Teachers’ Beliefs about the Teaching of Reading in Early Years Settings

Volume 2 of 2

by

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CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

5:1 Conceptual framework

The previous chapter aimed at giving an account of the findings of this research. The findings were presented in such a way as to demonstrate participants' views on reading as a process, and on reading as teaching practice. Barnes (1989) wrote that, 'teaching is seen as ambiguous and complex work requiring judgement, action, and the capacity to reflect and revise decisions on the basis of one's observations and insights. Sound teacher judgements, therefore, must be rooted in deep understandings of teaching, learning, learners, and subject matter, and how these factors interrelate in the teaching-learning process.' (p.13)

Barnes (1989) also argued that knowing one's subject matter implies understanding what it means 'to do an activity'. (p.17) In addition, McDiarmid et al. (1989) suggested that teachers must develop a flexible, thoughtful and conceptual understanding of their subject matter if they are to help children develop understandings. Flexibility, according to McDiarmid et al. (1989), indicates the ability to develop, select and use appropriate representations for information, ideas or procedures. This in turn means 'understanding the content they are representing, the ways of thinking and knowing associated with this content, and the pupils they
are teaching. Such flexibility in creating access to knowledge in turn demands a more critical understanding of subject matter than that needed simply to tell children what they need to know.' (p.198)

If the children are to pick up on messages embodied in instructional representations, then teachers need to know as much as possible about their subject matter if they are to represent it well. Shulman (1987), Grossman, Wilson and Shulman (1989) discussed in detail the kinds of knowledge of subject matter that teachers need. What the present research seems to suggest is that the participants had clear beliefs about their work as teachers of reading, which were formulated on each occasion through what Schön (1987) called 'a reflective conversation with the situation'. (p.42) Participants in this study had clear understandings of nature, purposes and conditions of teaching as professional work. Broadly conceived, such rationale indicates, according to Barnes (1989), the ability to 'transform broad intentions into specific daily activities. As teachers pursue multiple goals and intentions for learners they must be able to ground their choices and actions in theoretical, practical, ethical and empirical principles.' (p.17)

Putting this into practice meant that participants in this study tended to claim that the teaching of reading involved the development of skills such as speaking, listening and comprehension. They were also very clear about the way in which they were going to help children develop those skills. The approaches they followed were strongly influenced by the education and training which they had received and the
way they understood their role. All practitioners felt that children's reading improves by practice and children learn better when they enjoy the activities. This seems to be in agreement with Katz (1992) (cited in Riley, 2003) who suggested that 'the introduction of positive learning dispositions should be foremost in the early childhood educator's mind'. (p.17) At the same time, Dowling (2000) claimed that 'unless a young child is not disposed or inclined to use what s/he knows the mechanisms of the brain will not function'. (p.67) Participants in this study seemed to indicate that 'learning with understanding includes the generation of relationships between previously acquired knowledge and the information to be learnt'. (Wittrock, 1986 (p.306)) But the construction of knowledge is influenced, according to Riley (2003), by the quality of interactions planned and used by teachers.

At the same time the OFSTED publication 'The Quality of Nursery Education' (1999c), stated that, 'The recent conflict between national requirements and the views of early years practitioners contributed to a reduction in the degree of challenge provided within areas of learning'. (cited in Rodger, 1999 (p. 74)) The conflict between national requirements and the views of early years practitioners is one of the issues that this chapter will address. Another issue will be how the differences in education and training, as well as in the duties that practitioners were expected to perform, influenced their practices in teaching reading. Deciding which knowledge and experiences to include raises the question: What conception of teaching underlies the selection of appropriate content in terms of reading?
The nature of the data gathered facilitated a dichotomy. On the one hand we have the views of Private Day Nursery practitioners while on the other the views of Nursery and Reception Class teachers were articulated. All participants felt that their views must be taken into account when decisions are made by the authorities about the National Curriculum (DfES 2000) because their own beliefs of what works in the classroom are what primarily affect their practice. Taking this into account, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate participants' 'pedagogical subject knowledge' (Shulman, 1986) in terms of teaching reading. The above term describes, according to Riley (2003), the way in which practitioners 'are able to make their own knowledge accessible to others'. (p.25) The level of participants' subject matter knowledge will be demonstrated by presenting the interplay between theory and practice through the similarities and differences in the views and practices of the two groups of early years practitioners.

The information regarding teachers' level of pedagogical subject matter knowledge will in turn, it is hoped, answer the following research questions:

- How did teachers' views about reading coincide with, or differ from, the theoretical models of teaching reading as derived from the literature?
- Did the experiences that teachers offered to children in pre-school settings reflect their beliefs about the teaching of reading?

The data gathered suggests that the participants had similar positive views with regard to:
• The value of play in the teaching of reading, and
• The way that the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) could benefit their practice.

On the other hand, the data gathered raises questions about the following issues:
• The ways in which play was used by the two groups to improve their teaching of reading.
• What the two groups of practitioners felt about assessment and how they used it to enhance their practice.
• The extent to which the activities offered in pre-school settings reflected teachers' beliefs, and finally
• The extent to which the differences in terms of education and training between the two groups influenced the way practitioners viewed their roles.

In order to effectively present the arguments, this chapter is divided into sections. The aim behind the choice is twofold; by presenting every issue raised separately and in detail, firstly the differences of opinion expressed are portrayed very clearly and secondly a comparison between the views and practices of the two groups of practitioners is facilitated.

The first section will extract any information that emerges from the results presented regarding teachers' beliefs about play. On this basis the researcher will attempt to
present the extent to which teachers acknowledge the importance of play in children’s learning, as well as the ways it was used in practice.

5.2 Play and the teaching of reading: beliefs and practices

Moyles (1994) argued that ‘quality links between play and learning seem obvious to many practitioners and parents; yet the dilemma still exists as to whether play can provide any kind of “excellence” in relation to real learning in early years educational contexts’. (p.3) At a time when teaching is required to be more planned, purposeful and rigorous, control by teachers has been a consistent feature of most literacy education. Teachers have to plan, implement, monitor and assess what is to be taught. This, according to Paley (1986), is ‘in complete contrast to the way play was usually viewed. No one explicitly teaches children how to play. Rather it was seen as a process learned more appropriately through apprenticeship.’ (cited in Hall, 1991 (p.4)) This thesis supports the idea that there is a close link between learning to play and learning literacy and for the scope of this research, learning to read. Evidence from the thesis would suggest that all participants had a coherent set of beliefs about the importance of play in the teaching of reading, which in turn influenced the selection of their teaching approaches.

All participants viewed play as a means toward the development of positive learning dispositions. Katz (1995) defined dispositions as habits of mind, which result in patterns of behaviour. Learning dispositions are also, according to Riley (2003), ‘the
pre-requisite skills and abilities without which no individual can develop into a proactive and autonomous learner’. (p.17) At the same time, Katz (1995) clarified that while skills can be taught directly, dispositions are learnt in a more subtle way. All participants in this study seemed to agree that play provides a context for revealing the form and content of children’s thinking as well as their ways of knowing and understanding. Practitioners also seemed to agree that literacy is learnt and developed through play and talk as well as through reading and writing instruction. When children are offered play experience with literacy-related resources they act in literate ways.

By widely using environmental print, participants in this study seemed to agree with Bielby (1994) who argued that recognising print in the environment can be one of the first signs of emerging literacy skills. Thus he suggested that ‘environmental print needs to be explicitly used as a teaching resource’. (p.56) Through the use of print around the buildings and in displays of children’s work, children were beginning to recognise the functions of print and that it served different purposes. Participants in this study seemed to have opted for a learner-considerate approach, which involves constructing an environment that is relevant to the learner and which children can easily take ownership of (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003). The importance of carefully designed environments fostering young children’s learning is not new in theory. Children, according to Piaget, need to interact with materials in order to learn. ‘Pestalozzi’s “object lessons” were built on the value of manipulative experiences, and Froebel’s “gifts” and “occupations” were systematically planned,
as was Montessori’s prepared environment.’ (Morrison, 1988) (cited in Morrow and Rand, 1991 (p.142)) Finally, the environment for the Reggio Emilia approach (Fraser and Gestwicki, 2002) was regarded as ‘the third teacher’. The principle of active learning requires that the classrooms ‘have a stimulating environment that offer children many choices, provoke them to engage in many activities, and encourage them to explore a wide variety of materials’. (p.109)

Providing the appropriate material was a significant part of adult involvement, since it enabled children to experiment and to assimilate new knowledge into their existing cognitive structures through play. ‘But creating an inviting environment and emphasising what children already know does not mean that learning, and by implication, learning goals are not important.’ (Edwards and Knight, 1994 (p.38)) As Moyles (1994) explained, ‘play in educational institutions should have educational consequences’. (p.6) In the establishments that participated in the study, children were engaging with the challenges of literacy within a familiar and goal-directed context, which allowed them to work slowly and safely towards agreed understandings. Participants in this study seemed to agree with Dowling (2000) who suggested that, ‘experienced and knowledgeable early educators see play and structured methodologies as interlinked. They recognise that effective play always involves some structure if only in ensuring what choices are open to children in the activities.’ (p.xxi) Despite the fact that neither the Desirable Learning Outcomes (DfES/SCAA 1996), nor the Review of the Desirable Learning Outcomes (QCA 1999) officially acknowledged the relationship between play and learning, all
practitioners chose a series of teacher-initiated play activities in order to work towards phonological awareness and letter knowledge with the children. The fact that practitioners used play as a means to an end indicates that they seemed to think that effective instruction should involve an element of playfulness and fun. Regardless of the chosen activity, participants in this study seemed to recognise that an indicator of the effectiveness of the activity was that the children enjoyed learning. At the same time Edwards and Knight (1994) argued that 'the alternative to what is commonly regarded as formal teaching methods is not random informality, but carefully structured situations in which children work with adults, other children or alone as they master the skills and concepts they need in order to function effectively'. (p.38)

With regard to the teaching of reading, two different approaches emerged. Private Day Nursery practitioners seemed to have placed emphasis on informally teaching children literacy skills rather than teaching them reading. The choices practitioners made were helping children to become communicators of increasing skill and confidence through play. Becoming a skilful communicator is one of the four aspects of the Birth to Three Matters Framework (Sure Start Unit 2002), the purpose of which is to provide 'information, guidance and challenge' for those with the responsibility of the care and education of children from birth to three years. Practitioners were against systematic and explicit instruction and they used props to create opportunities through which children had chances to increase their confidence and extend their competence in communication, speaking and listening. This seems
to be along the lines of the Birth to Three Matters (Sure Start Unit 2002) framework where learning the rules of communication through making meaning with their key person and other children is regarded as one of the components which make up a skilful communicator. Private Day Nursery practitioners also used what Smith (1994) called ‘imaginative play training’, where the teacher demonstrates skills to the children with the help of make-believe activities. The children ‘read’ in a range of situations with the aim that they should gain more confidence in their abilities as developing readers. Participants also used modelling in order to demonstrate the use of language for reading, through telling stories and sharing children’s favoured books. The above situation is seen by the researcher as ‘what Bruner describes as joint involvement episodes in which both the child and the adult were highly motivated to engage with the understanding of the other participant. The learning is achieved through a process of reflexive co-construction which means that both parties are involved in the learning episode and that also the content is instructive.’ (Riley, 2003 (p.22))

On the other hand, practitioners who worked in Nursery and Reception Classes suggested that the acquisition of literacy occurred in ages and stages directly linked to a child’s capabilities. In addition, they, especially Reception Class teachers, argued that it was necessary for the child to meet certain attainment targets before the end of his/her Reception Year.
Reflecting on teaching reading, Nursery and Reception Class teachers used a series of play-based techniques (e.g. flash cards, matching words, games) in order to interact with those in their care in such a way as to foster and enrich their attempt to make meaning.

Practitioners focused on phonics teaching, name recognition, and high frequency words. The aims of the majority of the play-based teacher initiated activities in this study were included in the Baseline Assessment requirements (SCAA 1997), although none of the participants admitted that their selection was influenced by the scheme. On the contrary, Reception Class teachers openly stated that they used play to meet National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) requirements for the Reception Year.

It seems that all practitioners valued purposeful structured play as a process, but they used it differently in order to achieve their aims.

People who worked in Private Day Nurseries offered a variety of literacy-related materials for the children to use in their role-play situations. 'Role-play was acknowledged by all practitioners as offering the children holistic experiences where literacy is appropriately embedded. It was also regarded as a tool for identification of children's capabilities. Through play, practitioners could build on children's existing knowledge and extend their awareness and competence with language in its oral and
written forms, while they offered children the chance to control the ways in which literacy is viewed and experienced.' (Hall, 1994 (pp.114-115))

In this case, play was used in order to empower active learning in an environment structured to provide key experiences in the areas of learning as stated in the Desirable Outcomes (DfES/SCAA 1996). Practitioners introduced, and at a later stage assessed, the emergence of literacy-related skills through story telling or role-play. Children had the freedom to combine materials on their own initiative.

