. To some extent, this links to the discussion in Activity [8] about operational staff being able to understand the priorities and responsibilities of senior staff as the role is outside their experience. It is understandable then that the students would not necessarily have a personal framework from which to make meaningful observations about managers.

In charts 4.6 & 4.7 the observation notes have been presented in a random order and should be seen together – they represent a number of settings. Some observers have focused on positive things to report whereas others have picked up on negative issues. If these are the first impressions for people visiting settings that are new to them then both points of view are valid and are likely to be representative of the views of new parents, inspectors and other professionals visiting the settings. As such, it would be helpful for settings to undertake such an exercise on a regular basis if feedback could be provided. Comments indicate that the senses are aroused with notes about smells, sights, displays, routines, labelling, accessibility, evidence of values, tidiness etc.

Similarly, in charts 4.8 & 4.9 the observers make some notes about things they have actually seen and other information that has been gathered through talking to staff at the settings. Some comments are very positive whilst others have implied criticism. The way the observations are recorded indicate that these operational activities are within the observers experience and there is greater confidence in the matters considered worth reporting. A

number of the observations related to the way staff spoke to the children and how staff at the setting interacted with colleagues and with parents.

Overall, this set of observations gives a mixed picture of how well early years practitioners can observe and make reflective comments about the various activities taking place in early years settings. It does provide some useful nuggets of information that will contribute to the discussion about management practices that support the development of children's well-being, and as an activity, the outcomes can be matched against the issues raised in the literature search to test the various views of the nature of the child and childhood.

#### **4.3 Summary of preliminary survey findings**

Piloting of the staff morale survey with staff from other settings provided valuable feedback on the questionnaire design, but actually undertaking the survey had limited success in other settings due to ethical issues arising. Where this was undertaken in two organisations, it proved to indicate high levels of staff morale which mirrored the manager's own assessment.

This preliminary survey phase has formed the first stage of the action research cycle in which a general idea relating to clarification of early years purpose, practice and workforce issues has been explored. Within this phase, the context for the main study has been established and key tools have been developed and refined for further use.

**Key outcomes** of this preliminary fact-finding aspect of the action research are:

- A set of descriptors of desirable characteristics in early years practitioners (by employers)
- A description of a desirable features in an early years working environment (by employers)
- An initial VI framework for developing ways to value the early years workforce (by practitioners)
- A questionnaire to interrogate staff perceptions of personal morale and well-being at work
- A questionnaire to interrogate levels of parental involvement in early years settings
- A set of reflections and observations of local practice (advanced practitioners)

Overall, this phase had successfully generated evidence to help provide answers to the six research questions in this section with a conclusion to this section as follows: Employers are seeking emotionally intelligent people with a positive outlook who are primarily motivated by job satisfaction rather than by pay and career prospects. Such employees will be attracted and retained if they feel valued by employers by being offered a supportive working environment with a beneficial management style and a clear operating philosophy.

Therefore, in order to provide a beneficial environment for young children to thrive, the focus of the Action Planning in the main setting was directed towards gathering further data about what it means to staff to 'feel valued' through exploring staff perceptions of the working environment, management style and operating philosophy of early years settings in order to shed further light on these motivational issues and develop the VI theory to a working model. To explore these matters further, the next phase of the action research cycle looks at reconnaissance and fact finding in the main setting and the findings of these activities are given in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5

### FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION 2

#### Reconnaissance and Action Planning in the main setting

##### 5.1 Introduction

Moving the study into the main setting developed from discussion with the second Focus Group. It had been the intention within the planned methodology to initiate a focus group with practitioners at the setting at a slightly later time but as events unfolded, this activity was brought forward to capture the issues arising. As this research activity focused on enhancing practice, it was important to be responsive to the needs of the setting.

A senior member of staff with many years experience and the respect of colleagues, requested a meeting to explore a number of concerns that were emerging within the setting which they considered to be the responsibility of the director to resolve. A group meeting was organised by the senior members of staff and it was initially felt appropriate in the circumstances to listen to the views without judgement and to capture the detail of the issues raised so that a positive way forward could be explored with them. As far as possible, the normal directorial style adopted was to encourage resolution through a collaborative approach supporting staff to find their own ways to resolve matters

The underlying issue reported within the group was one of low staff morale (*negative emotional climate*) in the setting and the likelihood of losing more than one experienced member because of it. It was reported that this would undoubtedly lead to instability in the setting and would be disruptive to the children and may affect parental confidence. I sought agreement from the senior team to address the matters by making use of the concerns and to use this as a way to encourage the whole staff team to consider matters affecting morale. The senior staff members agreed to reflect on the situation using a survey style format with numerical values (see appendix e) and to invite other members of staff and the manager, to participate in the survey as a way of raising the issues for general discussion rather than to accept the situation at face value. The nature of staff morale is, after all, one of perception



that needed testing before any action could be used to resolve it. The staff Focus Group members drew up the initial concerns into a list of 20 issues without the manager's involvement. The list was then used to create two reflective tasks for staff to undertake.

## 5.2 Research activities [7-9]

7	Which issues are of most concern to staff at the main setting?	Staff focus group (no manager)
8	Which issues have greater impact on staff in the main setting?	Prioritising exercise [A] and Self-assessment exercise [B]
9	What are the reasons given for staff leaving the main setting?	Employment records over 10 years
<b>Details and rationale of the Management Action Plan to be implemented in the main study setting</b>		

### Research Activity [7] Senior staff Focus Group data.

The issues of importance are not given in any particular order but recorded as they arose in the preliminary meeting. See table 5.1 below

<b>Table 5.1</b>	20 critical issues presenting problems to varying degrees - raised by senior staff at the main setting.
a	Staff level of enthusiasm for their work
b	Commitment to the organisation
c	Willingness to improve
d	Social/friendships
e	Working over & above hours that are required
f	Working confidentially
g	Enjoying being with the children
h	Cheerful staff outlook
i	Confident staff team
j	Confidence in manager
k	Feeling secure and valued
l	A good reputation of the setting
m	Staff concerns were being met
n	Attention paid to operational issues
o	Resources available when needed
p	Roles are clear & fair
q	Pay rates differentiate
r	Equality of opportunity for career development
s	Problems solved quickly
t	Policies are kept up to date

Having identified the issues causing concern, two tasks were devised: task one was to prioritise the issues in order of those considered to be most important from 1-20, with 1 for top priority and 20 for lowest priority; and task two was to indicate by use of numbers 1-5 how close to best practice the member of staff felt that the current working situation was with 5 being 'very good practice evident'. The four senior staff completed this assessment anonymously and the manager was also asked to complete a copy. At this time the manager was not made aware that the senior staff had raised particular concerns but was aware that the topic being researched focused on child emotional well-being in early years settings.

This situation had the potential to raise an ethical issue of deception as the manager believed the two tasks on the survey were being undertaken simply for the benefit of the research project and was intentionally not advised of any other purpose in order to avoid an over-cautious response. The situation also highlighted the discomfort of being a participant researcher attempting to work through two potentially conflicting roles, in that the tasks were also being undertaken as an attempt to use action research to resolve a complex situation brought forward by staff at the setting, but would have been necessary irrespective of the research activity. It was this Focus Group activity that highlighted the connection between low staff morale, poor retention of staff and a potential detrimental effect on the experience of the children if morale remained low in the setting.

As requested, the question sheets were returned and identified as Manager (M) or Senior Staff (SS) so that comparisons could be made and any differences in perception could be established. Pragmatically, I considered it necessary to compare views objectively such that a sensitive plan could be established that did not undermine any member of staff nor contribute to any deterioration in morale. The desired outcome was that all staff should remain in the setting for the immediate future and reflect on how to improve morale as a joint activity with the manager. Any management practices impacting negatively on staff morale would need identifying along with any new activities that could contribute to raising morale. The results of this Focus Group and the outcome of the reflective tasks are explored below. This initial list of issues was also used as a basis to create the Staff Morale questionnaire used in Activities [4] & [10].

## Analysis of data

From consideration of the issues arising out of activity [7] table 5.1 shows that a wide range of problems can arise in a nursery setting and that these create concerns for staff who are motivated to work well. From the initial senior staff focus group discussion it became evident that some of the problems had been ongoing for some time and related in part to the particular supervisory style of the manager and, to some degree, in the fact that, as director of the setting, much of the day to day supervision was left to the manager and allowed her a high degree of autonomy. It is to the staff credit that they felt able to raise the concerns despite the sensitivity of some of the issues and the implications for the manager and the director, though it was not clear quite how they envisaged the subsequent development process to evolve. The way the matters were raised and the willingness to explore a way forward indicated that resolution of the problems was the primary motivator rather than any attempt to make anyone feel uncomfortable, inadequate or at fault.

The issues raised by the staff at the meeting were varied and include: aspects about themselves as employees – such as enthusiasm, friendships, cheerfulness; aspects about the way they are managed – such as feeling valued, availability of resources, whether problems are being solved; and aspects of employment circumstances – such as good reputation of the setting, differentiated pay rates, policies reviewed and updated. If staff morale is potentially affected to the point that staff members were considering leaving, then these issues were worth investigating further in order to learn more about good practice. Some of the issues raised such as 'feeling valued' also mirrored those identified in the NIESR (2003) workforce survey which supports the applicability of these PhD research findings to the wider context.

Literature in Chapter 2 indicated that children were potentially at risk of experiencing a disadvantageous emotional climate and that parental confidence would be affected if good staff left the setting. Exploration of staff issues underpin a number of the research activities in this study and this is because of the emerging link between the well-being of staff and that of children in their care. Hence, the identification of factors affecting the well-being of the children in early years settings is the primary focus of the study through better understanding of how to value practitioners as the key resource that contributes to child well-being.

As the focus group was small and only comprised senior staff, the views of other staff were also sought through a follow-up questionnaire in which these same issues were used to formulate the questions. It was also considered possible that the list provided by senior staff may have omitted some other factors that might be of concern to operational staff so it was important when devising the subsequent survey to ensure that the questionnaire included scope for respondents to add further comment if they wished. The manager would also have the opportunity to add further issues. The senior supervisor focus group provided a very interesting and valuable range of issues for consideration and formed the basis for many of the other research activities.

**Research Activity [8]** Which issues have greater impact on staff at the main setting?

Data was collated from tasks undertaken by the manager and four senior members of staff from the main setting and given in table 5.2 as M = manager and SS = Senior Staff member. The list of twenty critical issues generated during Activity [7] was used as the basis for Activity [8]. Task [A] was to prioritise, then task [B] was to make an assessment of a perception about their own setting.

Although everyone ranked the issues from 1-20 (as requested) the results have been condensed and grouped into five categories of priority represented as high priority 5 to low priority 1 to enable numerical comparisons to be made.

e.g. Key to findings for Task [A]

Prioritising		description	
Priority levels 1,2,3,4	=	High priority	= 5
Priority levels 5,6,7,8	=	Next priority	= 4
Priority levels 9,10,11,12	=	Med. priority	= 3
Priority levels 13,14,15,16	=	Lower priority	= 2
Priority levels 17,18,19,20	=	Lowest priority	= 1

Key to findings for Task [B]

Staff assessment of	very good	= 5
Current practice	good	= 4
	satisfactory	= 3
	some concerns	= 2
	unsatisfactory	= 1

In order to be able to compare and investigate any patterns that may emerge, a chart of results is necessary. Once the priority level [A] is attributed to the issue, and the assessment of practice [B] is rated, the two numbers have also been multiplied [AB] to give a perceived status of individual issues within the setting - for example an issue that is given high priority may also be assessed as very good practice so would receive an overall maximum score of 25 and would represent 'not a concern' whereas an issues with high priority may be assessed as unsatisfactory practice so would receive a score of 5 and this would represent a 'major concern'. The multiplied scores cannot be separated from the individual [A] and [B] scores as there are a number of permutations that result in the same outcome score. The chart remains part of the qualitative approach by simply assisting with sharpening the issues where there is agreement between the senior staff and the manager from issues where there is a significant difference of opinion. It is worth noting that whilst there will be a spread of 1-5 for the priorities (4 of each grade) the self-assessment ratings can be any number which means that any [B] ratings of 1 or 2 would be automatically a concern of some sort. Analytic statistics would not be appropriate with this sample.

Table of results for tasks [A] prioritising importance and [B] assessment of setting

The findings have been colour-coded to assist with analysis of critical factors and issues for further exploration:

**varying** ratings across the group  
consistently **medium to low** level of variation given  
consistently **medium to high** level of variation given

issues

Yellow = a,b,c,d,g,m,q,r,s  
Blue = e,i,l,t  
Green = f,h,j,k,n,o,p

**Table 5.2**

	*Issue	Manager			SS 1			SS 2			SS 3			SS 4		
		A	B	<b>AB</b>	A	B	<b>AB</b>	A	B	<b>AB</b>	A	B	<b>AB</b>	A	B	<b>AB</b>
a	Staff enthusiasm	2	3	<b>6</b>	5	3	<b>15</b>	2	4	<b>8</b>	5	3	<b>15</b>	3	3	<b>9</b>
b	Commitment to org	2	3	<b>6</b>	4	2	<b>8</b>	1	3	<b>3</b>	1	2	<b>3</b>	3	1	<b>3</b>
c	Willing to improve	1	4	<b>4</b>	2	4	<b>8</b>	4	2	<b>8</b>	2	3	<b>6</b>	2	3	<b>6</b>
d	Social/friendships	1	3	<b>3</b>	1	4	<b>4</b>	2	5	<b>10</b>	4	4	<b>16</b>	2	4	<b>8</b>
e	Work over & above	2	2	<b>4</b>	1	2	<b>2</b>	1	1	<b>1</b>	1	2	<b>2</b>	1	2	<b>2</b>
f*	Working confidentially	4	5	<b>20</b>	4	1	<b>4</b>	4	1	<b>4</b>	5	1	<b>5</b>	5	1	<b>5</b>
g	Enjoying children	1	4	<b>4</b>	4	4	<b>16</b>	3	4	<b>12</b>	4	4	<b>16</b>	5	4	<b>20</b>
h	Cheerful staff outlook	3	5	<b>15</b>	4	3	<b>12</b>	3	4	<b>12</b>	4	3	<b>12</b>	5	3	<b>15</b>
i	Confident staff team	3	5	<b>15</b>	1	3	<b>3</b>	2	4	<b>8</b>	3	3	<b>9</b>	3	3	<b>9</b>
j*	Confidence in manager	5	4	<b>20</b>	5	1	<b>5</b>	5	1	<b>5</b>	5	1	<b>5</b>	4	1	<b>4</b>

k	Secure and valued	3	4	<b>12</b>	5	2	<b>10</b>	3	1	<b>3</b>	4	2	<b>8</b>	4	2	<b>8</b>
l	Reputation of setting	1	5	<b>5</b>	3	1	<b>3</b>	1	1	<b>1</b>	3	1	<b>3</b>	3	1	<b>3</b>
m	Staff concerns met	5	5	<b>25</b>	5	2	<b>10</b>	2	3	<b>6</b>	3	2	<b>6</b>	1	2	<b>2</b>
n*	Attention to operations	4	4	<b>16</b>	3	1	<b>3</b>	5	1	<b>5</b>	4	1	<b>4</b>	4	1	<b>4</b>
o	Resources available	4	4	<b>16</b>	3	2	<b>6</b>	5	1	<b>5</b>	4	2	<b>8</b>	5	2	<b>10</b>
p	Roles are clear & fair	4	4	<b>16</b>	3	1	<b>3</b>	4	2	<b>8</b>	4	1	<b>4</b>	4	1	<b>4</b>
q	Pay rates differentiate	5	5	<b>25</b>	2	1	<b>2</b>	4	5	<b>20</b>	3	2	<b>8</b>	-	-	-
r	Equal opps for careers	5	5	<b>25</b>	2	4	<b>8</b>	2	4	<b>8</b>	2	4	<b>8</b>	1	4	<b>4</b>
s	Problems solved fast	3	4	<b>12</b>	2	2	<b>4</b>	3	2	<b>6</b>	4	2	<b>8</b>	4	2	<b>8</b>
t	Policies up to date	2	5	<b>10</b>	1	2	<b>2</b>	1	2	<b>2</b>	3	2	<b>6</b>	2	3	<b>6</b>

\*Fuller descriptors are given in Appendix e)

### Analysis of data

Individual priorities can clearly be seen to vary amongst staff of similar levels of responsibility (yellow) Note: issue (g) is clearly a lower priority for the manager than for senior staff and issue (r) is clearly a higher priority for the manager.

Some issues (blue) can be seen to have a consistently lower priority rating for both the manager and the team of senior staff than other issues whereas some other issues (green) can have consistently higher priorities for all concerned.

In all the issues in the green category, there are wide differences in perception between the manager and all the senior staff of how the setting is performing despite all sharing the view that the issues are high priority. Average variation from priority level [A] x [B] setting rating:

issue	variation	observation
f,	-15.5	significant variation between manager perception and Senior staff
h,	-2.25	not a significant variation
j,	-11.5	significant variation between manager perception and Senior staff
k,	-4.75	some variation between manager perception and Senior staff
n,	-12.0	significant variation between manager perception and Senior staff
o,	- 8.75	significant variation between manager perception and Senior staff
p	-11.25	significant variation between manager perception and Senior staff

The six (f, j, k, n, o, p, ) most significant variations that arose between the manager's perceptions and that of senior staff were as follows:

**(f) Working confidentially** – all agreed that it was a high priority (rated 4 or 5).

The manager believed that confidentiality was being maintained and assessed this as a 5 whilst the staff did not, so all separately gave it a rating of 1

**(j) Confidence in the manager** - all agreed that this was a high priority (rated 4 or 5).

The manager believed there was confidence in her management abilities and assessed this as a 5 whilst the staff did not, so all separately gave it a rating of 1

**(k) Feeling secure and valued** - staff generally agreed that this was a high priority (rated 5,3,4,4) although the manager rated this aspect slightly lower as a level 3 priority.

The manager considered that staff are feeling secure and valued by giving this a rating of 4. However, staff actual experience is reported as low with most rating it as 2 and one at 1.

**(n) Attention to operations** - all agreed that this was an important priority (rated 4 overall). The manager believed that attention was being given to operations and rated this aspect a 4 whilst the staff did not, so all separately gave it a rating of 1

**(o) Resources are available** - all agreed that this was an important priority (rated 5,5,4,4,3). The manager considered that resources were available and assessed this aspect as a 4 whilst the staff did not, so most gave it a rating of 2 with one rating of 1.

**(p) Roles are clear & fair** - all agreed that this was an important priority (rated 4,4,4,4,3). The manager believed that roles were clear and fair so assessed it as a 4 whilst the staff did not, so most gave it a rating of 1 with one rating of 2.

These findings highlighted six main sources of discontent and were all the more of a concern because the manager considered that all aspects above were good and was clearly unaware of the discrepancy between her assessments and the staff perceptions. Overall, the manager only awards one grade that indicates less than satisfactory practice whilst the senior staff consider a number of areas to be less than satisfactory (numbers of staff -13,11,13,11). Such findings opened up a number of challenges from a research point of view, the main one being the dilemma of whether to convey the information to the manager or not. Reflection was necessary:- after all, the whole thrust of the study was to seek ways to improve children's well-being by improving management activity using action research and staff team empowerment.

If research intervention resulted in unwelcome interference by a researcher that caused upset and potentially contributed to loss of key staff, the whole process would be counterproductive and could jeopardise the development of the project. The decision taken was to provide feedback on the outcome of the activity simply by verbally expressing the fact there were some differences of opinion – but without showing the results in the expectation that by the time the study was concluded, the issues would be historic. A final reflective interview Activity [21] was undertaken with the manager at the end of the research to provide closure on this matter once the team had moved on.

The other dilemma was the fact that as director of the setting I had intended to develop a distanced approach to the analysis. The discussion arising with the senior staff forum highlighted the impossibility of remaining detached from the development process and led to the conclusion that this study would need to be openly based on participant action research. Indeed, one salutary outcome from the factorisation process was the recognition of the role and responsibility that an external director has in maintaining staff morale and tackling problem-resolution activities. Further reflection suggested the uncomfortable truth was that the director of the setting should be doing something more.

Continuation of the research became essential to be able to fulfil the needs of both the staff team and research process. The difficulty then emerged of whether the manager's reporting could be taken as an accurate reflection of issues affecting staff morale and whether the senior staff team experience is the same as for other staff or whether senior staff members see things differently to operational staff. As a researcher, an element of vigilance has been introduced as the manager of the setting cannot be deemed to speak on behalf of the experiences of other staff so that any reporting by the manager must be validated through other methods. Another three possibilities to explain the situation are that the manager is in fact aware that there are problems to be addressed but is

- i) choosing not to acknowledge them to herself because it will challenge her self-image as a competent manager or
- ii) choosing not to acknowledge them to the director as it may appear that she is not capable of dealing with things or



- iii) is protecting the director from the discomfort of the complaints out of loyalty in order to maintain the arms-length style.

In the light of these reflections it became clear that everyone's views needed to be taken into account in the knowledge that there is not one collective experience for staff, rather that reporting comes more from individual, personal experiences which may depend on interpretation of job role, levels of experience, expectation of self and of others etc. From an observer position, there appears to be a real mismatch of perceptions between the manager and the senior staff and this seems to echo the findings of the NIESR study (2003) suggesting a need for common understanding of the priorities and responsibilities that go with the various roles.

Another aspect arising out of Activity [8] was to look at comparing how senior staff felt they were performing differed from that of the manager's perception. These were not as significant but interesting all the same.

**(a) Levels of staff enthusiasm** - staff generally agreed that this was a priority (rated 5,2,5,3) although the manager only considered it a priority rating of 2. Most, including the manager, perceived enthusiasm amongst staff to be rated as 3 with one rating of 4

**(r) Equality of opportunity for careers** - staff generally agreed that this was not a high priority (rated 2,2,2,1) but the manager considered it to be a very high priority, rating it 5. Despite this difference, all agreed that the equality of opportunity for career development was there, with all giving a rating of 4 and one at 5.

**(d) Social aspects & friendships** - although mostly considered by all to be a low priority (rated 1,1,2,4,2) the actual experience of staff was that this was worthy of a positive rating of 4 and a 5, with the manager giving this aspect a rating of 3.

Whilst there were some small differences in the prioritising and perceptions amongst the senior staff, there were clearly some significant differences between the senior staff and the manager. As this aspect of the research is considering factors affecting staff morale, one possible view could be that the morale of staff is affected by their (perceived) ability of the manager to meet their expectations. Significantly different ratings could indicate matters to be addressed in a collaborative way. Differing perceptions may also be a reflection on the

differing roles and responsibilities of staff or may reflect levels of personality and optimism. As there was a likelihood of losing good staff, all these possibilities needed addressing.

As a contribution to understanding more about beneficial leadership and management, one suggestion that arises is that if organisational priorities are agreed amongst the team members and then explicitly addressed, this may lead to higher levels of staff satisfaction and a raising of morale. If staff morale can be raised and maintained through a systematic review of priorities leading to a clear Action Planning process, this may ultimately improve staff retention and thereby benefit the children's well-being through consistency and continuity of carers in an emotionally positive environment. Further discussion and consideration is given in Chapter 8.

Exploration of these concerns through the prioritising activity [8] highlighted a key issue: that the priorities of staff working directly with the children are not necessarily the same as the priorities of the manager. Whilst this is most likely due to their different roles and responsibilities it appears to have such a significant impact on morale that it should be recognised and addressed in order to avoid dissatisfaction arising.

Being able to view the nursery operation from the viewpoint of other members of the team is also an issue for staff development and their ability to anticipate progression to higher levels of responsibility. As opportunity for progression is also a factor in staff retention, this aspect could impact on staff motivation. In many careers, the move from being a trainee to having a post with responsibility tends to be age related - younger employees may progress to be supervisors and eventually become managers over time such that older employees hold more senior posts. This is not always the pattern in early years employment as it can be a popular 'return to work' option for mothers without relevant qualifications but with experience of childcare from having their own family. Consequently, quite young staff can have organisational seniority over quite mature employees who are only beginning their training. Also, if the return to work option has been taken up as a part-time job, this is often for the convenience of having flexibility over hours and school holiday periods such that family commitments are understood to remain the employee's priority. The prospect of promotion is not necessarily regarded as motivational and may be viewed with anxiety due to the

expectation of making a greater commitment of time and energy to the setting and the possibility that this could lead to a personal conflict of priorities.

For other members of staff, the prospect of starting a family can introduce an element of delay in seeking promotion. Indeed, the love of working with young children and daily contact with children can motivate the desire to have a family to the extent that staff at all levels of responsibility find that their employment needs are reviewed in parallel to their home lives. If misunderstandings are to be avoided and problems averted, it seems essential for everyone to be aware of the different priorities so that they can work as a team and have a clear grasp of the factors impacting on each other's job satisfaction.

To summarise the analysis of Activity [7] and [8], the findings indicate that there was a range of problems identified by the senior staff team that were affecting staff morale to the point that some staff were considering leaving the setting because they did not feel valued. The senior staff did not wish this to happen as they were committed to their work and it would have a detrimental impact on the care of the children by creating an unstable environment. Rather than tackle the situation head on and risk further destabilisation, they sought a constructive approach that would enhance the operation of the setting.

The request for a meeting with the director became an opportunity to formulate a senior staff focus group for research purposes and this was discussed and agreed with everyone. On reflection it was possible that they may have felt that they had little option to agree to this but as the proposal met everyone's needs this did seem to be a mutually beneficial arrangement. A rational plan was devised that would encourage reflection by the team, action research and organisational development through staff empowerment. The staff were generally concerned not to upset the manager (or the director) of the setting but wished to find a way to address the concerns. The outcome of the activities that followed helped to establish the underlying difficulties such that a targeted approach could be implemented.

The way this factoring process emerged was generated by the circumstances in which the original problem was presented and as such, if further thought had been given to the evidence-gathering tool used, it may well have been the case that creating two separate

tasks would have been preferable rather than placing [A] & [B] on the same sheet of paper. Also, using a different approach to undertaking the tasks would have made analysing the information a simpler task. Another suggested improvement to the methodology used to obtain this information would be to have the return from task [A] first so that the factors could be established in priority using the five levels of highest to lowest order before task [B] asking senior staff to rate their current perception of the setting being studied.

In addition to examining the issues arising in one setting in particular, it was considered helpful to refer to the survey of views of senior staff in a range of other early years settings. This offered some balance to the findings and enabled the data to be generally applicable.

**Research Activity [9]** What are the reasons given by staff leaving the case study setting?

To inform the proposed action planning process, it was considered helpful to gain an idea of why staff resigned or left the main setting. This activity is therefore based on a data analysis of reasons given by staff for leaving the main setting. It is largely reliant on self-declaration by the leaving member of staff during their exit interview with the manager but where additional factors have been known to be true, these have also been taken into account. The data has also been matched to the staff employment records to confirm accuracy.

The employment records indicate that, over the ten year period for which records are available, 105 members of staff were registered as employees at the main setting. It is important to note that this is a relatively large setting and the average employment complement tends to be approximately thirty members of staff at any one time with a combination of full-time, part-time, gap-year trainees and relief staff.

The working hours of the setting are 8.00am to 6.00pm and the majority of staff are women with family responsibilities; the largest cohort of staff are therefore part-time employees. To this data collection date, 33 were still employed so the graph represents information on the 72 ex-employees who left during this period. Other settings may have different employment policies which require standard full-time contracts and these settings are more likely to have

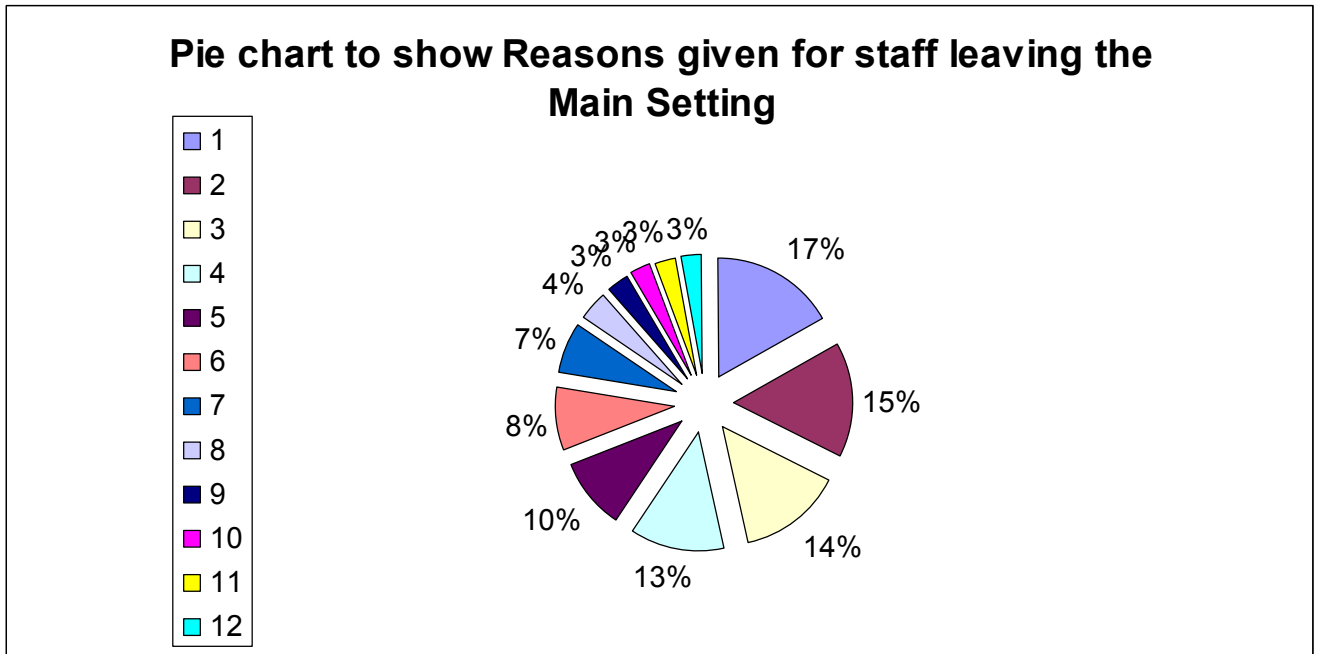
larger numbers of younger employees without family commitments so reasons for leaving may differ.

There is scope here for further analysis of trends over time by segmenting the data into three-year sections to see whether the introduction of the minimum wage has changed the reasons for leaving and also scope in the future to test whether the introduction of the Management Improvement Action Plan has made any difference to the rate or reasons for leaving (perhaps these are further research development opportunities). The box below gives the collated information on reasons given. The chart reference number indicates the colour given on the pie chart in graph 5.1.

**Table 5.3**

Chart ref	Summary of the reason given for staff leaving the setting	frequency
1	Personal/career progression/higher training elsewhere	12
2	Level of pay was not adequate for personal financial commitments	11
3	Employment was planned as a fixed term arrangement i.e. gap year student, or temporary relief staff	10
4	Standard of work by employee did not meet requirements of the setting	9
5	Unqualified/new career - deciding did not wish to continue in childcare	7
6	Moved away from the area due to husband/partner job e.g. RAF	6
7	Personal health reasons e.g. pregnancy	5
8	Part-time staff who wanted/needed more hours than available at the time	4
9	Travel problems arising from distance or the need to work shift hours	2
10	Age retirement	2
11	Unable to continue due to family commitments	2
12	Dismissed due to poor conduct i.e. aggressive attitude, drink related	2
	TOTAL	72

**Graph 5.1**



**Analysis of data**

This is an interesting range of reasons and highlights an important conflict of interest that arises for early years settings in that, providing training and support for career progression is likely to lead to the loss of a valuable staff member. The outcome of this activity was shared with the main setting manager as she had played a helpful role in collating the data.

Following discussion with the manager about the findings, a number of useful points were raised by way of understanding the underlying issues that this raised. Not all the reasons will be explored here but reflection about the main ones does lead to some implications for organisational practices.

The highest reason for leaving is due to the development of individuals who then seek to progress in their careers. The training and development of staff is generally supported by the setting with the intention of the benefits being felt by the children in the same setting through enhanced skills and understanding, leading to internal career progression. There is a cost involved and often some disruption to routines in allowing attendance on updating programmes etc. It can then be disappointing if the setting does not gain the benefit. From the individual member of staff point of view, progression (particularly with higher pay) would

be seen as a triumph and in reality, staff moving on is part of the normal cycle of employment to be recognised. For the children and their parents however, this would represent a significant loss of interpersonal contact so it is important that the timing of any such move would be better scheduled for key points in the year wherever possible in order to avoid disruption.

