All Aboard

Project Evaluation

Early Intervention in the Early Years

July 2011
Dr Ruth Dennis
Senior Educational Psychologist
FOREWORD

“If life chances are so indelibly struck for most children by the age of 5, then for any government wishing to rebuild the ladders to social mobility as a foundation for life long change, as well as to tackle the root of long term adult poverty, it must commit to a radical overhaul of a whole sweep of Early Years policies”

Frank Field, Atlee Memorial Lecture 2010.

Improving life chances for all children but especially those from low income families has been a major driver for government Early Years policy over the past 15 years. The resulting increase in regulation and availability of Early Years education has indeed driven up quality and improved outcomes for young children. Combined with the success of Sure Start and Sure Start Children’s Centre in improving children’s early educational experiences at home, real progress can be seen to have been made.

Despite this, certain groups of children, including those from poorer backgrounds continue to make less progress and there is a failure to ‘narrow the gap’ between the lowest performing 20% of children and their more affluent peers. This has been confirmed in a plethora of recent reviews which assert that poor children still grow up to be poor adults (Field, 2010) and that there is still a need for proactive instead of reactive intervention to improve children’s life chances (Allen, 2011).

This report describes an innovative attempt to improve outcomes for children whose attainment appears to be behind that of their peers on entry to Nursery or Reception class. Rather than offering ‘more of the same’, All Aboard provides a model of enhanced early years provision in order to support the children’s learning emotional and social needs. Based on evidence of how children learn in the Early Years, those children taking part in the project attended three ‘enhanced’ Nursery sessions a week, during which they worked in a small group with a key adult. These enhanced sessions allowed increased opportunities to develop language, social skills and personalised learning.

Children’s progress was measured at the beginning and the end of the project using the settings’ ‘My Learning Picture’ data and a comparison made with a parallel Early Years cohort. The results indicate that children taking part in All Aboard made greater progress in Communication, Language and Literacy compared to the control group. In addition, children with English as an additional language were seen to particularly benefit, with greater progress in all areas than similar peers in the control group.

In addition to this, feedback from parents indicated that they felt that All Aboard improved their children’s confidence and their communication skills. Moreover, parents reported that as a result of the project they felt more secure in their knowledge about what happens on a day to day basis in Nursery, and more able to support their children’s development at home.

These results indicate that All Aboard is a valuable tool which, combined with universal Early Years provision and Children’s Centres could make a real difference in improving outcomes and life chances for children from poor families. At a time of reduced funding from central government to local authorities low cost interventions such as All Aboard will become increasingly valuable.

I would like to express my thanks to all those who took part in the evaluation. Every effort has been made to ensure the anonymity all participants.

Dr Ruth Dennis, June 2011

For further information about this report contact: ruth.dennis@educationbradford.com
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INTRODUCTION

Child Poverty, Outcomes and Interventions

“(Poor children)… have a bad start and few of them recover. During their lifetimes they can impose heavy penalties on themselves and generate major costs, financial and social, for their families, local communities and the national economy.”

Allen 2011 p3

Frank Field’s recent review ‘The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults’ (HMSO, 2010) and many of the Early Years developments over the past 15 years can be seen to be premised on reducing child poverty. Life outcomes, including academic outcomes have been found to be consistently lower for children coming from poorer backgrounds (Allen, 2011).

In 2010, the Centre for Excellence in Outcomes (C4EO) found that up to half of children coming from poor backgrounds had speech and language difficulties on entering school. The same report goes on to make the link between communication difficulties low attainment and poor future employment chances. The Allen review (2011) draws on a number of longitudinal studies that demonstrate that a child’s developmental assessment at an early age can be an accurate predictor of later educational outcomes. This is reinforced by Field (2010a) who provides evidence that the majority of children in the bottom 20% of their class at the age of seven, will still be there at the age of seventeen.

This is not new knowledge. Since the mid 1990s, successive measures have been put in place by the government to tackle and reduce the number of children being brought up in poverty. Pugh (2010) points out that the most immediate way to raise children out of poverty is to facilitate more women re-entering the employment market. Thus a central plank of recent government policy has been the expansion of early years provision and government funded early education in order to increase parent’s opportunities to work and subsequently improve children’s chances of educational success (Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay, 2005).