On the other hand, Nursery and Reception Class teachers in this study acknowledged that once the children reached statutory school age, the curriculum became less flexible and thus attending to both the cognitive and more emotional needs of the children became more difficult.

Despite this statement, participants in this study believed in the value of play and used it to achieve clear learning objectives, namely to make children confident readers. They suggested that reading is not a set of isolated skills to be taught, but is instead an ongoing process in which the child is an active participant. Using play in the teaching of reading helped Nursery and Reception Class teachers in ‘having children’s developing understandings guided, by offering information and gradually putting the responsibility to the child for using a variety of visual and auditory strategies for reading’. (David et al., 2000 (p.45))
Moreover, teachers argued that the use of play in the teaching of reading helped towards achieving smooth transition to the literacy hour 'because play introduces literacy events in as natural a way as possible'. (Hall and Robinson, 2000 (p.97))

Private Day Nursery practitioners emphasised the value play holds for symbolic representation and action and they had the freedom to use play as their main teaching approach in introducing the Desirable Learning Outcomes (QCA 1996) regarding language and literacy. They viewed the Desirable Learning Outcomes (QCA 1996) as guidelines for teaching that did not take away the freedom of choice in terms of activities. As mediators of children's physical environment, practitioners tried to develop their language and communication skills.

Contrary to this, Nursery and Reception Class teachers seemed to argue that having to work 'in the spirit of' the Literacy Hour had possibly led them not only to restrict the variety of reading activities presented to the children, but also to limit the time they spent on play, something that possibly conflicted with their expressed beliefs.

Despite the differences in instructional practices, differences based on governmental guidelines, it was acknowledged by all the participants in this study that there was a relationship between play and the emergence of literacy. Play was regarded as a fundamental cognitive activity that can facilitate the use and development of literacy concepts and skills. Through the activities chosen by the participants in this study, it was clear that symbolic behaviour in play could be related to oral language
development as well as the understanding of a representational system like written language. During play children demonstrate such literacy skills as directionality, print processing and comprehension. Play offered active involvement, which is a prerequisite for the elaboration and extension of literacy abilities. Since play was capable of involving children in literacy behaviour, adults could design and guide the contexts in which learning experiences were offered.

In conclusion, play was believed by both Nursery practitioners and Reception Class teachers to be a key practice in their teaching of reading. Both categories of practitioners strongly believed in using play as a way of creating positive dispositions to learning. Katz (1995) suggested that if practitioners are to nurture dispositions to learn they have to take into account that ‘newly acquired knowledge and skills will only be secured in learning if they are used’, as well as the fact that ‘the way in which something is taught may either strengthen positive attitudes or damage them’. (cited in Dowling, 2000 (p.72))

Participants in this study used play as an educational technique that built on children’s interests. As a result of this, participants saw play as a way to scaffold children’s learning. In addition, if learning in this age range is ‘situated’ (Anning and Edwards, 1999), then practitioners in this study demonstrated ways in which role-play, socio-dramatic and imaginative play provided active involvement and interaction with objects and others, which in turn were capitalised in order to model ways of teaching reading. Although in this respect it can initially be argued that
there is correspondence between what participants believed and did, practitioners also claimed that there were sources of influence in relation to the variety of the play-based activities presented to the children. Parents or manageresses, for example, influenced the content of play in the private sector, whereas Government suggestions, in the case of maintained Nursery education, restricted the flexibility that play offered to teachers. Thus it can be argued that according to the findings of this study, there is a link between what people who work in the early years believe and do in relation to the use of play in teaching reading. At the same time, the way this link was expressed was strongly influenced by 'external factors'.

In the first section of this chapter, play was acknowledged as an integral part of teaching practice that enables children's learning. Another important element of teaching that allows children to reach their potential is, according to Nutbrown (1997), good assessment processes. 'Assessment of a learner’s present knowledge is a sound basis for the next teaching plan. The development, implementation, and evaluation of effective assessment in the classroom is the responsibility of the adults working for, and with, children and education. In terms of assessing early literacy development, it is therefore a case of children’s rights and adults’ responsibilities.' (p.12) Subscribing to the above view, the next section of this chapter will discuss participants' views and practices on assessing reading in the early years.
5:3 Assessing reading: beliefs and practices

Aubrey (1996) suggested that 'it was Shulman (1986) who stressed the importance of pedagogical subject matter knowledge which is concerned less with teachers’ knowledge of the subject matter, than with knowledge of teaching particular subject content areas gained through the experience of teaching these areas to children. It guides the design of the teaching tasks, as well as the means by which these are introduced, supported and assessed.' (p.128)

In terms of assessing reading, the following issues will be discussed: firstly, how practitioners interpreted and put into practice assessment in reading, and secondly, the extent to which these views were related to the Government suggestions as stated in the Baseline Assessment Scheme (SCAA 1997).

The Task Group on Assessment and Testing (DfES 1988) (para.23) discussed the purposes that an assessment programme should be capable of fulfilling. Formative, so that the positive achievement of a pupil may be recognised, discussed and the appropriate next steps may be planned. Diagnostic, through which learning difficulties may be scrutinised and classified so that appropriate remedial help and guidance can be provided. Summative, for the recording of the overall achievement of a pupil in a systematic way, and evaluative, to enable some aspects of the work of a school or educational service to be assessed and/or reported upon (cited in Hurst and Lally, 1992 (p.7)).
Hurst and Lally (1992) suggested that in the purposes of assessment presented above, two underlying assumptions can be discerned. Assessment is linked with the definition of objectives and teaching them in such a way as for teachers and pupils to know what is required of them (i.e. what counts as achieving the objective). The assumption is that complex knowledge can be broken down into its constituent parts with hierarchies of learning being established and learners encountering and mastering 'simple' facts and concepts before moving on to learn more complicated material.

The publication of Desirable Outcomes (DfES/SCAA 1996) set out learning objectives for six areas of learning which had to be achieved by most children by the age of five. The document was regarded as an attempt to introduce a centrally prescribed curriculum for young children with links to the National Curriculum. The introduction to the document states, ‘The following pages show how the Desirable Outcomes for children’s learning before entering compulsory education provide a Foundation Stage for Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum’. (p.8) This development, coupled with a linked inspection system and Baseline Assessment on school entry, impacted on practice. It was suggested that practitioners were pushed to introduce formal learning activities (Anning and Edwards, 1999).

Data from this study indicates that all Private Day Nursery practitioners acknowledged that Baseline Assessment (SCAA 1997) would occur during the first seven weeks of the children’s Reception Year, and this document suggested that
certain aspects of reading should be assessed. However, practitioners also claimed that achieving the targets set in the scheme was not one of their main objectives. Following the Baseline (SCAA 1997) requirements was, according to Private Day Nursery practitioners, part of a teacher's job description. Given that all practitioners made very clear that they were not teachers, they claimed that the Baseline Scheme did not 'fit in' with their work.

At the same time Private Day Nursery practitioners mentioned that all establishments had been inspected. Inspections were based on the way providers help children reach the Desirable Learning Outcomes (QCA 1999) in the six areas of learning. The inspector assesses 'the quality of the planning and content of the educational programme, the quality of teaching and assessment of the children, and its contribution to the children's attainment and progress, and the effectiveness of the Nursery's partnership with parents'. (Falconer, 1999 (p.71)) Inspectors look at the 'extent to which teaching... is planned and organised effectively and is informed by effective assessments and records of children's attainment and progress. They also look at the quality of... assessment - the ways in which children's attainment and progress is assessed.' (Ofsted 1998) (cited in Hutchin, 1999 (p.6))

Data gathered for this study indicates that the planning of the assessment process was a result of consultations between the manager, the children's parents and the schools to which the children were to go to after they left the Private Day Nursery. The expectations of these external 'critical friends' strongly influenced the content
of what the children were being taught and 'assessed'. Moreover, the planning of the assessment process was mainly a job for the senior staff members or the manageress herself. Finally, the implementation was a team effort and it was based on observations of children and the development of observational sheets on which 'the girls' recorded their notes. They used development records that, in terms of reading, observed the extent to which children showed progress through a series of skills that facilitated the emergence of literacy. Practitioners 'assessed' the extent to which children knew how to hold a book, turn pages, use memory in order to retell a story, and their ability to recognise their names.

When the researcher mentioned that similarities could be found between the inspection requirements for language and literacy and the Baseline Assessment Scheme (SCAA 1997) requirements for reading, participants refused to acknowledge any possible link. In a few cases they mentioned the SCAA (1997) document 'Looking at children's learning', which contained examples of activities where children's attainment matched the Desirable Learning Outcomes. They made it very clear that they worked on the basis of the Desirable Learning Outcomes (DfES/QCA 1996). In the document, although detailed description is given in terms of achievement of the individual in literacy, it is stated that 'judgements should be made, not by assessing children, but through inspection about the extent to which the quality of provision is appropriate to the desirable outcomes in each area of learning, rather than on the achievement of the outcomes themselves by individual children'. (DfES/QCA 1996, (p.1)) Private Day Nursery practitioners' purpose behind...
'assessment' was to present a cumulative portrait of learners' strengths, weaknesses and capabilities, which in turn would be used by teachers as a starting point for their work.

Given the data gathered for this study, it is possible that the diagnostic element in the assessment process indicates that the teacher-learner interaction goes beyond the communication of results and teachers' judgements of progress and the provision of additional instruction, to include a role for the teacher in assisting the pupil comprehend and engage with new ideas and problems. Torrance and Pryor (1998) suggested that if this is the case, the process of assessment is seen as having an impact on the pupil as well as the product – the result. The argument is, in this case, that it is important to identify not just what pupils have achieved, but what they might achieve with the help of an adult or a collaborating peer in the zone of proximal development.

In the same line of argument, Nursery and Reception Class teachers who participated in this study suggested that assessment was an ongoing process, which despite the specificity of the 'suggested' attainment targets should not determine what is taught and learned. The suggestion made by Reception Class teachers highlights the danger that imposed assessment procedures can narrow what is assessed. Smith (1995) instead argued that one of the principles of assessment is that 'it should describe the skills, attitudes, and concepts that the student has developed. These should be related to the curriculum and the instructional objectives. That is.
assessment should be criterion referenced. This leads to a description of what a student can do rather than a comparison with other students.’ (p.121)

Evidence from the data collected indicates that all the teachers accepted the usefulness of the curriculum targets as guidelines that ‘provide the learning goals on which mastery should be demonstrated and help define the areas of adult expertise to be highlighted by teachers in their work with pupils’. (Edwards and Knight, 1994 (p.22))

Implementing this in teaching reading meant that even though they suggested that assessment opportunities needed to be planned and identified but not specially designed, teachers were very clear about the content of the reading activities offered to the children as well as the most effective assessment processes. They worked with children towards phonological awareness and letter recognition by offering them a series of goal-directed play-based activities. The way teachers implemented assessment was through frequent and informal attention to the children’s reading or reading-related activities. This involved using a range of assessment techniques including observational notes and the creation of records and portfolios over a period of time.

Moreover, all teachers subscribed to a broad view of the assessment process. Even though once children reach statutory school age the curriculum seems less flexible, what teachers tended to use was what is usually called a ‘hidden’ curriculum, which,
according to Riley (2003), ‘influences the learning of pupils in many subtle and unintentional ways’. (p.18) In achieving this, participants in this study seemed to subscribe to Carr’s (2001) view, who developed an assessment process, which was based on recording children’s experiences as a narrative. The learning stories that Carr (2001) suggested provide a picture of the child as a learner. They are not split into curriculum areas, but provide evidence regarding what the children think they learn out of a situation. Helping them do this enables children to develop an interest in and a disposition towards learning. Katz and Chard (1989) defined dispositions as ‘habits of mind or tendencies to respond to situations in a characteristic way’. (pp.20-21) Carr (2001) identified five domains of learning dispositions: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty or uncertainty, communicating with others and taking responsibility (p.23). Riley (2003) argued that ‘the opportunity to develop these learning dispositions makes up a large part of what is conceptualised as a curriculum’. (p.17)

The teachers who participated in this research suggested accordingly that a suitable curriculum for children of this age should not simply be related to the content of the academic subjects and should do more than just attend to intellectual development. The learning stories of Carr (2001) guide toward a more holistic approach of what children can do, which seems to contradict the need that schools feel to ‘prove that they are teaching children effectively and that the learning that a child can demonstrate by the age of the Key Stage 1 tests of assessment has in fact been facilitated by the school. Without Baseline Assessment on entry to school, the value-
added component of a child’s later performance cannot be calculated.’ (Burgess-Macey, 1994 (p.48))

Despite the fact that assessment is specific, it can facilitate through dispositions the ability of the child to participate in learning. The learner is a learner in action and assessment is about participation in whatever is provided and defined as learning. Dispositions to learn, which include independence, creativity and self-motivation, need to be assessed, according to Bertram and Pascal (2002). These dispositions are learned but are rarely acquired didactically. These dispositions are central not only to educational achievement but also to personal fulfilment. For Bertram and Pascal (2002) there was an urgent need ‘to develop methods for assessing those other elements of early learning which appear to be critical in ensuring the child’s progress as a life-long learner. Currently the aspects of learning which form the basis of national testing regime fail to capture the critical determinants of success and so fail as predictors of longer term strength.’ (p.101) Carr (2001) went on to suggest that, in terms of the assessment process, the narrative approach stresses the importance of valuing the voice of the child, in other words, seeking the perspective of the learner before making any decisions. Finally, Carr (2001) indicated that learning stories might reflect learning better than performance indicators.