The second highest reason given is an ongoing concern for employees and employers alike and suggests that an important factor in staff retention is related to pay rates. This can lead to the loss of 'the right kind of people' from the setting (see activity [1] in Chapter 4). In order to maintain the staff stability and morale that is needed for the children's well-being, the quality and scope of the rewards and working environment are vital. The staffing ratios are statutory and the staffing budget represents a large proportion of the running costs of any setting whether it is government or independent provision. There is little scope to provide financial enhancements without subsidies from outside the setting - which is what makes the development of some form of Value Indicators other than money, all the more pressing if good staff members are to consider the balance of rewards and decide to stay.

Reason 3 is an altogether more manageable situation in that the terms of employment are understood and there can be a planned introduction and exit to the setting. Students often undertake their year within the normal school year of September to August which conveniently ties in with the movement of the children in and around and out of the setting. Relief staff members tend not to make such close regular daily contacts with children so play a more supporting role as they move into different areas of the setting. In some cases, staff may be undertaking sessional work on a trial basis to see if they wish to continue and train but then decide against it. In other cases it may be that a parent had offered to help out as relief to cover a specific time period whilst new people were sought.

Reason 4 is a different situation and shows that a number of people began employment and either did not satisfactorily complete their probation period or were encouraged to consider whether early years is an appropriate career route for them. These would perhaps be recognised as not the right kind of people i.e. anyone who lacked the qualities considered to be desirable. The fact that they had started work at all does suggest that they may have

shown promise – after all, anyone entirely unsuitable would not have been employed in the first place. In three cases, these were people that had been placed through government employment schemes with the request to give them a trial period. It is unusual but not unheard of for someone to be asked to leave employment following a review at the end of their six months probation period. If the situation was not developing well and the employee seemed unable to demonstrate improvement despite clarification of their role and team encouragement, it is more likely that the departure would be by mutual agreement.

Reason 6 is different from 5 in that the people may well have been performing in the setting in a satisfactory way but made their own decision to leave even if the manager wished them to stay. For some, it was felt that the reason given may have been a general one rather than a specific one i.e some other factors may have been involved such as not feeling that they fitted into the team or they did not like the early start/late finish shift, the nursery was too large and busy for them, or they realised that they did not enjoy working with the children as much as they thought they would.

The experience of staff at the main setting may be particular to this set of circumstances or may be part of a bigger picture that reflects the experiences of other types of early years settings. It is clear from the results of activity [9] that a combination of personal and organisational factors affect retention. This information is useful as a contribution to understanding the types of intervention that may improve morale and retention.

These main reasons considered above, and the others given in the table, are not unusual in the sector and have been the subject of the large scale research projects identified in the Literature Review. The large NIESR study confirmed that 'Providers reported high turnover rates' and another Key finding was that Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships tended to focus on recruitment

EYDCPs emphasised recruitment with retention treated as a lower priority. This was because of their concerns to meet government targets for new childcare places, but also because of a more limited expertise on retention issues'.

NIESR (2003)



The information gained from activity [9] is valuable as it helps to identify factors that can then become the target for interventions to improve retention and can be considered when drawing up the Management Action Plan.

### **5.3 Management Action Plan**

#### **This action plan was developed to implement changes of organisational practice and management style**

From all the information gathered during the Reconnaissance and Planning Phase it was clear that to ensure a positive emotional climate for the children, changes to organisational practice and management style were needed in the main setting. As part of the qualitative approach taken for this PhD study, a single-cycle Action Research over time was devised and a range of management activities were introduced over a two year period. At the end of the two year period, questionnaires and interviews were used to establish the perceptions of staff in relation to the impact on their work and the contribution that the various items have had on their team morale and individual well-being.

This action plan is introduced to explore whether management style and directorial activities will be perceived by staff members as indications of how well they are valued and whether staff morale can be improved to the benefit of the children. Answers were sought to the question of "Which management activities increase a sense of being valued and appreciated" research activity [14]. These activities are subsequently referred to as Value Indicators (VIs) The following management activities are simply a reflection of possible practical motivational measures that have arisen through informal discussions with the manager and with staff members. Some suggestions were also generated through a full staff team agenda item looking at ways to improve and build on current practice. The rationale for each introduction has been explained using aspects of Maslow's Basic Needs hierarchy as this best seemed to reflect the concept of 'feeling valued' which arose from Research Activity [3]

The objectives of the following Action Plan were

- i) to improve the emotional environment for the children by developing practices that impacted positively on relationships through raising the morale and well-being of the staff and

- ii) to improve the recruitment and retention of good staff in order to achieve objective i).

Through the discussions with the manager and the staff team, it was decided that there were specific areas of practice that needed to be addressed and these are given below:

## **Proposed Actions**

### **Work organisation and staffing structure**

(some aspects were already in place but sharpened up in focus)

- Three teams were formed, each with a team-leader and a deputy so that staff, parents and children work consistently in a smaller 'family' unit within the main setting  
*(Rationale: recognition for roles of senior staff and the meeting of social needs and sense of belonging for all members of the team. The children and their parents would have fewer members of staff to develop meaningful relationship with – seen as beneficial)*
- Children are grouped in a base-room with peers of similar age range and undertake/select activities using resources appropriate for their age. *(Rationale: the provision of base rooms contributes to child and staff sense of security by way of creating a home base/comfort zone; children's social and emotional development needs can be met through age-appropriate play equipment and appropriately presented activities. This contributes to the empowerment of children to choose their play activities, reduces the need for staff to control children and enhances job satisfaction by increasing the length of time for enjoyment of relating to the children)*
- Clear planning arrangements for the curriculum/scheme of play activities with responsibility remaining within each team. *(Rationale: empowerment of staff through clarity of roles and responsibilities with provision of resources & training enabling more people to be aware of how to document the planning in a consistent way across the setting adding to confidence, self-esteem and enhanced status for the those with planning skills)*
- All members of the team employed and paid as staff (not as trainees). *(Rationale: pay rates recognise and value the work undertaken so that no one feels taken advantage of for having a trainee status. This also leads to higher retention of staff as trainee status often reflects a fixed term contract for the duration of the training programme with no guarantee of employment. Anyone needing training is fully employed and paid the going*

*rate for the hours worked giving them equal status and adding to their sense of inclusion. All staff can then be asked to develop skills across the whole range of work tasks in order to maintain variety and add challenge to their role)*

- **All staff allocated specialist roles. Responsibilities and accountabilities clarified.**  
*(Rationale: this contributes to esteem and recognition of status for all staff as they have the scope to develop a specialism that enables their peers to regard as valuable. It can be used to encourage emergent leadership skills through role modelling and appreciation by others for the tasks being undertaken and may lead the person to grow and seek further training. They would also be invited to attend external training in their specialist area e.g. Special Needs co-ordinator, music specialist, responsibility for provision of healthy meals, Health & Safety adviser etc. This approach will contribute to team working and further support the need to belong to a social community)*

## **Management**

- **Collectively contribute to a revised information booklet giving written details of the ethos and educational approach adopted by the setting issued to all staff members and parents using the setting and displayed publicly to demonstrate clarity of purpose.** *(Rationale: if the staff are to feel confident about their roles they should also be clear about the underlying purpose of the setting though induction and refreshing of understanding such that they can work consistently with colleagues, children and parents. This contributes to group identity and a sense of belonging as well as enabling confident role modelling to newer members of staff)*
- **A clear staffing rota with regular sessions/shifts and any changes notified in advance (unless in an emergency).** *(Rationale: a poorly devised or poorly communicated staffing rota contributes to anxiety and unsettles staff personal sense of security which can lead to grumbling and the expression of dissatisfaction, particularly if changes are made that disrupt other personal arrangements that are already established. As far as possible, aiming to retain emergency cover staff within the age groups that they are familiar with to support continuity)*
- **A budget allocated for each team to select new and replacement play equipment according to the needs identified by the team.** *(Rationale: Each family group team will be able to make decisions and choose new or replacement play equipment, this gives a*

*sense of responsibility and empowerment enabling choices to be made that meet their own evaluation of the needs of the group and signals that senior management have confidence in their ability to assess the needs of the group. Through successfully delegated budget management, self-esteem and recognition is fostered, paving the way for the development of skills leading to career progression if desired)*

- **Regular offers to provide training for updating and to assist with promotion prospects.** *(Rationale: staff members own personal need for growth & development and eventual career progression can be encouraged such that the team benefits from the increased range of skills being developed in the setting. Some people will eventually move on to bigger & better responsibilities but this should be regarded as a positive outcome such that junior staff members are supported to grow into the vacancies and contribute to the evolution of the organisation. When colleagues recognise that career progression is possible this has a beneficial effect on their own sense of being valued)*
- **Ongoing staff support provided by the internal review and appraisal process.** *(Rationale: when a respected senior manager takes time to focus on an individual staff development and reviews their performance, this time is regarded by the colleague as providing recognition and value. As long as this experience is constructive and the end result of the discussion is positive, it contributes to staff self-esteem and sense of belonging. To some degree, the systematic appraisal of performance process is a valuable organisational bonding process which should be used to enhance team cohesion. It would also contribute in a small way to supporting individuals in their longer term quest for what Maslow would refer to as 'self-actualisation')*
- **A schedule of staff meetings notified in advance with attendance time at meetings regarded as hours worked and therefore paid.** *(Rationale: meeting together as one whole team helps to overcome the communication difficulties that can arise from the use of a staff rota system with part-time people in on different days and the fact that people are working in separate smaller teams. Ensuring there is a known structure in place for receiving and giving feedback in a group enables issues to be brought into the open as generic challenges such that the team can be involved in understanding each others work and empowered to resolve issues arising. The real issue here is that attendance at team meeting will be regarded as paid time or time in lieu, which ensures a higher level of*

*attendance without complaint and places a value of meeting outside normal working hours rather than an expectation of doing so out of goodwill)*

## **Conditions of employment**

- Involvement of staff in the development of a detailed employment contract resulting in improvements due to listening to requests. *(Rationale: if the whole staff team is offered the opportunity to contribute to a revised staff employment contract and the various suggestions are afforded merit this creates a positive employment relations atmosphere and a sense that people are working for an organisation that values its staff. If the resultant contract details are negotiated such that they largely meet staff and employer needs with each side explaining the background to various requests then a common understanding can be reached that contributes to staff retention as there is no sense of anyone being exploited. Such a process places a responsibility on everyone to behave with integrity and, once agreed, should reduce unhelpful disgruntlement)*
- Annual pay increases that exceed inflation and are above the National Minimum Rate. *(Rationale: if the lowest pay rates are at least marginally above the NMR and all scale points are increased annually by a small amount above inflation, then this contributes to the sense that even junior staff are not being paid 'the minimum' and adds to the status of working for an employer who pays above the minimum rate. If all pay rates rise according to an established pattern then this supports the whole team self-esteem and recognition and avoids the need for staff to request pay rises and reduces any sense of feeling undervalued. This approach will also enhance the local reputation of the setting as an employer that behaves fairly towards its staff members which will contribute to attracting the 'right sort of people' in the future)*
- Increase to 30 days paid annual leave inclusive of Bank Holidays for all staff (or pro-rata) and flexibility over when holidays can be taken. *(Rationale: as this is above the current national allocation it enables staff to favourably compare their contractual commitment with other potential job offers and this should contribute to staff retention as personal holiday needs can be negotiated to fit in with other family commitments. This would also be attractive to other potential staff members)*
- All newly appointed staff to be qualified to at least level 2 or be prepared to undergo training to level 2 within the first year of employment. Gaining of a level 2 qualification is

recognised within the setting as it generates a pay increase. *(Rationale: whilst the minimum national standards only require settings to have 50% or more qualified staff, this introduction ensures that a high value is placed on qualifications and training, so acting as a message to others about working professionally and belonging to an organisation with integrity. Unqualified potential employees would be aware that their personal development will be addressed)*

### **Other various aspects**

- Individual named and signed letters of thanks or annual correspondence issued to all staff in the summer. *(Rationale: use of the personal touch from the director will represent contact from a 'person with status' and give value and recognition to the person as an individual by showing that they are worth the time and that they have been thanked for their efforts)*
- (Small) cash bonus given to everyone as appreciation of goodwill efforts made during a difficult period overcoming externally generated challenges. *(Rationale: the introduction of an occasional cash bonus in recognition of efforts would not be anticipated so its receipt would generate surprise and may be considered a thoughtful gesture – however modest the amount may be (although a small amount may be considered an insult by some if they perceived that it was intended to be a reflection of the amount of goodwill offered. Some caution and explanation may be needed here)*
- Provision of a drinks 'kitty' or payment for meals as a contribution to the staff team Christmas Evening. *(Rationale: encouragement of staff social activity would be given management recognition by such a gesture which would value the social needs of staff by contributing to team bonding processes. Also, this supports the concept that time for the team to look forward to and share emotionally positive experiences helps to overcome some of the stresses that arise in a teamwork environment. It would be seen as recognition over and above that deserved through normal working pay so may contribute to esteem and a sense of value as a person)*
- Director's attendance at some staff meetings in order to take note and action as requested. *(Rationale: rather than leave the manager to exercise total autonomy this introduction would be beneficial in three main ways, i) it would show senior support for the manager in front of the team thus enhancing her authority and allowing for*

*immediate clarification of direction if any difficult issues arise & avoiding the need to return to a subsequent meeting with any responses from the director, ii) it allows the staff team members to meet with and get to know the director better such that conversations during visits to the nursery can be held in context and the director's involvement is increased, iii) it enables the senior staff to see that the director is addressing their concerns by having a closer monitoring role within the nursery operation such that the problems that can arise from the preferred 'arms-length' style are moderated and intervention actions can be initiated earlier if needed. This will avoid the anxiety of a potential deterioration in staff morale if issues are not addressed)*

#### **5.4 Summary**

This set of activities [7], [8] and [9] has formed the major reconnaissance and planning phase of Lewin's (1946) Action Research cycle and as such, has generated a number of valuable outcomes. The experiences of early years practitioners in one setting have been examined and senior members of staff have provided a prioritised list of twenty work-related factors that can have a positive or negative impact on staff motivation and subsequent potentially negative impact on the experiences of the children in the setting. This has led to informed knowledge about the appropriate management actions to be implemented through the Management Action Plan. Another productive outcome has been the evidence of differing perceptions by practitioners about which matters are of greatest concern. The outcome from the priority rating appears to reflect the differing levels of responsibility at the setting - this is valuable as it helps to understand the areas where improved communication would be of benefit. Capturing reasons for good staff leaving the setting has provided helpful as information to update employment practices in a way that will retain experienced staff.

Data gathered during the Planning Phase provided useful information on what early years practitioners mean when they report that they wish to 'feel valued'. The combination of findings from the literature search, the preliminary research activities [1]–[6], and reflective discussions with the manager of the main setting all helped to formulate the interventions given within the Management Action Plan as a way of testing out which particular factors had a greater or lesser impact on staff morale. This Management Action Plan was implemented

over the two year period of the Action Phase and a number of research activities were undertaken in order to monitor progress and assess the effectiveness of the various actions.

A **key outcome** from this phase of the research process is greater knowledge of motivating factors that affect the practitioners' satisfaction of the workplace and have an influence on staff retention. This provides understanding that can be discussed and applied to create practical workplace actions that have the potential to transform the emotional climate of the setting. Alongside the specific interventions arising from analysis of the Reconnaissance of the setting, key information gained from the Preliminary Survey was also incorporated into the *Management Action Plan*.

The use of positive interpersonal responses identified in the Value Indicator suggestions from Activity [3] was encouraged by the manager and by senior staff members so that there was a concerted effort to improve morale and staff stability. The action proposal was then to start with a full survey and assessment of morale levels in the main setting. This is followed by investigations of how relationships with parents and children are fostered as well as an activity to encourage all staff to begin reviewing their practices in the light of the data arising. Subsequently, an 'Impact Assessment' was conducted as research activity [14] during the evaluation & reflection phase of this study and findings presented in Chapter 7.



## Chapter 6

### FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION 3

#### Implementing Actions in the main setting

##### 6.1 Introduction

Following on from the senior staff Focus Group Activities [7] & [8] and using the data from the employment records in activity [9], the Management Action Plan was implemented over time. The objectives of the Action Plan were i) to improve the emotional environment for the children by developing practices that impacted positively on relationships through raising the morale and well-being of the staff and ii) to improve the recruitment and retention of good staff in order to achieve objective i). It was therefore important to establish whether the actions designed to make improvements were having a positive effect or whether the staff concerns identified through the senior staff focus group were continuing unaffected.

##### 6.2 Research Activities [10-13]

10	Which issues affect staff morale at the main setting?	All main setting staff questionnaire
11	How involved are parents of children in main setting?	Questionnaire to 20 parents (during a parents evening)
12	Can staff at the setting recognise the impact of their practices?	Use of 'temperature check' questionnaire in main setting
13	How many adults does a young child form bonds with during a week in an early years setting?	Child tracking diaries in the main study setting

##### **Research activity [10]** Which issues affect staff morale at the Main setting?

The staff morale survey, which was the same format as used in the Preliminary survey for research activity [4], was presented to the team during a staff meeting. This was two years after the Management Action Plan had been initiated.

<b>Table 6.1</b>	Setting	Number of returns (percentage of possible total)
Main setting	Independent Childcare & Education Centre	19 (63%)

A prepared script was read out explaining the processes, inviting responses and assuring anonymity then all members of staff present at the meeting found a quiet place to complete the questionnaire given in Appendix b). Not all staff members were present, but anyone who was there did complete the questionnaire and this gives a representative cross-section of age, experience and qualifications. It would have been helpful for the analysis to know whether individual respondents were senior staff or not, but to ask the question on the survey would have removed some of the scope for non-attributable comment and may have compromised the validity and anonymity of the results. The introductory script is given in Appendix b) to demonstrate how the activity was introduced. No other instructions were given, this was to ensure that there was a clear message and clear instructions which were intended to prevent the need for discussion amongst staff about the task once it was started. No clarifications were sought.

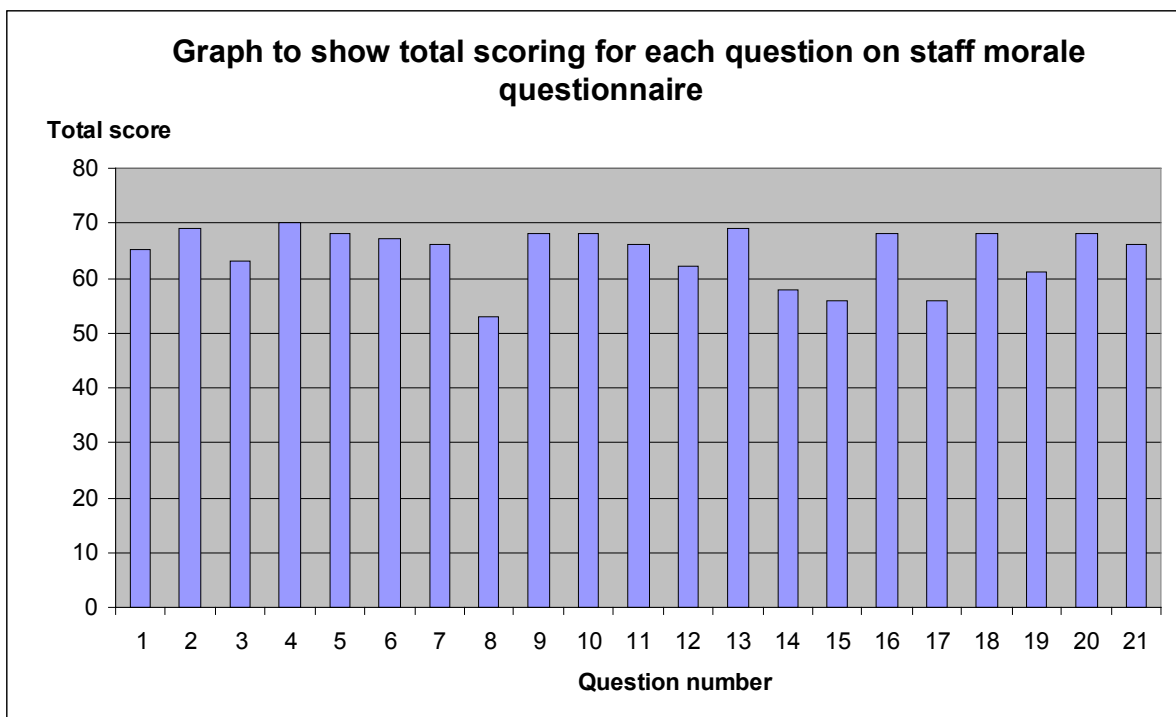
Completing the survey took approximately 30 minutes and all the forms were returned before the staff meeting resumed so that discussion did not take place between completers. At the end of the session, the returns were folded and placed in an envelope which was removed to allow staff to continue with their planned meeting.

Two different simple numerical analyses were undertaken with the same data. The first was to use it to identify collective responses to the questions so that remaining issues of general concern could be identified. The second was to identify the range of individual responses to get an idea of the spread of perceptions amongst staff and thereby generate data on the range of personal morale levels of the staff. For the first graph, the scores were kept as a maximum of 84 as there was nothing to gain from converting them to percentages. The graph below shows the variation in collective responses - a score from 63 to 84 therefore represents the upper quartile.

It is always possible that staff responses to a survey undertaken by a director are given with caution and questions answered in a way that is intended to please the researcher. However, everyone had been assured of anonymity and no responses could be attributed to individuals so no one would gain any personal benefit from answering over enthusiastically.

As the purpose of the activity was to continue to improve the working environment, there would be little for staff to gain from hiding the truth from a person who may be able to implement changes. In fact, the responses covered a range of satisfaction levels and identified some areas of concern and it was concluded this had been undertaken with the honesty requested. Responses from the main setting are given in question order

**Graph 6.1**



**Analysis of data**

Observations on the first graph show that two-thirds of responses are in the upper quartile (63-84) and one-third of responses are between the centre and the upper quartile (42-62). The seven lowest scores are in support of statements 3, 8, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19 and these indicate that further work may need to be done to be done to raise levels of satisfaction. The seven issues are given below in order from the lowest score and the order given represents the level of priority for staff.

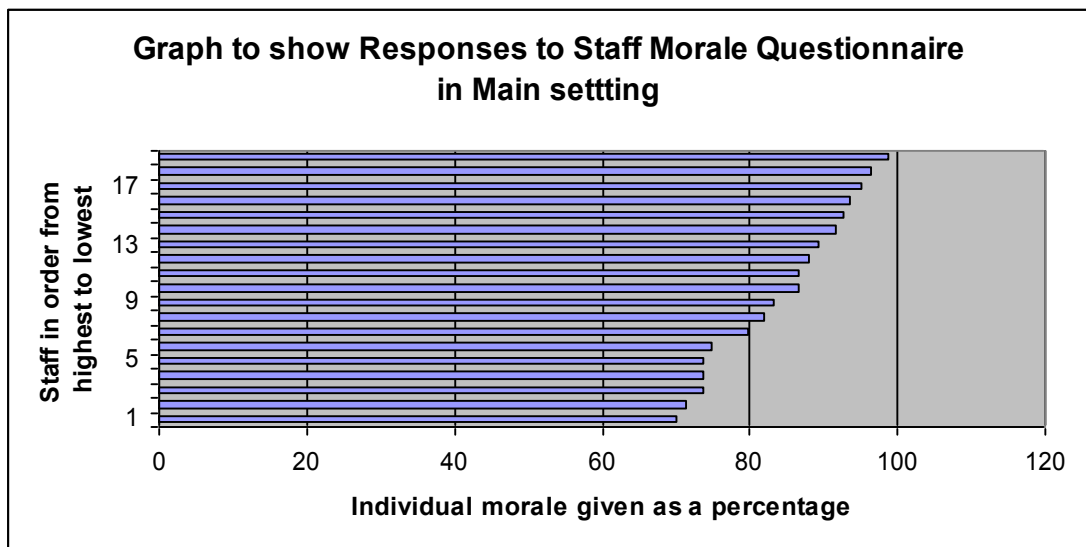
Qu. 8. Pay rates compared to people doing similar jobs in other settings

15. Access to resources and equipment needed to do the job well

- 17. Opportunities to discuss personal progress and job satisfaction during regular appraisals
- 14. Assurance that personal matters will be treated confidentially by the manager
- 19. Holiday allowance not considered to be fair
- 12. Suggestions being listened to and valued
- 3. Interest in attending training and looking forward to learning new things

A summary graph showing the range in order from highest 'morale rating' of 98.8% to lowest of 70.2 % is given below:

**Graph 6.2**



For the second graph, the maximum rating would be a raw score of 84 devised from the rating given by the respondent multiplied by the number of questions (4 x 21), the 19 individual responses were then converted to form a percentage i.e. a maximum score of 84 converts to 100% and the individual ratings have then been plotted in order from highest to lowest. Whether is possible to claim the scores are an actual rating of 'morale' is difficult to conclude but the term is used in a loose way to facilitate the discussion, it is a score reflecting to some degree "the level of individual psychological well-being based on such factors as a sense of purpose and confidence in the future" (Merriam-Webster online dictionary).

One drawback arising from formulating individual scores is that the offer of confidentiality means that there is no way of knowing which members of staff have higher or lower ratings and therefore targeted support cannot be offered as a follow-up activity. This range of questions may be a helpful instrument for use during an individual staff member's performance review and leads to the prospect of using such a survey prior to appraisal then the responses could be used to form a framework for discussion with individuals.

As the twenty-one questions are based on the findings of the earlier Focus Group of senior staff that were looking at issues affecting morale, it seemed reasonable to consider that the staff could relate to the questions presented to them. It had been hoped to have graphs from other settings to compare the main setting findings with as there is not yet any way of knowing whether this outcome is within a range of 'normal' distribution of data or whether it is particularly high or low for the sector. As this is not intended to be part of a quantitative study, the graph can still be very useful for the insights it provides and any subsequent use of the questionnaire in other settings will have some initial benchmarking data to work from.

It can be seen that there is a difference of 28.6 % between the highest and the lowest which suggests differing personal perceptions and possible variations to a sense of job satisfaction. The pattern across this graph is quite evenly spread across the range with no obvious batching of groups having higher or lower levels of morale so it would seem that having different levels of responsibility would not appear to be a factor in generating a high or low morale rating. Much of the general dissatisfaction reported by senior staff members two years earlier does not now seem to be evident although there are still issues to address. The highest and the lowest scores do not suggest that they are significantly above or below the norm for the group so would not unduly influence a statistically average rating for the setting if this were to be calculated.

The comments provided in the script boxes at the end of the questionnaire proved to be particularly helpful in establishing factors that attracted and retained staff in their jobs and gave an indication of motivational issues that could be developed in a continuing strategy of ways to improve leadership and management practices. These comments have more

significance for the underlying theme of this study than a detailed exploration of responses to specific questions and individual scores.

Table 6.2 below is based on responses given to the prioritising exercise at the end of the questionnaire. The statements regarded as the main reasons for being in the job have been allocated values according to the highest reason given (= 5) to the fifth-highest reason (= 1) The number of occurrences for each score has been multiplied by the priority factor at the top of the table and totals have been added for each statement so that a priority ranking can also be given. This table should be read in conjunction with the questionnaire.

Reasons given for being the most important factors for being in the job are given below:

**Table 6.2**

<b>Question number</b>	<b>Rated top priority</b>	<b>Rated 2<sup>nd</sup> priority</b>	<b>Rated 3<sup>rd</sup> priority</b>	<b>Rated 4<sup>th</sup> priority</b>	<b>Rated 5<sup>th</sup> priority</b>	<b>Total score</b>	<b>ranking</b>
	Value = 5	Value = 4	Value = 3	Value = 2	Value = 1		
1	5	1			2	31	<b>2</b>
2		2	1			11	<b>9</b>
3	1	1	1	1	3	17	<b>6</b>
4	2	1	1	2	4	25	<b>3</b>
5	10	5	2			76	<b>1</b>
6				4		8	<b>11</b>
7		1	3		1	14	<b>7</b>
8		2			2	10	<b>10</b>
9		1	3		2	18	<b>5</b>
10			2			6	<b>13</b>
11		1				4	<b>16</b>
12		1				4	<b>16</b>
13			2	3		12	<b>8</b>
14				2		4	<b>18</b>
15			2			6	<b>13</b>
16	1	2	1	3	2	24	<b>4</b>
17						0	<b>21</b>
18				3	2	8	<b>12</b>
19			1			3	<b>19</b>
20		1			1	5	<b>15</b>
21				1		2	<b>20</b>

The most significant statements given in rank order as reasons for being in the job with all additional comments given in italics:

1] (q5) Children are great to work with and I really enjoy spending time with them, playing and having conversations whenever I can.

*"this is why I do the job"*

*"I really enjoy interacting with the children, also, what they give back is priceless"*

*"the children are never the same every day"*

*"spending time with the children is more important than paperwork"*

*"I enjoy working with the children"*

*"I look forward to seeing the children and spending my day with them"*

*"I love talking to all the children and enjoy their company"*

*"I enjoy working with children and their parents"*

*"I care greatly for all the children"*

*"working with children is the most rewarding and special job I have done"*

2] (q1) I really look forward to going to work

*"you have to be happy to enjoy work"*

*"actually enjoying work is important for morale and makes you want to achieve"*

*"important to look forward to work"*

*"doing a job I enjoy is important"*

*"if I didn't enjoy my job, I wouldn't want to do it"*

*"if I didn't enjoy work I wouldn't be happy doing my job"*

*"when I come to work I enjoy working with my colleagues and that makes my job much better"*

3] (q4) I have made some good friendships at work and I like the people I work with

*"it makes for happier work place if you get on"*

*"you have got to be happy in your workplace"*

*"the people I work with support me and each other"*

*"I feel very close to all my work friends"*

*"people are caring and friendly"*

*"it is important to get on with everyone"*

*"a good team"*

4] (q16) I look forward to meeting the parents of the children and talking through their child's experiences with them

*"at the end of the day I feel good in talking to parents and tell them what a good time their child has had in our care"*

*"I enjoy telling the parents about what they (the children) have done"*  
*"it is important to show the parents they can trust you and are happy"*  
*"I would like to be more involved"*  
*"need more confidence in myself (to do this)"*  
*"I enjoy forming a relationship with new families' children"*  
*"I enjoy communicating with parents about their children and meeting new people"*  
*"I enjoy seeing the parent's faces when you describe their child's day"*

5] (q9) I would like to develop my skills so that I can make a successful career in working with children

*"I would like to reach higher levels within the nursery"*  
*"I would like to gain as many qualifications in childcare as possible"*  
*"I would like to finish my NVQ 3"*  
*"I would like to do more training when convenient"*  
*"more varied training options could be offered"*

6] (q3) I enjoy attending training and look forward to learning new things

*"will consider more once finished NVQ 3"*  
*"I like to develop my skills and refresh when possible"*  
*"I am interested in progress to higher levels"*

7] (q7) I am clear about my job role and my responsibilities

*"I enjoy the responsibility of running a room"*  
*"I enjoy my position as it enables me to make a difference"*  
*"get a little confused not knowing which room which day"*  
*"it is good to know what your responsibilities are"*

8] (q13) I like to play an active role in developing the setting and attend all staff meetings

*"I enjoy contributing ideas to make a difference"*  
*"I have many future ideas for developing the setting"*  
*"more appreciation could be shown for the time spent"*

9] (q2) I am highly committed to my work setting and expect to stay for some time



*"I would love to stay here for a long time, because I have commitment and support"*

*"I feel happy enough to say I will be here in at least 5 years time still"*

10] (q10) I am confident in the management abilities of my supervisor. I feel I am treated fairly

*"the management of my supervision are very good because there is good communication"*

Other comments:

*"I find work here fun and enjoyable because of both staff and children"*

*"I enjoy the work atmosphere"*

*"I know people that earn more per hour that do my kind of job, when you work hard I feel we could be rewarded a bit more"*

*"I do enjoy socialising with friends from work"*

*"Don't always have the right craft resources"*

*"this (personal problems treated confidentially) is very important to me and is always available"*

*"this (helping out when needed) is how I feel a good team works"*

*"often asked to take on more responsibility without it being reflected in my pay"*

*"I could not ask for a better place to work and for management to listen"*

*"if someone off sick feel that main staff have to work a lot harder"*

*"I believe that my room staff work well as a team"*

Responses to the invitation to add 'issues that may affect staff retention and morale' brought fewer comments;

*"continuity of standards + treatment of employees with the workplace"*

*"communication, time"*

*"I sometimes get the impression that not all staff are treated the same which causes animosity within the workplace"*

*"I feel that resources in the setting has a large effect on staff morale on my colleagues who wish to do their job well"*

*"conflicting signals sometimes arise – we are told that the children always come first, yet often profits appear to be higher on the agenda. We want to do the job to the best of our abilities but get frustrated when lack of resources/facilities get in the way"*

*"people need to work together as a team and do their fair share of the good and the bad jobs. Everyone feels happier, then it is not always the same people doing all the jobs"*

Some of these additional comments seem to be in contrast to the range of earlier positive statements and suggest a level of unhappiness in a few people. It was this willingness for some staff to report negative opinions that reinforced that view that staff had responded honestly. These negative comments raise the question of whether the individual personal sense of morale and well-being is related exclusively to the experiences within the setting or to what extent they are arising in a person's life outside the setting. The personal lives of the majority of staff members may be very settled and their social relationship may be very supportive which is contributing to their overall positive outlook on life, but this is evidently not the case for everyone.