Meeting the Childcare Challenge (DfEE 1998) highlighted a triad of difficulties relating to Early Years provision. These difficulties related to the poor availability of childcare, the prohibitive cost of childcare and the poor quality. At the time there was no accepted framework for learning and no consistent inspection framework leading to highly variable quality across settings.

“Early Childhood services are fragmented, inflexible, incoherent and full of inequalities, unable to meet the changing and varied needs of families. They rely on a workforce most of whom are poorly paid and poorly trained. Like many other parts of the national infrastructure early childhood services suffer the consequences of chronic underfunding.” Moss & Penn 1996

In response to this, a number of early years and childcare initiatives were introduced. Local authorities were charged with ensuring that there was sufficient childcare for those parents wishing to avail themselves of it and all children from the age of three were offered up to twelve and a half hours of Nursery education per week in a setting of their parent’s choice (either in a school Nursery or a private, voluntary or independent (PVI) setting). The introduction of a learning framework for the Early Years, which settings were compelled to follow in order to claim Nursery grant funding aimed to ensure consistent quality across settings. In addition, the Ofsted inspection framework was extended to cover both maintained and PVI settings and a graduate training programme was devised to encourage all PVI settings to employ a suitably qualified graduate with the additional ‘Early Years Practitioner’ status. This is based on the evidence coming from the EPPE (Effective
Provision of Pre School Education) project that settings with more highly trained staff were more likely to achieve better outcomes for children (Sylva et al, 2004).

The resulting improvements in outcomes for children appear to be positive. Ofsted (2011) found that overall, Early Years Foundation Stage profile results had improved nationally since 2008. However, despite this positive evaluation the review also found that there were some groups of children (for example those from poorer backgrounds) who, despite an improvement in the proportion reaching a good level of development, lagged behind the majority.

“... The recent increase in early years provision has not yet improved outcomes. The well-being of children in the UK continues to lag well behind that in other rich nations.” Allen, 2011 p100

Home Learning Environment

Field (2010a) suggests that that this relates to the fact that many of the problems children experience in school predate their entry into education and as such require more than just access to good quality childcare.

“Good parenting and home learning environment matter most to young children’s eventual life chances; more than extra money and more than schools...” Field 2010b

This mirrors the findings of the EPPE project (Sylva et al, 2004) which concludes that the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. What parents do is thought to be more important than who parents are. Similarly Blanden (2006) found that having parents who are interested in their child’s education can increase the child’s chances of moving out of poverty by 25%.

“Poorer children tend to be less ready for school and less ready to take advantage of the resources invested in the universal education system.” Field 2010a p38

The index devised by the EYTSEN (Early Years Transition and Special Educational Needs) project to measure home environment identified a significant link between a child’s background and their cognitive attainment (Taggart, 2006). Reading to children, teaching them songs, and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing playing with letters and numbers and visiting the library were all identified as protective factors which could potentially reduce the incidence of SEN (Sammons et al, 2003).

Sure Start was launched in 1998, with the expressed aim of: "giving children the best possible start in life”. Based on evidence from the ‘Head Start’ programme in the USA (Thomas & Currie 1995), the aim was to coordinate childcare, early education, health and family support, in order to bring about improved outcomes for children. The initial areas for Sure Start development were selected according to the levels of deprivation within the locality, the focus being particularly on disadvantaged areas but open to all families living in the catchment area. Following the publication of Every Child Matters Sure Start local programmes transformed into Sure Start Children’s Centres, which were provided in all areas.

The National Evaluation of the Sure Start programme (http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk) provides wide ranging evaluations of various aspects of Sure Start and tends to show positive, if modest, effects for all categories of families. In a recent evaluation (NESS, 2010), the impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on five year olds and their families was explored. Compared to a control group, mothers in Sure Start areas reported positive change in life satisfaction, more improvement in the home learning environment, a greater decrease in harsh discipline and a greater decrease in workless household.
Evidence from NESS and other research suggests that increased access to high quality, affordable Early Years Education combined with the Sure Start local programmes and the Children’s Centres initiative have had a degree of success. A project investigating ‘Early Years Transition and Special Needs’ (Taggart et al, 2006) found that one third of children were ‘at risk of developing special needs on entering Pre School’, however, they also found that attending a pre school had a positive impact on cognitive development and reduced number of children identified as being ‘at risk’. Children with little or no pre-school experience consistently showed lower attainment and were more likely to be ‘at risk’ (Taggart 2006).