This research seems to suggest that in terms of reading assessment, there was for both groups, strong external influence. Both teachers and other practitioners seemed to have a clear understanding about their role within the process. The results of this
study seem to suggest that the assessment practices followed by Private Day Nursery and other practitioners have the effect of a framework. This enhanced flexibility and placed emphasis on the process. Assessment was viewed as a holistic integrative process, which brought to the foreground the diversity and the differences of the children. These ideas coincide with the rationale behind the QCA (2000) document.

Reception Class teachers in this study viewed assessment as a continuous, highly localised process. Teachers argued that there had to be discussion about the purposes of assessment, and the structure and use of the results must flow from the agreed purposes. Participants acknowledged the need for accountability but implied that with Baseline Assessment they felt as if they were the only ones to be held accountable for the children’s progress. Finally they argued that ‘there is no substitute for the teacher’s knowledge of the child, or head’s and governors’ understanding of the school. Statistical information must stand alongside this and not be seen as a substitute for it.’ (Sainsbury, 1998 (p.80)) Instead, teachers had to face a simple, formal and standardised approach to assessment expressed through specific suggestions in the form of attainment targets. On this understanding it can be argued that there might be a basic clash of values.

In conclusion, there was homogeneity in the beliefs practitioners expressed regarding assessing reading. All acknowledged the benefits involved in the process. All the sample members regarded assessment as a helpful tool in order to understand and capitalise on what children know and can do. At the same time, the Reception
Class teachers were against the practices followed concerning how reading assessment was implemented, namely, they were against the Baseline Assessment Scheme (SCAA 1997).

The nature of the responses obtained suggested a change of thinking on the researcher’s part. Participants’ responses indicated to the researcher that the area of questioning should not ask whether assessment was an important part of the teaching practice or not, but rather should question the way in which assessment was implemented in the classroom. The data gathered for this study led to the researcher posing the following question: was there a link between the way practitioners believed that assessment should be implemented and what they actually did? Regarding the Nursery practitioners, the answer can be positive since they followed processes of their own preference which they did not want to link to the Baseline Assessment Scheme (SCAA 1997), even when similarities that were obvious to the researcher were suggested. Reception Class teachers instead claimed that even though they believed that the Baseline Assessment Scheme (SCAA 1997) was not the most effective way of assessing children in terms of reading, they had to follow it on the basis of Government suggestions.

In this section of this chapter it was made clear that what is easily measurable cannot perhaps reflect the complexity of early learning. Bertram and Pascal (2002) argued that ‘there has begun a reassessment of what constitutes effective early learning and an alternative curriculum, embodied in the Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance
(QCA 2000), is now being promoted'. (p.88) The next section of this chapter will present practitioners' first reactions to the QCA document.

5.4 Curriculum Guidance

As O'Grady (1998) argued 'the early years community has gained hugely in confidence and muscle and early years practitioners have found their voice'. (cited in Drury, Miller and Campbell, 2000 (p.1)) One example of this is that children under six are now included in the Foundation Stage for children in all early years settings.

Sylva et al. (2003) suggested that 'a good grasp of the appropriate curriculum content is linked to strategies for promoting learning. Content knowledge is a vital component of pedagogy which is shown to be just as important in the early years as at any later stage of education.' (p.3)

Shulman and Sykes (1986) defined the knowledge base of teaching as 'that body of understanding and skill, of dispositions and values, of character performance that together underlie the capacity to teach'. (p.5) (cited in Tamir, 1988 (p.99)) Shulman and Sykes (1986) included curriculum knowledge in the list of eight categories that encompass the knowledge base of teaching. They defined curriculum knowledge as knowledge 'possessed by the teacher of how the almost infinite range of topics and skills that might be taught to students have been organised and arranged into
systematic programmes of instruction called curricula'. (Shulman and Sykes, 1986 (p.10)) (cited in Tamir, 1988 (p.106))

The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) was not in effect when the research was conducted. But since it is now regarded as 'the core reference document for successful implementation of the Foundation Stage from September 2000' (QCA 2000, p.2), the researcher aimed at obtaining practitioners' initial views on the document. Given that the interviews were conducted during the spring of 2000, the researcher expected that all practitioners would ask for more time to familiarise themselves with the document.

The document had been described as 'a more detailed curriculum planning guidance complementing the Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999), as well as a comprehensive guidance which sets out in detail what might be expected of children at different stages in the Foundation Stage'. (QCA 2000, p.2) The document established a generic framework for practice. The term framework refers to a document that sets out examples of good practice and presents principles for practitioners to follow in their work. Guidance documents instead tend to offer more detailed advice on ways of working towards curriculum aims and goals.

The above statement echoed the content of the comments made by Private Day Nursery practitioners. They argued that through detailed practical examples, the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) offered a variety of
activities that can help children develop their key skills. They also mentioned that the document acknowledged children's various stages of development. Through the stepping-stones, practitioners had the flexibility to plan learning opportunities suitable for children aged three to five on the basis of their capabilities. Finally, Private Day Nursery practitioners mentioned that perhaps given the appropriate time for reflection, the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) could help them achieve a broader understanding of the Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999). This in turn would improve the quality of their planning and help the children reach the standards set for them by the end of their Reception Year.

Shulman (1987) also suggested that 'to advance the aims of organised schooling, materials and structures for teaching and learning are created. These include, among other things, curricula with their scopes and sequences.' For Shulman (1987) 'it stands to reason that the principles, policies and facts of teachers' functioning comprise a major source of teachers' knowledge base. If a teacher has to "know the territory" of teaching then it is the landscape of such materials with which s/he must be familiar. These comprise both the tools of the trade and the contextual conditions that will either facilitate or inhibit teaching effort.' (pp.9-10)

Putting this into practice meant that in addition to their need for more time for reflection, Nursery and Reception Class teachers mentioned that the QCA (2000) document made the planning process easier to understand and offered more opportunities for teachers to differentiate. Moreover, they mentioned that the
Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) was the first document to officially acknowledge the importance of play in early years teaching. But at the same time, Nursery Class teachers expressed worries about the feasibility of the suggestions included in the document on the grounds of the children's young age. They also mentioned that the implementation of the suggestions in the document might increase the presence of formality in early years teaching. The teachers seemed to question such a possibility given the age range of the children.

The QCA (2000) document demonstrates ways of teaching the six areas of learning as presented in the Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999). For the purposes of this study the document exemplifies how skills that are attached to meaning and intent, which in turn Carr (2001) called 'learning strategies' (p.7), can cultivate the 'will and skill to do' (Sylva, 1994 (p.163)) in terms of language and literacy.

The general suggestions made in the document help children to develop independence of action, creativity, and self-motivation towards literacy. It is stated in the document that 'every aspect of literacy [and consequently reading] needs to be planned for, planning that is flexible, informed and involves the whole team, so that practitioners know how to respond to children or take the lead, both in activities structured by children and those directed by adults'. (QCA 2000, p.46) This quotation presents one of the main responsibilities included in the job of an early years teacher. Despite that, it is often assumed that anyone can teach young children (Pugh, 1996). Due to the existing uncertainty as to the qualities needed by early
childhood teachers, the next section of the chapter is going to discuss whether there is a need for, and the optimal nature of, training such teachers.

5:5 The aspect of training: conceptions of the teacher’s role

The debate about the content of and the knowledge base for training and qualifications for early years practitioners is ongoing. In the Desirable Outcomes (SCAA 1996) (p.6) it is stated that 'adults in each setting take the responsibility for identifying and, where appropriate, meeting their training needs'. It is the training needs of those staff that this section of the thesis is trying to address. Evidence from the data collected will be used to address the following issues: firstly, to describe the nature of qualifications participants held and what these qualifications indicated about their role, and secondly, the extent to which practitioners’ pre-service training enhanced their abilities in teaching reading.

The Start Right Report (Ball, 1994) suggested that early years practitioners must have 'mastery of curriculum content, sound knowledge of child development including language acquisition, cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. They are required to lead and plan for a team of other professionals including parents, nursery nurses, students, speech therapists, language support teachers, psychologists and social workers. They are responsible for the assessment of children and for monitoring progress and ensuring continuity and progression between stages and establishments.’ (paras.58-59)
The skills and abilities required by early years professionals indicate the necessity to incorporate a multi-professional dimension in training so that childcare, health and education are covered. Abbott and Hevey (2001) argued that each of the different groups of people involved in the early childhood profession are rooted in a separate tradition with different professional ethics, values, education and training requirements, and career paths. However, the explicitly multi-disciplinary nature of Government incentives in recent years in terms of policy and practice (i.e. Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000), Birth to Three Matters (Sure Start Unit 2002), Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships, Excellence Centres and the Sure Start Programme) make imperative the co-operation and integration of services and professions. Work with children and their families requires support from trained professionals who possess a broad range of knowledge and skills and appropriate attitudes and values.

Anning and Edwards (2004) talked about a community of practice that could enhance the link between education and care. Anning and Edwards (2004) discussed the development of educare as a form of professional practice. For them ‘communities of practice are seen as knowledge communities that create and use their understandings in specific ways’. (p.221) Abbott and Moylett (1997) also suggested that ‘to the educarer is given the responsibility for providing the kinds of quality experiences which are instrumental in bringing about appropriate early interactions’. (p.5)
But this is difficult to achieve since, as Pugh (1998) suggested, the services provided in early years education have different aims and objectives and underpinning philosophies, some focusing on children's learning and cognitive development, some more overtly concerned with children's care and welfare. They also operate to different standards set out by different legislation, some within the welfare tradition and some as part of the educational legislation. Consequently they fall under different inspection regimes and require different levels of staffing, training and qualifications (p.5).

The Audit Commission (1996) argued that the service offered in Private Day Nurseries is care throughout the working day, five days a week, throughout the year. The staff have a range of qualifications, while the child-adult ratios are specified through statutory guidance as 8:1 for three-year-olds. Contrary to this, the services offered in maintained Nursery education as well as the Reception Classes of maintained Primary Schools, are considered as educational experiences for the children. Typically five sessions a week are offered in term-time, each lasting two hours thirty minutes and six hours thirty minutes respectively. The establishments are led by teachers and the child-adult ratio is 13:1 or 10:1 in a Nursery School. (Adapted from Counting to Five, 1996 (p.10))

In the present study, Private Day Nursery practitioners thought of themselves as carers or childcare workers. They addressed themselves as nursery nurses working with pre-schoolers, emphasising the nurturing and preparatory aspects of their work.
In every case they agreed to express their opinions after having specified that they did not want to be related to the teaching profession. They clearly stated that according to their understanding, the term ‘teacher’ implied holding official teaching credentials, something that was regarded as incongruent with their paraprofessional assistant status.

Katz (1995) expressed similar views when she argued that reluctance to use the term ‘teacher’ is often expressed by those who work in childcare provision due to the fact that the term ‘teacher’ implies holding a formal teaching qualification. This term would exclude the majority of the workforce in early childhood education where Jameson and Watson (1998) argued that, ‘the experience and qualifications required for childcare staff would be largely required by the local authority registration regulations and the philosophy or ethos you wish to adopt in the Nursery’. (p.85) Furthermore, Moss and Penn (1994) suggested that the usual qualification for workers in the private sector was that of ‘the nursery nurse who has a two-year post-sixteen training and has been awarded an NNEB (National Nursery Examination Board) Certificate. This training has an academic transferability of between GCSE and A Level. The theoretical background underpinning the certificate, although covering the range of child development and learning from birth to seven years, is cursory by conventional academic standards. There are variations in this college-based course. Moreover, the BTEC in Nursery Nursing is rated slightly more highly than the NNEB and can serve as an entrance qualification to teacher training or social work.’ (pp.101-102)
All the people who worked in Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools held vocational qualifications, namely NNEB, BTEC or NVQ Levels 2 and 3, the content of which did not include any direct reference to the teaching of reading. Although it is true that the content of similar courses may vary, the prospectus of the City College where most of the participants gained their qualifications included phrases such as ‘theory in childcare practice’ and ‘work with young children’. Only in the case of NVQ Levels 2/3 in Early Years Care and Education (Modern Apprenticeship) (Foundation/Advanced) did one of the courses/modules aim at ‘promoting children’s language and communication skills’.