Also, individual personality types will have varying motivators and will perceive events differently from colleagues so that the effect of new management practices may have different outcomes on the morale of staff. A review of the questionnaire identified that a number of the negative statements were from the same sheet and this raised a dilemma from a researcher/director conflict point of view – whether to make further investigations to see if someone was genuinely unhappy in their work and seek to address any issues (taking a directorial responsibility) or whether to note the matter and simply report on it, leaving the person to their views (researcher viewpoint).

The decision taken was to request a confidential informal meeting with the manager in order to avoid the concern becoming a worry, but as the manager had already been identified as having difficulty maintaining confidentiality this was a risk in itself and could have compromised the promise to staff that the forms would be confidential. A general enquiry to the manager revealed that there was indeed one member of staff who was experiencing a particularly difficult period in her personal life and had made similar comments within the setting. It was agreed that these comments would be omitted from any feedback to the whole group as they would be recognised by some members of the team and could therefore be attributable to the individual concerned. The negative comments have been left in this report as they raise useful information about how financial constraints are communicated to staff such that everyone is encouraged to understand each other's roles and the pressures that arise from differing priorities.

The evidence from this activity highlights the importance to staff of being able to develop relationships with children, with each other and with parents. Practitioners feel they have something personal to give and the satisfaction of being in these developing relationships would appear to be a very strong motivating factor for early years staff. If they should perceive that this personal effort is not recognised or valued by their manager then it is understandable that dissatisfaction could arise.

Another issue raised is the importance of people enjoying what they do. Staff report on experiencing a sense of happiness at belonging to a supportive team and of looking forward to their work. The opportunity for career progression through training and additional responsibility also receives a strong endorsement as a reason for being in the job despite the responses to statement 3 on the survey: '*I enjoy attending training and look forward to learning new things*' placing it on the issues list. The most significant group of negative comments related to experiencing being treated with 'unfairness' in some way and this appears to be destructive to group morale so unfair treatment should be regarded as behaviour to be avoided by all staff.

An outline of these findings was included in the feedback of various aspects of the study which was presented to the staff team in Research Activity [18] in conjunction with feedback from the parent's survey when staff had an opportunity to make some comments.

Building relationships has emerged as a key factor in early years work and from the responses to the morale survey, staff have internalised the view that communicating with parents of the children in their care is a vital part of their role. In order to understand this relationship from the parent's point of view it was considered helpful to undertake a survey of parental experiences. In the same way that early years staff may see their workplace quite differently from the way the manager sees it, it is interesting to report on whether parents see communication with the setting differently to how staff see it. This consideration then led to the following two research activities.

**Research Activity [11]** Parental responses at the main setting to the same questionnaire used in the Preliminary Survey

### Parents Questionnaire

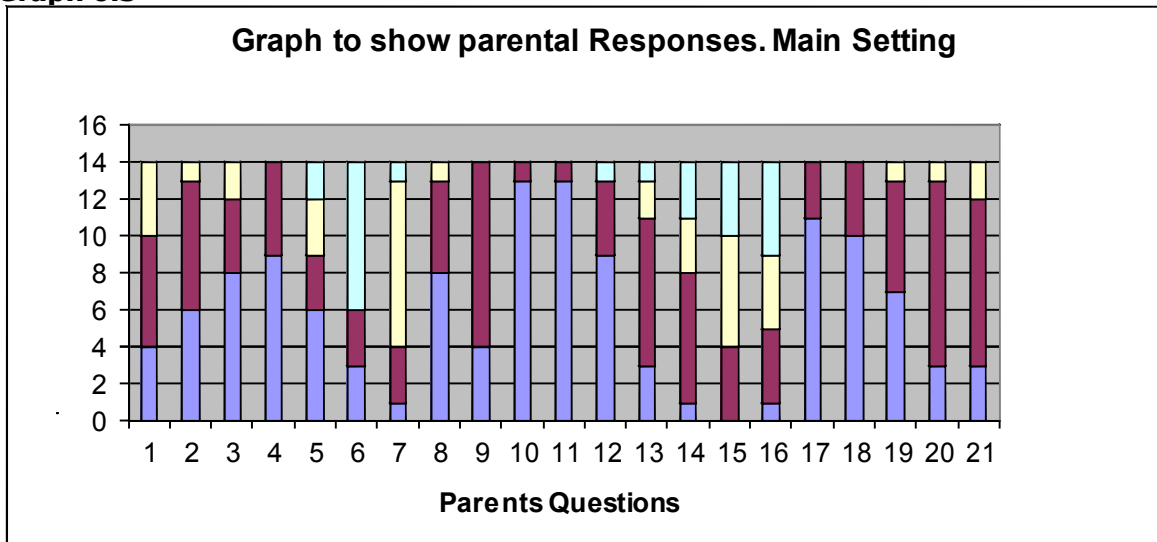
The survey was undertaken during a newly introduced Parents Evening when families were invited to discuss their child’s progress with their Key Worker. The number of returns was disappointing considering there was a good turnout on the day.

**Table 6.3**

	Type of setting	Number of returns (sample)
Main setting	Independent Childcare & Education Centre	14

- Areas shaded blue indicate 'strongly agree' to the statement
- Areas shaded maroon indicate 'agree mostly' to the statement
- Areas shaded cream indicate 'not sure' to the statement
- Areas shaded aqua indicate 'disagree' with the statement

**Graph 6.3**



#### Analysis of data

Looking at the columns with the lowest responses, the same statements 15, 14, 16, 7 & 6 are consistent with those of the other settings in research activity [9] and these indicate that the main setting is not dissimilar in its level of contact and communication with parents over these issues.

However, looking at the parental responses to the same two questions as given in the examples in Activity [5] it is evident that the main setting compares unfavourably with the other settings as far as information to parents 29% (qu.1) and parents meeting with specific staff 43% (qu.2). As a researcher this difference is interesting as such information identifies that organisational practices do not match up to the policies about parental involvement that in place. It also raises questions about how aware the manager is of the implementation of practices at the setting.

This activity provides plenty of opportunity for final feedback to the staff group and proved to be worth exploring with a group of parents during the evaluation phase of the study in activity [19]. In addition to the potential to examine responses to individual questions, the questionnaire also invited comments. This also proved to be very valuable and the majority of useful responses arose from comments relating to questions 17-21. However, the number of returns was quite limited in relation to the high number of families that use the setting and other ways of capturing the views of parents would need to be sought.

The comments given below all relate to the main setting and are given to questions 17-21 note: all comments made have been included with none selected out, in order to give a balanced view. The comments do not seem to reflect any major underlying problems that there might be after consideration of comparing the responses to the questions with other settings. Indeed, the comments from parents are generally very positive.

**Table 6.4**

	questionnaire	comments
17	I find the appearance of the setting is very welcoming and I am happy to send my child there	<b>Give examples:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Everyone is happy and makes you very welcome</i></li> <li>• <i>Friendly staff, 'homely' setting</i></li> <li>• <i>Bright &amp; cheerful and clean</i></li> <li>• <i>Organised, colourful, happy friendly, nice staff/carers</i></li> <li>• <i>She is so happy, so I am happy</i></li> </ul>
18	I find the members of staff are approachable and I am happy to talk to them about anything	<b>Give examples:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If I need advice on my child they will help as best they can</i></li> <li>• <i>Very approachable, normally someone available to talk</i></li> <li>• <i>All are approachable and friendly</i></li> </ul>
19	My child undertakes activities that meet his/her needs at the setting and is always happy to go there	<b>How can you tell ?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Very happy to attend</i></li> <li>• <i>He comes home very happy and singing</i></li> <li>• <i>Nearly always happy to attend – 'second home'</i></li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>She is happy to be left there</i></li> <li>• <i>She loves it + was asking all half-term when she could go again</i></li> <li>• <i>Talks about his time at nursery</i></li> <li>• <i>Notice board</i></li> <li>• <i>She is happy and settled, looks forward to returning. Happy and enthusiastic at end of session</i></li> <li>• <i>Doesn't always want to leave</i></li> </ul>
20	I know all about the activities that my child undertakes during their time at the setting	<p><b>How do you know ?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Written report each visit</i></li> <li>• <i>I am told this when I pick him up</i></li> <li>• <i>Verbally from carers and from my child</i></li> <li>• <i>Told, or letter sent home</i></li> <li>• <i>She (child) tells me lots but probably not everything</i></li> <li>• <i>She (child) tells me or staff tell me</i></li> <li>• <i>See new games, hear new songs, discuss with carers etc.</i></li> </ul>
21	I feel as if the setting considers me to be the 'expert' on my child and I find that staff respect my views	<p><b>Explain further:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>They do what is asked by myself</i></li> <li>• <i>Carers will always listen to me if I explain how I deal with situations</i></li> <li>• <i>I would not say that this has really been discussed. The carers know that I know my child best</i></li> </ul>

**Table 6.5 Parental responses to supplementary section**

aspect	Please add further suggestions that would improve 'Working in Partnership' between home and setting
Methods of communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Would like e-mail contact</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Newsletter could be more visual</i></li> <li>▪ <i>A website would be fab!!</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Monthly fact/update sheet</i></li> <li>▪ <i>I feel communication is good, I have direct contact with the people who look after my child and that's as good as it needs to be</i></li> </ul>
Information sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Would like e-mail</i></li> <li>▪ <i>As long as the carers talk to the parents, information can be shared well</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Noticeboard could be opened up so you could leave messages, party invites etc. for kids (noticeboard on the web-site ?)</i></li> </ul>
Parental involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Would like monthly session to work with staff and child</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Nice to be encouraged but not forced</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Would like a chance for parents to attend a session</i></li> </ul>
Children's progress and welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Would like quarterly meeting</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Illnesses (contagious) should be on memos to each parent/carer, not on doors that people miss when in a hurry</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Communication (i.e. talking directly) to parents about their child's welfare/progress is key</i></li> <li>▪ <i>A mini 'school-report' (nothing too serious – more fun) would be nice and also a nice keepsake for parents</i></li> <li>▪ <i>An Open Evening termly would be preferable to annually</i></li> </ul>
Relationships with staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Would like meetings to meet trainees, new staff – but we could be informed via fact sheet</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Parents evenings are good for getting to know staff without the distraction of children</i></li> </ul>

Any general comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Overall, we are very happy with this setting</i></li> <li>▪ <i>An open setting where people can talk seems to me to be the best way to learn how things are going</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Daily report on 0-2 room <u>very</u> useful – a simplified version of this for 2-3 room would be good as at that age the child is too young to report back on, for example, if they have had a sleep, how well they have eaten their food</i></li> <li>▪ <i>I have found my child is more happier since being at nursery</i></li> <li>▪ <i>I am generally very pleased with the care provided. Suggested improvements would be smaller groups of children and healthier lunches &amp; snacks (more variety)</i></li> </ul>
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The responses to the supplementary section provided practical suggestions that were later explored briefly with the staff team in activity [18] and later used to formulate a proposal for further management and staff Action Planning as an outcome of the whole study and as a demonstration of empowerment of the team to reach conclusions about the way forward. The use of surveys and the suggestions raised through them also demonstrates empowerment of families by providing a valuable opportunity to involve parents more in the way the setting develops. This development also led to the prospect of staff devising and implementing their own parental questionnaire and discussions in Activity [20]

**Research Activity [12]** Can staff at a setting recognise the impact of their practices?  
*(use of the well-being 'temperature check' in main setting)*

The intention for this activity had been to follow on from the previous set of observations which had been undertaken across a range of settings as part of the Preliminary survey. From the charts 4.1 to 4.9 collated from the observation tasks in Activity [6] it was clear that practices varied across the range of settings with some appearing to provide very positive emotional climates and others less positive. The task for activity [12] was to administer a questionnaire requiring every willing and able member of staff in the main setting to undertake observations of the children, observations of themselves as a team, and observations of the manager in a more systematic way. To aid feedback discussions, the model of a thermometer has been created. The returns were then collated and used to form a particular type of graph showing the results in colour bands. This will be referred to as a *polychromagraph* and is being used to indicate whether the emotional climate of the setting could be regarded using six categories as cold, cool, ambient, warming, over warm, or uncomfortably hot described in the Emotional climate 'thermometer' in Diagram 6.1 below.

**Diagram 6.1 Emotional climate 'Thermometer' version 1**

Emotional climate provided by adults:	Possible child behaviours (not exclusive)
<p><b>Uncomfortably hot,</b> <i>(stressful/harmful)</i> High pressure to conform &amp; achieve over-fussing about detail</p>	<p>Quiet and restrained Possibly anxious and approval -seeking Very formal when addressing staff Low self-confidence, not spontaneous Unwilling to undertake messy activities</p>
<p><b>Over warm,</b> <i>(discomfort/anxiety)</i> Some pressure 'work' important little free play as more adult directed activity</p>	<p>Generally shows conformist behaviour Questions or doubts own abilities Keen to be noticed and praised Knows 'the rules' about putting things away Attempts to control younger/other children</p>
<p><b>Pleasantly warm,</b> <i>(challenging/excited)</i> stimulating, active feeling positive stable, boundaries known</p>	<p>Co-operates with adult initiated activities Concentrates on activities well &amp; for some time Shows motivation to achieve outcomes Has a positive attitude to new tasks Willing to help younger/other children</p>
<p><b>Ambient</b> <i>(comfortable/satisfying)</i> relaxed, free choice, undemanding, stable, boundaries known</p>	<p>Moving freely, choosing own activities Growing in self-confidence, expressing self Caring towards others Relating well to most adults Generally appearing settled and happy</p>
<p><b>Cool,</b> some contact, <i>(toleration/boredom)</i> adequate care but un-stimulating, boundaries unclear</p>	<p>Exploring where not supposed to Superficial repetition of activities Low level of 'engagement', short attention span Begins activities if encouraged by an adult Spasmodic arguments with others</p>
<p><b>Cold,</b> <i>(neglect/harmful)</i> little contact with adults, neglecting, unconcerned, boundaries non-existent</p>	<p>Very short concentration span/restless Little evidence of developing social skills Destructive, aggressive and uncooperative Passive, institutionalised Unhappy, demanding attention</p>

This approach is being presented as a pilot of a proposed model in order to help in the later discussion looking at children's emotional well-being in relation to the quality of relationships experienced in the setting. It is not intended to be a scientific analysis but simply a way of discussing the findings. The descriptions of child behaviours against each colour aspect has



been developed and interpreted for this task through discussion with the student Focus Group following the earlier observation exercises in Activity [6], and through use of the information gained during a review of the literature in Chapter 3, and also with regard to the work of Laevers (2005) that the students had been studying.

Each colour is used to represent the degree to which the environment feels happy and welcoming to the child, and also indicates the way the activities are managed by the staff. The implication of this approach is that there is a correlation between the environment and the child such that some environments are more beneficial and generate more favourable outcomes in terms of behaviour and development.

The related questionnaire, given in Appendix f), draws on a wide range of behaviours and places judgement on whether these are desirable or not within the setting. The order of the statements is given in the same order as the 'thermometer' to make collation of the results easier. Each section of five items is used to represent a colour band. Discussion on this approach is given at the end of the analysis.

#### Analysis of data

Staff members at the main setting were advised that this survey would be undertaken as part of the wider brief about the research during the introduction to Activity [7]. They completed it individually in their own time during the week specified. As this was an unsupervised questionnaire it is not possible to be entirely sure that there was not some collaboration. There is a suggestion (made privately) that in a few cases, staff felt under pressure by the manager to complete and return the questionnaire in a short time. As the forms were confidentially returned it is not possible to know which ones these were but this could have a compromising effect if the members of staff did not think about the statements sufficiently.

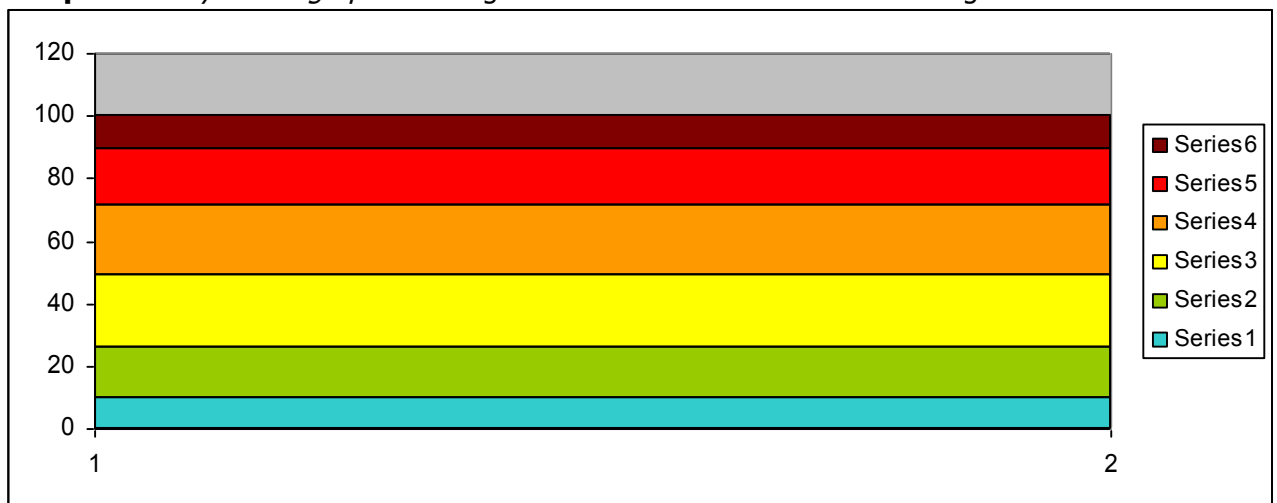
The statements were intentionally unexplained and the order of the questions did not provide an instant clue about potential answers to the task. Some staff began to tick the first section as if the initial items were assumed to be desirable then amended the questionnaire when they had completed more of the questions and presumably saw a pattern emerging. This

led to the prospect of presenting the questions in random order if the survey was to be used again. This tool did not have the benefit of being piloted and, on reflection, was a lesson learned. The language used may also have been more readily understood by staff who had been trained such that the scope of the survey may have been harder for some than for others.

The questionnaire produced some very interesting findings but, as yet, the method of converting the findings to a meaningful graph is still to be improved.

Below is an indication of the overall effect showing that much of the activity in the nursery is judged by staff to be within the yellow 'comfortable' & orange 'stimulating' zones with some aspects of 'cool' and others of 'too hot'. This may be a good reflection of the emotional climate in the setting or it may related to the nature of the questions asked or the order they were asked in and, as a research tool, this will need further work. Using the model above, the most beneficial emotional climate would be represented by having the majority of the chart showing yellow and orange with similar amounts of each colour. 'Cold' and 'Uncomfortably hot' are considered undesirable emotional climates for child benefit.

**Graph 6.4** *Polychromagraph* resulting from observations in the main setting



Version 2 of the Emotional climate Thermometer grid was subsequently developed to include possible manager behaviours and is given within the recommendation of Chapter 9.

**Research activity [13]** How many adults does a young child form bonds with during a week in an early years setting?

The purpose of this activity was to investigate the number and nature of the interactions between adults and children in the setting. The result of this type of activity will vary according to the size of the setting and staffing rotas as well as the staff turn-over rate. This was only undertaken in the main setting. Instructions were produced and the activity explained then the diaries collated at the end of the week. Details of the instructions and diary sheets are given in appendix (d)

Findings:

Five children were selected for tracking based on availability during the specified week in August

**Simmion** (dob: 26.2.04) who was 2½ years: tracked over 5 days in the 2-3 room

**Fernley** (dob: 29.9.04) who was 1 year 10½ months: tracked over 5 days in the baby room

**Mahmood** (dob: 24.3.04) who was 2 years 5 months: tracked over 5 days in the 2-3 room

**Katrina** (dob: 30.9.03) who was 2 years 10 months: tracked over 2 days in the 2-3 room

**Jacob** (dob: 9.10.04) who was 1 year 10 months: tracked for 1 day in the baby room

The charts show the main members of staff that interact with each child during the day.

**Simmion** (total 10 different members of staff)

**Tables 6.6** Child tracking sheets

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
morning				
Gail Lorraine Jenny Anna	Gail Anna Lorraine Michelle	Gail Elaine Jenny Lorraine	Jenny Gail Lorraine Anna	Gail Anna Lorraine Effrin
afternoon				
Linda Anna Gail Jenny	George Linda Anna Michelle Gail Anna Lorraine	Lorraine Elaine Jenny	Linda Gail Anna	Gail Anna Denise

**Fernley** (total 12 different members of staff)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Laura Helen Elaine Delphine Linda	Jill Delphine Robert Denise	Laura Helen	Laura Helen Delphine	Jill Delphine Denise Robert
Laura Helen Delphine Gail	Jill Effrin Robert	Laura Helen Lorraine Michelle Delphine Parent of other	Linda Helen Delphine Laura Effrin	Jill Gail Denise

**Mahmood** (total 9 different members of staff)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Elaine Gail Melanie Anna Lorraine	Lorraine Elaine Gail Jenny	Gail Elaine Anna Jenny	Gail Lorraine Jenny	Effrin Lorraine
Lorraine Melanie Anna	Anna Linda Elaine Jenny	Selina Elaine Gail Lorraine Jenny Melanie	Jenny Linda Lorraine Gail Anna	Gail Anna

**Katrina** (total 9 different members of staff)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Lorraine Jenny Elaine	Gail Lorraine Anna			
Selina Elaine Jenny Lorraine Delphine Melanie	Linda Jenny Delphine Visitor Anna Gail			

**Jacob** (total 4 different members of staff – one day)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
		Laura Helen		
		Laura Helen Lorraine Melanie Grandparent		

Analysis of data

When the diary sheets were collated and analysed it became clear that some form of sorting would help with understanding the information about types of contact. It was decided to sort the responses into three main categories of behaviour according to whether interactions between staff and children were to i) to undertake **care tasks**, ii) provide **activities** or iii) be of a mainly **social**/interpersonal nature.

Examples of interactions with the children above as recorded by staff during the week 14-18 August – this is a collective record rather than by individual children. This collation helps to illustrate the types of activity that regularly take place in an early years setting. Guidance was provided to staff members in the instruction sheet (see Appendix h) but the range of comments recorded underpins the extent of interpersonal interaction that take place.

**Table 6.7** Collation of child care tasks, activities and social behaviour

Care tasks	Activities	Social
Wiping nose Put lunchbox in the fridge Providing drink and snack Changing nappy Providing lunch and supervising independent eating Clearing away Accompany to cot Settle to sleep	Talking about what can be seen out of the window Playing with building blocks Tidying up toys Singing songs & clapping together Painting in craft room Talking whilst playing with toys Reading a story/looking at	Greeting on arrival Saying goodbye to parent Greeting other babies on arrival Addressing behaviour Smiling at and listening to Waving and smiling at others Having a cuddle Asks to be taken to the toilet Handing over to parent

<p>Regular checking whilst asleep  Remove from cot &amp; cuddle  Comfort child when upset  Taking to the toilet  Help with washing hands  Asking for a tissue  Asking for a drink of water  Getting ready for outdoor play – help with shoes and coat  Help to get lid of yoghurt  Mopping up spilt drink  Hanging coats up on hooks  Cleaning face  Providing comforters i.e locate and give dummy  Setting table for lunch  Change of clothes  Provide reward for successful use of the potty  Provide help with turning the taps on/off</p>	<p>pictures  Listening to story in a group  Outdoor play  Play with a puzzle and asking for help with it  Asking to play on bike  Brings toys to show staff  Dancing with staff  Conversation with others at the sand tray  Decorating biscuits  Playing a fishing game to test colour recognition  Role playing - mopping floor  Playing on music keyboard  Setting imaginary scene with toy cars  Looking at photographs  Kicking ball in the garden  On the climbing frame  Building the train track  Help onto slide  Using the computer  Playing football  Helping with dressing up clothes  Threading activity  Peek-a-boo from behind a chair  Painting activity, getting very messy  Drawing activity  Sitting up at the table  Naming other children around the room  Sitting on the sofa talking  Role playing: the hairdresser's  Role playing: mummies  Playing with dolls  Playing 'catch'  Watching the maintenance man doing repair jobs  Glueing activity  Running around giggling  Playing with the camera</p>	<p>Saying goodbye  Laughing together  Chatting &amp; giggling  Asking for juice &amp; other from lunchbox  Asks to go on the computer  Ask adult to sit with her  Showing pictures to staff  Showing her birthday cake  Asked if she looked pretty in dressing-up clothes  Showed damaged toy to staff  Said 'hello' to visitor  Talked about the rain and said did not like the thunder  Copying older child in the toilet and telling staff about it  Holding hands and chatting  Crying and approached staff  Said a child had hit him  Pretending to be a monster and showing staff  Standing on staff foot  Showing staff insect found outside  Asked for brother –cuddle brother  Showed sunglasses to staff  Smiled at staff  Arguing  Frowned at staff when being 'corrected'  Staff stroking head until child asleep  Greets mum excitedly  Showing rocket toy and telling staff about it  Rocking to sleep  Child answering adult questions  Observing other children  Role modelling good behaviour at the table – 'please' &amp; 'thank you'  Encourage to help with tidying up  Sit with child and talk about food</p>
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		Encourage independent use of a spoon Pull faces, laugh and wave Affectionate behaviour towards others Ask staff to draw lots of pictures Telling staff about other child's behaviour (rough play) Showing staff new cardigan Ask staff to keep picture safe
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For context:- All staff members have undergone early years training to level 2 or 3 and have been inducted into the working philosophy of the setting and during this week, no students were present on work experience and therefore untrained staff members did not contribute to this activity.

These notes, although brief, demonstrate the richness of interactions and interpersonal behaviours taking place during a typical day at the setting. All these activities and interactions can be affected by the frame of mind that a child is in, and by the interpretation of job role and responsibilities exhibited by the members of staff. The overarching ethos and emotional climate of the setting will therefore impact on staff well-being and morale such that the social aspects are most likely to suffer in a cold emotional climate.

### 6.3 Summary

This selection of activities has contributed to what Lewin (1946) refers to as the 'take first action' step of the action research cycle and includes the first part of the 'evaluation' stage in that some outcomes from the Management Action Plan have been considered. It can be seen from the wide range of activities undertaken that all care tasks, all activities and all social contact in the setting have the potential to provide opportunities for positive and negative emotional experiences for the children and for staff. Quite how sensitive each response is will depend on the personal qualities of the individual member of staff in conjunction with the overall ethos and emotional climate of the setting.

From the Literature Review it was clear that all interactions will lead the child to form opinions of themselves and of others which will contribute to their self-esteem and well-being and contribute to the formation of their 'life script' (Berne 1961, 1964). The adult behaviour is therefore a critical factor in the day to day business of nursery provision from an interpersonal perspective as well as from the perspective of the cognitive development of the child. Staff morale, staff perception of the purpose of the setting, management practices, and staff turn-over all require close analysis if a consistently positive emotional climate is to be maintained. This activity and the implications of data from it highlight the absolute importance of staff having training in child development and in developing positive interpersonal skills so that they remain focused on interpersonal interactions rather than simply focus on performing care tasks and getting jobs done.

A **Key outcome** for this phase is the work and discussions relating to the '*emotional climate thermometer*' which proved to be particularly productive as well as being a practical visual representation that used accessible language for early years practitioners. This led to a desire to develop the model further for more generic use. Version 2 of the chart is given in the recommendations.

The details of the Management Action Plan were drawn from analysis of the data arising from the earlier reconnaissance research within the context survey and main setting. The resultant actions have been implemented and it is evident from the staff comments above that the team has engaged with the research process in an enthusiastic way. This is a particularly significant step in this study as the involvement of the team in the research processes conferred value on them as practitioners. The findings demonstrate that application of the changes can successfully bring about a cultural shift that impacts positively on the emotional climate of the setting. Further evaluation and reflective work has been carried out to bring the action research process to a close and then findings are given and discussed in Chapter 7.



## Chapter 7

### FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION 4

#### Evaluation and Reflection

##### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the final set of activities and is focused on research activities after the implementation of the main management actions. The presentation and discussion of findings is given here in three sections. The first section focuses on further fact-finding tasks to identify the extent to which the actions have had an effect on the emotional climate of the setting. After a full staff impact questionnaire, this aspect is explored mainly through interviews with three of the senior staff members who contributed to the original analysis of the difficulties in the setting. The second section is focused on activities that help to move the practitioners forward with new confidence based on their involvement in the research and a growing contribution to the development of the setting. The final section concludes the study with a reflective interview with the manager following an open discussion about all the findings and some personal reflections about the action research process.

##### 7.2 Research activities [14-17]

Research activities relating to the main setting of the study are given here for reference.

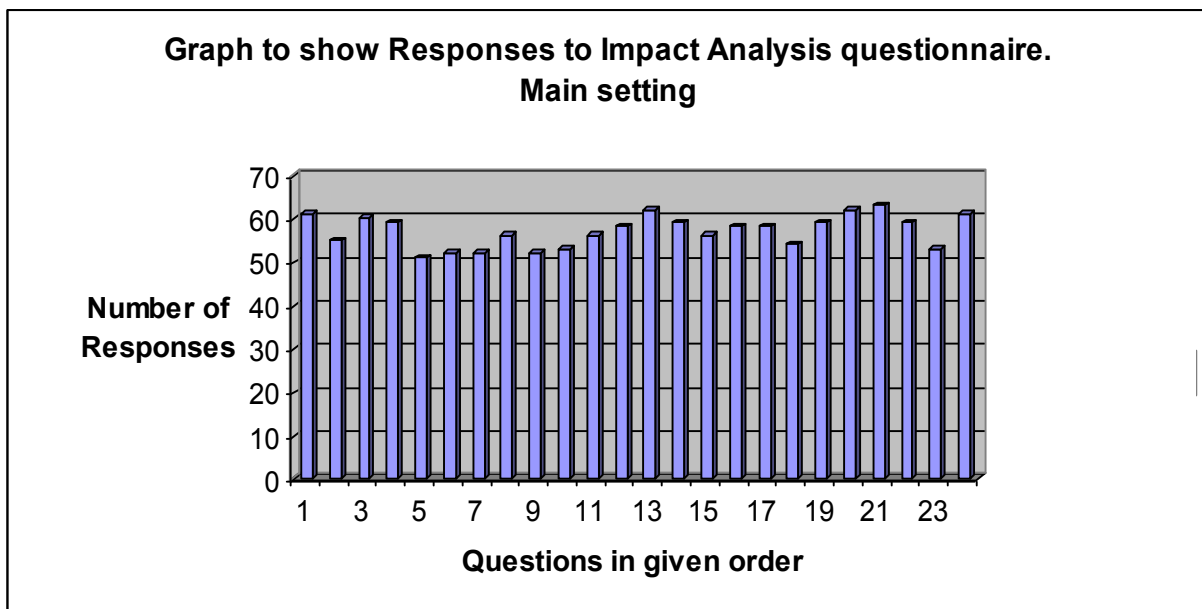
14	Which management actions increase the sense of being valued and appreciated?	Impact analysis Questionnaire with main study staff
15	In the light of feedback from the research so far, what does the manager now consider to be the purpose of an early years setting?	Interview with the manager of the main setting
16	In the light of feedback from the research so far, how can the staff team and setting manager work well together?	Interview with a senior supervisor continuing at the main setting
17	In the light of feedback from the research so far, what factors may impact on a staff member's decision to remain or leave an early years setting?	Interview with a senior supervisor at the main setting following her resignation

**Research Activity [14]** Which management activities increase the sense of being valued and appreciated?

The questions for this feedback questionnaire are based on specific management interventions implemented over the period of this study as detailed after activity [9]. As well as identifying the issues earlier in the research process, it was considered important for this study to find out to what extent the various actions were perceived to be effective as Value Indicators and whether some had a longer lasting effect than others. In order to gather this data, a follow-up staff feedback was sought during a different week but the same month as Activity [12]. The questionnaire was completed by staff in their own time, placed anonymously in an envelope and collected at the end of the week for data analysis. Each question could be scored from 4-1 then the scores for each of the 16 questionnaires returned were added to give a total out of 64. The items with the highest scores therefore represented the issues that staff considered to have the most effect on their morale. The questionnaire format is given in Appendix i).

