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## Not so great a leap

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The gulf between reception and Year 1 can be vast. Jennifer Beckles learns how teachers are bridging the gap by incorporating play into learning. Photographs: Richard Lea-Hair. Ice white polar bears and shiny penguins skid along blocks of melting ice on the table. “It’s so slippery,” says Katharine, six, as a toy penguin slides into a pool of water at the bottom of the tray. While in another Year 1 classroom at Burlington Infants and Nursery School in Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, children touch, feel and describe the textures of seashells and spiky outer casings of horse chestnuts. Further along the hall, children brainstorm adjectives for tastes of food, from “punchy” lemons to “yummy” chocolate.

It hasn’t always been like this. Several years ago, young children who moved from play-based reception to key stage 1 had to forgo buckets and spades and fancy hats to sit up and listen during literacy and numeracy and follow a formal national curriculum.

“Many of our children found the change difficult,” says Samantha Herbert, deputy headteacher and foundation stage leader. “Children lost confidence and some ended up in tears in the morning when they came to school. They struggled to cope with the independence needed during literacy and numeracy hours.”

Such was the concern that Samantha, along with five other schools in Kingston upon Thames, got together

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to look at the children's move from reception. "We wanted to create a thematic approach, to make children's learning more imaginative," she says, "and to make their experiences in Year 1 similar to those in reception."

The Government couldn't ignore the issue either, as a study carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research in 2005 clearly pointed to problems such as loss of learning through play once children entered KS1. They were bored by the need to sit still and listen, and found writing difficult.

Two Government packages followed on from the findings: Continuing the Learning Journey, an inset training package, and Seamless Transitions, a compilation of case studies from six local authorities.

Many schools recognise that a play-based, experiential, interactive approach is right for the early years of a child's school life.

In fact, the National Primary Headteachers' Association (NPHA), in its recent response to the Government's primary review, recommends that the foundation stage should be rolled through to Year 1.

The association criticises the Government's focus on developing literacy and numeracy skills and suggests other areas are more crucial, such as social skills and verbal development.

As Burlington School has a high proportion of children with English as an additional language and communication difficulties, a formal literacy hour may not be right there, says Samantha.

"Many of our children join reception class with poor speaking and listening skills. Although there is some improvement at the end of the school year, some do not manage to reach the early learning goals set out in the foundation stage," she says.

Sangeev, a quiet and insecure five-year-old boy who spoke very little English, had only six months' experience at the school before entering Year 1. "The transition project allowed Sangeev to explore the classroom and select activities with which he felt comfortable," says Kate Vivian, a Year 1 teacher. It took the pressure off, she says, as he did not have to try to make sense of new vocabulary because there were fewer whole-class teaching sessions.

As the term progressed, Sangeev became more confident due to a range of fun and educational games. Turn-taking, speaking and listening helped Sangeev to rekindle friendships. He also began to ask questions.

Lesley Staggs, former national director of the foundation stage, feels this approach applies to many. She says, "The key in my view is to recognise that most children are still working towards some, or all, of the early learning goals as they move into key stage 1. The curriculum and general approach need to reflect that."

Recent figures show that only 45 per cent of five-year-olds manage to meet the early learning goals; this figure drops to 35 per cent for five-year-olds from deprived areas, according to figures from the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Jayne Halliwell, headteacher of Park Walk Primary in southwest London, agrees. "Many of our children,

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particularly those who haven't experienced nursery, or join reception class mid-term, haven't met the early learning goals when they begin Year 1."

This has implications for planning and assessing. "There is a lot of cross-referencing between foundation stage profiles and the national curriculum, which is time consuming, but necessary," says Kate.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is to be implemented in all schools in England from September next year. It is a detailed, play-based framework which aims to provide better outcomes by concentrating on high quality learning and care during a child's first five years. Early years practitioners and teachers will plan, teach and assess children using the framework. Will it affect the transition of children to key stage 1?

Lesley feels the new framework won't make any difference. What counts, she says, is an integrated curriculum, because that works best for children in Year 1.

A good example of this is the "ourselves, our bodies" theme at Burlington School for Year 1 classes. Role play areas have been designed to incorporate baby and X-ray clinics and a GP surgery. Children find a lot to talk about and discover. Not least, the real-life X-rays bought from eBay by Sarah Botting, a Year 1 teacher.

Clara, five, was quiet and lacking in confidence when she entered Year 1 at Burlington. She found it hard to remember letter shapes and sounds. The transition project allowed her time to catch up. Role-play provided her with lots of opportunities to develop speaking and listening skills - the building blocks of literacy.

As the term moves on, children gradually adapt to a more formal curriculum. Until then, both literacy and numeracy hours are flexible.

Is practice like this widespread? "There are some really good news stories of how the foundation stage has changed Year 1 practice. But it is still an ongoing concern," says Lesley.

"We should have the foundation stage all the way through to when children are seven years of age, just like they are doing in Wales," says Mary Cowland, headteacher at Burlington School.

Children's names have been changed.

#### A touch of class

Jenny Stainsby, reception class teacher at Central Street School in Hebden Bridge, Halifax, has worked with her team of staff to improve children's transition.

Literacy and numeracy are taught flexibly, literacy over three mornings and numeracy over two. The children become more involved in activities and the teacher can provide more variety.

Staff have devised a red and green job system to encourage children to work independently. Children are given red jobs - focused activities, which they complete first - followed by green jobs to help them learn skills.

Years 1 and 2 share a creative workshop - painting, sand, dough and water. Year 1 classrooms have a

writing corner, book area, role play and construction area.

“We decided to take the foundation stage principles right through to Year 2,” says Jenny. “We have reorganised classrooms by removing tables and created role-play and construction areas in Year 1.

“Our Year 1 and 2 teachers are very experienced in the foundation stage. They have continued to develop the way they organise teaching and learning in key stage 1.”

Long players do well

In Wales, a foundation phase has been introduced to cover the education of children from three to seven years in maintained and non-maintained schools. It is being piloted in 42 areas and will be rolled out throughout the country from September next year.

The foundation phase sets out to provide a holistic approach to learning through a child-centred curriculum and it aims to produce confident learners.

The move follows research which showed that children do not begin to benefit from extensive formal teaching until the age of six or seven, in line with their social and cognitive development.

The result is, children are actively learning through play.

The foundation phase consists of seven areas of learning: personal and social development and well-being; language, literacy and communication skills; mathematical development; bilingualism and multi-cultural understanding; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development, and creative development.



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