In 1986 the British Government established National Vocational Qualifications, ‘in order to provide a guarantee of competence to do a job through being based on nationally agreed occupational standards and being assessed primarily in the workplace. Each NVQ is made up of modules or “units of competence”, which have a meaning and a value in employment and which allow for credit towards a full award to be built. There are no formal academic entry requirements and no one is forced to take a particular course or to complete “time serving” periods in order to gain access to assessment. Ideally candidates should be able to put themselves forward for assessment when they are ready.’ (Hevey and Curtis, 1996 (p.213)) Terms such as ‘early childhood educators’ have been used to describe the early years workforce (Moyles 1994, Anning and Edwards 1999, David et al. 2000) while the Curriculum Guidance (QCA 2000) favours the term ‘practitioners’ (p.13). The aim behind the use of these terms is not to undermine the value of qualifications held by...
the practitioners but rather attempts to provide a broad conceptualisation of the roles and responsibilities of the adults who work in the early childhood settings.

The nature of the qualifications held by Private Day Nursery practitioners could be seen as directly work-related and oriented to the needs of the employer. The Review of Vocational Qualifications Working Group has defined Vocational Qualifications as 'a statement of competence clearly relevant to work and intended to facilitate entry into, or progression in, employment, further education and training, issued by a recognised body to an individual. The statement of competence should incorporate the assessment of:
- skills to specified standards;
- relevant knowledge and understanding;
- the ability to use standards and to apply knowledge and understanding;
- the performance of relevant tasks.' (Raggatt and Williams, 1999 (p.54))

The Children's Act (1989) gave a comprehensive definition of a 'fit person' to work with children. The local authority should have regard to the following points: 'previous experience of looking after or working with children; qualifications and/or training in a relevant field; the ability to provide warm and consistent care; knowledge of equal opportunities; commitment and knowledge to treat all children as individuals and with equal concern; physical health; mental stability, integrity and flexibility; and no involvement in criminal cases involving abuse to children and other relevant cases'. (Smith, 1994 (p.37))
The National Standards of Care for young children (under the age of eight) are also set by the Government under the Children’s Act (1989) as amended by the Care Standards Act (2000). There are fourteen National Standards, which describe the outcomes that providers should aim to achieve. Although the Standards clearly declare that health care and education are interlinked, Standard 3 links care, learning and play when it states that ‘the registered person meets children’s individual needs and promotes their welfare. They plan and provide activities and play opportunities to develop children’s emotional, physical, social and intellectual capabilities.’ (cited in Elfel et al., 2003 (p.64))

Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002), in their Effective Pedagogy in Early Years Project, suggested that ‘the term teaching may appear to be incompatible with learning environments for young children where emphasis is often placed on learning through play and exploration’. However, they emphasised that ‘effective pedagogy can be described as a balance between a teacher-directed programmed learning approach and an open framework approach. Child-initiated play can provide a more powerful effect on children’s learning if it is drawn together with teacher-initiated activities.’ (cited in Fumoto et al., 2004 (p. 183))

Putting this into practice meant that in the present study practitioners who worked in Private Day Nurseries and Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools argued that teaching reading per se was not included in their duties. Their suggestions seemed to be in agreement with Stevens’ (1999) view who argued that ‘any form of literacy
behaviour before the age of five is simply pre-reading, rather than appropriate reading activity for that age and stage of development. Like pre-school, it is still seen as preparation for the next stage when “real learning” will begin.’ (p.109) They allowed children to set the pace by offering them a series of play-based activities through which:

- children became confident with English as a spoken language;
- children developed skills of listening and expressing themselves;
- children enjoyed the different uses of language;
- children learnt the basis of reading and writing.

Private Day Nursery practitioners chose, through ‘teachable moments’, to expand children’s interest in literacy rather than deliberately teaching them reading. These practitioners did not feel restricted by Government policies and thus had more freedom to pursue children’s capabilities and interests. The choice of activities presented to the children was made by the senior staff members responsible for planning. But perhaps the lack of related training limited their ability to take full advantage of this freedom.

Contrary to this, Reception Class teachers were trained teachers who might next year be appointed to a different class. They had received training along the lines of the National Curriculum (DfES 2000) and their day had a clear structure and specific attainment targets for the children to meet. Their main goal was to help children
learn, and for the scope of this thesis, specifically to teach them how to read and write.

Reception Class teachers had received training specifically related to the planning of reading activities. Government suggestions strongly indicated working within the spirit of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) and Literacy Hour (DfES 1997). Their principal aim was to plan their work in a way that could contribute to the achievement of:

- the Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999) and
- the Baseline Assessment requirements (SCAA 1997), which in turn would facilitate linking with the National Curriculum Key Stage 1 requirements.

Even though the above documents are not statutory and only set learning objectives for the children, it seems that they influenced the choices that practitioners made. Perhaps the fact that the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) suggests that work is to be done on word text and sentence level, and at the same time details a set of possible attainment targets for the Reception Year children to meet, possibly leads to restricting the variety of activities presented to the children.

But Katz (1995) also argued that 'decisions could not be made solely on the basis of evidence. What we are willing to accept as evidence is also a function of our ideologies. No matter how carefully policies might be developed, their implementations and evaluations occur in contexts of ideological controversies, a
fact of life which we must learn to accept with understanding, insight and forbearance.’ (p. 216) The implications of this for the classroom is that teachers filtered the activities presented to the children through their personal ideologies of what is ‘developmentally appropriate for the child’. (Riley, 2003 (p.18))

Reflecting on this research, the data seems to suggest that in both cases practitioners felt very strongly about their roles, which were very different, but at the same time complementary. This was made clear through the way they approached the teaching of reading.

Both kinds of practitioners used similar instructional practices. Despite that, Reception Class teachers placed a distinct educational emphasis on the activities provided to the children. Thus the content and the structure of the activities presented to the children were strongly influenced by the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) requirements. The main significant difference was that, with the exception of teachers, the experiences offered by the rest of the practitioners seemed to be based on ‘the adults’ ability to capture the children’s momentum towards learning, so that learning environments are based on the children’s intention to achieve a goal’. (Fumoto et al., 2004 (p.188))

At the same time, Connelly et al. (1997) suggested that the role of the teacher is not limited simply to translating others’ intentions and ideologies into practice (p.674). Early years practitioners have to be able to give confident answers to questions
about their practice. Ways of achieving this were offered by David (1998) when she suggested that early childhood educators need to be able to explore their thinking. To be capable of reflective and reflexive practice they need high levels of understanding, education and empathy. Thus training should not only be about ‘acquiring facts and knowledge, but also about exploring bodies of knowledge and submitting them in the light of real life experience. There should be opportunities for experiencing and reflecting on teamwork with other adults leading to open self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses.’ (p.25)

If teacher knowledge, as Connelly et al. (1997) suggested, is ‘not something objective and independent of the teacher to be learnt and transmitted, but rather is the sum total of teachers’ experiences’ (p.666), then this section of the thesis attempted to comment on the competences required by the early years workforce justified in the light of their present-day roles and responsibilities. The different roles suggested by the participants in this study were in turn associated with different expectations and duties.

Nursery practitioners regarded themselves as carers. They agreed to participate in this study on the condition that they were not considered as teachers and they were not linked to them in any way. Their primary role was believed to be that of preparing happy and secure children for school where the real learning process would begin. On the other hand, Reception Class teachers viewed their role as people who had to provide proof that they help children learn how to read.
Attempting to translate this into an answer as to whether there is a link between what people believe and what they do, this research suggests that the training that practitioners received reflected the way they conceptualised their roles.

Under the umbrella of teaching reading, this section commented on the debate about the need for, and optimal nature of, training for early years teaching. Up to this point it has been demonstrated how the emphasis on learning through play alongside a set of outcomes or goals that teachers and other staff members have to work towards, has been broadly accepted as the framework for curricula developed in early years education. If the Education Reform Act (1988) defined attainment targets as 'the knowledge, skills and understanding which pupils are expected to have at the end of each Key Stage' and 'programmes of study as the matters, skills and processes which are required to be taught to pupils of different abilities and maturities during each Key Stage' (cited in Tyler, 1991 (p.21)), then the last section of this chapter will focus on the activities offered, and address one of the main aims of this research, which is how practitioners who work in early years settings teach reading to children.

5:6 The nature of reading activities offered to the children

Bowman et al. (2001) suggested that 'classrooms are complex environments with many overlapping interactions going on between adults, children, materials and conceptual tasks. Teachers respond to this complexity by referring to their own store
of beliefs, experiences and priorities, establishing a teaching stance that gets the job
done.’ (p.264) Taking this into account, the last section of this chapter will attempt
to clarify the roles played by adults in young children’s learning in early childhood
settings while they attempt to introduce the concept of teaching reading to them.

Based on the data collected for this research, the following aspects of the argument
will be discussed: a) the extent to which the different groups of practitioners planned
the reading activities presented to the children, b) the nature of the activities offered
to the children, and c) the extent to which the activities offered to the children
coincided with, or differed from, practitioners’ views on teaching reading.

Participants in this study seemed to subscribe to the view of Riley (2003) when she
argued that in early years education ‘pedagogy does not necessarily refer to a direct
and didactic transmission of knowledge, but rather it will include the considered
provision of an effective environment with planned opportunities for play and
exploration. Pedagogy in a pre-school setting embraces talking to children,
discussing things with children, and drawing facets of a shared situation to their
attention.’ (p.18) And if awareness means being able to ‘attend to something, act
upon it or work with it’ as Clay (1998) (p.42) suggested, then contextualised play
involved in the settings visited provided those teachable moments, which in turn
were based on children’s choice. In all cases, play provided realism and authenticity,
and most of all it was purposeful.
In the present study, all the adults involved expressed confidence in including reading-related activities in their practices. However, depending on their backgrounds, belief systems and curriculum knowledge, their 'pedagogical reasoning and action' (Wilson, Shulman and Richert, 1987 (p.120)) was different.

In terms of planning reading activities for the children, some of the Private Day Nursery practitioners argued that they did not plan the activities at all and presented a choice of some phonic games as structured moments of their day. In addition, some of the Private Day Nursery practitioners and all of those who worked in Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools planned the activities presented to the children on the basis of a thematic peg (Jameson and Watson, 1998). More specifically, they chose a topic every month as an umbrella, and they presented activities to the children where all the six areas of learning, as suggested in the Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999), were incorporated. Practitioners did not feel the need to plan activities specifically for reading since they regarded reading and writing as interrelated and they had already included them into the children's daily routines, games and other activities.

On the other hand, Reception Class teachers emphasised phonics teaching through games and the reading scheme of the school. Teachers planned the activities in the spirit of the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) requirements and had the children informally assessed while they were occupied with the activities offered to them.
All practitioners seemed to view the learning process as a 'transaction, since learning to read was regarded as a product of reciprocal relationships between the environment and the mind. Individual learners engage in activities and their participation changes the activities, while at the same time they are changed by those activities.' (Carr, 2001 (p.9))

The views expressed by practitioners who worked in Private Day Nurseries and Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools seemed to be in agreement with Edwards and Knight’s (1994) views when they argued that 'teaching above all is led by sensitivity to the state of the learner. A learner's state will include motivation, confidence, and existing understandings. Formal teaching is ultimately the making of appropriate purposeful interventions. These interventions can be exciting introductions, encouraging revisions, challenges, praise and distant monitoring.' (p.28) But according to Kruger and Tomasello (1998) (cited in Fumoto et al., 2004) 'adults' attempts to understand children's experiences depend not only on their sensitivity towards children themselves, but also on their own knowledge of the content that is being learnt by the children and on their ability to monitor and make judgements on the process of learning as it happens'. (p.185) Putting this into practice meant that practitioners who worked at Private Day Nurseries and Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools needed to find a balance between what the children expressed interest in and what the children needed to be taught.
The knowledge, which includes an understanding of what it means to teach a particular topic as well as knowledge of the principles and techniques required to do so, has been termed by Wilson, Shulman and Richert (1987) as 'pedagogical content knowledge'. (p.118) Framed by a conceptualisation of subject matter for teaching, Wilson, Shulman and Richert (1987) continued to argue that 'teachers hold knowledge about how to teach the subject, about how learners learn the subject, what the subject specific difficulties in learning are, what the developmental capabilities of students for acquiring particular concepts are, what the common misconceptions are, how curricular materials are organised in the subject area and how particular topics are best included in the curriculum. Influenced by both subject matter and pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge emerges and grows as teachers transform their content knowledge for the purposes of teaching.' (p.118)

Data collected for the present study indicates that the way participants' pedagogical content knowledge was put into practice was strongly influenced by Government documents such as The Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning (SCAA 1996) and Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999) where language and literacy was one of the six areas of learning for which specific goals were identified. Although the suggested outcomes were not regarded as a curriculum, the document was full of examples of ways to achieve specific goals.
The activities practitioners chose might have been helping children understand reading as a meaningful activity, but most of all they appeared to be aimed at achieving two goals. Firstly, to provide a learning context that builds on the attitudes the children bring to school, and secondly, to help children bring their skills to the foreground and grow in confidence while extending their competence.