Despite this success, evidence from recent reviews (Field, 2010; Allen 2011; Tikell 2011) suggests that outcomes for children born into poverty still lag behind those of other children. Field (2010a) reports that pupils who start off in the bottom 20% of attainment at age five are still six times more likely to be in the bottom 20% at Key Stage 1 compared to their peers. The early years outcomes duty (sections 1-4 of the Childcare Act 2006) aims to address this by placing a duty on local authorities to improve the outcomes of all young children (0-5) in their area and reduce inequalities between them. Additional measures introduced in response to this have included funded Early Years education for two year olds and increasing the number of hours funded education available to children in the 3 – 5 age range from twelve and a half to fifteen hours per week.

Field (2010a) comments that:

“It is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money, in determining whether their potential is realised in adult life.”

Existing and previous strategies to improve outcomes have focused on increasing children’s opportunities for learning and development through the provision of high quality early years education and improving home learning experiences. Little consideration however, has been given to whether the nature of the early years experience provided could affect outcomes for children. Increasing access to childcare and making it available at an earlier age has had some success, but could changing what and how this early education is presented have a greater impact in improving outcomes for children?

Background to the All Aboard Project

In January 2005 a Sure Start Local Programme manager commissioned a piece of research in order to respond to questions raised by local schools regarding their impression that despite Sure Start interventions children were still arriving in Nursery and reception classes without the prerequisite learning skills. This unpublished qualitative study (Dennis, 2005) identified that up to 30% of the children in the surrounding Nursery classes were, to use the EYTSEN descriptor, ‘at risk of developing SEN’ (Taggart, 2006). This was recognised by school staff as being evident in a lack of skills across social, emotional and educational domains. In addition, difficulties in engaging the parents of this group of children were identified as a barrier to supporting the children’s development. In response to this, in June 2005 a project proposal was drawn up to address these difficulties. ‘All Aboard’ aimed to provide a short term, intensive early education intervention for an identified group of children, in order to compensate for perceived or actual lack of entry skills for school.

The initial research project found that previous interventions had focused on starting children in Nursery at an earlier age, or allowing them to attend for full rather than half days. This was based on the premise that because most children benefit from high quality Early Years Education, giving children at risk of poor outcomes more of the same will have a corresponding impact on their attainment. Whilst this view has some merit, ongoing evidence suggests that this approach has not been successful in helping children from poorer backgrounds to ‘catch up’ to any real extent.
All Aboard took as its focus evidence from psychology, based around how children learn best in the Early Years, drawing on the work of amongst others Bruner (1987) and Vygotsky (1987).

All Aboard adopts a socio-cultural perspective, whereby learning is viewed as the outcome of an interaction between an individual and a more able other. In the case of All Aboard, the adult is given the role of supporting and mediating the learning experiences of the children in the group (Feuerstein, 1969, Bruner, 1987). In addition to this, All Aboard draws on attachment theory and the experiences of the Nurture Group Movement (Boxhall & Bentham, 2000), utilising this to create an intimate and responsive environment for learning. In addition, a large element of All Aboard relates to the engagement of parents, on the grounds that what parents do to support their child’s development is far more important than their income or academic attainment (EPPE, 2004; Desforges, 2003).

At the time, due to financial constraints the project was not taken up by the Sure Start local programme. It was however eventually piloted in 2008, in a local Children’s Centre in a different part of the city. Over the twelve weeks of the pilot project, six identified children continued at their regular Nursery sessions, but attended three one hour enhanced Nursery sessions per week. These one hour sessions (taking place during the normal Nursery time) were enhanced through higher adult child ratios, small group work and a greater individual focus. The sessions were run by a specialist Early Years educational psychologist and the teacher in the local Children’s Centre alternately, and supported by the parental engagement worker from the host school. The Speech and Language therapist from the Children’s Centre also contributed to the planning and evaluation of the project.

Through combining a play based learning environment within a structured, routine led programme All Aboard aimed to develop the following skills:

- Expressive and Receptive language skills including building vocabulary and following instructions;
- Early literacy and numeracy skills including identifying sounds in words, rhyming, alliteration and early mark-making;
- Cognitive skills: general knowledge, early maths concepts;
- Emotional literacy including self esteem, empathy and motivation;
- Social Skills for example following instructions, independent play and attention to task;
- Self help skills such as toileting, eating and drinking.