Staff Responses to the questionnaire about issues affecting morale and staff retention (Impact Analysis) The results were calculated and graph 7.1 was created:

**Graph 7.1**



The results organised with order of priority given below:

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Qu.</b>		<b>score</b>
<b>1</b>	21	Operating in a new, purpose built building designed to match the way the nursery operates with easy access to the garden	63
<b>2=</b>	13	Annual pay increases that exceed inflation and are above the National minimum rate	62
<b>2=</b>	20	Development of a group identity by provision of a personal polo shirt with the nursery logo for every member of staff	62
<b>4=</b>	1	Clear team structure with experienced room supervisors, deputies and assistants	61
<b>4=</b>	24	Being part of an organisation whose childcare practices are respected in the local community and by external professionals	61
<b>6</b>	3	Clear planning arrangements for curriculum/scheme of play meeting Birth to Three or Foundation Stage	60
<b>7=</b>	4	All members of the team employed and paid as staff (not volunteer or other)	59
<b>7=</b>	14	Increase to 30 days paid leave for all staff, and flexibility over when holiday can be taken if planned in advance	59
<b>7=</b>	19	On some occasions, director's attendance at full staff meetings when available to hear views/issues of the team	59
<b>7=</b>	22	A consultative management style that seeks feedback from staff members on issues that will affect them or the way they work	59
<b>11</b>	12	Consultation on the development of a detailed employment contract resulting in improvements – all views considered	58
<b>11=</b>	16	Individual named and signed letter of thanks from director given to all staff in the summer	58
<b>11=</b>	17	Small cash bonus given as appreciation of efforts made during a difficult period	58
<b>14=</b>	15	A well-qualified team – all new staff to be qualified to level 2 or to commence training within the first year of employment	56
<b>14=</b>	11	A schedule of staff meetings notified in advance with attendance time recorded as hours worked	56
<b>14=</b>	8	A budget allocated when available, for staff to select new and replacement play equipment as identified by the team	56
<b>17</b>	2	Children grouped in ages in order to offer provision using appropriate resources	55
<b>18</b>	18	Provision of a drinks 'kitty' as a contribution to the staff team Christmas evening	54
<b>19</b>	23	Being linked by situation and association with the college and having responsibility to support the experience of childcare trainees	53
<b>19=</b>	10	Ongoing staff support through internal review and appraisal process with feedback & support on progress and improvement	53
<b>21=</b>	6	Revised nursery booklet issued to all staff – giving details of the aims of the setting, ethos and educational approach	52
<b>21=</b>	7	A clear staff rota with regular sessions and any changes notified in advance (wherever possible)	52
<b>21=</b>	9	Frequent offers to provide training and updating to assist with promotion prospects	52
<b>24</b>	5	All staff allocated specialist roles with responsibilities and accountabilities clear	51

## Analysis of data

All the items scored high, with quite a narrow range between the highest of 63 and the lowest of 51 with none of the items rated as having no effect. The most effective Value Indicators relate to the quality of the working environment, pay rates, professional recognition through provision of a uniform to demonstrate corporate image, and clarity over arrangements for line management support and responsibilities. The least effective Value Indicators, though still scoring high, are those that require more input from staff to take responsibility for development of their own skills and understanding. The conclusion from this activity is that all these things are important to staff, and the items where staff feel that the organisation is giving something to them in addition to pay, do help with feeling appreciated. This holds true even if what is being given is recognition through a status or an opportunity i.e. for personal development, rather than a more tangible indicator such as money.

The objectives of the Management Action Plan were twofold

- i) to improve the emotional environment for the children by developing practices that impacted positively on relationships by raising morale and well-being of staff and
- ii) to improve the recruitment and retention of good staff in order to achieve objective i)

The responses given to statements in the impact assessment go some way to indicate that the first objective has been achieved in so far as the staff morale and well-being has been raised. A further discussion with staff would be needed to detect whether this has had the desired effect on the environment for the children. What had been reported over the same period are an increase in the numbers of children attending and an increase in the number of sessions per child requested by parents. Exact reasons for this growth have not been investigated, but one factor reported independently by a senior member of staff is that "parents can detect an increased confidence in the staff and they say that the children are very happy at the nursery".

Establishing whether objective ii) has been met required further employment data on appointment and retention since the previous analysis of data. Of the 33 staff in employment at the time of the previous analysis, 25 remain to this date three years later. One senior member of staff left during this period for personal career development and her reasons for leaving are given in the interview as activity [17]. The number of resignations and appointments have reduced over the three year period since Activity [9] with the same types of reasons provided as before for any other staff leaving, though there have been no more dismissals. One interesting and very positive indicator during this period is that the manager reported a notable increase in the number of speculative enquiry letters and C.V.s of people at all qualification levels who expressed a wish to be employed at the setting in the event of a vacancy arising. Whether this is now the norm in the sector or not is difficult to interpret but it suggests that the setting offers favourable employment practices and working conditions. No further representations have been made to the director by senior staff and it the general increased focus on staff well-being has improved communication and understanding amongst the team.

**Research Activity [15]** In the light of feedback from the research so far, what does the manager now consider to be the purpose of an early years setting?

This activity was carried out through a semi-structured interview with the manager of the Main Setting

As the main purpose of this interview was to provide qualitative data for research purposes on the views of the manager, 10 questions were proposed beforehand. Without questions the interviewer and interviewee would be at risk of being distracted by issues being raised such that this would lead to a work related discussion rather than a research one. The questions were then kept to despite some opportunities to explore other areas. Permission to report on the findings was given and the interview was checked and amended prior to its inclusion. The questions were open-ended and devised using information arising from the literature search and as a way of reflecting issues arising from the earlier research activities. It was hoped that they would elicit evidence of knowledge and understanding as well as provide a fuller picture of the working culture of the main setting. The responses were captured at the time using a laptop computer and shown to the manager for agreement or

amending so that she could be certain that what she wanted to say had been recorded accurately. Any minor grammatical errors have been left in the report to represent the fact that this was a conversation rather than a report.

All responses are therefore in the managers own words and are given in full in Appendix j)

### **Table 7.1 Manager interview questions**

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1 What do you feel an early years setting is for?</li><li>2 From your experience in early years, which 5 things are most likely to have a negative impact on the quality of care and learning of the children?</li><li>3 What qualities and characteristics do you look for when seeking a new member of staff?</li><li>4 What happens during the new staff probationary period?</li><li>5 In what ways, if any, do you feel that staff morale affects the children in your care?</li><li>6 In what ways, if any, do you feel that staff morale affects the parents of the children in your care?</li><li>7 In what ways, if any, do you feel that your personal morale affects the staff in the setting?</li><li>8 How do you detect if staff morale is high?</li><li>9 How do you detect if staff morale is low, and what, if anything, could/would you do about it?</li><li>10 In which ways can/do you affect the retention of your staff members?</li><li>11 This study is investigating management actions that impact on the well-being of children in early years settings. Is there anything else you would like to raise or any other issues you feel it would be appropriate to discuss?</li></ol> |
|---|

#### Analysis of data

The manager demonstrates a very confident understanding of the purpose of the setting - which is what would be expected as she had been in the management post for four years and has seen the numbers of children increase despite local competition. The reasons cited for things that can have a negative impact on quality demonstrate issues that are of priority to a manager are also to be expected and the most interesting is the "lack of access to external support network". This reflects the fact that independent settings do not have the Local Authority back-up and resources that statutory provision has access to. It also reflects the reality that setting managers and directors must be multi-skilled and constantly aware of information about changes in regulations as well as new initiatives and guidelines so that informal collaboration with other settings is needed. When this was discussed during the feedback stage, the manager reported that she is often contacted by other managers to help clarify new requirements or provide revised policies and documentation.

Responses to question 3 confirm the views of characteristics of the 'right kind of people' that were identified through the focus group in Activity [1] but rather than suggesting that everyone is similar in their characteristics, the benefits of a blend of different types of characters is also stressed as being important for the children. Question 4 is largely descriptive and confirms the process that will decide whether a member of staff is suitable or not and is an important factor in team building – this also relates to the reason 4 given for leaving the setting (unsuitable).

The responses given to questions about the effect of staff morale in 5 and 6 makes a significant contribution to the overall purpose of this study and is a clear reflection by an experienced practitioner on the links between staff morale and her recognition of its direct effect on the children. There is also awareness that allowing low morale to be noticed by parents would not be professional behaviour even though there may be an unsettling effect on the children. Question 7 shows awareness by the manager that her own morale and well-being would have a direct effect on staff and she is conscious of trying to keep her personal issues out of her work commitments, believing that the team is supportive and able to recognise appropriate times to approach her. The specific indicators of high morale given in response to question 8 are really quite helpful as they point to evidence of social behaviour that impacts on team spirit and show how interpersonal communication between adults and children is affected. There is an underlying perception that it is these shared experiences that contribute to group bonding such that there is a feeling of developing an extended family community. If improvements to inspiration, encouragement and enthusiasm are evident, then maintaining high morale would appear to be beneficial to the well-being of everyone in the setting. Similarly, indicators of low morale arising from question 9 suggest that changes in staff behaviour would not go unnoticed by colleagues or by the children. The effect on the adult-child relationships would clearly be affected.

The answer given to question 10 reiterates the overall message that the manager wished to convey; that selecting, supporting, involving, developing and retaining good staff is the key to provision of a good experience for the children. The skills and ability of the manager to function effectively and consistently is therefore a critical factor in promoting the well-being of children in the setting.

It is important to note that this research is intended to provide new insights into the experiences of children and practitioners in early years settings for the benefit of the wider community. It was not specifically being used to form an assessment of the way the setting was operating and therefore judgements about the management are not appropriate and have not been extracted from the interview above.

Two further interviews were arranged to test the manager's views on morale and its effect on staff retention and the experiences of the children and parents at the setting. It had been identified at the start of the research period that the manager's reflections could differ from those of senior staff members due to having different work responsibilities and priorities. The staff interviews were conducted with two members of the team who had no history of interpersonal conflict with the manager and their offer to contribute to the study was made on the basis of wishing to be involved as they felt they had something constructive to say.

**Research Activity [16]** In the light of feedback from the research so far, how can the staff team and setting manager work well together?

This activity took the form of a semi-structured interview with a senior member of nursery staff following an invitation to contribute to the study.

The member of staff voluntarily offered to contribute to the study and arranged to meet away from the setting to ensure privacy.

Within the setting, the member of staff (EC) is respected by others for her honesty, confidentiality and commitment to the children and the nursery. She can be outspoken and, because of her confidence, is often approached by colleagues to represent their views. On this occasion she made it clear that the discussion would reflect her personal opinions and she was not speaking on behalf of the team. EC has been at the nursery for many years and was part of the original group of senior staff who contributed to the focus group in research activity 3, she had therefore been observing the development of the research project and considered it in part to have arisen from concerns that she and others had initially raised.



EC explained that there were six or seven members of staff who would like to contribute to the study as a group and felt that it would be helpful if this could take place before a separate meeting with parents and would be preferable to the joint meeting initially proposed. This suggestion was considered to be worth pursuing. Prior to commencing the interview, the main focus of the study was clarified and the purpose of the interview was to consider issues affecting staff morale and the well-being of the children with suggestions for developing an emotionally positive climate.

The interview opened with the offer of allowing EC to say what she wanted in relation to issues affecting staff morale and agreeing that she must be completely honest. The researcher was conscious of not wishing to ask leading questions nor allowing the interview to develop into an opportunity for complaining but was aware that uncomfortable issues may be raised. For this reason, the questions did not enquire about specific problems but tried to focus on the underlying views and expectations and arose in response to the answers given. The interview is therefore reported in a more 'conversational' way with the question numbers added afterwards to aid identification during analysis.

As time was limited, the responses were recorded in note form and word processed after the event. The completed interview record was offered to the interviewee for checking, confirmation and amendment prior to inclusion to ensure that she was happy with what had been recorded and reported. The full interview responses are given in Appendix k) and the following analysis draws on key points made.

**Table 7.2 Supervisor interview questions**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Where would you like to start?</li><li>2. What do you think makes people feel valued?</li><li>3. Do you have any suggestions of how to improve things?</li><li>4. Are other parents confident about the quality of care?</li></ol>
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The interview exceeding the time allocated, EC was thanked for her contribution. This last point about improving communication with parents was then picked up as the topic for the small group session (proposed at the start of this interview).

## Analysis of data

Analysis of the interview with EC initially indicates that she first felt the need to express some concerns that were contributing to her own feelings of being less than happy about some aspects of management at the setting. She indicated that there were a number of practical, operational issues that had been allowed to remain unresolved to the extent that frustrations had emerged unnecessarily. This ongoing situation was perceived as detrimental to morale and to the well-being of the children and points to issues of operational problem-solving that managers need to be aware of if small things can turn into bigger concerns simply by lack of input. This input helpfully led to being able to ask the second question (without forcing it in) and the opportunity to identify positive aspects of morale building. EC felt that

- i) being listened and responded to by the manager,
- ii) having flexibility & support from the manager, and
- iii) an understanding by the manager that staff focus is in children's well-being, were all important factors in feeling valued.

In an effort to suggest to EC that there may be other ways of looking at the situation, the third question was asked. This elicited recognition that some staff expectations of the manager may be unrealistic and indicated evidence of team dependency on the manager to solve everything. This seemed to provide an opportunity to empower the team to take greater responsibility for using their initiative to provide solutions rather than just identifying problems and would be brought up in the later evaluation session.

EC took pride in having a professional approach and strongly considered that however staff morale may fluctuate, she had confidence that the care needs of the children would always be met to a high standard. The final question linked into the responses from the parental survey and drew out the role of parents in contributing to staff morale. EC considered that spending time positively with parents also made staff feel valued and that this aspect of the way the setting worked could be improved.

**Research Activity [17]** In the light of feedback from the research so far, what factors may impact on a staff member's decision to remain or leave an early years setting?

This activity took the form of a structured interview with a senior member of nursery staff following her resignation and offer to contribute to the research.

Some weeks after the surveys had been undertaken in the main setting, a senior member of staff gave her notice to leave. It is the usual practice for the manager to conduct the exit interview but on this occasion the staff member was invited to participate in an interview for research purposes. The request was discussed and agreed with the manager to ensure that everyone understood the arrangement. JB had previously been a student on the Foundation Degree programme so was familiar with the scope of the study and agreed to a semi-structured interview in order to provide qualitative information (notes of the meeting are given in Appendix I). The situation created some potential for conflict of interest and this was discussed at the beginning of the interview with agreement of temporary confidentiality but with recognition that the study would eventually be available to be read.

#### Analysis of data

Interview responses show that JB chose to leave due to a personal career progression opportunity arising elsewhere - this is given as reason 1 for leaving the setting, as shown in activity [9] and considers that her personal growth whilst being at the setting has added value to C.V. as well as to her sense of personal achievement. Whilst loss of a suitable person creates a gap in the setting it is also encouraging to see people grow and develop; the gap can then be filled through career progression for someone else. JB also confirmed the experience of EC by acknowledging that unhelpful gossiping was going on and that there were ongoing practical problems affecting operations which led to some negativity amongst staff – though these were not cited as reasons for leaving. JB recognised and confirmed EC's view that the management style at the setting was positive and supportive with most staff working co-operatively whilst a few others were cautious, but not resistant, to changes.

#### Issues raised by the three interviews

Both EC's and JB's comments tie in with the data arising from the staff morale questionnaire showing generally high levels of morale but with a range of views depending on the general personality types working at the setting and their responses to the manager's particular style of working. All three interviews state or suggest that staff morale has an effect on personal relationships and the way the setting operates. Though the manager was able to recognise

the value of providing staff support, she did not seem to be quite so aware that staff had been experiencing frustrations with some aspects of the way the setting operates as far as problem solving of practical issues. It became very evident during the interviews that the extent to which a setting has a positive emotional climate can be a rather abstract judgement to make depending on personal experience and position in the organisation. Development of this concept must be based on a search for agreement about best practice from discussion across differing roles within the setting rather than application of an externally imposed measure.

### 7.3 Research activities 18-20

Research activities relating to the main setting of the study are given here for reference.

18	How do staff members respond to feedback about the research findings?	Discussion with staff team in main study setting following feedback of initial findings
19	How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?	Focus group staff from the main study setting
20	How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?	Focus group parents from the main study setting

**Research Activity [18]:** How do staff members respond to feedback about the research findings?

Response by staff members following feedback of initial findings from research activities

A full staff meeting was called after working hours in the normal way and the first 40 minutes were scheduled to enable the initial findings of the parents' questionnaire, the recording of target child activity over one week, and the staff morale questionnaire to all be conveyed to staff. The intention was then to capture responses and report them here. After briefly explaining the data from the findings, a short discussion took place to clarify staff understanding and to motivate reflective thinking about organisational practices. The staff team was then asked to work in groups of three and discuss the following questions – writing down their agreed views.

The purpose of this activity was to use the findings to illuminate operational activities and relationships and empower staff to work together to consider making informed improvements. Small group discussions were initiated and six feedback sheets were issued for comment. Staff seemed genuinely pleased that they were being asked to respond and all contributed enthusiastically to the activity. The collated results are given below with the bullet points representing each group response to the question

*How have you felt about being involved in a research project?*

a) Positive feelings were expressed which included:

- Good to receive feedback & parents views, good to express our views on increasing staff morale.
- Interesting to get the feedback
- Yes, it made us analyse what we do, good to get feedback on how parents feel about us
- It was nice to listen to the feedback
- Interesting to see end results. It was good giving my point of view and seeing others point of view
- It makes us evaluate our own work ethic

b) Negative feelings were expressed which included:

- It gave us more work to do after a busy schedule
- No negative feelings
- That some of the things you mentioned that parent want, we already carry out
- None
- It was time consuming
- It has taken up a great deal of our time

The groups were asked to give their initial feelings about the findings:

- Very true – need to discuss further, we would like the opportunity to explain how morale could greatly increase through conditions linked to your findings
- Fair and interesting and thought provoking.
- Not surprised that morale is high. The suggestion of daily written reports for parents would not be feasible.
- Was surprised to hear what parents did or didn't want/require
- Interesting to hear parents' views
- It was interesting finding out the parents' views

They were also asked about which of the current organisational practices they would like to consider reviewing:

- Better ratios, 1:3 for babies is very difficult when the babies are very small. 1:8 for pre-school is not practical with only 2 staff due to 1 staff having to get snack, toilet runs etc.

- More general continuity within rooms and more opportunity to meet with parents
- None, happy with the current set-up
- The ones suggested by the parents
- More continuity of care, more opportunities and time to meet with parents

And invited to indicate which ways they would like to contribute to further research on child well-being:

- Opportunity to discuss ways to boost staff morale to encourage staff & child relationships – promoting well-being
- Mental, social and physical aspects
- Open to suggestions, willing to contribute within reason
- Not on a regular basis, maybe twice a year – not on a termly basis as there is not enough time
- Any way
- Answer written surveys if given enough time

Analysis of data

All responded positively to the request to give permission to publish any of the information that has arisen.

Before the activity was introduced it was initially difficult to gauge quite how to provide feedback that was both genuinely informative but not too overwhelming in its scope or implication for change. The staff team had varying levels of early years training, expertise and length of service. The intention of the activity was to inform and engage staff at all levels so that they collectively took ownership of the next stage of the action planning process. It was also important to ensure that support was shown for the manager so that greater understanding of each others' roles and responsibilities could be understood and appreciated thus avoiding any tendency to focus on things not done being the fault of any one person.

The desired outcome was for the eventual establishing of a collaborative and democratic problem-solving structure so that there could be a reduction in any gossiping or complaining and a quicker response to practical operational problem-solving in order to support greater staff focus on the needs of the children. There would also need to be an effective way of communicating how progress was developing so that time-scales could be monitored and reviewed.

The focus of the feedback was therefore mainly on positive aspects of each of the three activities but with some areas to address:

- i) from the results of the parents' survey in Activity [11] several of the positive comments arising were reported to the team. This was followed by a few things that parents indicated that they would also like to see taking place at the setting.
- ii) from the results of the staff morale survey in Activity [10], the high levels of positive response were reported to the team. The range was also given to show that everyone was aware that there were some people who felt less positive than others and this generated some debate.
- iii) the findings arising from the target child tracking diaries in Activity [13] proved of great interest and time was spent explaining the value of being able to review the three types of contact that the children experienced – it was hoped that this would go some way to publicly recognising the work that those involved had put in and valuing their efforts. The introduction also served to remind everyone of what was being researched and why.

The process of staff empowerment would take time to embed and the outcome of this activity gave optimism that the team would be willing to engage further in contributing to a strategy for involvement and sharing of views over and above the normal staff meetings. It was also clear that to develop this strategy would require greater directorial involvement once the participant research study had concluded. Following this feedback and reflection activity, the offer was made to meet with anyone who wished to take part in a group discussion. A small group of staff volunteered and a mutually convenient day and time was arranged. This led to the opportunity to speak more informally to a staff group rather than rely on the data arising from a questionnaire format.

**Research Activity [19]** How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?

Focus groups of staff from the main setting were formed following informal discussions with small groups of staff during the latter phase of implementing the Management Action Plan.

Opening questions invited comment about

- i) what they liked about the job
- ii) what had improved in recent months
- iii) what still needed to be addressed
- iv) ideas for better working with parents

A number of key reflections were shared and these are given in full in table 7.3

**Table 7.3 Responses arising during the main setting staff Focus Group**

- Holding parents evenings has increased staff confidence and improved relationships with families – inexperienced staff had been anxious about meeting with parents for an 'interview' type meeting but felt very elated to have overcome their fears and greatly enjoyed the responsibility and status.
- Teams feel very positive about Parents Evenings and are now planning the arrangements themselves. As the anxiety has reduced, they are looking forward to the meetings.
- Developing the Key Worker system further and improving the children's record booklets ensures better child observation notes which also makes staff feel good about their developing professionalism, particularly when sharing the observations with parents.
- More ongoing external staff development has raised awareness of curriculum developments e.g. Birth to Three, the Foundation Stage and Special Needs training so staff feel better able to respond appropriately to the children and this boosts confidence in their abilities. Better activity planning and staff reported that they are more able and confident to explain to parents what the children are doing and why.
- Team members can tell if each other is 'stressed' and this can generate negative ripples across the setting so staff watch out for each other and try to minimise the effects on the children
- Manager seems less stressed and this has a benefit for everyone as she makes time to spend with teams to listen to their concerns. When the manager is happy and focused, this is better
- Things are better now that everyone is clearer about their responsibilities
- The maintenance book system is working to some degree but repairs which are the college responsibility, are still taking too long frustrations create unnecessary niggles
- Changes to the physical environment have given everyone more space and the setting feels less pressurised and more relaxed with greater freedom of movement and autonomy for the children. Parents are able to see how the setting operates and children can show what activities they have been doing through the daily information boards.
- Access to the garden and patio is much improved and this is better for everyone. Parents can see that the children have easy access to outdoor activities and free play.
- The type of noise about the place has changed with less staff use of controlling or impatient language and more evidence of enjoyment by everyone – more happy babbling by the children and they often want to stay at the nursery when it's home time
- Students in the setting do not seem to have enough information prior to starting and explaining things to them can take up valuable time and detract from being with the children
- Group meetings are difficult because the time they are held is not convenient for staff with families. Although good to meet with everyone, attendance can be a bit of a chore – but much better now this is regarded as paid time.



- Pay and holiday increases are better, nice to have some staff space and lockers, but pay is still low for the skills needed for the job now that there is a greater expectation on staff to plan and record activities and development etc.
- It is still difficult for staff members that are mothers, to work shifts with 8.00am start or 6.00pm finish, especially during school holiday periods as childcare costs make it not worth doing – particularly for anyone with two or more children.

#### Analysis of data

The tone of the focus groups was notably positive with a genuine underlying enthusiasm for team collaboration and explorations of ideas. Whilst there are still aspects of the employment situation and operational issues that can be improved, it is encouraging to note that the various members of staff are reporting an increase in confidence and are taking greater responsibility for initiating activities that develop relationships with parents. This may be partly due to intentional use of value indicators in that value that has been given to such activity through the language of the manager and focus of this study by involvement of the director - particularly through the feedback given to staff from the parental survey [activity 11] and reflections [activity 18]. It may also be due to the intended empowerment process, in that the director and manager have indicated 'permission' to staff to take ownership of ideas and responsibility for implementing the improvement strategies whilst giving support and encouragement for personal development and training. Where staff are choosing to try new things for themselves there is a greater sense of commitment to ensuring success, this appears to be generating a higher level of job satisfaction and contributing to staff morale.

**Research Activity [20]** How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?

Focus group of parents from main setting:

This activity was undertaken in conjunction with the pre-school staff team and consisted of a self-devised survey arising from the room supervisor's attendance at an externally provided training day. The questionnaire format designed by the staff is given in Appendix m). Parental responses were also planned in the context of this study so it made practical sense to combine the two and share the information. By this stage of the study, following the

discussions arising from activities [18] and [19], the staff team were motivated to seek responses from parents about how they could work more closely together. The team met and they formulated a few simple questions in a letter offering support and information. It was encouraging to see that the staff team members had taken ownership of this process and were genuinely keen to find effective ways to improve their partnership with parents. This activity comes at the end of action study period and follows the implementation of the Management Action Plan. The questionnaire sheet was not intended or devised as a quantitative research tool but simply as a method to obtain parental feedback for the team to use. Altogether, 28 letters were given out and 16 returns were received. The results were discussed by the team and the findings collated into the chart given in Appendix n).

#### Analysis of data

The parents' returns demonstrated a generally high level of confidence in the care and early learning that their children are receiving. They indicate enthusiasm for receiving further information about curriculum activities and are keen to find out more about their child's individual progress. The return rate of 57% was disappointing and staff members concluded that the return rate could be improved if not sent out just before a holiday, and a return date included.

Staff also recognised that the feedback form was not anonymous, so parents would be aware that practitioners will know who has made the comments which might inhibit parents who might wish to make some criticisms.

It was also considered that some parents may not be comfortable completing questionnaire sheets, however simple the questions are as they may prefer to speak to a member of staff and answer the same questions verbally. However, all parents in the group have been given the opportunity to respond and if some have chosen not to then that choice should be respected. From a researcher perspective a 57% return rate may be disappointing but in practical terms it was felt that staff should not place parents under pressure to provide the missing returns. However, the analysis has to be based on feedback received.

From the suggestions given above, there are a number of positive ideas for the team to consider in relation to improvements to operational practices, information sharing and general communication methods. The staff members are now comfortable with devising their own action planning and will be supported by the manager in implementing it. There is scope to create an organisational policy to involve staff and parents working collaboratively on improvement plans for the future. As an activity intended to gain parental feedback it also had the advantage of acknowledging staff input. It was considered by the team that this recognition of their skills and contribution made them feel valued within the setting.

It was very evident from the staff and manager behaviour relating to this activity that the setting had transformed into a collaborative community of confident practitioners who felt empowered to take actions that contributed to the well-being of the children and themselves. After completion of the primary research, analysis and initial conclusions, a final interview was undertaken with the manager to discuss all the findings and explore opportunities for closure of the research period and my withdrawal as researcher.

**Supplementary activity [21]** What is the manager's reflective view of the transformation within the setting?

As this study included the co-operation of the manager of the main setting and has been dependent on her willingness to participate with her team in the action research process, her own reflections have been included. This study has been complicated by the duality of my roles as both researcher and director of the setting and it is this participant researcher aspect that has also provided the motivation to pursue the topic for such a period of time in that it was clear at the start that the organisational issues needed to be addressed whether the work was recorded as research or not. It is this necessity to take measured action, coupled with the optimism of a favourable outcome that contributes to a justification of the methodology used to explore the various underlying factors. The processes and outcomes of this research have produced a wealth of information that is valuable to other settings and to other practitioners.

To explore the perceptions of the manager, a final interview was undertaken. The prospect of reflecting back together on the initial circumstances and on the subsequent actions taken

of the research period proved to be quite informative. There had been a five year process from the start of the study and this was recalled at the start of the interview.

Presentation and analysis of data

### **Activity [21] Interview with the nursery manager at the end of research project**

#### **1) Five years ago, before the start of this study, the nursery was a different place and senior staff morale was not high. Do you recognise this was the case?**

Yes I do recognise this and I did recognise it at the time. There had been a period of great change 5 years ago and uncertainty with the college about their commitment to us. I also felt that the staff weren't motivated to undertake training and they were also exhausted then. We were so busy and were trying to provide high quality with the same large numbers of children in a new (1 yr) building that there were great demand on everyone. Also, the Foundation Stage curriculum had not been in very long and the requirements asked of Ofsted regulated nurseries was really a lot more prescribed that before so this was a big learning curve. There was so much happening all at once. That amount of change and new demands reflected in the drop in morale as everyone was overworked.

It was evident that this period was viewed with hindsight by the manager as a time of change and instability making heavy emotional demands and requiring considerable resolve to establish a consistent working culture. The tensions had arisen out of trying to implement externally imposed changes and she perceived there was resistance to change by members of the staff team due to a lack of positive emotional energy and confidence.

#### **1) continued ... and what are your reflections of that period?**

I was trying to change to a much more holistic approach to childcare and some of the staff were resistant to this as they had been trained in a more traditional structured approach. I was wanting them to work in a way that they were unused to so were reluctant to make changes. It became evident in staff meetings they were reluctant to let go and wanted to stay in their 'rut'. The particular staff I had at the time did not like the new curriculum and their perception was that there was more paperwork and they resented that. I had an awful battle to gain co-operation and needed to support staff to internalise the new way of working. As a manager it was difficult to get people on board and move the nursery forward. There was so much resistance by senior staff that it was frustrating for me to find ways to break down the barriers in order to implement the changes. Longer established staff had difficulty accepting the changes. There were also some personal staff issues that were

emotionally draining and this also impacted on the staff team e.g. the sudden death of a staff member's husband, an aggressive male member of staff, an opinionated and critical pre-school room supervisor creating conflict, a new deputy which generated jealousy in the team, and staff NVQ training was being jeopardised by inadequate external training.

The difficult personal events and unsettling effects of unskilled staff were perceived to contribute negatively to the working environment in the setting and the reflection indicates that an underlying power struggle demanded perseverance and personal effort in order to overcome it. There is a recognition that constant changes imposed externally can have a demanding effect on a setting. This is something that should be noted by policy makers as successful organisational management of change relies on gaining the full co-operation of a staff team.

**2) What was the emotional climate like at the time and what was the effect of this on the team?**

The emotional climate was really unsettled and the effect was low morale and frustration. I had fewer trained staff and they were not working fully as a team. They would not work with each other and were not respectful of one another. It was definitely a turbulent time.

At the time, (see activity [7]) the senior staff had identified that the manager was not focusing on the same priorities as they were and the analysis of this had indicated that there was a lack of recognition of the difficulties. It is interesting to note that, with hindsight, a more reflective and distant view has enabled a different interpretation to surface. This is also evident in the response to the following question.

**3) Do you consider that the children were affected at the time?**

Certain staff were working harder to limit the effects that this turbulence was having on the children and this was particularly draining and contributing to low staff morale. The more experienced staff were recognising the distracting effect this was having and were working to ensure that quality was maintained. At the time, the Ofsted report was good and parents considered it as very good provision so I believe we genuinely kept the disruption 'in house'.

This response suggests that the efforts to contain the negativity were largely successful such that the high standard of care tasks and play activities were all visibly apparent to Ofsted and

parents despite the tensions amongst the team. From looking at the summary of activity [13] it is noted by the staff that they will continue to focus on providing good care and appropriate activities irrespective of personal problems and low morale as this is what they gain their job satisfaction. The emotionally draining effect of trying to stabilize the work of the team is most likely to be apparent in the limiting effect on the interpersonal opportunities available to the children. However, looking back is always difficult as the detail gets lost in the memory of events. Once the sequence of events was revisited, the manager was invited to recall her own understanding of her role and of her experiences of leading the team. Her responses indicate a subjective account of events at the time.

**4) How did you interpret your management role during this time?**

Firstly by recognising that there was unsettledness and investigating why this was happening. At the time, I recognised that in order to deal with and manage the situation, I needed to develop my own personal skills (I had not been a manager for very long) and joined a counselling skills course in addition to starting a Foundation Degree programme. I believed this would improve my underpinning knowledge as well as my skills. I felt I really needed to listen properly to what the staff were saying as they were frustrated with one another.