Participants in this study seemed to be in agreement with Wertsch's (1978) view that a learner is a learner in action (cited in Carr, 2001 (p.4)). This is a view of learning that focuses on the relationship between the learner and the environment and 'seeks ways to define and document complex and reciprocal relationships in that environment'. (Carr, 2001 (p.5)) The observations indicate that participants in this study used big books, story telling and play in order to model 'developmentally appropriate' practices to children. The notion of appropriateness can be described as the extent to which a learning activity 'presents experiences in which the learner is able to master, generalise and retain concepts, skills and knowledge which relate to previous experiences, whilst linking to future learning expectations'. (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995 (p.15)) (cited in Riley, 2003 (p.19)) Reading the children's favourite story was an activity repeatedly chosen by practitioners and lasted almost fifteen minutes in every establishment that was observed. This seems to suggest that for the participants in this study this activity provided the quality of interactions that were necessary 'for an involvement of the child which flows from, and is influenced by, the engaged teacher'. (Pascal and Bertram, 1997) (cited in Riley, 2003 (p.20))
If pedagogy is a pursuit of an educational goal (Riley, 2003 (p.19)) (i.e. the teaching of reading) then participants in this study used phonic games and nursery rhymes in order to introduce the children to all the aspects of print processing necessary for fluent reading to be developed in accordance to the Desirable Outcomes (SCAA 1996) and National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) requirements respectively. Practitioners suggested that with the right provision, children’s literacy-related behaviour became apparent and helped them to foster children’s attempts to learn by initiating ‘suitable’ activities. Practitioners who worked in Private Day Nurseries and Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools indicated that their aim was to make children enjoy literacy-related activities. Through play, practitioners could create opportunities through which literacy could be introduced to children. Hall (1999) suggested that ‘play, and especially socio-dramatic play, can provide opportunities for young children to act appropriately as users of literacy rather than simply as analysers of literacy’. (p.106) The nature of the activities provided coincided with what practitioners felt obliged to teach children in terms of reading. In their interviews, practitioners who worked in Private Day Nurseries as well as in Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools, seemed to agree with the notion that any form of literacy behaviour before the age of five serves the emergence of literacy skills. But at the same time, Private Day Nursery practitioners acknowledged that after children finish their time in the setting they would go into establishments where specific skills are expected to be known. In the same line of argument, Carr (2001) suggested that ‘teachers and schools might construct a package of entry skills that through teacher expectations can become critical’. (p.7)
She went on to suggest that skills that are attached to meaning and intent can be termed 'learning strategies' and that learning strategies are different from skills in that they have a purpose.

For the Reception Class teachers this meant that the teaching of reading was what they tried to achieve through structured teacher-initiated activities. The activities chosen were planned by the teachers and reflected the Government requirements. Shared reading, big book stories and comprehension questions were what teachers chose in order to achieve their aims. Phonic games, story sacks and stories that led to rhyme making were also included in the teachers' preferred techniques. One of the aims of this study was to have practitioners/teachers exemplify their teaching approaches in terms of reading. Although Reception Class teachers might not be aware of theorists such as Clay, they seemed to be in agreement with the teaching strategies Clay suggested as effective if children are to access a text.

Using searching, checking, self-correcting and confirming strategies with the goal of making everything make sense, the child, according to Clay (1991), 'can work backwards and forwards between what s/he knows in the visual language information consistently building for himself/herself all the types of phonological-visual matches that can be used to read English. Such systems include grapheme-phoneme relationships, orthographic patterns and their sounds, and analogous parts of words.' (p.175)
Finally, in every case there was a twenty-minute main activity that was focused either on phonics teaching, name recognition, or high frequency words. The National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) presented phonics (sounds and spelling), word recognition and graphic knowledge as the grapho-phonetic cueing system that a child has to use effectively if s/he is to make meaning of a text. Recognition of high frequency words is one of the ways of developing grapho-phonemic awareness according to Myers and Burnett (2004). Using phonological information is also one of a network of strategies for operating on or with a text. Reading acquisition for Clay (1991) involves the ‘active construction of a repertoire which includes strategies that help increase understanding, maintain fluency, detect and correct errors and indicate the aspects of print to which children must attend’. (p.326) The Framework for Teaching, according to Browne (1998), ‘offers detailed guidance about the content of the curriculum for reading in the primary years. But the framework does not represent the complexity of all that is required in order to become an effective reader. For example, acquiring a vocabulary starts through experiences with books, and listening and watching as stories and books are shared.’ (p.152)

Browne (1998) also offered a list of suggestions about what might take place in a guided group reading session:

- Introduce a book;
- Discuss the cover and title and make predictions about content;
- At the beginning the teacher reads and the children follow the text;
• Draw attention to words and letters;
• Discuss the story, evaluating it, and reflecting on it. (pp.81-82)

The data collected for this study seems to indicate that Reception Class teachers might have used guided group reading and shared reading as situations where sustained shared thinking was the result of verbal interactions between participants and the children. Sylva et al. (2003) defined sustained shared thinking as ‘the situation where two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding.’ (p.3)

The activities chosen by Reception Class teachers facilitated the development of understanding of texts. Observation suggested that teachers in the present study attempted through comprehension exercises to facilitate engagement and meaning making with texts. Teachers gave the children the opportunity to hypothesise about what the text would reveal, visualise aspects presented through a text, and think or refer back to earlier events in a text. The skills of predicting, retrospection, picturing, interacting and evaluating were considered by Myers and Burnett (2004) as aspects of response, and the activities chosen by Reception Class teachers in this study have been named by the same authors as ‘directed activities related to texts’. (pp.48-49)

In conclusion, what this research seems to indicate is that the way participants approached the teaching of reading reflected the different expectations they had as
professionals. Even though both groups used play in order to introduce reading as naturally as possible, practitioners who worked at Private Day Nurseries and Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools focused on the emergence of literacy skills whereas Reception Class teachers followed the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) requirements.

The results of this study also indicate that the content of the activities chosen by Nursery practitioners was similar to that of Reception Class teachers. Nursery practitioners claimed that their practices were influenced by decisions/suggestions made by the manageress of the establishments or the children’s parents, as well as effective practices followed by senior members of staff. Practitioners focused on the implementations of decisions made by the ‘more experienced’ others. Thus it can be argued that Nursery practitioners agreed with the content of the activities presented to the children, but at the same time it was not clear the extent to which the content represented their views.

A few of the participants suggested that the manager/manageress of the establishment kept contact with the schools that the children were going to go to after the end of their year in the establishment, and they tried to some extent to meet their suggestions. On these occasions [especially during the pilot study], the researcher attempted to suggest that most of the children would go to schools where the teachers followed the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) requirements. Then, although all practitioners were aware of the document, they said that they had
nothing to do with it because they were not teachers. They even went further to suggest that the researcher would have had better results had the research been carried out in the Primary sector. All practitioners who participated in the pilot study for this research were not willing to talk about the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998). Some of them asked the researcher if Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999) was the document that she wished practitioners to talk about. All Nursery practitioners were aware of, and some of them were familiar with, the Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999), which this research has acknowledged as an important tool for planning. They emphasised two of the six areas of learning presented in the document. These were personal, social and emotional development of the children, and communication, language and literacy. At the same time, they suggested that although they used the thematic peg as a planning approach, the content of the reading activities was decided, to a certain extent, on the day, depending on the availability of materials, the children’s interests, or other sources of influence. On most occasions though, Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999) was a source of ideas.

So were Nursery practitioners’ views reflected in the content of the reading activities presented to the children? What this research suggests is that there is room for a positive answer even if Nursery practitioners were reluctant to admit it. All practitioners used Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999) as a frame of reference, but at the same time they had the flexibility to decide otherwise if they thought it was beneficial or effective for the class.
Finally, regarding the content of the activities, the choices made by Reception Class teachers were directly linked to the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) suggestions. This might restrict the variety of activities presented to the children. Even though the scale of this study is small and the results cannot be generalised, it can be implied that there are differences between the suggestions included in the document proposed by the Government and the practices that participants in this study would choose. At the same time, the teaching technique through which the reading activity was presented to the children was a decision that the teachers had to make. This meant that the teachers perhaps had a way through which they could introduce their views as to how reading should be taught. What this research seems to suggest is that, although the level of flexibility for the Reception Class teachers is rather limited, there are indirect ways through which they can introduce elements of their views with regards to the teaching of reading in the classroom. The results of this study seem to be in agreement with Browne (1998) when she argued that ‘the teachers’ own plans translate the statutory requirements into workable activities and routines in the classroom’. (p.153)

At the same time, this study suggests that Nursery practitioners were unwilling to link their practices to the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) suggestions, and to a lesser extent to Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999). This unwillingness to offer a theoretical background to their choices – in other words, explain the why and how of their practice – makes it impossible for the researcher to know whether or not Nursery practitioners could actually offer a theoretical background for their choices.
At the same time, it is impossible for the researcher to understand whether they could link theory and practice.

On the other hand, the training that Reception Class teachers had received offered them sound theoretical knowledge, which could be used in order to validate any attempts they decide to make towards a link between their beliefs and practices. But what this research suggests is that Government suggestions in the form of assessment requirements or attainment targets can influence the strength of the link between Reception Class teachers' beliefs and practices in terms of the teaching of reading.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION – IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The aim of this research was to provide an understanding of what early years teachers and other practitioners thought that teaching reading involved and how these ideas related to their choices of teaching practices. This was a research project that explored teachers’ beliefs and their effects on the teaching of reading in early years settings. The underlying assumption was that understanding the interplay between teachers’ actions and thought processes in the context of teaching reading would offer a better understanding of how these two components interact, which in turn might be used in order to increase educational effectiveness. This research attempted to contribute to a better understanding of the role that teachers’ concepts of subject matter (reading) play in planning, interactive decision-making and teaching.

The importance of teachers’ subject knowledge has been acknowledged by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED 1993) when it was suggested that ‘improvement of teachers’ subject knowledge is of central importance if primary schools were to make the looked for progress with teaching the National Curriculum’. (OFSTED 1993, para.32, p.16) (cited in Aubrey, 1997 (p.3)) If the aims behind policies are to ‘challenge the standards and promote performance, meet the needs of all pupils and promote the quality of teaching’ (Aubrey et al., 2000
(p.183)), then documents such as the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) demonstrated the importance of what children bring to school as well as the kinds of knowledge required on the part of the teacher. At the same time, Aubrey (1997) suggested that 'the tasks that teachers set are a function of feelings and beliefs about disciplinary knowledge and assumptions about teaching and learning. Even if their views on learning change, the scope for teaching topics in new ways will be set by the subject knowledge they hold.' (p.41)

With these ideas in mind this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- What were teachers’ views about teaching reading?
- How did these views coincide with, or differ from, theoretical models of teaching reading as derived from the literature?
- Did the experiences that teachers offered to children in pre-school settings reflect their beliefs about teaching reading?

Although this project does not follow the action research approach it supports the claim that ‘the improvement of a practice (i.e. reading) will come through the improvement of the understanding of a practice by its practitioners and the improvement of the situation within which practice takes place’. (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) (cited in Robson, 1993 (p.439)) Robson (1993) went on to argue that ‘the emphasis on a specific situation of looking at practice in a particular context and
trying to produce change in that context puts action research firmly within the case study strategy'. (p.439) Even though observations were used as illustrative case studies and improvement and involvement were regarded as key concepts in this study, the fact that the aim of this study was to exemplify early years practitioners’ beliefs and not to produce change led to the decision not to follow the action research approach.

Through the discussion of their beliefs, the researcher hoped to find out why early years practitioners do what they do in terms of reading. Understanding why people do things the way that they do is regarded by Aubrey et al. (2000) as one of the principle aims of ethnographic research. Ethnographers, according to Aubrey et al. (2000), focus on ‘patterns of behaviour because they represent internalised rules that comprise an individual’s implicit knowledge of how to behave appropriately as a member of a particular community’. (p.112) When Aubrey et al. (2000) went on to discuss the essential characteristics of ethnographic fieldwork they argued for the ‘descriptive adequacy of ethnography’. (p.115) Although observations and thick description were eventually used as research techniques, the fact that the research was conducted by a ‘lone researcher’ meant that she could not meet the requirements of adequacy in relation to the ethnographic standards.

Aubrey et al. (2000) also suggested that there should be ‘a shared linguistic and cultural competence between the ethnographer and the observed community’. (p.118) In this case, the researcher was qualified, professionally competent and the
interviews suggested that she shared common concerns with the other professionals in the settings. The fact that the researcher stayed for only one day in each establishment as well as the fact that she was regarded as a colleague made the participants very open. But what made the researcher decide not to follow the ethnographic approach is what Aubrey et al. (2000) called the ethnographer's dilemma. These authors argued that 'the teacher in a classroom is invested with a particular role and this influences the way they behave towards others in the classroom and particularly towards the children in their care. Classrooms are public places and hence the data gathered may not be totally unguarded and hence not truly representative of private acts.' (p.119) Finally, if the reports of ethnographers have to reflect people's ways of being (Aubrey et al., 2000 (p.113)) the purpose, scale and sample of this research could not help in achieving this aim.

What the researcher tried to do was to follow a methodological approach that would allow her 'to be reflexive by remaining alert to potential sources of bias'. (Aubrey et al., 2000 (p.5)) The methodological approach adopted, which combined qualitative and quantitative elements, proved effective. Using questionnaires, interviews, and observations allowed the researcher to collect rich and in-depth data about the professional lives of the participants and relate these to the contexts in which these teachers and Nursery practitioners were working. Moreover, the methodology enabled teachers to talk about their work from their own perspectives. Under the umbrella of teaching reading, this research highlighted the way practitioners'
educational careers and working experiences shaped not only their views on teaching but also the way they saw themselves.

Using both the literature currently available and the data provided from one hundred and sixty questionnaires, nine interviews and nine observations, this study has explored several aspects of teaching reading in the early years.

Questionnaires and interviews enabled teachers and other practitioners to express their views about teaching reading. Common threads appeared in the way participants completed the questionnaires as well as in the way they explained themselves in the interviews. The aim of the present chapter is to summarise the findings of this study and highlight what early years teachers and other practitioners thought that teaching reading involved. The findings have been presented in the form of a comparison between two sets of participants who held very clear, and at the same time very different, sets of beliefs about their identities as practitioners. This research provided findings about the beliefs and practices of the participants in terms of teaching reading alongside the issues of play and assessment in the same domain. The differences in approaches to the teaching of literacy and the subsequent impact on the children’s experiences of literacy appeared to be linked to the following factors: practitioners’ beliefs about the teaching of literacy, the training practitioners had received, and external pressures from the demands of the Primary School curriculum expectations.
In terms of teaching reading, participants in this study had the ability to represent key ideas in a variety of ways by using demonstrations, examples and metaphors to convey meaning to young children. In the Government funded studies on Effective Provision for Pre-School Education (Sylva et al., 2003) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in Early Years (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), the teams discussed the concept of sustained shared thinking. Wood and Attfield (2005) attempted to create an analogous concept and suggested that one way to interact with children is ‘to involve them in sustained shared playing. The nature and extent of adult involvement will depend on the learner and the learning, playing-teaching context. The practitioner can also influence the child’s intentions by introducing new knowledge, skills or understandings. This does not mean that the adult should lead or dominate the activity. Creating continuity between play and learning involves reciprocity between child’s and adult’s intentions.’ (p.104) The findings of this research suggest that participants used sustained shared playing situations to present key skills related to reading to the children.

Muijs and Reynolds (2001) also argued that ‘research seems to indicate that the prime purpose of pre-school education is to promote school readiness, focusing on skills rather than academic content. Key school readiness skills include, amongst others, task-related behaviours.’ (p.136) In terms of reading, for teachers and other practitioners, this meant conceptual learning that led to understanding along with the acquisition of basic skills (e.g. holding a book and turning the pages the right way),
which in turn would facilitate the development of linguistic competency rather than the teaching of reading.

Through meaningful and relevant learning experiences, participants expressed their preference towards interactive learning and a broad range of content integrated across the traditional subject divisions.

The vast majority of practitioners, even though they had clear aims relating to the teaching of reading, were against direct instruction and supported what Hannon (2000) explained as facilitation. Hannon (2000) defined the characteristics of facilitation in terms of literacy and at the same time – although he was not referring to early years teaching – explained how and why participants in this research introduced reading to children.

'It is a less intensive form of teaching and tends to be embedded in other (often everyday) activities. It is opportunistic – more patient and less urgent than instruction. It can still be deliberate even if the teaching aims are at the edge of the teacher’s consciousness. Teachers are aware of desirable learning outcomes even if they rarely plan teaching episodes to achieve specific objectives. The teacher, seeing the opportunity to impart some knowledge, might temporarily take on a teaching note before resuming an earlier one. The episodes might be brief and relatively spontaneous. The teacher is open to unexpected
learning and may be willing to follow learner's interests. Facilitation can be powerful to individual learners because it relates to their immediate concerns.' (Hannon, 2000 (p.62))

This seems to be in agreement with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2000) suggestions where it was argued that 'the available studies suggest that early reading, writing and maths experiences can be valuable as long as they are embedded in children's preferred experiences and interests and they are not too formal, abstract or disconnected from other activities. There is some evidence that pressuring young children to learn about letters or numbers in too formal a manner might be counter productive.' (POST 2000, p.12) (cited in Fisher, 2002 (p.35))

Practitioners in this research explained that they used the Desirable Outcomes (QCA 1996) and Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999) as a framework for planning the activities presented to the children. These documents are targeted at four-year-olds and they offer a good synopsis for the general organisation of the progression of the nursery learning programmes for all the groups. Both documents are designed to be broad enough to encompass all accepted approaches to early years learning. The objective is that every four-year-old child has an equal foundation on which to build later educational achievement.

Wood and Attfield (2005) also suggested that 'all curriculum models reflect a set of beliefs and values about what is considered to be educationally and developmentally
worthwhile in terms of children’s immediate needs, their future needs and the wider needs of society’. (p.139)

Putting this into practice meant that practitioners who worked at Private Day Nurseries and in Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools held practice-oriented qualifications, which placed emphasis on the nurturing role of the early years practitioner. These people were not teachers and did not have any training related to teaching reading. Their main commitment was to children’s social and emotional development and to the children’s happiness at school, which in turn would make learning more effective. The fact that they did not feel obliged to follow the National Curriculum (DfES 2000) guidelines gave them the freedom and flexibility to pursue children’s interests. The nature of the activities provided to the children indicated that these practitioners seemed to facilitate the emergence of literacy skills through creating positive dispositions to learning. By using a learning through play approach, they had chosen to introduce children to literacy-related skills instead of teaching them reading. Practitioners wanted to work with children who were decision-makers and problem solvers. They chose an active learning approach based on using play. Private Day Nursery practitioners and people who worked in Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools used the Desirable Outcomes (QCA 1996) and the Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999) in order to provide the ‘pedagogical framing’ (Wood and Attfield, 2005) behind the activities presented to the children. They also demonstrated their diagnostic judgement which, according to Tripp (1993), involves ‘using profession-specific knowledge and expertise to describe, understand, explain and interpret practical judgements’. (p.140) (cited in Day, 1999 (p.47)) By having
defined learning objectives these practitioners demonstrated their intentions and they possibly indicated what were regarded as key ideas and skills in the discipline of literacy by those who dealt with the planning of the activities. Demonstrating awareness of the key concepts and procedures in a field of knowledge was regarded by Shulman (1987) and Aubrey (1997) as part of subject matter specific pedagogical knowledge.

On the other hand, Reception Class teachers had to follow documents such as the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) and the National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998). These documents are more specific and hierarchical in terms of knowledge, skills and understandings within each of the discipline based areas. Although practitioners themselves argued that their work was to prepare children for Reception Class or school where 'the real learning begins', there is a controversy as to how this can be achieved more effectively. Only in the Reception Classes were elements of the Literacy Hour (DfES 1998) implemented. As for the rest of the settings, practitioners felt that they were not required to implement the document and that it was not appropriate for the age range of the children they were dealing with. Reception Class teachers also indicated that the use of such documents, that are characterised by a strong academic orientation and propose age-related expectations, suggested that the content of early years education was becoming increasingly centrally controlled – something that contradicts many features associated with good early years practice. For the scope of this study, these
documents influenced the subject content in terms of reading and indicated the representations through which the suggested content should be taught.

The findings of this study are confirmed by those of McInnes (2002) who attempted to compare the educational experiences of four-year-olds in Nursery and Reception settings. Although the focus of the research project was different, she suggested that in settings where formal aspects of the Literacy Hour were implemented, the children were engaged in activities involving language and literacy more than any other area of the curriculum. However, children did not engage in activities involving language and literacy any more than children in the other settings. McInnes’s (2002) conclusion, which supports the findings of this study, was that ‘the emphasis placed on engaging with the National Literacy Strategy does not appear to increase the amount of language and literacy experiences encountered by the children’. (p.124)

This study suggests that more work needs to be done on finding ways to implement the Literacy Hour more effectively in Reception Classes. Perhaps incorporating teachers’ and other Nursery practitioners’ views in this attempt could free their ability to use their knowledge and understanding towards improving their children’s academic-related performance.

Moreover, all participants argued for clearer policies especially after the introduction of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfES/QCA 2000). Even
though practitioners were in favour of the document, they claimed that they needed more time to familiarise themselves with it and decide how to make effective use of it. Finally, the findings of this study bear similarities to those of McInnes's (2002) project when she argued that 'the introduction of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) made Reception Class teachers feel that there would be less top-down pressure and there would be an opportunity to work from a bottom-up perspective'. (p.124)

But the fact that the Curriculum Guidance (QCA 2000) suggests that children 'should continue to be interested, excited and motivated to learn' (p.32) indicates that the document is in favour of helping children acquire positive dispositions to learning. Brooker and Broadbent (2003) argued that 'without appropriate dispositions children will acquire knowledge and skills which they do not then use'. (p.53) And if dispositions are caught rather than taught, as Dowling (2000) suggested, then Reception Class teachers can model behaviours that will 'support and consolidate children's learning and help them make progress'. (QCA 2000, p.27) This research suggests that better understanding of the subject content knowledge could help Reception Class teachers use the available Curriculum materials more effectively and take full advantage of children's competencies. For the vast majority of the teachers, teaching reading was mainly an externally controlled issue at least in terms of content. The fact that they had to meet specific attainment targets possibly restricted the way and number of times play was used,
something that possibly conflicted with teachers' beliefs on effective teaching of reading.

The nature of activities provided by Reception Class teachers indicates that participants in this study seemed to favour the concept of assisted performance. This is defined by Wood and Attfield (2005) as 'what a child can do using internal motivation and capabilities, but with support of more knowledgeable others and the learning environment'. (p.105) Reception Class teachers in this study, alongside the other practitioners, used talk, play, representation, rhyme, rimes, stories and narrative and the environmental print in order to introduce literacy-related activities to the children. These strategies have been termed by Whitehead (1999) as 'essential strategies which could provide a framework for a literacy curriculum'. (cited in Campbell, 2004 (p.115)) Through such activities teachers demonstrated their understanding of subject knowledge. Reception Class teachers seemed to attempt to scaffold children's learning and help them reach their zone of proximal development. Zone of proximal development was defined by Vygotsky (1978) as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined though problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. (p.86)

The assessment process can help practitioners identify the children's zone of proximal development. Private Day Nursery practitioners in this study were against
any kind of formal assessment. They had difficulties using the term ‘assessment’ and seemed to subscribe to Hutchin’s (2000) idea of keeping a record of children’s significant achievement. For people who worked in Nursery Classes attached to Primary Schools and Reception Class teachers assessing reading was another issue where once again control was exerted by those outside the classroom. None of the Reception Class teachers in this study felt comfortable with the specificity of the attainment targets. For them, assessment meant monitoring children’s understandings and achievements. For this, flexibility was necessary and this was something that was lacking from the Baseline Scheme (SCAA 1997).

The practitioners of this study seemed to be in agreement with what Carr (2004) presented as ‘divergent’ assessment. Divergent assessment, instead of summing up the child’s knowledge or skill from a predetermined list, ‘emphasises the learner’s understanding and is jointly accomplished by the teacher and the learner. It tries to connect external accountability and responsive teaching together. It advocates the documenting of learner outcomes and it is embedded in episodes of responsive teaching.’ (pp.56-57)

Participants’ views about assessment in terms of reading seemed to be in line with the suggestions made in the Foundation Stage Profile (QCA 2003) where it is stated that ‘teachers build up their assessments throughout the year on a cumulative basis from ongoing learning and teaching. The profile has been designed to reflect the process and can be completed periodically throughout the year using the evidence
from ongoing assessment. This will assist practitioners to make ongoing records or track progress informally.' (p.3) For the participants in this study assessment had four characteristics: 'it is about everyday practice, it is observation-based, it requires observation and it points the way to better learning and teaching'. (Carr, 2004 (p.64))

The way that participants in this study approached assessment brings to the foreground once again the need for the practitioners to have knowledge and expertise about the learners, the curriculum content and the pedagogical strategies followed. These were regarded by Shulman (1986) as aspects of pedagogical content knowledge. Although the scope of this study is very small and the results cannot be generalised, this study acknowledges the importance of subject matter knowledge and the influence this might have on the implementation of the curriculum. This study suggests that training which facilitates the understanding of subject knowledge would help teachers implement their views more effectively.