There is a refreshing level of reflection evident here despite this skill not being so evident at the start of the study. Involvement of the manager in the earlier activities of the study would also have contributed to a sense of 'permission' to address quality issues and the knowledge that she had support for personal development may also have awakened the motivation to seek further training.

Following on from the response to question five, there was a little hesitation before introducing question six as it was really the first time this was formally raised and may have had the effect of introducing a negative element to the interview by retrospectively undermining the manager's skills and self-perception. However, it was important to understand her reflective perception of the situation.

**5) Were you aware that they were also frustrated with their manager?**

Yes, I was. I knew that they believed that as a manager I should have the solution to everything. They blamed me for all the changes and for the fact that things were taking too

long to sort out. I did not take this personally as I felt that this was part of a manager's job. I would not have survived if I had taken it personally. I had my own frustrations with the same things as the staff and the fact that the team was not 'gelling'. I also had external frustrations with the college over building snagging and the NVQ training. I had to also get quite assertive the County Council for curriculum training and support for children with SEN as support was not there for either. I was stuck in the middle and could not recognise what was going on and felt frustrated that I could not easily get the support the staff needed. They were shouting at me because they could not shout at anyone else. My own frustration was compounded by the fact that the director was being kept particularly busy on college curriculum matters and did not have much time for me to offload and discuss ways to resolve the issues. I don't really think I expected her to have the answers but I would have liked more time to be supported. On a different level I also had emotional needs that weren't being met. I didn't have enough highly trained experienced staff to manage the room teams so I felt drained myself as I could not delegate some of the management responsibilities.

This response highlights the differing internal and external demands that a manager has to juggle and the potential for an increase in the manager's stress levels. A setting does not operate independently from the wider local and political context such that issues impacting on a manager's workload are not necessarily within her control. There is a call here for external support that was probably not adequately answered by the college, the LEA or the director such that the manager was dependent on her own emotional reserves and coping mechanisms. Another implication of this response is that my own responsibilities towards the setting were also raised and the inherent issues of conflict of interest between the director role and researcher role have been brought sharply into focus. In the circumstances, both were used to move the setting forward but there were no instant answers to resolving the tensions that had arisen. The development of a supportive management style was also dependent on the recognition for a need to use a particular directorial style as a support mechanism.

## **6) So what is different now?**

My staff are more experienced, more highly trained and work together as a team. They have all taken responsibility for their own areas and have grown in confidence and knowledge. They have basically developed their own areas and evolved their skills so that they are strong in their own areas. The team has become stronger and this means that I can manage differently. They are all much more involved in the running of the setting. I meet with the supervisors to sort things out. The relationships between the staff in the room teams has improved and there is much better co-operation across the setting. The management style

of the room supervisor is quite a critical issue as far as team morale is concerned. Morale in general is really very good. We have recently come through an unannounced Ofsted very well indeed and spirits are high. Despite an uncertain future with the college (proposed building works and another move) I think the staff are very trusting. If I show anxiety they pick up on it so I am much more skilled and experienced at keeping my emotions/feelings to myself as this keeps things more settled.

During the turbulent time I may not have been as good at disguising my own feelings and this may not have helped the situation.

This presents a much more positive and productive picture, reflecting a more desirable emotional climate in which relationships can flourish and thereby enable recruitment and retention of appropriately skilled staff who will be operating in an environment that encourages the development of relationships. It is evident that a change in approach has been taking place during the period of this study which includes the development of a more emotionally sensitive management style. It is also interesting to note that, having been empowered through involvement in the research, the manager is now incorporating aspects of the language of this study. This was explored further in the following question.

### **7) What management style do you feel contributes to good staff morale?**

A much more democratic management style where the nursery supervisors are much more involved in the general running of the setting. When there was conflict previously, I had been much more democratic but because of the turbulence I had to adopt a much more assertive style myself because when I involved the staff all it did was result in more turbulence. I became much more autocratic to take control and get back on track in order to cope with some very strong characters who were not moving in the right direction. I am normally a very democratic manager but the clash of staff personalities meant that I had to do things differently. On reflection it was a difficult time and I am not sure how we managed to resolve it.

This reflection opens up the need for a manager to interpret the organisational activity in order to adopt a style that will contribute to positive progress towards a desirable operating state. The manager had interpreted the underlying issue as that of conflict within the team and recognised in herself that the situation called for a different way of managing the setting. At the time, the director had also interpreted the situation as one of conflict, but between some members of the team and the manager. The resolution strategy employed was to



create a 'real world' Action Research approach in order to generate a considered strategy for improvement in a way that maintained everyone's self-esteem by involving them in the proposal. The critical issue throughout the process has been to ensure best provision for the children and families using the setting. This concern led to the next question.

**8) Do you notice any difference in the children or how staff relate to the children now?**

I have recently spoken to a parent who was with us at the earlier time. She said they were exceptionally delighted that the quality and high standard are as good as they have always been.

I feel the children are still developing, growing and thriving. The staff are much happier and more relaxed and the children are seeing this. They have good role models for personal relationships. They see staff being very respectful, sensitive and supportive of one another. There is a lot of laughter and banter about the place. It is a much more pleasant place to be. The whole team is much more comfortable with each other. If ever there is an internal dispute it is recognised and dealt with quickly.

At the earlier time, staff had not internalised the new working practises and this created resistance and conflict.

This report clearly indicates that the whole range of processes used during the research period have led to an improvement in the working atmosphere for the staff and the manager. At no time throughout the study has there been any suggestion that the children were not provided with suitable activities or adequately cared for. The parental report above is reassuring and confirms the nature of the parental comments elicited during the parents' survey. The parents' main concern at the time of the survey was for greater communication (not an improved quality of care and early education)

This PhD research concludes that the role of the manger is critical in establishing desirable practice throughout an early years setting. The follow-up interview was undertaken to record the manager's perceptions and reflections to document some of the changes that have taken place. Fortunately, the research process has had a stabilizing effect and has supported the team in becoming more collaborative and sensitive to the needs of the children as well as to

each others emotional needs. Changes to organisational practices were explored further in the following question.

**9) Has your management style changed?**

My own training has meant that I have new ideas and this has meant that working practices have also changed. Team meetings now involve discussion about changes so that everyone can understand the reasons for new things and this helps with implementation. Everyone is encouraged to contribute ideas and all are involved in nursery planning. The nursery is much more self-operating and I can concentrate on staff training and financial management. Anxiety levels for staff and me personally have now greatly reduced. We have pressures but not stress. Staff are much more open to change and less resistant to new ideas. Staff feel much more confident to take on board new EYFS changes later this summer and I feel that I can trust the teams to resolve some of the issues between themselves.

Improvements to working relationships are very evident here as is the personal development of the manager through training, research activity and directorial support given over the period. The response to question 9 indicates a much higher level of trust within the team and the use of a more democratic and reflective operating style that is able to nurture the team. Finally, question 10 was introduced to capture views on the process of self and organisational development.

**10) How do you feel about this reflective process?**

It has been interesting for me to do this. I am now a genuinely reflective practitioner and feel that it works. Everything that I now do I reflect back and do an analysis. I consider implications and learn from looking back. I also feel that my staff team have internalised what reflective practice is all about. They have developed an ethos of reflecting back and are much more skilled at recognising the implications of their practice. They are much more motivated to develop and undertake further training. Several staff are now gaining higher qualifications and are encouraging one another to do the same. Almost the whole team is now trained or training at level 3. Others are training at level 4/5 and aiming higher. However, retention of these well trained and experienced members of staff will be dependent on continuing to offer challenge and progression.

This is a very positive outcome and represents a considerable move towards optimum operating practice. The staff members are now well established, trained and very experienced in providing for children's emotional development. This also makes them highly

desirable to other establishments and the challenge identified above will be to retain and develop them in a way that supports personal progression but ensures continuity for the families using the setting. If any loss of staff is anticipated then careful transitional arrangements will need to be put in place to maintain the stability of the emotional climate.

## **7.5 Summary**

This phase of the action research process has been particularly helpful in providing understanding of the differing experiences within the setting and of common features of early years practice. Implementing the various management actions identified at the end of the Planning Phase has shown to have a positive impact on whether staff members feel valued. Consequently, making improvements to the ways in which staff feel valued has had a positive effect on the levels of staff morale and well-being. This has reduced staff dissatisfaction and improved the retention of staff with desirable characteristics, it may also have raised the profile of the setting's reputation with the local workforce such that 'the right kind of people' are attracted to work at the setting.

Various activities have shown that by the end of the process, the emotional climate is positive and this shows benefits in the responsiveness of staff to the children's needs and improved communication with parents. The level of well-being and supportive management style of the manager has been shown to have a beneficial impact on staff morale. Practitioners are demonstrating greater confidence through organisational empowerment but the different activities also indicate that there is still more work to be done. From the questionnaire responses arising from activity [20] the many parental reports of happy and settled children indicates a stable and positive emotional climate in the setting which is proving beneficial to the families that use it.

Whether all the ethical issues inherent in such an approach have been adequately assessed is difficult to judge but this has certainly been an opportunity to experience the untidiness and optimism of real world research at first hand. The prospect of initiating a further cycle of activities would potentially be beneficial to the setting but is not currently part of a follow-up plan. However, four members of the team have subsequently enrolled on the Foundation Degree programme and, with the encouragement of the manager, will be able to use their

experiences and role-modelling of research practice when they complete their dissertations. This is a very satisfying outcome as it establishes research and reflective practice as a normal activity within the setting and strengthens the development of a community of practice within the setting.

A **key outcome** from this phase has been the distillation of experience and knowledge relating to features of a supportive and democratic management approach that will be described here as a *pro-nurturative* management style.

This section concludes the data sections of the action research processes and brings together the full cycle of reconnaissance, planning, action, evaluation and reflection. The actions taken arose out of a concern to improve morale such that the children would benefit from their time at the setting. I continue to have directorial responsibility for this setting and am therefore in a good position to continue modelling the practices identified as supportive to the manager and the practitioners. My own reflections suggest that maintaining closer contact with the practitioners and active use of Value Indicators would be advantageous in embedding the sense of 'being valued' that generates loyalty and commitment. I did perhaps underestimate the demands of implementing a real world action research over a period of time, and consider that the undertaking such a range of activities was rather ambitious whilst in full-time employment. Further conclusions on the whole of the research process and findings are given in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 8**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

I have defined well-being as the state in which people thrive. This applies to physical well-being (health), and mental well-being (mental health), but my particular angle has been emotional well-being as a fundamental building block of child development. Consequences of an emotionally dysfunctional or traumatised childhood may be problems in physical health, mental health and educational achievement later in life, so this is a vital component of early years provision to consider. The concept draws on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1953/1965), the unconditional positive regard and actualizing tendency of person-centred psychology (Rogers, 1961, which Maslow further elaborated) and the identification of mature 'adult' relationships in Transaction Analysis (Berne, 1964). Emotional well-being therefore demands a particular style of practitioner relationship and interaction that needs to be explicit. I have drawn on the more recent work of Goleman (1996, 1999) and Weare (2004) to develop this into the concept of a beneficial environment and have explored how to establish a positive emotional climate in an early years setting.

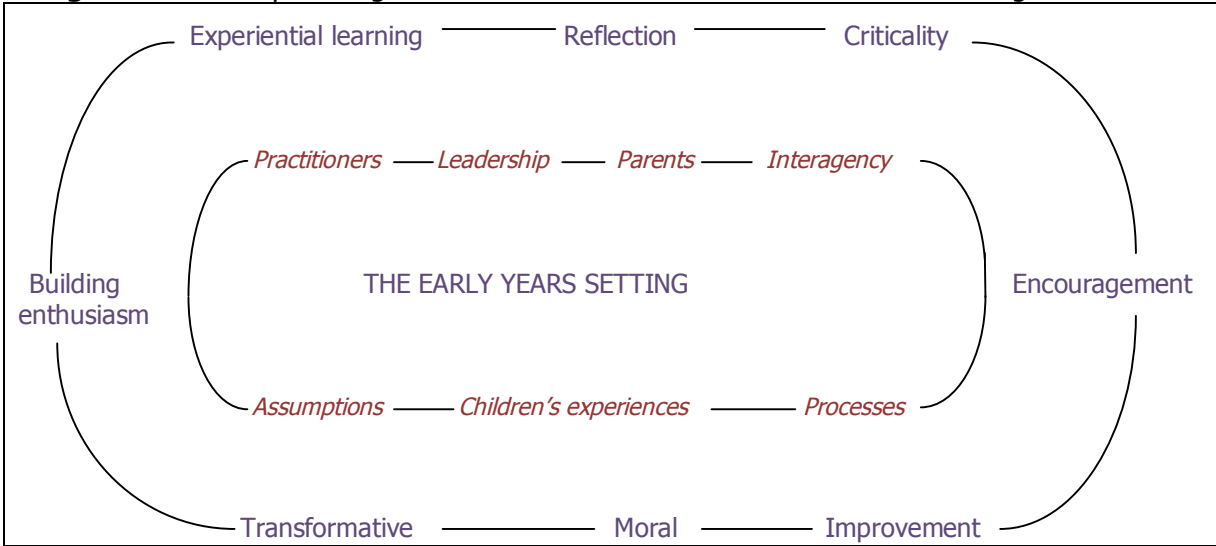
My research activities have explored a range of views and practices relevant to emotional well-being, focusing both on adult and children's interactions in early learning environments. The case study of the main setting identified a range of management and leadership issues that need to be tackled if the setting is to be 'beneficial', that is to promote well-being at all levels. I have emphasised the term 'beneficial' in terms of the emotional climate and environment of the setting, that the personal growth and potential of each child is paramount and the leadership, management, practices and processes of the setting should be explicitly planned to be of maximum benefit to each child.

The aspect of action research which is 'critical' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000) means challenging and moving beyond traditional educational assumptions of power and status to find new ways of working which emphasise equity, equality,

personhood and empowerment. Applying this to early years provision is challenging, since the staff are *in loco parentis* and responsible for behaviour and routines: so ways of safe operating which are empowering are sought. The early years setting, like a school is a moral order, where fair, kind and considerate relationships with others are developed in an emotionally stable and inclusive environment. It could be argued that the success or failure of society is rooted in the quality of this moral foundation in the early years. Critical theory emphasises equal rights for all rather than social privilege and hierarchy and works towards social transformation. Therefore, securing emotional well-being in the early years is an essential feature of ensuring equality of opportunity for all children.

This research raises the question of what is meant by being emotionally mature and well balanced, and how a setting can contribute to this, or diminish it. Collectively we look for answers in developing ideas of self in early childhood – confident, aware, responsible, realistic, seeing potential, accepting of faults, strong in personality, not weak willed, championing fairness and objecting to unfairness. All members of the staff team need to be aware of these desirable qualities in order to reflect on their practices and model these characteristics. The sense of self (self-worth and self-esteem) that is not selfish implies fair, just and empathetic relationships with others. This also needs to be modelled by staff and, though harder to influence, by parents. This research found that parents can be positively influenced by staff role models and this is an aspect of the work that is very encouraging.

**Diagram 8.1** Encapsulating a beneficial environment for emotional well-being



In the inner ring, the top line shown in red, are the people involved. **Practitioners** need engaging in the processes of recruitment, training and supervision. The model of reflective and reflexive practice (Kolb, 1984; Rolfe, 2011) has the potential to develop their individual and corporate understandings. The **leadership** are tasked to encourage and supervise the process, not just to manage it but to model and champion it. **Parents** are co-educators and the early years setting needs to communicate its vision and practices to parents in the expectation that this will also help the child's life at home to be more fulfilling through consistent and continuous experience of adult relationships. **Interagency** personnel need to understand the vision and work with it, which requires careful communication between practitioners and other involved adults. The bottom line in red, are processes: the people bring with them **assumptions** which may be traditional or critical, empowering or disempowering. We should not under-estimate the nature of the learning and discussion required. The **children's experiences** may be balanced, controlling or traumatic; their behaviour may be responsible or unacceptable. Again, working on this is long-term and complex. And finally, **processes** need to promote personal transformation, enthusiasm and self-discipline.

The outer ring in purple brings out theoretical issues that need to engage the early years practitioners. **Experiential learning** points to staff developing their quality of practice and understanding systematically. This is underpinned by **reflection**, examining incidents, or the flow of the day and through this one's own values and style of working (reflexivity, as in Kolb, 1984 and Rolfe, 2011). The **criticality** of the action research, challenging tacit knowledge, beliefs, understandings and practices, needs to flow into the broader operation of the setting, so that a vision of transformation and empowerment remains and is inculcated to new staff. The middle line deals with the central values of pedagogy - **building enthusiasm** and **encouragement**. The whole is underpinned (bottom line) with **transformative** relationships and curriculum, which have **moral** ends in that emotional well-being promotes social empathy, respect and responsibility. Through this the **improvement** of the setting and its provision becomes ongoing. Such a positive environment develops self-control and self-regulation in all participants and consistently models human interactions in a way that builds emotional maturity from a very early age.

Knowledge of child emotional well-being is a vital area to research for two main reasons i) it relates directly to establishing new knowledge about features of a beneficial environment, identified here as one that presents the most favourable conditions for young children to thrive and experience a happy early life on which a stable, resilient and productive adulthood is based, and ii) this knowledge creates a new understanding and framework for valuing the work of early years practitioners in a way that contributes to raised status and improved self-confidence within the workforce, thus aiding team morale and staff retention.

Conceptualising early years provision as a fundamental foundation to the formation of secure relationships, will impact on the focus of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. And understanding the factors that contribute to a positive emotional climate will make a valuable contribution to supporting early years providers and their networks in being able to structure effective family provision on the basis of sound principles.

This study invites practitioners and policy makers to re-focus early years activity from provision that is primarily geared towards achievement of learning ('outcomes', 'goals', 'stepping stones') in preparation for schooling, to one of developing essential relationship skills that are necessary for functioning in a social world, through the continuity of positive, loving, stable relationships during their early years. It is concluded here that young children, particularly those under the age of three years, are best served by the collaboration of adults who are able to model emotionally literate behaviour, and demonstrate personal stability, happiness, holistic well-being and unconditional enjoyment of time spent with children.

'Establishing a positive emotional climate in an early years setting' has proved to be a complex and fascinating task. The various research activities have shed light on the topic in a multi-dimensional way by considering aspects relating to the broad underlying themes initially raised in the Introduction chapter about a) what an early years settings is for, as viewed by the government, the staff who work in them, and the families that use their services; b) what the roles and responsibilities of the early years practitioner are, as perceived by employers, and by the staff themselves, and c) what the job of an early years manager entails, as viewed by the staff team and the manager of the main setting. The



specific research questions and the findings arising, each tease out aspects of knowledge which collectively take this search for understanding forward.

This research process has generated a considerable volume of knowledge. When considering the wider issues arising in this study and their implications for practice, the various threads of enquiry and their outcomes are given below with each line of enquiry reviewed. The wider issues are then explored in relation to the literature within the discussion section that follows.

## **8.2 Review of the primary research**

### **Activities undertaken and findings gathered over a five year period have included:**

- Identification of the characteristics of people considered by employers to be suitable to work with other peoples' children through focus groups.
- Identification of issues affecting the recruitment and retention of suitable early years practitioners through an analysis of employment research data and records in one setting.
- Establishing characteristics of an appropriate early years work environment in relation to aspects of the emotional climate such as working ethos, values, staff morale and consistency through an evaluation of management activities and the development of a descriptive model referred to as the Emotional Climate Thermometer.
- Recognition that there are multiple views and judgments about the same working environment and staff experiences shown through staff interviews.
- Highlighting the need to manage organisational change and team morale through training, development and career progression of staff and the development of a 'Value Indicators' model.
- Development of a policy for the main setting through collaborative use of a parental questionnaire and exploration of relationships with parents.

The focus of this PhD is to make a contribution to knowledge about conditions supporting the well-being of young children. The methodology is based on identifying which organisational practices can be instigated to establish a positive emotional climate in an early years setting. This principal question has been interrogated by exploring a set of 21 sub-questions to be answered through the various research activities. As such, this study has covered a complex range of issues and it will be helpful for the reader to be reminded of the questions and key

findings before further exploring the relevant themes of the discussion. Some of the activities have proved to be more productive than others and the extent to which these are discussed relates to the consideration of their relevance. The numbering below will be used to reference the points made in the discussion and are given here for ease of identification.

### **8.2.1 Reconnaissance Phase (Initial Survey)**

[1] *Who are the 'right kind of people' to work in early years?*

Education and childcare employers have a high expectation of the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills of people who they wish to employ in early years settings and schools. Employers consider these personal skills are of a higher value than staff members having a child development knowledge-base or appropriate early years qualifications. The particular skills set identified by employers suggests that early years practitioners need to have a positive mind-set, be 'emotionally intelligent/literate' and have a value system that supports an inclusive philosophy. Possibly possessing 'mothering' skills and willing to work for low pay.

[2] *How are the 'right kind of people' attracted and retained in early years?*

Suitable people are attracted by a setting that has an organisational culture which values and develops relationships across the setting. Recruitment and retention is also helped by having employment policies and practices that are based on a clearly understood and shared working philosophy that is internalised by the whole team. An attractive setting will also have an emotionally intelligent and democratic management style that recognises, supports and contributes to staff well-being in a way that offsets the pay issue.

[3] *How do members of staff in early years settings perceive 'being valued'?*

Responses indicate that 'being valued' is an essential aspect of personal and team morale and it was identified that communication skills are at the heart of 'being valued'. All forms of communication in the setting convey and confer value on people and on the activities that take place in a setting. This led to the opportunity to develop greater understanding of what those 'Value Indicators' might be and how they can be used positively in building team relationships and the development of the setting such that the children's experience of the setting was enriched. With identification of these indicators comes the possibility of staff training in the use of positive language as a tool for managing the interactions between practitioners of all levels and when building relationships with children and parents.

[4] *Which issues affect staff morale in early years generally?*

Staff morale was most affected by the perceived lack of understanding and recognition by others for the work being done (this relates closely to employers expectations) and it was felt that this was evident by the inherent low pay for their skills and experience, even with the potential for career progression. It is interesting to reflect here on whether childcare is considered a 'domestic' job which anyone can do and is therefore low paid, or an 'educational' job which implies a higher level of training and therefore warrants higher pay. Whatever the view of early years staff, it seems from this research that experienced child carers are cautious about leaving their own children in the care of others as they know the reality about the skills of others. It is also evident from the findings relating to staff retention that a staff member becoming a parent, contributes to increasing the staff turnover.

[5] *How involved are parents of children in early years settings (different settings)?*

Settings have differing underpinning philosophies of how they should communicate with parents and it is clear that policies and practices in settings vary greatly in the ways parents are involved. Parents indicated that they would like greater consultation and involvement but generally don't feel encouraged by the staff to contribute on a day to day basis.

[6] *Can staff reflect on practices in their own and other settings?*

Observation reports showed that there is a tendency for practitioners to have an ideal and optimistic view of the child. Also, practitioners' reflective reports seemed more likely to be critical of other settings and more favourable towards their own. The reflective task identified differing views and judgements about desirable early years practices and organisational activities which also raised questions of objectivity and accuracy of judgements when practitioners reporting observation findings.

### **8.2.2 Action Research Phase: Planning**

[7] *Which issues are of concern to staff at the main setting?*

The issues that caused most concern were those that distracted practitioners from focusing on spending time and building relationships with the children. These were issues affecting personal morale, commitment and motivation. Additionally, at the start of the study, early years practitioners expressed frustration that their operational priorities did not seem to have the same recognition and priority of response that management activities had. There was an expectation that staff personal needs should be met by their employer, and concern was

expressed if they felt that their personal needs were not being met, even if this was an unreasonable expectation.

[8] *Which issues have greater impact on staff at the main setting?*

Early in the study there was evidence of a clear mismatch between the manager's perception of morale levels and practitioners' perceptions. In part this had arisen through differences in the interpretation of staff job roles but was also attributable to leadership styles and issues of power balance that resulted in different values placed on operational activities by practitioners and managers.

[9] *What are the reasons given for staff leaving the main setting?*

Twelve main factors were given for staff leaving and these could be for positive reasons or negative reasons. On the positive side, staff loss could be to meet a personal need for career progression, or may include age retirement or staff pregnancy. On the negative side, examples of staff turnover can be due to dissatisfaction with the low pay rate, family pressures, or being asked to leave due to an unacceptable standard of work.

### **8.2.3. Action Research Phase: Implementation of Action**

[10] *Which issues affect staff morale in the main setting?*

The main aspects of the working environment that were deemed to create a positive effect were: time to enjoy being with the children and experiencing a sense of doing something worthwhile; social bonding and building friendships with others in the team; sharing children's progress with parents and experiencing the parent's delight at their child's achievements; opportunities for personal development and fulfilment; recognition and support from the manager.

The aspects that generated a negative effect were: any perceptions of unfair treatment of staff or activities that could be interpreted (or mis-interpreted) as favouritism; frustrations arising from any barriers to doing a good job; not having sufficient time to do the job well.

[11] *How involved are parents of children in the main setting?*

In the main setting, the practice did not match with the policy on parental involvement and this became an issue to explore further. Parents indicated that they would like to be more involved and they requested more communication with staff. Parental feedback has the potential to provide valuable opportunities to empower staff to take greater responsibility for initiating communication strategies and this became an area to initiate a positive change.

[12] *Can staff at the setting recognise the impact of their practices?*

Within the main setting there were differing perceptions of what was going on in the setting when staff observed the same activities. . Individual practitioners interpreted their observations according to their own understanding of what an early years setting was for rather than drawing on a collective view of best practice. This also linked to the differing levels of personal morale. Responses seemed to indicate there was a tendency for staff to want to answer the questions with the right/desired answers.

[13] *How many adults does a young child form bonds with in an early years setting?*

In the main setting, a young child experiences relationships with approximately ten practitioners in addition to family members during an average week. During the week selected, there were high levels of child-initiated social contact during each day and these required consistently positive responses from each member of staff. It was considered that individual staff well-being, motivation and morale affected their responses to each child - hence the need to ensure these are reliably high.

#### **8.2.4. Action Research Phase: Evaluation and Reflection**

[14] *Which management activities increase the sense of being valued and appreciated?*

Activities that give something to the staff i.e. feeling proud to belong to the organisation - having a high quality working environment and good conditions of employment. Feeling a valued member of the team can overcome issue of low pay. It was also found that activities that expect staff to put more into the job by giving more time and effort tend to contribute less to feeling valued. A manager can sometimes be unable to tell the difference between the two types of activity and may be disappointed by the staff response.

[15] *What does the manager now consider to be the purpose of an early years setting?*

The purpose of the setting is clearly considered by the manager to be for the all round benefit of each child and their family. The quality of staff expertise and the level of team morale is considered by the manager to be the primary resource for fulfilling the purpose of the setting which is to form positive relationships with the children and parents. As a result, a high proportion of management time is spent on staff development and addressing issues affecting staff well-being. This interview was conducted after the majority of the staff survey activities and was held during the mid-latter stages of the research at a time when the direction of the study had been made clear and changes were being implemented.

[16] *How can the staff team and setting manager work well together?*

This activity was undertaken as an interview and the senior practitioner highlighted a good team spirit and a supportive management as being essential factors in job satisfaction. She also identified that lack of progress on practical task and maintenance issues can have a big effect on team morale. Reflection on expectations indicated that practitioners are not always realistic about their expectations of the manager and this can lead to dependency on the manager to resolve all the issues arising.

[17] *What factors may impact on a staff member's decision to leave an early years setting?*

The senior practitioner who was leaving the setting for a promotion, considered that staff should take responsibility for communicating their frustrations to the manager. She felt that negativity cannot be dealt with if it is not brought forward for discussion. She expressed appreciation of the opportunity to grow professionally as this has contributed to her sense of being valued and has enabled her to move on.

[18] *How do staff members respond to feedback about the research findings?*

The team at the main setting expressed appreciation at being involved in the research process and felt that it placed value on their views. There was also an expression of genuine surprise at some of the comments made by parents through the parental survey and as a result, there was a greater willingness to be involved in further empowerment activities in order to help the setting develop a more communicative approach to parents. This activity mirrored the earlier results of mismatch between the manager's perceptions and those of the senior staff members, in that staff believed they were communicating well with parents but the parents were asking for more opportunities to communicate. This reflected the general theme of different perceptions arising within different groups.

[19] (Staff group) *How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?*

It was considered by the staff team that job satisfaction is increased through staff empowerment and that personal confidence can be developed through tackling challenges that are supported by their manager. A positive team spirit was also felt to be an important factor in job satisfaction and a positive team spirit was recognised as something that could be passed on and developed through personal contact. A negative team spirit was also acknowledged as 'contagious' and undesirable.

[20] (Parents group) *How can the staff team and parents work together to ensure provision that supports the children's well-being?*

In the same way that staff members interpreted the same situations differently, it was evident that parents can have individual perceptions of similar experiences. Many parents expressed a wish to have greater levels of contact with staff, and made good suggestions for improving joint communication. This was a particularly encouraging aspect of the work and reflected the potential for influencing parental contributions to the setting.

[21] *What is the manager's reflective view of the transformation within the setting?*

It was evident that the manager perceived that at the start of the study, the rapidly changing external context for early years provision had placed quite a strain on the emotional reserves of the staff team such that they struggled to focus on the needs of the children and had turned their frustration on the manager. As a researcher, taking the whole team steadily through the action research process had proved to be beneficial in heralding a more democratic period of working that contributed to stability within the setting and an opportunity to re-build emotional reserves to the benefit of the children.

Use of Lewin's (1946) basic action research cycle has proved to be helpful as a framework for the investigation in providing a structure for collating and discussing the findings. This 'single cycle over time' framework has also included the participatory forms of action research promoted by Reason and Bradbury (2006) and Wicks, Reason and Bradbury (2008) to ensure an opportunity to bring about a steady long-term transformation to the setting by allowing all adult participants to have a voice in the research process. The evidence indicates that internalisation and embedding of a more democratic leadership style has brought sustainable benefits to the staff and families using the setting, as well as identification of new knowledge, understanding and organisational practices for use in other settings.

### **Key outcomes of the whole process**

Preliminary survey: A theory about use of *Value Indicators* to develop staff well-being

Reconnaissance and planning: Development of a *Management Action Plan* model

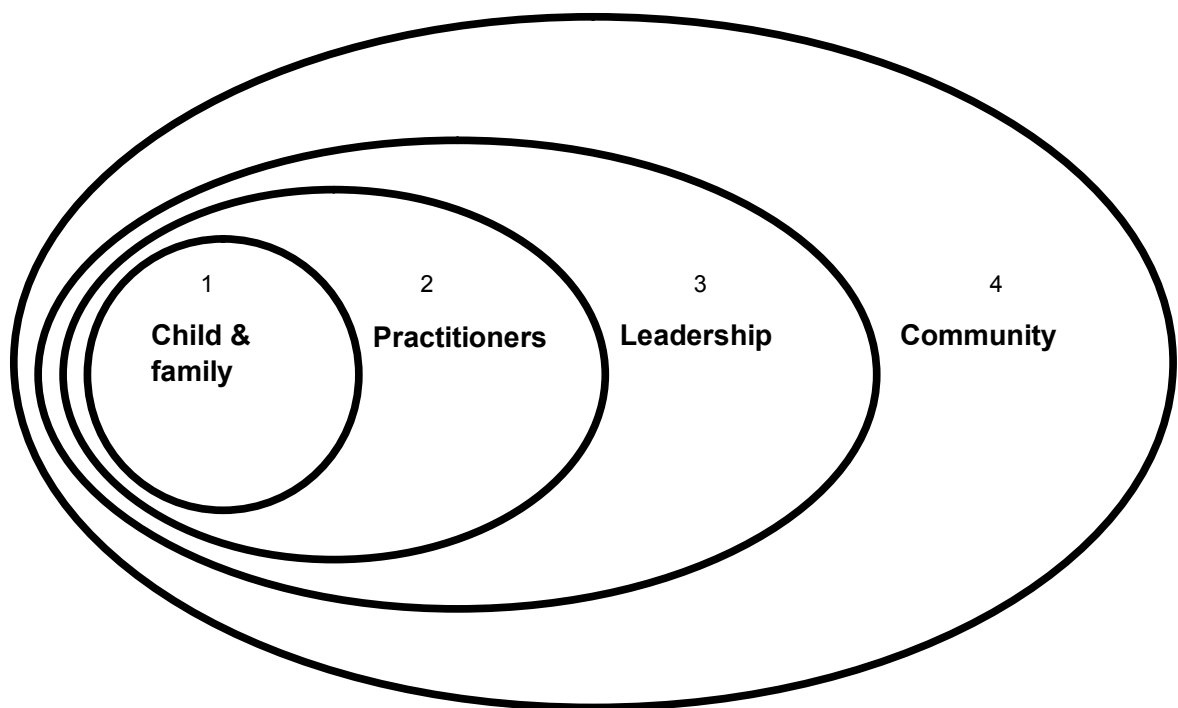
Implementation of actions: Developing the *Emotional Climate Thermometer* model

Evaluation and reflection: Development of a *pro-nurturative* leadership style

The various research activities have generated a considerable amount of data for analysis and all contribute in some way to an understanding of the main research question of how to establish a positive emotional climate in a n early years setting. In order to create a coherent picture and draw some meaningful conclusions, the broad context for this study can be considered visually using a model with layers and a central core, in that each aspect is contained within the subsequent one and is affected or influenced by it.