This study also appears to support the suggestions of the OECD (2001) where the need for appropriate training for staff in all forms of provision is stressed. In that document it is argued that 'quality early childhood care and education depends on strong staff training across the sector. Initial teacher training might be broadened to take into account the growing educational and social responsibilities of the profession.' (p.11) What the present study suggests is that incorporating
practitioners’ views into the training they receive may be one important element towards recruiting and retaining a qualified, diverse and satisfied workforce.

Subject matter knowledge can enhance teachers’ abilities of reflection in action (Schön, 1987). This in turn will enable them to stand critically against suggested policies and possibly adapt strategies of action in a way that is closer to children’s capabilities and interests. The findings of this study highlight ways in which subject matter knowledge can help practitioners who believe in a holistic approach to education, based on play and active learning, to be confident in interpreting the curriculum in creative ways.

For the Private Day Nursery practitioners it was their need to have subject matter knowledge as part of the training they receive. High quality early years education needs appropriately qualified staff. This research suggests that the lack of related training possibly limited their ability to make full use of the freedom given to them to plan in a way that suited the developmental needs of the children under their responsibility.

The introduction of the Literacy Hour (DfES 1998) in Reception Classes, the separation of the subject areas and the fragmentation of time were questioned by the teachers who participated in this research. They also claimed that the scheme specified the content and experiences that children had to access in order to become literate. What they argued was that the scheme could become helpful to their work if
they were able to introduce the suggested content in ways which were appropriate and relevant to the needs of their group of children. This research suggests that knowledge of the subject matter could increase the level of flexibility regarding the implementation of the Literacy Hour (DfES 1998).

If learning can occur through a variety of approaches, as this study indicates, then having an awareness of the reading process could influence the structure of the activities chosen as well as the planning and the organisation of the environment. It could be hypothesised that a general enhancement of such awareness among early years practitioners might well facilitate children’s knowledge, skills, aptitudes and dispositions to reading through the use of effective guided participation. ‘Teachers naturally learn through the course of a career. However, learning from experience alone will ultimately limit development. Thus teachers will only be able to fulfil their educational purposes if they are both well prepared for the profession and able to maintain and improve their contributions to it through career-long learning. Support for their professional development is therefore an integral and essential part of efforts to raise standards of teaching, learning and achievement.’ (Day, 1999 (p.2))
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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire

Section 1: Early Years Educators’ Beliefs about the Teaching of Reading

Personal Information

1) Please tick the appropriate box

Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

2) Length of teaching experience (including this year as a full year)

1 year ☐ 2-5 years ☐ 6-10 years ☐
11-20 years ☐ More than 20 years ☐

3) Please tick any qualification which you hold

BTEC in Nursery Nursing ☐ NVQ in Child Care (3 and 4) ☐
Teachers Certificate ☐ B.Ed. ☐
BA (QTS) ☐ NNEB ☐
BA ☐ B.Sc. ☐
PGCE ☐ PhD. ☐

Other (please specify)
4) Please state the kind of Nursery in which you work this year

Nursery School
Nursery Classes attached to Roman Catholic school
Nursery Classes attached to C.E. school
Reception Class
Reception Class attached to Primary school (non denominational)
Reception Class attached to Roman Catholic school
Reception Class attached to C.E. school
Private Day Nursery
Workplace Nursery
Community and non-profit making Day Nursery
University/College school Day Nursery
Other (please specify)

5) Do you hold any special post of responsibility related to reading in your school?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes please specify

6) Please state the size of the group of children for whom you are responsible

Under 20 ☐ 21-25 ☐ 26-30 ☐
31-35 ☐ More than 36 ☐ Other (please specify)

7) How confident are you about teaching reading?

Very confident ☐ Quite confident ☐
Confident in a limited way ☐ Not at all confident ☐
I do not know / I cannot tell ☐
Section 2: Teachers' Beliefs about Reading

The following section suggests some of the characteristics involved in beginning reading. Please rank them 1-3 as you grade them. Give 1 to the most important, 2 to the second most important and finally 3 to the least important.

8) Being able to read means:

a) Knowing the alphabetical code
b) Being able to extract meaning from a text
c) Being able to integrate a number of skills in order to extract meaning

9) Please rate each of the following statements by circling the appropriate number. The numbers represent the following values:
I - strongly agree, 2 - agree, 3 - disagree, 4 - strongly disagree, 5 - neutral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children learn to read naturally as they acquire language skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonics is the most important way of helping children learn to read</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Acquiring phonic skills:

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<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct teaching of phonics is not necessary since children learn the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alphabetical code by encountering text in the company of literate people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order for someone to read s/he needs to acquire the following skills:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word recognition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of letters and sounds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading activities can help the child improve the following skills:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 3: Teachers’ Beliefs about Teaching Reading

10) Please rate each of the following statements by circling the appropriate number.

*The numbers represent the following values:
1 – strongly agree, 2 – agree, 3 – disagree, 4 – strongly disagree, 5 – neutral*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a fixed sequence of reading experiences which is necessary for the child to follow</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is necessary for children to do reading at a fixed time every day</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of teaching reading should be subject to whole school decision-making</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ beliefs should be taken into account when decisions are made by the authorities about the National Curriculum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I have to teach about reading this year is manageable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Early Learning Goals in teaching can be regarded as:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A framework for teaching</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Useful for planning teaching</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful for carrying out teaching</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A means of assessing children’s learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 4: Teaching Reading and Classroom Practice

11) The following question presents 7 teaching techniques. Please rank them from 1-7. Give 1 to the most frequently used in your class, 2 to the next most frequent and give 7 to the least frequent technique used in your class.

a) Paired reading  

b) Group reading  

c) Silent reading  

d) Story telling  

e) Big books  

f) Play  

g) Reading Schemes  

Other reading techniques used with the children? (please specify)

12) During a typical one-hour's Literacy Lesson how long do pupils:

Work individually
Work in groups
Work as a whole class

In the following questions please rate the factors that may influence your teaching practice. The numbers represent the following values: 1 – strong influence, 2 – significant influence, 3 – little influence, 4 – no influence at all, 5 – do not know/cannot tell

13) Factors that influence your teaching practice may include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Learning Goals</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>National Curriculum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My school policy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head’s views</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues’ views</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ views</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My own beliefs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14) What might lead you to change your teaching practice?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A change imposed by the government</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your own understanding of the positive effect that a new practice has on the class</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions of your colleagues</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
15) Which of the following do you use most frequently in order to plan your teaching? (please tick one box)

National Curriculum  □  My school scheme  □
Early Learning Goals  □  Commercially produced materials  □
National Literacy Strategy  □
Other (please specify)

The following two questions address constraints and ways of improving teaching practice respectively. (please tick as many as apply)

16) Sources of difficulty in the teaching of reading may involve:

Many topics to cover in order to deal with the National Curriculum  □
Large number of pupils in the class  □
Children’s home background  □
Lack of time  □
Lack of resources  □
Lack of teacher knowledge  □
Lack of motivation  □
Other (please specify)

17) Ways of improving teaching practice may include:

Co-operation between teachers  □  Clear school policy  □
In-service training  □  More time for reading  □
Parental involvement  □  Smaller class size  □
Quality of resources  □  Quantity of resources  □
Other (please specify)
18) Please give an example of a reading activity that you have recently done in class, which you think best exemplifies your approach to the teaching of reading. (Please also state the aims)

19) If you wish to make any comments, please use the space below.

Thank you very much for your help

Angeliki Kostopoulou
Cross Tabulation Charts

Question 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Very confident</th>
<th>Quite confident</th>
<th>Limited confidence</th>
<th>No confidence</th>
<th>Don’t know/ Cannot tell</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers' Certificate</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NVQ in Child Care</td>
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CTI: Respondents' qualification * Confidence about teaching reading
Question 9

<table>
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<td>BA</td>
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**CT2:** Respondents' qualification * Views on the importance of phonics when teaching children to read

<table>
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<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>PGCE</td>
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<tr>
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**CT3:** Respondents' qualification * Reading Naturally
### Necessity of Fixed Sequence of Reading Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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**CT4:** Respondents' qualification * Necessity of Fixed Sequence of Reading Activities

### Placement of Reading Schemes as a Teaching Technique

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Respondents' Workplace</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nursery Class attached to RC School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nursery Class attached to CE School</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Day Nursery</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community &amp; non-profit making Day Nursery</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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**CT5:** Respondents' workplace * Reading Schemes
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<th>Placement of Group Reading as a Teaching Technique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Nursery Class attached to Primary School</td>
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**CT6:** Respondents' workplace * Group Reading

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**CT7:** Respondents' workplace * Paired Reading
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CT8: Respondents' workplace * Silent Reading

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CT9: Respondents' qualification * Early Learning Goals: A means of carrying out teaching
APPENDIX 2

*Interview*

Q  Could you please tell me what you are planning to teach the children within their Reception Class here in terms of reading?

A  Really we want them first of all to just enjoy stories. Our first step is to actually get them to talk about the pictures and stories. Their first Stage One books don't have words because we just want them to get to know how to use a book. The most important thing is that they can follow and turn the pages one by one; they understand a book is pointing this way up not upside down. It is getting them to understand you read it from page to page; you don't start at the back, you start in the right way.

We actually get them to learn their Stage One words first of all. They use Oxford Reading Tree books and we have big books and also small books. And basically we just get them to be confident readers. They have flash cards to take home, we have lots of activities at school like matching words, recognising the letters and recognising key words. By the end of Reception some children are on their Stage Three books and are reading quite confidently. Other children may still be having trouble recognising words but they can actually talk about a story in detail.
If I read a story to them most of them can actually retell it back to me.

Q  Do you follow a set plan for lessons every day to achieve certain outcomes each day in terms of reading, or do you leave it to the interest of the child?

A  Well really each child is different, so one child might be better with just actually sight reading words, so they might recognise 'the' straightaway, or they might recognise 'a' straightaway, or other children might have to use the phonic approach. And every day we use phonics and teach them how to use phonics. Phonics is just letter sounds and we learn different letter sounds. They have a phonic book. Let me show you their phonic book.

And they learn the action to go with the phonic so like a snake action, a, a, a is like ants crawling up their arms; t, t, t is like a tennis ball bouncing to and fro.

And what they do is they learn a few of these each week and then when they come to a word they don’t know such as 'sat' they can look at the first letter sound and say, 'Oh, this is s-s-s,' and then go on to the next letter and say, 'That’s a-a-a,' and that is a fun way of learning. And next they say ‘t,’ and eventually ‘s-a-t,’ and they actually blend those letters together and say, 'sat'. So each day we try and focus on a phonics activity and most of the time, well all of the time, they are done in a fun way.
And today I gave each child a different phonic, well they had four phonics, so four children had ‘s’, four children had ‘mmmm’, which is the letter ‘m’, another four children had the ‘i,i’ sound for the letter ‘i’ and then what they had to do was they had to hold their letter shape next to their chest and move around the carpet making that letter sound and the action.

And when they found another friend or another person making that sound they had to hold their hand and sit down so each group was making a phonic sound. And then they showed me their letter shape and just by doing fun activities like that they actually learnt all the letter sounds. And when they learn their letter sounds they can actually read most words unless you get the tricky words that they can’t sound out. But if they know this book and they learn phonics in a fun way they can actually read lots of words.

Q How do you assess their progress then?

A Well when we are actually reading with them, we have a sheet on which we monitor it. There might be one learning objective that we look at – it might be about noticing the difference between writing and pictures. So I might ask a child if they can show me the writing or the pictures. And it is actually basically just a tick sheet. Another one might be to check if they can follow the words with their fingers. So we get the sheet out when we read and tick it and write notes on what they are doing and if they know certain words.
We also have a list of words, Stage One words, and if they know the words, kipper, floppy, chip and they are in their reading book we can mark them off as well. And if they know those words we will give them brand new words to learn.

Q Correct me if I am wrong, but I know within the first seven weeks of the Reception Class they have Baseline Assessment.

A That’s right.

Q This to me says that children have to have at least some knowledge in terms of reading before they enter Reception Class. How do you assess them when they come and what are the steps you take from this point onwards?

A They come in, first of all part-time for a few weeks, and as you say they have got seven weeks from the day they walk into the classroom to assess them and we assess them not only on reading and writing but also on speaking and listening, personal and social development skills, and also maths. And there are various activities that every single child has to do.

Q Such as?
A One of them is to give them six names and they have got to recognise their own name. So if it was Thomas I would also put in a name such as....

Q Similar to?

A Yes – the sound. So for Thomas I would also put in Tamara or Daniel. I would also put in the name David. And Declan. They might think they recognise their name from the first letter, Thomas could see the letter ‘T’ and decide that was his name, but I want them not just to recognise the first sound, I want them to really make sure they do know their name. So I would give them six names and they have got to choose their name. That is one.