### **Diagram 8.2 A beneficial emotional climate**

*Representing the child within an early years setting operating in a broader social context*



At the heart of the model is a representation of the encapsulating and overlapping nature of the different interpersonal relationships and experiences of each individual child in the setting and includes the content of diagram 8.1 above. Diagram 8.2 proposes

- a) that the unique combination of experiences of each child is placed at the very centre within its family culture and relationships,
- b) the child's individuality portrays its natural personality and genetic pre-dispositions operating within its peer group and developing early social relationships, and



c) the child's experiences within the early years setting and its relationships with key staff are formative features of this early experience of relationships.

This uniquely individual combination of influences will all contribute to the view that the child develops about him/her self, forming a 'life script' (Berne 1964) and determining whether they believe they are a competent learner and a valued young member of society. The stability and predictability of these experiences are considered at risk in an environment with poor or uncertain adult relationships.

Using the descriptions given in the 'emotional climate thermometer' model, each section of the diagram will have an 'emotional warmth' factor represented by a colour from the diagram 6.1. The emotional warmth may be consistent across all the relationships, or it could have variations from 'neglectful' to 'pressured' representing more, or less beneficial conditions for development. Different combinations of cool, comfortable or over-heating (over-charged emotions) within the various overlapping ovals will impact on the outcomes for a child and would be a uniquely individual experience due to home and temperament factors rather than the same experience for all children in a setting.

The layer surrounding the child is an oval that encompasses the circle at the heart. This oval represents the emotional climate and warmth of the early years setting of the study which contains all the children and practitioners and is used as an example of provision through which specific research activities have been focused here. It is the sampling of the experiences of staff, children, parents and the manager within this oval that have been captured and influenced by the Action phase of this study. This layer represents the collective ethos and emotional climate that impacts on the quality of care experienced by each child and their family as well as each member of staff. This area may relate closely to the concept of the microsystem in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-cultural Ecological Theory but differs in that the child's biological inheritance and temperament is regarded as a key factor affecting the child's interpretation of his or her experiences. The leadership and management style of the setting will have an overall effect on the predominant emotional climate and is something that can be influenced by training. In ideal circumstances, the positively warm intervention of the setting can have a therapeutic effect on the child such that it can overcome disadvantageous experiences of emotionally neglectful family

experiences or anxiety in a child of nervous disposition. If the climate of the setting is cold or cool then outcomes for any child, however well balanced, would be diminished.

The third layer represents the regional climate within which all provision is made. Some views and observations are drawn from a range of local provision in the south Lincolnshire region using focus groups, questionnaires and secondary observations. It is the sampling of the experiences of practitioners, children, parents and managers within this oval that have been captured by the survey in the Reconnaissance of this study. The regional emotional climate would represent the levels of consistency and support or competition offered across settings by mutual arrangements and by the Local Education Authority. Organisational priorities and practices may vary according to the extent of local collaboration or competition.

The fourth layer represents the range of statutory, and private voluntary and independent (PVI) Early Years provision across the nation and would provide a further sampling range within which to test the validity of the local findings if time permitted. This group may be referred to as the 'Early Years Sector' in government literature. This outer layer also represents the recent UK Government strategies and policies that provide the current contextual backdrop to the study – as policies are changing then the factors impacting on settings also change e.g. policies affecting the required staffing ratios, qualification levels, national minimum wage and holiday allowance, quality standards, nursery education grants, more/less investment or changes to family benefits, funding streams, a policy move away from supporting PVI to statutory provision etc. The climate of this layer will therefore have a positive or negative impact on all the inner layers.

Another layer could also be added to represent EU and International policies but this is less relevant to this study though could provide valuable comparable information with other countries.

With this model 8.2 in mind, a beneficial emotional climate (shown as yellow on the emotional climate grid) would represent a comfortable, secure, stable, positive environment. A beneficial educational emotional climate (shown as orange on the grid) would represent an achievable challenging, discovery-based, problem-solving environment within which a child

could experience the balance between the skills they possess and the challenges presented by their environment. This combination of 'comfort zone' and 'challenge/achievement zone' would also represent the optimum conditions for engagement in what Csikszentmihalyi refers to as the 'concept of flow' (1987). It would also represent the conditions in which informed staff could make best use of Vygotsky's (1934) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development or Bruner's (1986) process of 'scaffolding' learning.

For each layer described above, this mix and movement between yellow and orange would be considered the desirable emotional environment for optimal functioning. The interplay between the two would represent positive progress and development such that the task of early years staff contributing to overall development would be to ensure a child is in their emotional 'comfort zone' in readiness for activities in the cognitive 'challenge/achievement zone'. The overall conclusion to the research investigation looking for organisational practices that establish a positive emotional climate in an early years setting is therefore: "*those organisational practices that promote emotional well-being for children and adults within the setting.*" Through this study, specific practices have now been identified and can be actively implemented.

The focus of this study has been a concern over how well children's emotional well-being is understood and supported by early years practitioners. This concern is reflected in the three underlying themes exploring what an early years centre is for, the job of the practitioner, and the role of the manager. There have been many interwoven strands to this enquiry and, following the conclusion of the Literature Review, the focus of the primary research has been on relationships, teamwork practices and leadership in early years settings. Particular threads that have been considered, relate to early years staff employment stability and factors affecting staff morale. In the following section, the initial underlying themes are used to gather together groups of findings in a way that generates meaning and new knowledge.

### **8.3 Discussion relating to underlying themes**

#### **8.3.1. Relating to what an Early Years setting is for: Activities 3, 6, 8, 9, & 15.**

Children's early social and emotional experiences are being re-shaped by decisions made by adults. As a result of rapid social change impacting on family life, greater numbers of

children are now being looked after in a variety of ways: by other family members, in day nurseries, by registered childminders, in 'wraparound' (out of school) settings, and by combinations of these with informal arrangements with neighbours.

Fewer children are being brought up with both biological parents in the same household and this means that greater numbers children are being raised in single parent and reconstructed families. With these changes in family structure, greater numbers of children are experiencing domestic instability with the formation of 'semi-detached parenting' by one or even both parents. As more women return to the workplace after having children, the responsibility for care and education of the under fives has been changing. Alongside this development, schools have lowered their entry age resulting in more children attending school from increasingly younger ages. In response to the needs of working parents, more children are also staying at school for increasingly longer days. Although not considered a direct consequence of such social changes, it is also reported that greater numbers of children are being diagnosed with stress and other mental health disorders.

English law has attempted to keep pace with the increased social changes in order to safeguard the welfare of our most vulnerable members of society involvement and the focus remains on the welfare of the child with the subsequent introduction of the updated Children Act in 2004. There is now a greater government perception that satisfactory outcomes for children are best achieved through National Strategies of intervention and that this is achieved by supporting a growing number of employed staff offering childcare and undertaking related professional roles. Funding of childcare places is also available through grants to providers, tax credits for parents and a strategy that includes the development of hundreds of Children's Centres and the extension of community facilities in every school.

Activity [5] identified that levels of parental involvement varied greatly from one setting to another and even where there were 'parental Involvement' policies clearly in place, the experiences of parents indicated that the practice could be different from the policy. When asked in the surveys, parents generally knew less about the setting than the staff realized and parents also sought better communication and greater involvement.

This PhD research has identified 2 primary purposes of an early years setting: to create a beneficial environment for child development, and to form part of a strong social support network to assist parents in undertaking their responsibilities towards their children. Whether a setting is effective in both these aspects will depend on the skills and understanding of practitioners, and the implementation of organisational practices of the setting. Effectiveness will also depend on the guidance, funding and support provided by external statutory and community support.

### **8.3.2. Relating to the job of an early years practitioner: Activities 1, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19.**

From the research information provided in the Bright Futures Report (1998) it is vital that the new Early Years Practitioner does not see themselves in a purely teaching role but also has a good grounding in issues affecting a young child's emotional well-being. Any practitioner role should also include responsibility to support parents in understanding their parental responsibilities through modelling emotionally literate interpersonal behaviours.

A key aspect of the job of a practitioner is to work collaboratively with the leadership to maintain a consistent ethos in the setting. Interestingly, it was evident from activity [7] at the start of the action research phase that the senior staff team did not interpret the manager's actions as necessarily working coherently with their own actions as there was a destructive undercurrent of conflict impacting negatively on the work of the setting. This type of unhelpful energy can occur in any workplace and is distressing for employees and managers, contributing to workplace stress. If such a negative emotional climate develops in an early years setting it is potentially very serious in its effect on working relationships, staff instability and the likelihood of fulfilling the purpose of providing a beneficial environment for children and families.

From the work of Weare (2004), Corrie (2004), and others such as Gerhardt (2004), it has been shown that child happiness and emotional stability are a necessary pre-requisite to good educational attainment. As this is the case for all children then creating an early years environment where young children can feel unconditionally loved and stimulated is more likely to contribute to maximizing a child's potential. The extent to which managers and staff can reflect on their practices in order to develop supportive relationships will impact on

their ability to generate and maintain a positive emotional environment. Whether a manager can genuinely interpret their own actions in a way that shows understanding of their team concerns has been shown in this study to be problematic. Perhaps one responsibility of team representatives should be to act as a 'sounding-board' in order to provide feedback on management practices and their impact on staff morale and well-being.

The research activities have led to a number of conclusions, primarily that young children experiencing day care and early education are vulnerable to emotional inconsistencies in the setting and this is not in their best interests emotionally, socially and educationally. The morale and quality of relationships amongst the team and between day care staff and their manager or supervisors contributes to a child's well-being in both positive and negative ways, depending on the prevailing emotional climate that is generated by these relationships. Similarly, the quality of relationships between day care managers and children's parents also contributes to a child's well-being and these relationships develop out of all manner of formal and informal mechanisms.

There is scope here to further consider the contribution of Berne's theory of Transaction Analysis (Berne 1964, 1975) as this represents interpersonal behaviour through the use of relationships to play out the roles of parent (P) adult (A) and child (C). Adults may be observed relating to one another in one of the three main roles using language and interpersonal behaviour that inadvertently elicits a reciprocal role in a colleague. i.e. a manager operating in a (P) role may treat staff members as if they are children (C) rather than as adults (A). The (P) role may be demonstrated as an indulgent and forgiving parent or it could be as a controlling and dominating parent causing staff to respond with resentment. Alternatively if all members of staff relate to one another in a mature adult way then the possibility of a productive dialogue becomes much greater.

The potential for emotional inconsistencies in the setting is further increased by staff turnover and team changes which impact on the stability and continuity of care experienced by each child and its family. This is why the development of a 'reflective management' approach based on an understanding of Emotional Intelligence/Literacy can positively affect the ethos and emotional climate of a setting by helping to manage the change of staff in a sensitive way

that plans for change by making transitional arrangements. This research has identified that the job of an early years practitioner is to work collaboratively to develop and implement organisational practices that promote children's emotional well-being. This can be extended to include a responsibility to support each other by contributing to the development of a community of practice within the setting.

### **8.3.3. Relating to the job of an early years manager: Activities 2, 4, 5, 7, 14, 15, 20, 21.**

The job of a manager has also been shown to include reflecting on ways to build and maintain staff morale as this can be improved by the use of management activities that focus on the use of 'Value Indicators' as identified earlier. These improvements to staff morale will have a positive effect on the emotional climate of a setting in a way that is beneficial for the emotional well-being of young children such that a happy child in a stable environment has a higher likelihood of achieving its potential.

Given the predominantly female workforce and an underpinning philosophy of nurturing development in early years, one consideration could be to look at whether management styles mirror the broad categories of parenting styles; Authoritarian, Democratic, Permissive, Laissez-faire (Hayes, 1984). These styles reflect the levels of independence that parents allow their children and may also reflect the levels of autonomy that managers allow their staff. A democratic style is likely to have the most beneficial effect on the emotional well-being of the children in a setting.

The combined primary and secondary data relating to those "organisational practices that promote a positive emotional climate for children" indicate that the following would provide the optimum conditions for a positive emotional climate. The order is given in a way that relates to diagram 8.1 and surrounding circles:

- every child is unconditionally loved and nurtured by all adults responsible for its care
- every family is stable, well integrated and supported within the community
- every member of the early years staff team is skilled in emotional literacy
- every setting has a management style that is empowering and values its team
- every setting experiences positive local support from external agencies and specialists

- every local support group has a clear purpose and access to the necessary resources
- every national early years policy is focused on being in the best interests of the child

From the analysis of the current national situation given in Chapter 1, the research findings indicate that early years provision is in need of urgent review. Fees paid by parents, even with government grants and employer subsidies, cannot support the staffing ratios required for the care of young children nor can they fund the levels of pay that skilled practitioners should be able to expect. Consequently, the only legal option available for many settings to remain financially viable is to employ up to 50% unqualified and young or inexperienced staff at the lowest pay rates. Also, illegally, the temptation is to compromise on the staff-to-child ratios. This would not provide the optimal conditions identified above and can result in a compromise of care and education that may contribute to potential emotional neglect of children in some early years settings and subsequent educational underachievement.

The pressure then, is on managers to recruit and retain the most suitable staff and to find imaginative ways to either reduce or keep pay levels low, or to reduce the numbers of staff. Management compromises are inevitable and make the government policy of quality, accessibility and affordability a very challenging task. The only other options for the government are to

- i) amend the required national staffing ratios so that fewer adults are needed - which is not necessarily in the interests of the children,
- ii) provide ever larger subsidies which must be sustainable for successive governments but may be difficult to justify financially, or
- iii) look at using the finite financial resource in other ways that strengthen the parent and child relationships whilst encouraging flexible working arrangements for parents so there is less dependency on the skills and services of others.

The research activities have shed light on the role of the manager in a setting and it is evident from the various interviews that the demands on the manager of any early years setting are, by definition, extraordinarily complex and include the need to:

1. ensure high quality care and education for all the children according to their developmental needs



2. ensure that parents are kept informed, involved and satisfied
3. maintain team morale and staff well-being
4. ensure all guidelines and policies are adhered to
5. develop, maintain and make good use of network contacts with other agencies
6. balance the financial income and outgoings to ensure ongoing sustainability
7. stay positive and cope with personal stresses arising from juggling all the above daily

This list gives an indication of the skills needed to manage a setting and suggests a high degree of 'multi-tasking' is needed as well as good prioritising skills. The training and induction of anyone new to supervision or management would need to be very carefully given if the additional responsibilities are not perceived as overwhelming. With the focus of activity being largely interpersonal and intrapersonal, it is interesting to consider which type of leadership and which forms of organisation structures are most appropriate. These will vary according to the size and function of the setting but would be enhanced by viewing leadership as a community function (Drath, 2001) rather than an individual responsibility.

This study has focused on how an early years setting can make a positive contribution towards ensuring that the experience of a child of receiving childcare outside the home is provided in a way that is 'in the best interests of the child'. The manager of the main setting reflected that the purpose was for positive intervention by considering that the setting existed for the benefit of each child and their family. She therefore sought to fulfill this function to the best of her ability by having a sound understanding of how parental roles and responsibilities are changing.

With the increase in use of childcare and nursery education, parents have less time to spend with their children, particularly during the formative period of birth to five years and changes in work patterns mean that many parents now have less time available to learn the skills of interacting with their children and thereby strengthen family bonds. Indeed, some parents may now feel more inclined to abdicate their parental duties as a growing sense of inadequacy could set in once early years is regarded as a higher status employment activity. Social changes mean that family role models are harder to find and parent education classes seem to be predominantly focused on families with 'poor parenting' skills in deprived areas

through government schemes. Despite this situation with the provision of state-funded care and education for the under-fives, the parent/s still has primary rights and responsibilities.

The main conclusion from the literature and a summary of the research activities is that children's emotional well-being in early years settings can be improved through the use of particular organisational practices. Specifically, those practices that are based on the recognition that children's emotional well-being in early years settings is paramount as a pre-condition for development and learning. This context requires acknowledgement that children's emotional well-being is dependent on their carers' well-being and morale. Ensuring staff well-being is therefore an essential aspect of a manager's job role and is fulfilled by taking a relational perspective recognizing the 4Cs (Bond et al., 2010) of Change, Context, Complexity and Connectedness.

Other issues arising for consideration include the realization that there is a big difference between the theory of early years practice, and the reality of being able to provide an ideal environment for meeting the developmental needs of young children. Secure relationships are essential but very difficult to provide in a consistent way. As a foundation for future adolescent and adult functioning, emotional well-being would seem to be a greater priority than 'curriculum' during 0-5 yrs as it underpins development as the basis for all future learning. To be able to experience a sense of achievement contributes positively to individual well-being and within a stable relationship in a positive emotional climate will be more likely to generate a love of learning in children and adults. A manager's role is therefore to recognise and celebrate the achievements of all involved, however small.

Identifying the balance between government requirements and the individual personal philosophy of providers leads parents, staff and managers to develop a joint understanding of the purpose of the setting and understanding of their partnership role as carers and educators. At the start of the study, the employers' view of staff attributes, skills and training identified the role of the practitioner to be similar to that of a good mother but with highly developed emotional sensitivity. Part of the manager role is clearly to establish effective ways of communicating priorities with staff and parents.

It has also been necessary to understanding the parental views of the purpose of the setting – finding the balance between the best interests of the child and serving the needs of adults in employment. If a setting is unable to accommodate the hours required by working parents then the result for the child is likely to be an undesirable patchwork of early years provision. Yet, for all the hours that a child may spend in a nursery, parents can still be expected to regard themselves as primary educators and care givers so the setting has a role to play in developing parental partnership, and a joint responsibility for providing a happy childhood with the opportunity for parents to develop parental skills and relationship with children.

What has become very evident is that the focus on a young child's emotional well-being falls between the gaps of several established disciplines. Well-being and mental health 'goals' come more from the health and psychology disciplines rather than from education. There is less recognition, understanding and training in educational circles of the characteristics and conditions to promote 'wellness'. Mental health issues tend to be regarded as symptomatic of 'illness'. This study has found that organisational practices can impact positively on children's well-being and it has also identified that organisational practices can impact negatively on children's well-being, as this can be dependent on the morale of the staff team. Some of the critical issues here are adult stability and motivation of staff to remain or leave a setting. Other issues relate to power, leadership and management style, pay, social needs of staff, and meeting other personal needs e.g. for companionship, through early years employment.

Within the setting, there is a fine balance to be struck between manager priorities, operational staff priorities and the financial pressures for the setting to remain viable. What has emerged is that an approach to valuing people can be developed through the enhancement of the interpersonal skills of managers and this valuing of employees by improving conditions of employment can have a positive impact on staff motivation and morale. The self-knowledge and intrapersonal skills of managers may be harder to develop and would be more likely with provision of the local support mechanisms that are needed for avoiding isolation and overcoming the 'emotional labour' of early years work for staff and managers of settings.

I therefore conclude with things that seem to make a difference to staff retention and morale and can be recommended to others.

#### **8.4 Desirable provision for young children**

The provision of an environment that helps to develop a healthy personality and arises from the interplay between:

- i) genetic inheritance and pre-disposition to temperament (biological factors)
- ii) family relationships - immediate and extended (nurturing factors)
- iii) social/cultural interactions in the community - nursery, school, leisure, neighbourhood initiatives (social factors) and
- iv) wider social influences - media, government policy (cultural factors)

A beneficial childhood would therefore consist of role-modeling by all adults demonstrating the desirable skills and behaviour of 'emotionally and socially positive' people

Suggested evidence of a positive outlook to be desired as outcomes from the combined education and childcare process, with staff in early years settings working in partnership with parents to ensure that young people eventually:

- See each day as an opportunity to do something that generates a sense of achievement
- Have a confident belief in themselves and a realistic self-awareness of their abilities
- Ability to make plans for the future and able to identify the steps to take to make progress
- Expect to be successful and can accommodate the influence of unexpected external factors
- Likes self and takes responsibility for maintaining and improving own health and well-being through varied activity, good nutrition and hygiene
- Regards education as being greater than 'schooling' and considers it a life-long process
- Exercises self-discipline and risk assessment in the avoidance of potentially destructive activities and takes responsibility for own actions
- Handles disappointment and upset in a reflective way and is able to return to emotional balance
- Communication & spending time with others leaves them feeling better for having had the contact

- Able to ask for and accept assistance, able to offer and give assistance when and where needed

*(acknowledgement to 'Incentive Plus' for initial ideas)*

A positive outlook can arise naturally for some children to varying degrees, but it can be significantly influenced by the interventions and interactions with others. The likelihood of young children eventually developing a state of emotional well-being should be recognised and addressed at three of the four areas of influence given above. For children to have a bright future, caring for one's own children should be regarded as a rewarding privilege and delight, and not considered a domestic chore to be minimised, avoided or delegated.

Any job involving caring and educating other people's children should be highly valued and respected by the whole community. Anyone who cares for and educates young children, whether their own or others, should have a community network of support and guidance available in recognition of the demands of the responsibility and the 'emotional labour' involved in the task. Perhaps shops and services could display a 'family friendly' logo, rather like the disability access logo, to indicate a welcoming attitude to parents with young children.

On the basis of Emotional Literacy theory, children and adults experience emotions whilst learning. This should be recognised by managers as an important aspect of both the establishment of well-being and as a contributory factor essential for supporting the learning process, rather than asking questions such as:

- 'does this or that reading scheme work?' or
- 'how can we teach mathematics a different way?'

should we be asking:

- 'What frame of mind is the child in and can anything be done to bring it to readiness?'

or indeed a recognition that readiness can also apply to the practitioner by asking

- 'What frame of mind is the adult in and should anything be done to raise their well-being?'

Does it matter? If high levels of well-being contribute to a positive learning environment for both, then the question becomes 'could/should this be influenced?' if so, how can training be revised to include greater understanding of the benefits of understanding the role of emotional well-being as a pre-condition to learning and development? For anyone working in an early years setting, high retention and morale of good staff is critical to influencing the emotional climate and well-being of the children. The continuation of high staff turn-over can only have a detrimental effect. The findings of this study have shown that improving retention and morale can be achieved through the development of a leadership style that makes an informed use of Value Indicators.

If a beneficial and positive emotional climate can be created through the thoughtful use of relationship skills then it becomes imperative for managers to adopt, develop and use these skills to good effect. At present this is left more to chance but should develop in future as a result of a concerted effort to initiate high quality adult-adult and adult-child relationships within settings.

### **8.5 Valuing early years staff**

In order to understand staff retention and morale issues in early years settings it has been helpful to establish which employment factors most affect staff in early years settings. From the research considered in the literature review, disaffection can be attributed to general feelings of 'not feeling valued or appreciated'. As 'maintaining high levels of staff retention' has already been identified as a key issue for the well-being of the children in a setting then morale and the well-being of staff deserves to be better understood.

Value Indicators (VIs) as outlined in this study are linked to the identification of rewarding interpersonal experiences - a person will move towards or seek to remain in situations that confer personal value i.e. recognition, status and a sense of belonging. Simple day to day personal contacts with other people (colleagues, children, their parents) in the work setting can reinforce a sense of worth or alternatively, they may contribute to a sense of worthlessness. Although pay rates are an important VIs, they are not the only factor indeed, it may be possible to demonstrate that greater management attention to conferring value through the use of other VIs may go a long way to compensate for lower pay levels and

ensure retention. The intentional use of Value Indicators could work alongside the conventional leadership tools involved in motivating staff – though ethical considerations suggest that VIs should not be taken advantage of by employers to perpetuate early years employment as a low paid job.

Establishing a framework that could be used by managers for conferring value on staff members would seem to be a valuable activity in itself. The prospect of this approach having a beneficial effect on the well-being of the children in the setting and on the parents using the setting would be a most gratifying outcome to the work put into this study. This may also link to the proposal of an 'Emotionally Mature'/ compassionate /beneficial style of leadership and management.

In the current economic climate it is unlikely that the work of the majority of early years staff in independent and statutory settings will be financially improved and certainly not in the near future. In reality, for early years settings, the challenges of good staff management can be compromised by the need to keep within a tight budget and operate legally. Potential conflicts will continue to arise between ensuring high quality provision with well qualified, skilled staff, and the need to operate a setting in a cost effective way to ensure sustainability. Whilst the parent questionnaire identified good provision as a reason for choosing the setting, practically, the issue of affordability will always remain a factor.

## **8.6 Summary**

The various research activities undertaken have shed light on different aspects of operation within early years settings and this has led to the formulation of a number of recommendations about which organisational practices will contribute positively to an emotionally positive environment and the emotional well-being of young children in an early years setting.

The central conclusions arising from this collection of research data is that early years policies in England are not necessarily designed in the best interests of young children if provision is reliant on a low paid and undervalued workforce. If this remains the case and early years staff continue to feel undervalued, then young children are at risk of emotional neglect and

subsequent educational under-achievement. There is potentially a real risk that early years settings may do more harm than good in the long-term, if they are not suitably managed in a way that attracts and retains highly skilled staff with the emotional literacy to form and maintain secure, loving relationships with the children in their care. It is therefore essential for the early years sector to agree on management practices that create a positive emotional climate by raising and maintaining staff team morale as well as individual well-being if settings are to secure and ensure the emotional well-being and eventual educational progress of young children.

This research contributes new knowledge and greater understanding of what optimal leadership and management practices should be in order to establish the type of responsive and reflective working environment that develops a positive emotional climate. To contribute to development of the setting, an 'Emotional Climate Thermometer' has been created as a discussion tool. This study also contributes a reflective 'Value Indicator' model as a training tool for developing staff well-being.

The overall conclusions and recommendations focus on the following areas:

- Recognition of the impact of adult well-being on children's experiences;
- Description of a beneficial leadership style for early years settings;
- Clarification of specific organisational practices to be developed;
- Consideration of parental involvement and shared responsibility for childhood;
- Proposal of specific training activities to support development of practice.

The search for practical wisdom in early years practice is directly related to our construct of childhood and our understanding of good practice in a specific context as well as the application of general underpinning principles. The ongoing discussion involves practitioners, parents, policy makers and academics, but how agreement is reached will depend on who decides what best practice looks like and who holds power over it. Until there is a common agreement about the purpose of early years settings there will always be disagreement and tension based on the different constructs of childhood and of parenthood. This PhD research adds the practitioner voice to the debate. Recommendations for changes in practice and proposals for improving the effectiveness of early years provision are given in Chapter 9.



## Chapter 9

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 9.1 Introduction

This PhD research investigates early years provision and asks if the environment within an early years setting is inherently beneficial for the holistic development of young children. It specifically considers whether the task of meeting children's emotional needs in an early years setting can be improved by establishing a positive emotional climate through the use of particular organisational practices that focus on developing staff well-being. The primary data analysis of this study has shown that there is a significant gap between the theory of good early years provision and the reality of what is possible in practice. It is recognised that if parents wish, or need to work full or part-time, they may need to access some form of early years provision. In the review of literature, the distinction is made between the provision of nursery education - primarily for the benefit of the child; and full day care - primarily for the benefit of the parent. It is acknowledged that many early years settings effectively combine the two functions in an integrated way as well as offering other services.

The expansion of provision has focused on increasing the number of day care places and the number of hours that young children spend in group care. The strategy is based on a drive to lift families out of poverty by increasing employment opportunities, however, the implementation of well-meaning early years policies results in the government playing an increasing function in determining family experiences, to the point that the fundamental roles and responsibilities of parents are being changed through developing greater dependence on the skills of early years staff. These policies are now changing parenthood from being that of a childcare provider role to being a childcare consumer activity.

The childcare vision has been presented with the expectation that greater investment in early years will lead to long-term social benefits. Alongside the government investment of resources to develop buildings and services is the task for all early years providers to interpret the purpose of these settings and to address the operational issues, training, and development implications for practitioners. As has been considered and concluded in

previous chapters, the expansion and continuation of services should focus on the quality of experience and benefits for the children rather than simply on increasing the quantity of places to enable parents to remain in employment. To this end, the identification of organisational practices that are beneficial for young children's development provides essential information for any early years provider if we are to avoid unintended negative consequences.

## **9.2 Recommendations specifically for the main setting of the study**

At the start of this study, the manager and staff team of the main setting were experiencing continual change arising from the introduction of government policy. Diverting staff energy to reassess their practice and manage the change process was generating a negative emotional climate that had the potential to impact on the children's well-being. The action research approach was successfully introduced to support the setting and, as this process of change was replicated across the region, undertaking this research has also been valuable in finding out more about experience of early years from the workforce viewpoint across a number of settings.

Recommendations for this particular setting include the requirement to continue to operate in a democratic and mutually supportive way that will maintain trust amongst the adults such that their own social and emotional needs are addressed. This is to ensure that adult well-being and group morale can be maintained for the benefit of the children. Following the completion of the research process, the setting was advised to seek network opportunities with the local Children's Centre and to become involved with the PEEP programme of support for parents. This took place and the setting is now the provider of crèches and is involved in a range of sessional activities for the Children's Centre, including delivery of PEEP sessions and support for fathers. As director of the setting, I now have a much greater understanding of the complexity of the manager's role and the demands arising from it. I also recognise the need to provide regular one to one support for the manager and the need to schedule priority time for reflection on practice.

The overall conclusions and recommendations focus on three main aspects of the early years environment: the effectiveness setting, the effective practitioner, and the effective leader.

### **9.3 Thematic recommendations**

#### **9.3.i Relating to what an early years setting is for**

The rationale for the development of children's centres and the continued existence of any early years setting must be primarily to support parents in their responsibility to provide the continuity of a loving and stable family life and to promote their children's well-being and childhood happiness through partnership in fulfilment of the UN CRC article 3 (1989). All provision should focus on maintaining staffing ratios with all qualified practitioners and providing appropriate training that allows staff to facilitate building the one-to-one secure and stable relationships between parent and child that is so essential for early development and learning (Weare 2004). Early years policies relating to provision must therefore emerge from a 'child development and well-being' agenda rather than a preparation for 'schooling' agenda. The developmental needs that contribute to a young child's well-being can be summarised as:

Belonging – a need to bond securely and socialise with others

Stability – a need to be in a safe and predictable environment

Stimulation – a need to use all senses to experience new things

Choice – a need to feel able to influence their environment

Affection – a need for love, physical contact and comfort

Provision of all of which is the responsibility of parents with the support of practitioners.

#### **9.3.ii Relating to the job of an early years practitioner**

Early Years practitioners should have professional status in their own right that recognises their holistic role of supporting child well-being in relation to a combination of health, education, and social play therapy. Practitioners should not be seen as domestic support, para-educational or as a 'poor relation' to teachers but be valued by society for their specialist knowledge and skills. This recognition would be evident in the commitment to developing a set of recommended national pay scales and conditions of employment for early years practitioners in all types of setting. This move would help to raise the status of practitioners and establish parity with other professionals. By definition, adequate pay rates would also require an increase in the grants to support appropriate pay scales fairly across all types of setting as parental fees would be unable to cover this cost.

In order to become a recognised professional job role there would need to be an immediate statutory requirement for all early years practitioners to have had basic training to at least level 2 qualifications *before* starting employment and be working towards and/or gaining level 3 within two years of commencing employment. Early years should therefore move to have a fully qualified workforce with financial assistance available to support staff to gain training up to degree level. And the professional pay scales to match.

To support practices that contribute positively to young children's experiences, it is concluded that, in addition to knowledge of the normal emotional development of children 0 to 8 years, the core training for all early years practitioners should include:

- An understanding and recognition of the range of factors that may affect emotional well-being and early mental health issues in children.
- An understanding and recognition of the range of factors that may affect emotional well-being in themselves as adult staff members, and in others.
- Recognition of behaviour patterns that indicate emotional disequilibrium in children.
- Recognition of behaviour patterns that indicate emotional disequilibrium in themselves, and in others
- Development of skills and strategies to counteract the impact of negative life factors and to be able to introduce preventative measures
- Development of skills and strategies to support families experiencing instability and to be able to provide support that strengthens parental bonding with their children
- Development of skills and strategies for self-reflection and strengthening of personal 'coping mechanisms' and building self-belief
- Organisation development strategies to build team morale and common purpose

The professional support for families is available across a range of disciplines and it is concluded that there is not yet a common language for co-professionals working within early years. In order to create a common use of language for early years practitioners and other professionals a text or chart is advised. The development of a reference guide/chart for non-specialist staff would help to establish emotional well-being norms and would identify when professional help may be needed, and how to access it. This would then form part of an early identification and preventative action strategy that would support children and families in difficulty at a much earlier stage. Early years practitioners would effectively be empowered

and skilled to initiate therapeutic play strategies within the child's normal pre-school environment and this would avoid the 'medicalisation' of preliminary mental health issues.

The responsibilities and expectations of practitioners have been shown to be emotionally and socially demanding for staff team members and it is concluded that staff teams in settings would benefit from support provided by development clusters. Such clusters could receive regular updating and training on child well-being issues and intervention strategies with a statutory requirement for attendance at development events if the setting is receiving early years funding. These groups would be considered supportive communities of practice.

### **9.3.iii Relating to the job of an early years manager**

From the primary data gathered and analysed it is clear that early years leaders and managers have an extremely complex and onerous range of responsibilities. In the same way that 'clustering' would provide support for staff teams, it is concluded that all early years settings would benefit from some form of formal regional clustering and that this could be linked to specific Local Authority funding for the development of statutory local support mechanisms for managers in a way that recognises and values their role.

One of the central tasks of managers is that of maintaining staffing ratios with appropriately skilled people. The new text that would seem to be most helpful is the development of an early years management guide on: *'How to attract, recruit, develop and retain early years workforce by showing that you value your staff.'* Some aspects of the content of such a text are considered below.

As the interpersonal skills of the staff team are such a vital resource, and if a key factor in ensuring the well-being of young children is through maintaining staff well-being and team morale, it would be a major contribution if policy makers considered the prospect of developing a national policy document outlining a managers' Code of Conduct or

Recommended Practice which:

- Outlines a desirable management interpersonal style and the skills appropriate for early years settings
- Places responsibility on the manager/employer to maintain and improve staff well-being and morale

- Demonstrates a willingness by the setting to take the steps to promote staff morale as a team commitment and joint responsibility to adhere to the Code of Conduct/Practice
- Develops local and regional support mechanisms for managers of early years settings

This approach recognises that the essential resource available to fulfill the purpose of an early years setting is the quality of the relationships experienced by the children. These relationships need to be role-modeled and fostered in others by the person responsible for ensuring a reflective and responsive working environment in the setting. This could be regarded as a ***Pro-nurturative interpersonal leadership and management style*** predominantly applicable to the early years workforce and representing the responsibility to lead and manage in a beneficial, professional adult caring style that enhances the well-being of staff, children and, to some extent, the parents of the children. This description is different from the use of a caring 'parental' style of management as it acknowledges the adult nature of the workforce and thereby proposes the use of language appropriate to working with co-professionals.

In addition to good employment practice agreements on good pay and conditions, and a clear philosophy on the purpose of the setting, it is concluded in this study that a pro-nurturative management approach would promote adult relationships based on unconditional respect and regard (Rogers 1961) for one another and would include the following forms of interpersonal management behaviour: A reflective style that uses a consultative approach to decision-making by providing opportunities for team members to contribute suggestions and gain support for creative ideas. Recognition and positive responses would be offered readily when appropriate, and apologies given when necessary. Such an encouragement of collaborative working practices would demonstrate respect for the views of colleagues. Senior staff would be responsible for being consistent role models that set a clear example of desired interpersonal behaviour where all verbal and written communication is based on the use of positive language including the use of inclusive body language.

To sustain this approach, it is recommended that there would need to be an allocation of regular supervision and support time through team mentorship arrangements matched with clear areas of responsibility and accountability with recognition for good performance. Any

mistakes or errors of judgment would be seen as educational opportunities to be explored and lessons learned. The intention would be to use a good humoured, welcoming and friendly approach towards all staff, children, parents, visitors with the complete avoidance of any tactics that involve discomfort: blame, fear, threats, unpleasantness. There would also be an acknowledgment that each staff member has a range of external responsibilities and family commitments with flexible shift patterns available in order to respond to the needs of staff with families. The intended outcomes would be to develop interpersonal behaviours such as trust, consideration, mutual respect, and empowerment of the team to communicate and work in such a way that promotes and maintains a positive emotional climate for the benefit of the children within a framework promoting all round well-being.

## **9.4 Recommendations for action**

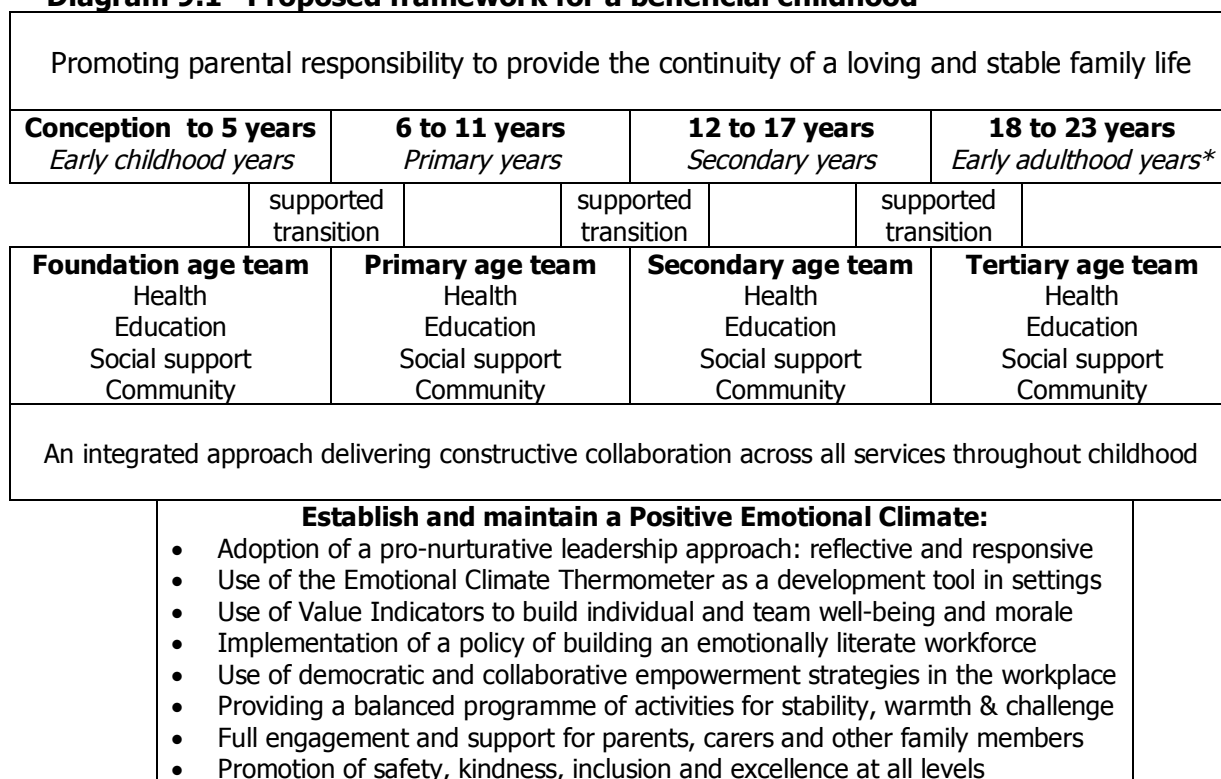
### **9.4.i As a conclusion to the research, it is recommended that the following proposals are promoted:**

- 1) Acknowledgement that the early years is the most formative stage in childhood and experiences during this time lay the foundations of the rest of childhood and adulthood.
- 2) Recognition and understanding by providers and parents that safeguarding the child's emotional well-being is a pre-condition for educational achievement of all children.
- 3) That providing care and early education for young children is nationally recognised and understood by the government and by those in the profession, as a skilled activity which makes a valuable contribution to the welfare and future of our society.
- 4) Prior to formal employment, a requirement that all early years staff should be trained in how to support young children's well-being. All appointments of staff should be on the basis of qualifying to at least level three within a fixed period of time - and no unqualified members of staff except in a level 2 trainee role, e.g. through an apprenticeship.
- 5) A recognition that a specialist style of leadership and management is needed to undertake the sensitive nature of the work of Early Years providers. And that this requires the development of an appropriate Early Years training/qualification that recognises and promotes the role of 'high staff morale and well-being', as a critical factor to establish a positive emotional climate to support young children's emotional well-being.
- 6) As children spend longer hours away from the family home, settings must strengthen their commitment to working in partnership with parents (and others) and also obtain commitment from parent/s to work with them in understanding and providing for the well-being of the child - especially to avoid potential abdication of parental responsibilities and semi-institutionalizing of young children such that they become semi-attached.
- 7) A joint text should be formulated to enable parents and early years practitioners to work consistently together in the interests of the child. A suggested model and outline is given below and encapsulates much of what has been learned through this research.

#### 9.4.ii Developing a model of practice: A Beneficial Childhood for all children

I propose a definition of a beneficial childhood that summarises the concept as *the collective total experience of childhood that enables a child to thrive and develop individual well-being in all areas of their life and is a consistently positive experience that lays the foundation for a socially integrated adulthood by establishing secure relationships during the early years*. This definition incorporates the responsibility of the parent/s to see childhood as a whole experience that requires a coherent chain of links across all the significant transition points, including supported transition to a fully functioning adult life. This definition also incorporates the responsibility of the various education, health, social services and community support mechanisms to work collaboratively within each age group and consistently across all age groups to establish a positive emotional climate in which children can thrive. Specific age-related strategies for the development of emotional well-being at each six-year stage of the model below, will have benefits for childhood and for adulthood.

**Diagram 9.1 Proposed framework for a beneficial childhood**



*\*Included here in recognition that these post-childhood years still require tertiary and parental support*

To assist with training activities, a text is proposed that incorporates this concept and model.



Suggested text for development of a coherent approach by parents and practitioners:

**Time for Children: Laying the Foundations of a Beneficial Childhood**

- To give children a positive foundation for lifelong well-being
- A joint resource to bring together parents, early years practitioners and others to construct a mutually supportive environment that seeks to empower parents, and lays the foundations for young children to become autonomous, active members of society
- A practical guide to developing well-being for anyone involved with joint day to day responsibility for the care, development and education of young children during their early years
- Available as a full text giving background theory and also available as a summary booklet for easy access to ideas and information by parents and staff

Six main sections to include information and best practice guidelines:

- 1) *Introduction and current socio-political context of families and early years provision*
- 2) *Focus on the child and on constructing a positive experience of childhood*
- 3) *Focus on the responsibilities & empowerment of parents/legal guardians*
- 4) *Focus on the responsibilities and empowerment of early years practitioners*
- 5) *Focus on the responsibilities and empowerment of early years managers*
- 6) *Establishing a shared understanding in order to support the best interests of the child*

A more developed outline for the text is given in Appendix o)

## **9.5 Further work that has been undertaken**

Since completion of the primary research, the *Emotional Climate Thermometer* has been extended to reflect the impact of management behaviours - see version 3 in diagram 9.2.

The use of *Value Indicators* as an approach has been refined and developed into a theory for wider application to other settings. Settings can be assisted in becoming more reflective and responsive about their leadership and management practices such that appropriate staff can be recruited, retained and developed in pursuit of providing an emotionally positive environment for young children. Some form of longitudinal research would need to be undertaken to test the effectiveness of this approach on outcomes for young children.

**Diagram 9.2 Emotional Climate Thermometer Chart** – Proposed as a discussion document

	Observable children's behaviour	Observable adult/staff behaviour	Observable supervisor/manager behaviour
<p>unbearable</p> <p><b>Stress</b></p>	<p>Quiet and restrained</p> <p>Possibly anxious and approval -seeking</p> <p>Very formal when addressing staff</p> <p>Low self-confidence, not spontaneous</p> <p>Unwilling to undertake messy activities</p>	<p>Rules and good manners very important</p> <p>'Work' is stressed rather than 'play'</p> <p>Planned activities used to control children</p> <p>Raising of voice to direct activities</p> <p>Confident of use of own methods</p>	<p>Contact according to established routines</p> <p>Authoritarian style or</p> <p>Highly demanding style</p>
<p>over warm</p> <p><b>Pressure</b></p>	<p>Generally shows conformist behaviour</p> <p>Questions or doubts own abilities</p> <p>Keen to be noticed and praised</p> <p>Knows 'the rules' about putting things away</p> <p>Attempts to control younger/other children</p>	<p>Structure and time-table very important</p> <p>Achievement of product rather than process</p> <p>Non-conformist behaviour discouraged</p> <p>Use of rewards and punishments</p> <p>Prefers clear lines of responsibility</p>	<p>Mainly directing and instructing others</p> <p>A focus on fault-finding</p> <p>Demanding style</p>
<p>Warming</p> <p><b>Challenge</b></p>	<p>Co-operates with adult initiated activities</p> <p>Concentrates on activities well</p> <p>Shows motivation to achieve outcomes</p> <p>Has a positive attitude to new tasks</p> <p>Willing to help younger/other children</p>	<p>Thoughtful planning of learning activities</p> <p>Encourages perseverance and completion</p> <p>Directs groups confidently and sensitively</p> <p>Focuses on spending time with children</p> <p>Shows personal emotional stability</p>	<p>Supports planning, observes staff and gives positive feedback</p> <p>Knowledgeable and authoritative style</p>
<p>Ambient</p> <p><b>Comfort</b></p>	<p>Moving freely, choosing own activities</p> <p>Growing in self-confidence, expressing self</p> <p>Caring towards others</p> <p>Relating well to most adults</p> <p>Generally appearing settled and happy</p>	<p>Spending time with children as individuals</p> <p>Showing respect for needs of others</p> <p>Planning and working as a team member</p> <p>High personal morale, cheerful in job role</p> <p>Confident in own knowledge &amp; skills</p>	<p>Genuinely involved and easily accessible</p> <p>Warm and caring style</p>
<p>cool</p> <p><b>Tolerant</b></p>	<p>Exploring where not supposed to</p> <p>Superficial repetition of activities</p> <p>Low level of 'engagement'</p> <p>Begins activities if encouraged by an adult</p> <p>Spasmodic arguments with others</p>	<p>Some low level involvement with the children</p> <p>Intervening if necessary to undertake tasks</p> <p>Much social chatting with other staff</p> <p>Undertakes tidying and getting 'jobs' done</p> <p>Avoids setting up messy activities</p>	<p>Occasional contact with staff during sessions</p> <p>Inconsistent and unfocused style</p>
<p>cold</p> <p><b>Neglect</b></p>	<p>Short concentration span/restless</p> <p>Little evidence of developing social skills</p> <p>Destructive, aggressive and uncooperative</p> <p>Passive, institutionalised</p> <p>Unhappy, demanding attention</p>	<p>Lack of personal involvement with children</p> <p>Reluctant to spend time planning activities</p> <p>Contact mainly with other staff, children left</p> <p>When used, language is controlling</p> <p>Speaks unkindly about children to others</p>	<p>Mainly absent from children's activity areas</p> <p>Inadequate or inexperienced style</p>

As a result of this investigation, a *Reflective Early Years Manager* resource has been developed which comprises a questionnaire for all staff, a questionnaire for all parents, a framework of questions for discussion based on the Emotional Climate Thermometer and a checklist of actions for implementation in the setting. The pack contains guidance for use and for subsequent monitoring activities in order to maintain the reflective approach and accommodate staff turnover. The underlying concept relates to the structuring of the behaviour of the manager and senior staff in the setting in such a way as to benefit and support the staff, children and parents using the provision so that they can collectively build a beneficial childhood for every child.

### **Further research suggestions**

Ensuring high quality provision remains a challenging task. The Care Workforce report by the Thomas Coram Research Unit (2007) giving a secondary analysis of the Labour Force Survey data, indicates that the early years sector is still very dependent on (predominantly white) women working for the lowest pay rates and that "childcare workers have the shortest period of continuous employment with the same employer of all six main occupational groups." Finding creative ways to recruit and retain early years staff with appropriate skills remains an area of concern if beneficial organisational practices are to be implemented.

There is scope to contact other settings that may wish to reflect on whether changes to their management style and organisational culture could positively impact on the well-being of their children by establishing improvements to the recruitment and retention of suitable staff. If the 'positive emotional climate' approach is tested successfully elsewhere, the adoption of morale raising practices could become regarded as normal practice for leadership training of early years managers.

If the trend towards publicly funded childcare continues, it will be interesting to see whether parents continue to consider themselves as the primary educator and carer of their own children or as child-producing agents acting on behalf of the government. This would lead to the question of 'whose children are they?' If the pension crisis is not able to be resolved there may soon be national strategies and incentives for families to expand by having more

children as a potential long term investment for securing pension funds and well-being for the nation's older generation.

Changes to parenting roles and the related increasing reliance on the provision of childcare and early education for the under-fives, is an area of social development that will require close monitoring if the aspiration of the UN CRC is to be achieved. From the findings of the Bright Futures Report (1999) there is a lot of preventative action research work that still needs to be done to ensure that the Five Outcomes of: Health, Safety, Enjoyment & Achievement, Economic independence, and Contribution to Society (DCSF 2006) are achievable for every child.

## **9.6 Summary**

### **In pursuit of establishing a positive emotional climate in an early years settings**

Attempting to undertake such a complex and ambitious mix of research activities has proved to be both exhilarating and frustrating, as the sense of achieving a satisfactory outcome for each task in an uncertain research environment has proved to be somewhat challenging. On reflection, a far simpler approach would have been to conduct a series of observations and interviews with staff, parents and the manager over a specific time-frame, but whether these would have elicited the same rich range of qualitative data cannot be known but is unlikely.

The use of different forms of focus group served to widen the inquiry and provided an opportunity to consolidate or revise emerging ideas. Exploration of the different forms of data collection has led to a better understanding of the subtleties of research methods and a consideration of the need to base the activities within a rational framework. A 'single cycle institutional action research over time' approach has brought visible benefits to the children, staff and manager of the main setting in that self-awareness and the use of the positive style is contributing to an improvement in staff retention. This stability is the result of a long process of reflection and understanding by the team which has benefits for the emotional well-being of the children using the setting. It is this outcome that has made the research activities worthwhile.

This PhD thesis represents the completion of one major single cycle, action research study over an extended period of time by focusing on the experience of development in one setting in particular. During this period, the early years context has changed by the introduction of further policy initiatives and public perceptions and continues to change through successive policies. If it is considered to be advantageous, a further cycle can now be undertaken using a similar methodology that bring together the current views of employers, practitioners and parents. The whole process has contributed to understanding the changing nature of childhood and parenthood in today's society. With this has also come a better understanding of the purpose of early years settings, the role of the early years practitioner and, in particular, the role of the early years manager in creating a positive emotional climate within the setting in a way that will be of benefit to all the children and families.

Reviewing this real world action research approach against the characteristics given by Heller (2004) at the start of Chapter 3 it can be concluded that the following are all evident in the action research methodology used:

- There is a close relationship between gathering knowledge about the context of the setting and the resultant actions implemented i.e. they have been derived from research and diagnosis.
- There are clear benefits arising from this research for the families and staff at the setting as improved management practices can be confidently continued.
- The participants have contributed to the learning and interpretation of the findings and can take ownership and shared responsibility for continuing the change process.
- Although specific to one setting, the knowledge generated includes a degree of generalizability to the management of other settings.
- The results generated through the research are able to be shared and available to staff and parents (although some sensitive data has been withheld where necessary).
- The ethical issues arising have been recognised and explored with staff to ensure they can contribute to the reflective process within a clear working philosophy.
- A variety of methods have been employed to gather data and to generate further knowledge and this has contributed to the overall breadth and depth of understanding about effective early years management leading to developing and maintain organisational practices that support the promotion of children's emotional well-being.

This PhD research process has sought to identify the features of a positive emotional climate and define the key components needed to build a beneficial childhood for every child. The approach has been polyvocal in that many voices have contributed to generating new

knowledge and understanding in order to elicit value-based practical wisdom and good practice from an Aristotelian *phronetic* perspective (Flyvbjerg 2012). Everyone contributing to this study has been involved in establishing the collective wisdom that is derived from a productive community of practice (Wenger 2002). Practice in one setting has been transformed through building greater self-belief (Eraut 2004) and implementing sensitive interventions arising from the range of knowledge generated by the research process. This dialogue with practitioners and leaders of settings must continue and must be heard by policy makers and providers to ensure the well-being of our nations' children. Failure to apply this focus will contribute to lasting personal, social and emotional damage to children and to future generations.

As social change continues, everyone involved in early years provision is asked to take time to stop and reflect on whether issues of child emotional well-being are really being adequately prioritized, addressed and monitored in recognition that collaboratively establishing and sustaining a positive emotional climate for young children is the primary purpose of early years provision.

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## **Appendices**

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## **Appendix a)**

### **Employers Focus Group**

#### **Participating members**

<b>Employer initials</b>	<b>Setting</b>
SM	William Hildyard School CE Primary School MD
GM	Smart Start Pre-school MD
SH	Ryhall Playschool
MM	St. Thomas Moore RC Primary School
DH	Tots to Teens at Isle FE College
JB	Small Saints Pre-school, Holbeach
EH	Twigglets Day Nursery, Holbeach
AS	Heltwaite School, Peterborough
SF	Westfield School, Bourne
SM	The Mulberry Bush Childcare and Education Centre, Stamford
LR	The Children's Garden (Parent)
NS	The Children's Garden (Private Nanny)

## Appendix b)

### Staff morale questionnaire

Introduction to the activity in the main setting following piloting in the survey settings  
(NB this introduction was not used when the questionnaire was used in the other settings)

Good Evening everyone, I am currently researching issues that affect children's well-being in Early Years Settings. From reading the available literature, I have already identified staff morale and retention as issues.

I wish to involve you in the consultation and I hope that analysis of the information gathered here today will shed further light on these issues.

My overall aim is to improve the quality of provision for the families that use this nursery and consider that the production of a final report will also be of interest to managers of other settings.

My intention is to undertake four main activities in this setting:

[A] a survey - completed honestly, individually, anonymously and confidentially [today 16<sup>th</sup> March]

[B] an exercise based on reflective observations of staff and children [week ending 24<sup>th</sup> March]

[C] a second survey - completed honestly, individually, anonymously and confidentially [31<sup>st</sup> March]

[D] a selection of individual interviews offering suggestions for future action- voluntary participation.

If anyone has any other thoughts, suggestions or contributions they wish to make towards this study, then I would be very pleased to receive them. To assist this process, I will place a suggestions box in the staff room between 20<sup>th</sup> March to 7<sup>th</sup> April.

Does anyone have any questions ?

Please can you take a black pen and a copy of the questionnaire then find a quiet and private area of the building. When completing the questions, please read the statements carefully and take your time before responding.

Place the completed questionnaire in the folder provided.

Thank you for participating

## A Study into Recruitment, Retention and Morale of staff in Early Years settings

Perception of employment circumstances. Type of setting: .....

Please answer **all** the questions by circling the scale below, thank you. [Answers will be anonymous]

qu		4	3	2	1	
1	I really look forward to going to work	4	3	2	1	I do not really look forward to going to work
2	I am highly committed to my work setting, and expect to stay for some time	4	3	2	1	I do not feel particularly committed to my work setting.
3	I enjoy attending training and look forward to learning new things	4	3	2	1	I do not enjoy attending training and believe I have all the experience I need .
4	I have made some good friendships at work and I like the people I work with	4	3	2	1	I do not tend to regard the people I work with as friends
5	Children are great to work with and I really enjoy spending time with them, playing and having conversations whenever I can.	4	3	2	1	I am very busy at work with jobs and care tasks which tends to leave little time to play and relax with the children
6	At work I am cheerful, relaxed and find I smile or laugh quite a bit because we have fun	4	3	2	1	At work I tend to be quiet and find some things annoy me. I do sometimes grumble a bit
7	I am clear about my job role and my responsibilities	4	3	2	1	I am unclear about my job role and responsibilities
8	I feel that my rate of pay is quite good compared to people doing similar jobs in other settings. I feel satisfied with my pay	4	3	2	1	I feel that I am underpaid for the work I do. I feel unsatisfied about my pay
9	I would like to develop my skills so that I can make a successful career in working with children	4	3	2	1	In the future, I have no wish to have any more responsibilities than I have now
10	I am confident in the management abilities of my supervisor. I feel that I am treated fairly	4	3	2	1	I am not confident in the management abilities of my supervisor. I feel that I am treated unfairly
11	I believe I have good communication skills and use the available lines of communication appropriately	4	3	2	1	I am not sure that I communicate adequately in the workplace as misunderstandings can arise
12	I feel that my suggestions are listened to and valued	4	3	2	1	I do not offer suggestions as I doubt they will be listened to
13	I like to play an active role in developing the setting and attend all staff meetings	4	3	2	1	I consider staff meetings to be inconvenient and a bit of a waste of time
14	If I have any personal problems I feel assured that matters will be treated confidentially by my manager	4	3	2	1	I keep my personal problems to myself as I do not feel that they will be treated appropriately

15	I have access to the resources and equipment that I need in order to do my job well	4	3	2	1	I am expected to do my job but do not have access to the necessary resources
16	I look forward to meeting the parents of the children and talking through their child's experiences with them	4	3	2	1	I am never quite sure what to say to parents so I leave talking them about their children to other staff
17	I get to discuss my personal progress and job satisfaction during regular appraisals	4	3	2	1	I rarely get to discuss my progress and can not remember when I last had an appraisal
18	I consider my working conditions to be good	4	3	2	1	I do not consider my working conditions to be very good at all
19	I consider my holiday allowance to be fair	4	3	2	1	I do not consider my holiday allowance to be very good at all
20	If someone is off sick I am happy with arrangements for cover and tend to offer to help wherever I may be needed	4	3	2	1	If someone is off sick, I am usually unable to help out and prefer to keep to my normal hours
21	I look forward to social events outside the workplace and enjoy a night out with the team	4	3	2	1	I like to keep my work and my private life separate and avoid social events with the staff team if I can

Please indicate below, **in order of priority**, which 5 of the above issues are the **most important** to you as your reason for being in the job you currently have, and provide further comment if possible.

Issue no.	Comments

Please add any other comments or issues that may affect staff retention and morale

**Please return this completed questionnaire (in a sealed envelope).  
Thank you for your time**

## Appendix c)

### Parents questionnaire

#### Working in Partnership with Parents of Young Children

This survey is part of a research project investigating how Early Years settings work in partnership with parents. Please will you take a few minutes to answer the questions below. Do not identify yourself or name the nursery etc. Your responses will be treated in confidence and the completed questionnaire should be sealed in the envelope provided and returned to the researcher this week.

What sort of setting does your child attend? .....

How long has he/she been attending? .....

How many sessions does he/she now attend each week? .....

Please complete all the questions by **ticking the box** that represents your response to the statements below

Qu.		Agree/ strongly	Agree/ mostly	Not sure	Dis- agree	Comments
1	Before starting, I received useful information about what the setting would provide for my child					Example:
2	Before starting, I met with the staff who would be responsible for my child's day to day care/education					Give initials of staff members if known:
3	Before starting, I was asked to provide information about my child to the setting					Example:
4	I am interested in what OfSTED has to say about the quality of care/ education provided for my child					What is OfSTED?
5	a) I know where to obtain a copy of the setting's last OfSTED report, b) I have read a copy of the Report	-----	-----	-----	----	Where from? What does OfSTED say?
6	I know how often my child's Record is completed by their main carer/teacher					How often?
7	I am able to regularly discuss my child's progress at the setting with their main 'key worker'					How often?
8	I continue to provide the setting with information about my child's life					How often?
9	I am easily able to contact someone at the setting during the day if I need to.					Preferred method of communication?
10	Someone at the setting is easily able to contact me during the day if they need to					How often and when does this happen?

11	I am my child's main carer and am the person who drops off and collects them from the setting					If not, who does?
12	I am encouraged by staff at the setting to take part in the activities and events they organise					How are you informed and encouraged?
13	I make an effort and get involved in as many organised activities and events as I can					Examples of involvement:
14	I am encouraged to make suggestions and to contribute to decision-making at the setting					How do you contribute?
15	Staff provide me with information on activities that I can do at home with my child					Give examples of suggestions:
16	I find the appearance of the setting is very welcoming and I am happy to send my child there					Give examples:
17	I find the members of staff are approachable and I am happy to talk to them about anything					Give examples:
18	My child undertakes activities that meet his/her needs at the setting and is always happy to go there					How can you tell?
19	I know all about the activities that my child undertakes during their time at the setting					How do you know?
20	I feel as if the setting considers me to be the 'expert' on my child and I find that staff respect my views					Explain further:

Please add further suggestions that would improve Working in Partnership between home and setting:

Methods of Communication	
Information sharing	
Parental involvement	
Children's progress & welfare	
Relationships with staff	
Any general comments	

**Please return this completed questionnaire (in a sealed envelope) to the researcher. Thank you for your time**

## **Appendix d)**

### **Workplace observations in own setting & other settings:**

#### **Foundation Degree student focus group to undertake visits to settings**

The activity was introduced through discussion

#### **ACTIVITY GUIDANCE**

Possible aspects of operation to comment on

- Structure of the children's day/routine
- Level of planning and involvement in activities by staff
- Level of autonomy and engagement in activities by children
- Children's language
- How children's behaviour is managed
- Visual appearance of setting
- Levels of teamwork
- Language used by staff towards children/towards each other
- Staff interpersonal contact with parents
- Level of consistency on setting's values and attitudes
- Management structure and activity of senior person

In small groups, consider the 'Best case' and 'Worst case' scenarios

Devise a set of Cue cards for

a)	observable children's behaviour
b)	observable adult/staff behaviour
c)	observable supervisor/manager behaviour

## **Appendix e)**

### **Possible indicators of staff morale**

*(derived from Focus Group of senior staff in the main setting)*

- Levels of staff enthusiasm for work
- Levels of commitment to the organisation/length of service
- Willingness to train and improve skills/knowledge/understanding/qualifications
- Social experiences/friendships with colleagues
- Involvement in /contribution to, activities beyond the scope of the work role
- Confidential information about children and staff is handled professionally at all times
- Enjoyment of conversations/activities with young children (language to control/involve)
- Cheerful outlook/positive behaviour by staff – smiling/laughter/having fun
- Relaxed and confident staff team that welcomes visitors and observers
- Staff confidence that management tasks will be done within appropriate time-scales
- Feelings of security and recognition/individual contributions are valued
- Ease of recruitment of new staff/work reputation outside the setting
- Staff needs/concerns are permitted and suitably addressed via a schedule of meetings
- Attention given to operational details and avoidance of unnecessary niggles
- Necessary resources are readily available
- All roles, responsibilities and work patterns are clear, rational and fair
- Pay rates reflect differential roles
- Equality of opportunity exists for career development
- Internal problems are solved quickly and effectively
- Working practices are supported by up-to-date policies which are available for reference

### **ACTIVITY GUIDANCE**

[A] Please organise these factors in order of priority as for work in any early years setting

[B] Please individually rate your setting on a scale of 1(low) to 5(high) for each item above

NB: You may add other factors to the list if you wish (if sufficiently different from those above)



## Appendix f)

### Emotional climate questionnaire

**CONFIDENTIAL**

#### ACTIVITY GUIDANCE

Please observe the other staff and the children in your setting for a period of one week

Read each description below and tick a column for every line (66 lines)

When completed, please seal in the envelope provided and return. Thank you

	<b>Observations of staff and setting</b>	frequently 4	sometimes 3	rarely 2	never 1
1	Rules and good behaviour very important				
2	'Work' is stressed rather than 'play'				
3	Planned activities are used to control children				
4	Use of loud voice to direct activities				
5	Confident of use of own personal methods				
6	Structure and time-table very important				
7	Achievement of product rather than process				
8	Non-conformist behaviour is discouraged				
9	Use of rewards and punishments to control				
10	Clear lines of responsibility evident				
11	Thoughtful planning of learning activities				
12	Encouraging perseverance and completion				
13	Directing groups confidently and sensitively				
14	Focus on staff spending time with children				
15	Showing personal emotional stability				

16	Spending time with children as individuals				
17	Showing respect for needs of others				
18	Planning and working as a team member				
19	High personal morale, cheerful in job role				
20	Confident in own knowledge & skills				
21	Some low level involvement with the children				
22	Intervening if necessary to undertake tasks				
23	Much social chatting with other staff				
24	Undertakes tidying and getting 'jobs' done				
25	Avoids setting up messy activities				
26	Lack of personal involvement with children				
27	Reluctant to spend time planning activities				
28	Contact mainly with other staff, children alone				
29	When used, language is for controlling children				
30	Speaking unkindly about the children to others				
	<b>Observable children's behaviour</b>				
31	Children are quiet and restrained				
32	Possibly anxious and approval -seeking				
33	Very formal when addressing staff				
34	Low self-confidence, not spontaneous				
35	Unwilling to undertake messy activities				
36	Generally shows conformist behaviour				
37	Questions or doubts own abilities				
38	Keen to be noticed and praised				
39	Knows 'the rules' about putting things away				
40	Attempts to control younger/other children				

41	Co-operates with adult initiated activities				
42	Concentrates on activities well				
43	Shows motivation to achieve outcomes				
44	Has a positive attitude to new tasks				
45	Willing to help younger/other children				
46	Moving freely, choosing own activities				
47	Growing in self-confidence, expressing self				
48	Caring towards others				
49	Relating well to most adults				
50	Generally appearing settled and happy				
51	Exploring where not supposed to				
52	Superficial repetition of activities				
53	Low level of 'engagement' in any activities				
54	Begins activities only if encouraged by an adult				
55	Spasmodic arguments with others				
56	Short concentration span/restless				
57	Little evidence of developing social skills				
58	Destructive, aggressive and uncooperative				
59	Passive, institutionalised				
60	Unhappy, demanding attention				
	<b>Observable supervisor/manager behaviour</b>				
61	Contact according to established routines				
62	Mainly directing and instructing others				
63	Observes staff and gives useful feedback				
64	Genuinely involved and easily accessible				
65	Occasional contact with staff during sessions				
66	Mainly absent from children's activity areas				

## Appendix g)

### Emotional Climate 'Thermometer' Chart (*amended version 2 – includes supervisor/manager behaviour*)

	Observable children's behaviour	Observable adult/staff behaviour	Observable supervisor/manager behaviour
	Quiet and restrained Possibly anxious and approval -seeking Very formal when addressing staff Low self-confidence, not spontaneous Unwilling to undertake messy activities	Rules and good manners very important 'Work' is stressed rather than 'play' Planned activities used to control children Raising of voice to direct activities Confident of use of own methods	Contact according to established routines
	Generally shows conformist behaviour Questions or doubts own abilities Keen to be noticed and praised Knows 'the rules' about putting things away Attempts to control younger/other children	Structure and time-table very important Achievement of product rather than process Non-conformist behaviour discouraged Use of rewards and punishments Prefers clear lines of responsibility	Mainly directing and instructing others
	Co-operates with adult initiated activities Concentrates on activities well Shows motivation to achieve outcomes Has a positive attitude to new tasks Willing to help younger/other children	Thoughtful planning of learning activities Encourages perseverance and completion Directs groups confidently and sensitively Focuses on spending time with children Shows personal emotional stability	Supports planning, observes staff and gives positive feedback
	Moving freely, choosing own activities Growing in self-confidence, expressing self Caring towards others Relating well to most adults Generally appearing settled and happy	Spending time with children as individuals Showing respect for needs of others Planning and working as a team member High personal morale, cheerful in job role Confident in own knowledge & skills	Genuinely involved and easily accessible
	Exploring where not supposed to Superficial repetition of activities Low level of 'engagement' Begins activities if encouraged by an adult Spasmodic arguments with others	Some low level involvement with the children Intervening if necessary to undertake tasks Much social chatting with other staff Undertakes tidying and getting 'jobs' done Avoids setting up messy activities	Occasional contact with staff during sessions
	Short concentration span/restless Little evidence of developing social skills Destructive, aggressive and uncooperative Passive, institutionalised Unhappy, demanding attention	Lack of personal involvement with children Reluctant to spend time planning activities Contact mainly with other staff, children left When used, language is controlling Speaks unkindly about children to others	Mainly absent from children's activity areas

## Appendix h)

### Child observation activity

#### ACTIVITY GUIDANCE

This activity is taking place as part of a wider, ongoing study into child well-being in early years settings.