Another reading one is whether they recognise the difference between print and pictures and another Baseline is whether they can read five phonetic letter sounds and another one is whether they can read fifteen. So we actually assess them – we have got a folder that tells you exactly what to do. But really they don’t need prior knowledge before they come to school because basically all we use Baseline for is to see what they are coming into school with and from that, when I get all those results, I can decide what to do next, so if a child does not know his name, over the next few weeks I work on fun activities that will help him recognise it.

Q You do ability groups in a way on the basis of...
A Well no – Baseline basically teaches us, shows us, what we need to teach the children and if we did not have it we would probably just be assessing them anyway, but we need to make sure, this gives us a clear understanding of who knows what and where we need to build them. There is no point teaching them reading if they don’t know their letter sounds because this is all about reading, so we need to start from ‘s-s-s’ and one child in the class actually knows all his letter sounds so I need to go on to blends and other letter sounds. And I need to make sure I can work with initial and final...

So really it is great because now I know how to move him on. We don’t exactly have ability groups because I think it is nice for one child to sit next to another child who can actually help him along and they bounce off each other.

Their seek and listen skills might be fantastic or their...

Q How do you understand if an activity works with the children and how do you decide what will be the next step so as to have a productive lesson?

A I think by the end of the Baseline you know what stage they are at and a successful lesson is pitching the lesson and the activities at their level. And you know it is successful if by the end of it they can come and tell you what they have learnt. So we ask them what letter sounds they have learnt that day, or what did they do in that activity and what did they learn and they will
actually come out and tell you what they have been doing and what new thing they have found out.

So by their feedback you know it was a successful lesson. Also, when I am doing a phonic activity I know if it is going well by their faces, whether they are excited and want to join in. There is no point them sitting there bored and I would not do an activity if I could see they were – as soon as they get distracted or they don’t look like they are taking part I will let them choose something else to do. So I know if it is successful by their... the way they are. Physically, have they got their shoulders down and their heads down or are they excited and wanting to learn. So that is how I assess them.

By observing, asking them questions and getting them to show me if they have actually finished a phonic matching activity or actually come and show me the end product of what they have done.

Q  Do you find whatever you have to teach manageable from your side?

A  It is manageable because it has to be. I mean, I have got a small class, there are twenty-two in the class. Sometimes we sit on the carpet to do phonics or we have big books where we share the text together so it is shared reading. I might ask them where I should put my pointer to start reading. If the book is about a mouse and a lion my pointer would be a big mouse to make it fun.
And they have got to come and show me where to start reading, so it is left to right in order to make sense. So what they do is just join in. The whole class can actually share a big piece of writing if it is big enough. And really in order for it to be manageable I have small groups, usually four children, so I can really concentrate. If you have a group of six or eight it is too big and there will be children sitting there on a chair feeling bored or sitting in the library. It is important to make eye contact with them and see their body language all the time so they are keen.

Also to keep it manageable you have to have short activities so they are not sitting there for fifteen to twenty minutes – it has to be short and to the point so they listen and do it and they understand it.

Q I hear you talking with great confidence and I admire that in a person. You base that on your experience and your pre-service training. What did you do before you started teaching?

A I left school at sixteen. I did two years of nursery nursing, which is called an NNEB and it is to work with children under five. So I went to college for two years and I had placements where I went out and worked in Nursery Schools and Playgroups and basically with any child under the age of six or eight, so I have had lots of experience there and I actually learnt the development of the
child. So I learnt basically a child inside out. And from that I was able to see how they learn what their first steps should be.

When I was eighteen I qualified as a nursery nurse and for a whole year I went round lots of Coventry schools as a supply nursery nurse and worked in Nurseries across Coventry in Special Needs Schools. Then I got a job in a Nursery and worked there for three years, teaching three and four-year-olds, which is the step before Reception. From there I went to university for three years and specialised in Key Stage One, which is Reception Years One and Two and did three different school placements. And one was in a Reception Class. So in all I had eight years experience before I even became a teacher. And this is my second year of teaching.

Q So you see the difference between what you did in the Nursery and what you have to do here?

A It is the next step up, yes.

Q Can you tell me how you understand that kind of difference, what are the expectations when a child is in the Nursery and when the child is here?

A Well really when our children start in September they are still pre-school, they are still four and in the Nursery they are four. So it is not really until they are
five, they are still very young and they don’t start the National Curriculum until Year One anyway. So it is quite similar to Nursery – mind you I don’t think there is a lot of difference to be honest – I think Reception is still very fun. I don’t think there should be a big leap. I think we are still early years practitioners and it should not be a totally different practice. A lot of things that I was doing there are still the kind of things that I am doing here because they are only four and five, which is still very young.

We are doing a lot more phonics but I think I know how to teach phonics now. If I went into a Nursery I think the children would love making the ‘sss’ sound and the ‘aaa’ sound. We had a puppet the other day and they love puppets and I have lots of things in a mystery bag and the puppet picked a pig out of the bag and I said, ‘Maisie the puppet can’t say the first sound’, and Maisie said, ‘ig, ig’, and the children shouted, ‘No, it’s pig!’ Then I asked the children what the first sound was and they called out ‘P’.

And I think even Nursery children would love that. They don’t realise they are learning because they are having such a great time with the puppet and you find yourself being really silly, but they love it. And so even Nursery children could cope with learning letter sounds, as long as it is fun they will learn and enjoy it. So there is not a lot of difference really.
Q Can you give me your opinion about the Foundation Stage and the Desirable Outcomes and all the paperwork related to legalities for early years education? Do you find any difference between what you had before as a framework and what you have now?

A Before we had the Desirable Learning Outcomes and a plan from them last year – this year we have Effective Early Learning Goals. And this is it here and I am still learning how to use it. But I think it is nicer because it actually breaks down the learning objective so it might say, ‘Attempts to write for different purposes’ and it actually shows the progression so it actually does break it down a lot for you, which is good.

The planning side of it is O.K. because they give you your learning outcomes. First of all you are meant to choose a learning outcome or a learning objective and then you actually plan an activity for that. So it probably is, well it is, a very good document – I really do enjoy teaching from it. There are lots of opportunities to have fun and it is actually for Reception, Nursery and Playgroups as well. It says it starts from the age of three until the end of Reception. So I think it is great because some children are still at the early year stages of three and you can actually assess them – so yes, Tom does this, so in order to progress he needs to do that, and it actually breaks it up for you so it gives a lot of guidance for early years practitioners.
And a lot of people who have not trained in early years are very formal and so this is like a Bible for them and it shows you good practice and there are lots of opportunities for fun learning. There is creative development and physical development. In your writing for language and literacy it says to make marks, which is very valuable so it is wonderful.

Q Thank you very much indeed. If you have something else to say please feel free to do so. You have left me speechless.
The children start to arrive at nine o'clock and for the first fifteen minutes they have free play or one activity of their preference.

The teacher brings the blackboard close to her chair and asks the children to gather around her on the carpet.

9.20-9.50

*Teacher:* Do you remember what letter we discussed last time?

*Children:* Mm.

*Teacher:* Give me an action for m.

*The children do accordingly.*

*Teacher:* Give me a word starting with m.

*Children:* Mum, Miss, Mia, Micky.

*Teacher:* What was the other letter we discussed last week?

*Children:* Uu.

*Teacher:* Give me a sound for u.

*The children do accordingly.*
Teacher: Today we are going to do two different sounds. Ff and th. They sound similar but they are not. We are going to use a ruler when we write them because they are hard ones to do.

The teacher asks a few children to copy what she writes on the blackboard. Then she asks the children to think of a word beginning with f.

One of the children says 'Fun' and based on this the teacher continues.

Teacher: What sound does fun start with?

Children: F.

Teacher: With what sound does it end? F-u ... The teacher waits for the children to respond and some of them say 'n'.

Teacher: And what is the long sound?

No response.

Teacher: Close your eyes and find it in your mind's eye. Close your eyes and sound it out. All together...

Teacher and Children: F-U-N.

The teacher follows exactly the same process for the word 'fat'. One of the children says 'fish' and another 'foot'. The teacher takes the chance and asks them to try and remember that two 'o' sounds together make a long sound. In addition she asks them to make the
sound that ‘sh’ produces. The last task for the children is to make the action for the letters g, n, m, p and f. Finally:

Teacher: What letter did we do today? Who can read the letters we wrote on the blackboard? Remind me of the actions for today’s letters.

The children respond accordingly.

9.50-10.10

Four tables. These are teacher-initiated activities but the children are allowed to choose which of the four activities they would like to do. The activity on the first table helps the children learn to write ‘Ff’. The one on the second table involves playing matching games. At the third table children are taught how to write CVC words. They are given a photocopied sheet with a parasol on it in which CVC words are written. The children have to find them and write them down. At the fourth table the teacher uses flash cards and the children have to say the word on the card held up and then write it down. When the children are writing they are constantly reminded not to forget to leave a finger space between each word.

10.10-10.40

Snack, registration, line up and then outdoor play (Break).
10.45-11.00

The children are asked to lie down on the carpet and take a book of their choice to look at. This was to calm them down after playing outside.

11.00-11.20

*Story time. The teacher gathers the children around her.*

*Teacher:* Who can remember who the character was in our story last time?

*Children:* Whinny.

*Teacher:* Today the character in our story is... what do you think Emma?

*Emma:* A dog.

*Teacher:* And what colour is the dog?

*Children:* Black and white.

*Teacher:* What is its name?

*Children:* [All together.] Bingo! [It's like a game!]

The teacher tries to calm the children down and asks them to listen carefully while she reads the story because after she has finished she will ask questions. The children settle down and the teacher reads the story.

*Teacher:* Put your hand up if you can remember:

What did Bingo say to his mum?

Where did mum tell Bingo to go and play?
What did he see first?
What did he try to do?

11.25-12.00

After the questions about the story the teacher explains the next task to the children. They are all given the same activity, which is presented on photocopied sheets containing three tasks. They have to, a) colour the sketches if the word starts with j or f, b) put the missing alphabet letters in the caterpillar, and c) write down the initial letter of each word.

Some observations of the four ability group tables are given here:

A bench with a lot of storage space underneath, displays of ‘The Keeper says Happy Birthday’ and ‘Living Creatures’. Two computers, books, folders and photocopied sheets detailing activities. The letters of the alphabet are displayed on the wall in both upper and lower case. Near the door there is a photograph of the whole class. The remaining wall space is covered with a series of posters and displays. The posters are: ‘Living Things: The Five Senses: Move, breathe, eat and grow’, ‘The Keeper says Happy Birthday’ and ‘Little Miss Muffet’. The displays are varied and colourful: ‘Me and My Family’ has children’s drawings of their families; ‘Look at our Shapes’ shows basic geometrical shapes; ‘Look at our Faces’ has small pictures of the children. The remaining displays are ‘Look at our Drawings’, ‘How Tall we are, I can Find my Height’, ‘Counting is Fun – Numbers 1-100’ and stories about the four seasons.
Also in the classroom there is a TV, a VCR, the carpet area, the teacher’s chair, a
blackboard, a small library and a small altar. There is a big book clearly on view:
‘Ten favourite nursery rhymes that are fun to read and sing’. On one table there are
photocopies of writing exercises and painting materials are laid out. A poster entitled
‘We have been mixing our colours’ is close by showing a combination of colours
(purple, green and orange).

Finally near the window there are the Stage One Red Books 1-4 and 5-8 as well as
the 1-4 and 5-8 Stage Two Yellow Books. Other books include the Green 360

The school has a strong Catholic element. The teacher endeavours to bring a
religious influence into the literacy lesson by asking the children to approach the
topic of the day from a religious point of view. She asks them to write small phrases
in their notebooks, such as ‘Thank God for our food’, ‘Today is a special day – it is
St Patrick’s Day’, ‘Today is Ash Wednesday and we went to mass’ etc.

Assessment takes place according to the suggestions in the Curriculum Guidance for
the Foundation Stage. The teacher thinks that the Early Steps and Desirable
Outcomes documents that she has used since September give the same information
in different ways. Her opinion is that the aim behind these documents is to provide
teachers with an overall view of the stage that a child has reached.
The teacher uses ability groups for classroom management purposes. The more advanced group is given the name 'Red Apples' and children within this group can write independently, are able to read, can use simple dictionaries and have knowledge of all letter sounds. The less able group is called 'Banana' and these children are still at the copywriting stage and need strong teacher input. The 'Oranges and Peaches' fall in-between the two extremes, they are progressing well but are not quite ready to move on from the copywriting stage.

The teacher offers a child profile and her focus is, a) to help children become capable readers, and b) to ease the transition to Year 1. She claims that the structure in the class is fairly loose and is able to offer different levels of words and activities to the varying abilities of the children. When a child has difficulties she takes them back to the basics and guides them in word building and CVC activities.

Agreeing with the school policy is a precondition for a teacher to secure a position within the school. In this case, if the policy did not meet with her agreement, the teacher would have followed her way of teaching and tried to back up her argument with research.