**The research question** for the child tracking diaries is "How many adults does a child form bonds with in a nursery setting?"

**The activity** is designed to take place continually over one week of nursery care for 5 children (varying ages) attending on a full-time basis. It is due to start in the week beginning 14<sup>th</sup> August.

**The manager** is asked to identify the 5 children (and obtain parental permission if deemed necessary) and to designate which members of staff are to take responsibility for initiate the diaries. She is also asked to oversee and monitor the process to ensure continuity.

**The designated staff** members are asked to record the information on the sheets provided for each child selected, and should delegate to others when there is a change of shifts to ensure continuous information. Every adult (including parents/visitors) who comes in contact with or who speaks to the target child/ren should be noted on the sheets.

Note: this activity is simply intended to capture a sample week as a snap-shot of typical nursery activity and all staff (and the manager) should work and behave as normal.

#### **Example of activities that may be noted:**

- Any conversations
- Removing/collecting coat, shoes, other personal items, etc.
- Providing food, drink, other
- Toileting, hand/face/nose wiping
- Playing with, crafts, outdoor/indoor activities
- Sitting with, chatting, listening to, storytelling, singing with, etc.
- Reassuring, settling to rest or sleep
- Observing, in sight, use of body language (smile) available (though not interacting)
- Solving problems with, resolving arguments, dealing with children's conflicts
- Role modelling, child copying, or helping with tasks, etc.
- Child in physical contact, on knee, being carried, providing assistance
- Which adult/s deliver and collect
- Any other forms of activity or contact

#### **Example of adult role that may be noted:**

- Parent – of child
- Parent - other
- Nursery Manager
- Room supervisor
- Nursery officer
- Nursery assistant
- Student
- Visitor – specify

### Child Tracking Diary Sheet.

Child Name: .....Date: .....

time	activities	Name of person	Person's role
8.00 – 9.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
9.00 -10.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
10.00 –11.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
11.00 – 12.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
12.00 – 1.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	

1.00 - 2.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
2.00 - 3.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
3.00 - 4.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
4.00 - 5.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
5.00 - 6.00	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	

## Appendix i)

### Impact analysis of issues that may affect morale and retention in Early Years Settings

Please reflect on the different organisational practices, management activities and conditions of employment that have been introduced over the last three years then tick the box to indicate your view on the effect each item has had/may have on your personal morale as a member of staff.

Please add further comments against any items that you wish

	Issues	Major effect 4	Good effect 3	Some effect 2	No effect 1	comments
1	Clear team structure with experienced room supervisors, deputies and assistants					
2	Children grouped in ages in order to offer provision using appropriate resources					
3	Clear planning arrangements for curriculum/scheme of play meeting Birth to Three or Foundation Stage					
4	All member of the team employed and paid as staff (not volunteers or other)					
5	All staff allocated specialist roles with responsibilities and accountabilities clear					
6	Revised nursery booklet issued to all staff - giving details of the aims of the setting, ethos and educational approach					
7	A clear staffing rota with regular sessions and any changes notified in advance (where possible)					
8	A budget allocated when available, for staff to select new and replacement play equipment as identified by the team					
9	Frequent offers to provide training and updating to assist with promotion prospects					
10	Ongoing staff support through internal review and appraisal process with feedback & support on progress and improvements					
11	A schedule of staff meetings notified in advance with attendance time recorded as hours worked					
12	Consultation on the development of a detailed employment contract resulting in improvements – all views considered					
13	Annual pay increases that exceed inflation and are above the national minimum rate					
14	Increase to 30 days paid leave for all staff, and flexibility over when holiday can be taken if planned in advance					
15	A well qualified team - all new staff to be qualified to level 2 or to commence training within the first year of employment					
16	Individual named and signed letter of thanks from director given to all staff in the summer					



	Issues	Major effect 4	Good effect 3	Some effect 2	No effect 1	comments
17	Small cash bonus given as appreciation of efforts made during a difficult period					
18	Provision of a drinks 'kitty' as a contribution to the staff team Christmas Evening					
19	On some occasions, director's attendance at full staff meetings when available to hear views/issues of the team					
20	Provision of a personal polo shirt with the nursery logo for every member of staff					
21	Operating in a new, purpose built building designed to match the way the nursery operates with easy access to the garden					
22	A consultative management style that seeks feedback from staff members on issues that will affect them or the way they work					
23	Being linked by situation and association with the college and having responsibility to support the experience of childcare trainees					
24	Being part of an organisation whose childcare practices are respected in the local community and by external professionals					
25	Other (state):					

Please indicate below - in order of priority, which five items above you would consider to be the main reasons that you wish to continue to work in this setting and why they are important to you.


Please indicate below - in order of priority, which five items (or other issues) you would consider to be the main reasons that you might at some time wish to stop working in this setting and why.


## Appendix j)

### Interview with the manager of the main setting

#### **1 What do you feel an early years setting is for?**

Child-centred first. For the children and enrichment of the children's lives and the family. We must provide for the family and to meet their needs, enhancing the child's development. For the child and supporting the family.

#### **2 From your experience in early years, which 5 things are most likely to have a negative impact on the quality of care and learning of the children?**

Not in any particular order

- Inappropriate staff
- Inappropriate provision i.e facilities and resources
- Lack of continuity of staff
- Poor communication between parents and staff
- Lack of access to external support network

#### **3. What qualities and characteristics do you look for when seeking a new member of staff?**

The first thing is basically, a caring nature with an affinity to children – a genuine liking for children. If you don't have those two qualities, then training cannot make a good nursery nurse. Skills can be refined and acquired but the underlying characteristics and attributes must be there first.

Examples of desired qualities (not necessarily both in the same person – different combinations of characteristics would be okay): warmth of character, passion for the job. To me, these are the two big things. Some people are motherly/fatherly whilst others are more able to bring skills and knowledge etc.

Within the environment here, we have so many characters it is trying to get the right blend that is important as different children respond to different people.

#### **4. What happens during the new staff probationary period?**

I've literally just changed this. The particular person will go through an induction process. We will have a mentor per person and an induction pack with policies etc, I do not want them to have any gaps in their understanding of how we work. It is important to have appropriate role-models so that the philosophy is suitably transferred.

At the end of the period, the new person will have an interview with the manager to evaluate their induction and make any suggestions for improvement to the process.

**5. In what ways, if any, do you feel that staff morale affects the children in your care?**

I believe that staff morale has a direct effect on the children. Ideally they should all be professional and personal stuff should not affect their work. However, I think experience demonstrates this not to be the case. If morale drops, it does affect the children e.g. during periods of stress the children can be more unsettled emotionally even though they are outwardly meeting the developmental goals.

Also, if morale is high, I think emotionally, the children seem to be much more settled. From experience, I can tell the difference and it genuinely affects the children. At Christmas time the staff are on a high and the children are as well, I think that one feeds off the other.

**6. In what ways, if any, do you feel that staff morale affects the parents of the children in your care?**

I feel the staff are more able to act professionally in front of the parents and that parents are not affected whether morale is high or low as they would be oblivious to this. Eventually over a long period of time they may notice if the children are unsettled. Staff can disguise it with the parents but not with the children.

**7. In what ways, if any, do you feel that your personal morale affects the staff in the setting?**

I think it would have a direct effect. The staff never know how I am as a person - I work very hard at keeping home and work life separate. Staff are very good at being aware. I think I am very successful at keeping things separate e.g. they had no idea when I was going into hospital etc, some staff can get quite protective towards me. They are also sensitive if I have a very high work-load and they will give me space so I don't have to deal with trivia. They can see if I have paper-work deadlines and am under pressure and will avoid coming to me with problems during that particular time. (Then the following day I get the whole lot!)

**8. How do you detect if staff morale is high?**

I know each individual member of my staff inside out. I can tell every single person and know if they are under stress etc, before they come to me, I detect it by knowing my staff very well. They tend to share information and spread their 'high' to everyone else. A couple of the characters go a little hyperactive as well. Communication changes, body language is more confident/perky, bouncing around the place. Staff speak to everybody more – children, staff, parents their whole 'aura is more 'up-tempo'. Ideas and inspiration tend to flow – more encouragement for others, infectious enthusiasm. Even those with private troubles are lifted by the enthusiasm of colleagues. It is a bit like a community here, everyone shares the news very much like a family. [Ex parent commented that it doesn't matter which building, the nursery feels the same – like a family]

**9. How do you detect if staff morale is low, and what, if anything, could/would you do about it?**

First of all – obvious signs: communication between the staff and the children (not the parents) would be far less light-hearted. Very much job-focused and functional but less fun factor between the staff. Less laughter in the building. Other things as well – ideas and enthusiasm would be lacking so that much more encouragement is needed to extract contributions. Children are very sensitive and they will gravitate to staff whose body language is 'warmer'. Children can detect staff feelings [ie. give a hug to someone identified as 'sad'] Also, children will avoid someone who is giving a 'colder' personal aura and will pass comment i.e. 3/4years old "what's wrong with ... they have a sad face today".

Nine times out of ten that member of staff would usually come to me in confidence before I even have to speak to them and ask to have a word after having an initial chat with their room supervisor. Spending time with staff (and parents) individually takes a large part of my time at certain times. This is how it is here and I find it very successful. Providing support for people is important whether it is work related or domestic. Fortunately I have done counselling training myself and do not provide answers but help them to explore the issues for themselves. Counselling was the best training I ever did. I feel quite strongly that every manager should have counselling training so that they can deal with situations professionally. Also so that staff know that whatever they tell me will be treated in confidence. The interpersonal part of the job is so important.

**10. In which ways can/do you affect the retention of your staff members?**

I think we have very high staff retention and I feel that by having a well-tuned induction process that can lead to happier staff and more appropriate staff. By choosing the right staff in the first place you can develop people and they are probably as loyal as any. I feel it is important to involve the staff team in the recruitment process and to listen to constructive feedback so that current staff feel valued and involved in the process. "We seem to get it right with the appointment of ...".

They are very proud of what we have and want to ensure the standards are maintained. New staff have internalised the ethos and enjoy the working environment.

**11. This study is investigating management actions that impact on the well-being of children in early years settings. Is there anything else you would like to raise or any other issues you feel it would be appropriate to discuss?**

The ethos of the organisation – its how the employer values the staff. Gestures are important to the staff. Feeling they are part of the ethos of the nursery. The staff form an opinion of the Director and that they know a bit more when not so distant. Staff have a pride of belonging to this organisation.

## Appendix k)

### Interview with a senior supervisor at the main setting

#### 1. Where would you like to start?

EC: The biggest thing and the most frustrating is if an issue/matter is raised with the manager and is not dealt with a) at all, or b) in good time, it creates barriers to doing a good job. For example some new members of staff have been at the nursery some time and still have not got their uniforms even though they have asked to have them. Another example is that the nursery was too hot in the summer and we were concerned about the children but not enough was done, even though possible solutions were suggested. It seems as though what is important to us is not that important to the manager or is too much trouble to deal with and we sometime feel that we are not really listened to and get excuses. This leads to feeling 'fobbed off' and not valued. Another recent example is that we have asked for shelves to be put in the outside store shed so that we can keep it tidy and more things can be put in there, but this has not happened yet. This means that some large play equipment in the rooms cannot be put away but staff feel criticised for something which it is not in our responsibility to deal with. We accept that shelves are due to go in but there should be understanding of why we are not able to put all the things away. Staff want to feel that what is important to them is also important to their manager. The longer things go on and nothing is done then it becomes a bigger issue and causes anger and frustration which does affect morale.

#### 2. What do you think makes people feel valued?

EC: Staff being listened to and feeling that their contribution is respected. On a more positive note, morale is raised by a feeling of staff team support. If flexibility is offered and available then people feel worthwhile and valued. The manager is approachable and responsive if personal issues arise and everyone is confident that the manager and the team will rally around to help each other over personal difficulties. If there were a lack of support, which there is not, then this would severely impact on morale.

We all like the fact that we look out for each other, it keeps us working the way we do – we all support each other. But we do need management to understand that the staff focus is on the well-being of the children and anything working against that will affect morale. Job-satisfaction depends on it. How issues are responded to can make a big difference.

#### 3. Do you have any suggestions of how to improve things?

EC: I'd like to suggest a book for logging issues and a brief action plan with an estimate of how long it might take to resolve things then staff can see that something is being done. I will raise this with the manager. The relationship that the manager has with the team is critical and I think this would help. In the nursery, relationships may vary across the team, it is a two way process. Some staff have a positive outlook and others are more negative. Some expect the manager to have a magic wand! It is a close team and both good and poor morale spreads very quickly and it does affect the children. It distracts staff and we are not as focused on responding to the children as we should or could be. When issues arise and morale is low, staff spend too much time standing around talking about things and not time

with the children, they (staff) can be not as happy in themselves and end up grumbling about their dissatisfaction. It takes skill to maintain a professional appearance when some staff find the negativity of other members not helpful. Despite all this, I know that the quality of care the children receive is still very good and that everything that needs to happen still takes place. I have my own child in the nursery and am completely confident about the care he is getting.

#### **4. Are other parents confident about the quality of care?**

EC: Parents are reassured though honest dialogue, they respect the staff and want to talk at the door about their child – asking advice, talking about their activities and behaviour. I have noticed that the more time we spend with parents, the happier they seem next time they come but there is not always enough time to speak so if they have particular concerns and want to talk more we sometimes arrange separate times when it is more convenient. Parent's evenings are so important because we are not having to watch the children at the same time and we can manage the time better and I think that once a term might be better. I think the relationship that staff have with parents contributes to morale – the feeling of being respected and valued by parents means that it is better for the children if everyone is getting on well. We could do more to improve and extend communication with parents.

## Appendix I)

### Interview notes from an exit interview with a supervisor (JB)

#### leaving the setting

##### **1. Explanation of reason for leaving:**

- Her decision to leave was not due to anything happening at the nursery but she has been offered career development and greater variety of experience so this represents a good opportunity for progression and is an exciting challenge.
- JB was 'flattered' to be asked to work at nearby setting and it makes her feel that her experience gained at the main setting is valued and recognised on her C.V.
- Professional development raining whilst at the main setting has widened her outlook, she has personally grown in the last two years and has improved her confidence.
- She will stay in touch and offers to be available for cover on free sessions if needed.

##### **2. Issues impacting negatively on ability to undertake her work whilst at setting**

- Inter-staff relationships are important, there has recently been some gossiping and some grumbling/complaining/off-loading but none that is seriously negative.
- Particular issues resulting in grumbles are (i) problems with ongoing building maintenance and (ii) inadequate level of support with cleaning. Both these can affect morale and the frustrations reduce the smooth running of the routines and also affect the sense of pride in the premises. [Some recent upheavals due to re-laying flooring, soil-water pump and a cleaner whose work was below standard]

##### **3. Issues impacting positively on ability to undertake her work whilst at setting**

- An open, approachable management style is good – relating to staff as people first.
- The opportunity to be honest is welcomed as is ongoing dialogue over any problems arising.
- The opportunity for development and to be able to 'grow as a person' makes for a positive workplace.
- Most members of staff seem to be 'up for new things' (although some are plodding along and getting in a rut, afraid of a challenge)

JB was thanked for her contribution and wished well in her new job.

## **Appendix m)**

### **Pre-school Parental Questionnaire** *(devised by the staff team)*

We believe that children benefit most from early years education and care when parents and settings work together in partnership. Our aim is to support parents as their children's first and most important educators by involving them in their children's education and in the full life of the setting. We also aim to support parents in their own continuing education and personal development.

May I ask you to take a few minutes of your time to complete the following questionnaire. The findings of this will enable us to continue to meet the needs of our families. Thank you.

1. Are you happy with the care your child receives in the pre-school room?
  
2. Is there any way in which you feel we could improve the care we offer?
  
3. Do you as a parent/carer have good understanding of the foundation stage curriculum and how this relates to your child's development?
  
4. Would you like more information on any areas of the curriculum?
  
5. Would you like the opportunity to meet with a pre-school supervisor to discuss your child's development?
  
6. Would you like to receive a Pre-school newsletter from the team containing monthly topics, room changes etc.?
  
7. We are currently planning a nursery parents/carers evening in May. Would you be interested in attending?



## Appendix n)

### Parental responses to staff questionnaire

Qu.	Summary and comments
1	<p>Are parents happy with the care their child receives Yes = 16 of which 9 added 'very happy'</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Just would like a little more help at lunchtimes as J doesn't eat a lot at nursery</li> <li>▪ E seems very happy to go to school which makes me feel comfortable with the care she receives</li> <li>▪ J is very happy and has no problems about coming to nursery, sometimes hard to get him home he enjoys it so much</li> <li>▪ Yes, although I would like to hear more about any work done with letters &amp; numbers in preparation for school</li> <li>▪ Yes, although in the mornings a lot of the time I see K wander in and find it difficult to join in. A little acknowledgement from the carers would be nice</li> <li>▪ I feel J has settled in well</li> </ul>
2	<p>Suggested improvements Yes = 11 (see below for ideas) None needed = 4</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Offer dance class or foreign language class. He had French and musical movement at previous setting</li> <li>▪ As I do not pick him up I feel a report of some sort occasionally would be nice so that I can see how he is getting on</li> <li>▪ More passing of info – through displays, brief outline of what topics the children focusing on so could talk to them about it at home also daily activities – what they've been doing during the day.</li> <li>▪ When C first started pre-school a visiting musician used to come. C always loved this, are other visitors possible?</li> <li>▪ The facility of being able to have warm meals during holidays - difficult to pack 2 meals</li> <li>▪ Information on how I can support E and the nursery with activities at home</li> <li>▪ Have no worries about care but do they wear aprons? Sometimes comes home covered in paint. Understand the need for the children to explore and its all about experience, some clothes are too "painted up" to get clean therefore have to throw them away</li> <li>▪ I would like to encourage O with words and numbers in a way which compliments the work you are doing</li> <li>▪ Information on Early Learning Stepping Stones and O's progress on them</li> <li>▪ Yes, but no suggestions</li> <li>▪ K really loves it at the nursery so I don't want anyone to think that I don't think the carers work hard - Children aren't always welcomed in the morning. Very rare for a carer to tell me how K has been. Have to rely on the white board or asking K what she has been doing</li> </ul> <p>No, I feel my child receives excellent care No, K is very happy attending No, I feel very pleased with the staff in pre-school as J always seems so happy and relaxed with all the staff</p>
3	<p>Do parents have a good understanding of the Foundation Stage Curriculum Yes = 5 No/not really = 7</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I know rough aspects but would be helpful to have further written information available</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Would be very interested in learning more</li> <li>▪ Nursery has developed J in so many ways I feel he gets all he needs by attending nursery. He get social interaction and his skills have improved in pencil control, learning alphabet, numbers etc.</li> <li>▪ The only concern I have currently is how little I understand about this stage of the curriculum, how E is doing, what I could do to support her &amp; the nursery</li> <li>▪ Just basics – learning through play, social, academic A-Z etc.</li> <li>▪ Would welcome more info – how this relates to preparation for schooling etc.</li> <li>▪ Would be nice to know more</li> </ul>
4	Would parents like more specific curriculum information Yes = 9 No/not really = 4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ With a first child and when the system has changed so much, it is hard to know what the guidelines for learning currently are. I would really appreciate more regular updates on how E is doing</li> <li>▪ As J often says he's done nothing would like to see what he's been up to. I'm aware of his routine but he won't say what he's been doing. Maybe to see more of what they do on a daily basis, but understand you are all very busy people!</li> <li>▪ Briefly, all of it</li> <li>▪ I think it would be good to have an outline of all the areas of the curriculum and so I would have more of an idea of what J is learning</li> <li>▪ Definitely anything to advance J knowledge and skills at home</li> </ul>
5	Would parents like the opportunity to discuss their child's development Yes = 14 No = 2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Although all workers are extremely happy and aware of progress – a slightly more formal meeting would be nice and happy to spend time with parents.</li> <li>▪ Keeping up to date with progress would be appreciated</li> <li>▪ I am very interested in how J is progressing. I would like to know if he is lacking development in any area before he goes to school</li> <li>▪ Would like the opportunity to meet and discuss J's development especially with school so near!</li> <li>▪ I would really like that</li> <li>▪ I would like to hear more about how J is developing and how his social skills are developing</li> </ul>
6	Would parents like to receive a monthly newsletter Yes = 15 No = 1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ This would be welcomed</li> <li>▪ It would give us an insight into our son's day</li> <li>▪ It would be interesting – I don't always have time in the morning to look at notices</li> <li>▪ This would be useful and also details of how parents can support the topics</li> <li>▪ This would be beneficial so we can see what's going on in pre-school</li> <li>▪ That would be excellent</li> <li>▪ This would be helpful as I can also discuss the topics with J</li> <li>▪ I think this would be a very good idea – a bit late for us</li> </ul>
7	Would parents be interested in attending an evening in may Yes = 16
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Would definitely appreciate the feedback</li> <li>▪ Definitely</li> <li>▪ Yes interested. J is very settled with you and loves coming. It's a good feeling to leave him and know he is okay</li> <li>▪ I would definitely attend</li> <li>▪ Absolutely, we would love to</li> </ul>

## Appendix o)

### Book Outline

#### *Time for Children: Laying the Foundations of a Beneficial Childhood*

- A practical guide to developing well-being for anyone involved with joint day to day responsibility for the care, development and education of young children during their early years
- To give children a positive foundation for life
- A joint resource to bring together parents, early years practitioners and others to construct a mutually supportive environment that seeks to empower parents, and lays the foundations for young children to become autonomous, active members of society
- Available as a full text giving background theory and also available as a summary booklet for easy access to ideas and information by parents and staff

Six main sections would include information and best practice guideline:

#### **1) Introduction and current socio-political context of families and early years provision**

- Young children being cared for by greater numbers of carers and in a wider range of early years settings – shared responsibilities due to changes in employment patterns
- Parents spending less time with own children, changes in parental role
- Need for parental participation
- Need to develop knowledge and skills in a rapidly expanding workforce
- Foundation Stage 'curriculum' introduced for 0-5 yrs in all settings
- Every Child Matters: multi-agency working to ensure outcomes for children
- Power relationships between parents and school/setting staff.
- Responsibilities, duty of care and in loco parentis: an introduction
- Greater range of responsibilities for early years providers
- Empowerment, initiative and ownership: an introduction.
- Mutual empowerment and partnership as the aspiration for parents and professionals.

#### **2) Focus on the child and on constructing a positive experience of childhood**

- What do children need in order to thrive?
- The importance of appropriate stimulation
- Hidden messages the child is given through assumptions and values – positive and negative; gender, race, language, class.

- Developing dependence or independence.
- What constitutes the visualisation of a 'beneficial childhood'?
- Exploring well-being as a holistic concept for optimal social, cognitive and emotional functioning of children and adults
- Factors positively affecting child well-being
- Factors positively affecting adult well-being
- The importance of relationships and communication
- Emotional understanding and self esteem.
- Conflict resolution.

### **3) Focus on the responsibilities & empowerment of parents/legal guardians**

- Providing a stable & happy home life – aim to accomplish trusting relationships, love, friendships, spending time, values, fulfil duty to establish consistent boundaries, develop child self-esteem, privacy, confidence, perseverance etc.
- Show kindness – stay calm, be patient, give encouragement, use flexibility
- Provide for physical needs – healthy food & drink, exercise & activity, rest & sleep, fresh air, medical care, warmth & clothing, a place for personal belongings, develop hygiene routines, establish a balance between gratification and healthy deferment of needs etc.
- Provide a balance of learning opportunities – play environment, stimulation, interests & activities, friends, have fun, toys, freedom of choice, foster curiosity, challenge, knowledge, problem-solving, exploration, achievements, mastery of skills, enjoy learning etc.
- Develop communication skills – speaking, listening, reading, writing, self-expression, friendships, conflict resolution, social bonding, a sense of belonging, creative experiences, understanding media etc. take time to listen to and involve children
- Cultural induction – social norms of family, role-models, community attitudes & behaviours, appreciation of locality, neighbours, self-discipline, co-operation, awareness of needs of others, social rules & manners, etc. lay foundations for autonomy
- Liaison with and accessing community services to support self and child – health, care, education & leisure, only use those that are good for the child
- Transitions – act as the child's primary advocate when using a range of early years settings, & when transferring to statutory education provision
- Make choices on behalf of children that are in their interests - about religious observation, education, health care. As children mature, provide support and reasoning to enable them to confidently make choices and take responsibility for themselves
- Protect – safeguard from potential dangers & educate for self-awareness and avoidance of danger by developing skill of assessing risks in adult and child
- Towards independence – ensure that relationships encourage individual thinking and self control/child learns to take responsibility for own choices
- Adult self-care – establish work/life balance, secure an adequate financial income, maintain own health & well-being, make good decisions, develop and sustain relationships with supportive adults, have personal interests
- Be realistic and reflective - stay hopeful and take time to enjoy parenthood

#### **4) Focus on the responsibilities and empowerment of early years practitioners**

- Build trust through recognition, understanding and respect for the unique range of responsibilities that parents have towards their children, value co-working
- Have a clear understanding of the purpose of the setting or provision
- Appreciate that every care task and every activity provides an opportunity for positive social bonding, developing language skills and trust with children
- Communicate & interact with parents to jointly construct an individual 'beneficial childhood' experience, focus on child holistic well-being, take time to learn and understand about individual family history, culture, and circumstances
- Contribute as a partner to the child's physical, emotional, social, cognitive, communication skills, and all round development, get to know children well
- Role-model consistently good practice & routines to colleagues and parents
- Liaison and co-operation with other agencies to support parents in their role – strengthening parent & child bonding
- Share and update professional knowledge, attend professional updating, provide advice, guidance and a 'listening ear' to support parents and colleagues through periods of personal difficulty
- Safeguard children – observe, record and respond appropriately to avoid or deal with potentially harmful situations
- Listen, understand and be careful – all forms of communication (including body language and media) convey social attitudes and confer value, avoid stereotypes and prejudice
- Balance sharing information with maintaining confidentiality in order to provide coherent provision, treat all personal information about families with respect
- Self-awareness – ensure own health and well-being, identify own needs and access personal or organisational support, maintain personal credibility and capability

#### **5) Focus on the responsibilities and empowerment of early years managers**

- Modelling leadership – develop trust, promote good practice by example, oversee activities of the team, empowerment and motivation of others, deal with issues promptly
- Human resources – development and consistent use of policies to attract, recruit, retain and build a competent and stable team, treat people fairly, listen carefully
- Operations – establish a positive working philosophy that places the child's well-being at the heart of all interactions and activities, use guidelines for prioritising, provide a stable & happy experience during time at the setting, respect staff experience and expertise
- Environment – have procedures in place to ensure regular maintenance of the physical setting re: cleanliness, safety, repairs, security, waste disposal, replacement of old or damaged play equipment, risk-assessment etc.
- Communication – induct & update all users into the practices of the setting

- Broker links – develop and commit to practices that support parental co-working and community liaison, treat all visitors and enquiries with respect
- Sustainability – financial awareness to ensure that decision making about resources will support the continuing viability of the setting
- Access support – develop and maintain contacts with other professionals, initiate action to support families according to agreed guidelines, identify need and initiate action to support self and colleagues
- Work/life balance – take responsibility for contributing to the morale & well-being of colleagues whilst encouraging a self-supporting culture, recognise emotional dissonance in staff and provide counselling support to overcome periods of personal distress
- Reflective practice – make & take time to review the purpose of the setting and monitor ongoing impact on children, families, colleagues and the community, be democratic when taking action to avoid problems
- Self-awareness – ensure own health and well-being, identify needs and access personal support, maintain personal credibility and capability
- Hope – demonstrate optimism, instil confidence, work collaboratively with colleagues and families through periods of change

#### **6) Establishing a shared understanding in order to support the best interests of the child**

- What well-being and a beneficial childhood looks like.
- The ethos and expectations of the setting.
- Staff professionalism.
- Embedding good practice and an ethos of continual evaluation.
- Place a high value on working towards building a 'beneficial childhood' for every child
- Recognise that investment in beneficial childhoods provides long-term benefits for all
- Empower parents to gain increasing confidence in fulfilling their responsibilities
- Empower Early Years practitioners to have competence and confidence in their role
- Empower EY managers to have the knowledge and skills to undertake their role
- Spend time together – family time, staff team bonding, community collaboration, nurture one another, share activities and laughter
- Have a 'mission' – assess priorities for being in the best interests of the child and clarify focus behind decision-making, preventing disadvantage
- Continuity - maintain contacts beyond time spent at a setting
- Work positively and consistently – everyone to use all forms of communication sensitively
- Exercise sound collective judgement – consider impact and effect of choices on others
- Liaison with others to build mutual strength and use this to have influence with policy makers

**END**