Each All Aboard session comprised of four key elements, starting with ‘Family Time’ during which the children and the All Aboard leader sat together for snack. During this time they had the opportunity to talk about things of interest to the children, revise previous learning and practice social and practical skills. Following on from this was ‘Activity Time’, during which activities linked to the children’s interests or to the class theme were carried out. This gave the opportunity for shared experiences, rehearsed learning and consolidation of basic skills in a small group setting. The third element of the All Aboard session was ‘Circle Time’. Addressing this in a small group enabled the children to build their confidence in participating and practice skills such as turn taking and listening. Each session closed with ‘Story Time’. The same story was repeated over a whole week to give the children opportunity to become increasingly familiar with it and eventually lead the story themselves. Once a week, one of a series of ‘Home Activity’ was provided. These activities were intentionally informal and fun, with the express aim of encouraging parent child interaction and the development of positive relationships.

Pre and post intervention measures were taken covering the children’s language development, cognitive development, social skills and behaviour using the British Ability Scales II (Early Years). The Derbyshire Language Scheme’s Rapid Screen Test (RST) and the Renfrew Bus Story. The children’s social and emotional development in Nursery was measured using the Boxhall Profile.
Parent’s perceptions of their children were measured using the ‘Strengths and Difficulties’ questionnaire and the children's views were recorded through pictorial means, at the beginning and at the end of the project.

Analysis of the data indicated that all children taking part in the project made substantial gains on each of the assessment measures. As such All Aboard achieved its aim of improving outcomes for low achieving children. The data was subsequently submitted to the ‘Centre for Excellence in Outcomes’ (C4EO) (a non governmental organisation which shares this evidence and the best of local practice in relation to improving outcomes) and was acknowledged and validated as an example of ‘promising practice’.

METHODOLOGY

Description of the Project

As a result of the initial pilot project, a further roll out of All Aboard was commissioned by a consortium of local primary schools. The current report details this roll out of the programme over the school year 2009 -10.

Eight early years settings took part in the project. This included one Children’s Centre, six maintained Nurseries and one maintained Reception class. The settings were all located in Keighley, a small town in the north of the England. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in all of the participating schools is above average and all of the schools are in an area of social disadvantage.

After attending an initial briefing session about the project, nominated lead All Aboard practitioners attended a series of six planning and implementation training sessions. These sessions aimed to ensure fidelity to the original All Aboard pilot project and to support the roll out of All Aboard in these eight different settings. Training included an overview of the background to and theoretical basis of All Aboard, organisational issues such as planning and delivering the sessions and evaluation procedures ie the use of pre and post test measures. All eight settings proceeded with the project although data was only collected from six settings due to difficulties with staff leaving and long term sickness in two of the settings.

All Aboard was delivered for a total of twelve weeks in each of the settings, with three one hour enhanced sessions being delivered each week. Six children from each setting were chosen to participate, although some nurseries chose to run All Aboard both during both morning and afternoon sessions, thus involving up to 12 children. The format of the All Aboard sessions was consistent with the original pilot project, but the content varied between settings depending on the setting’s planning and the children’s individual needs and interests.

Data Collection

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the All Aboard project the following data was collected:

1. Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) tracking data from ‘My Learning Picture’ (MLP): this was collected on all of the children at the beginning of All Aboard and again at the end. This coincided with the standard data collection periods used in school ie just after Christmas and just before the summer holidays. Similar data from the whole cohort of one of the nurseries was also used to provide a control group.
2. A non standardised, adapted version of the Boxhall profile, measuring social and emotional skills in the classroom. The scale consisted of 15 questions relating to classroom based skills for example: *To what extent does the child listen / attend as part of a large (whole class) group?* Pre and post intervention measures were taken using a using a 10 point Likert scale, giving a total possible score of 150. This was supplemented by a qualitative statement provided by the teacher about each child’s response to the *All Aboard* intervention.

3. Parent’s Views: Parent’s views on *All Aboard* were collected using a written questionnaire in order to establish the usefulness of *All Aboard*. This was completed either independently, or with the help of school staff for those parents for whom reading and writing in English was an issue.

4. Practitioner views: The views of those delivering *All Aboard* were collected using a written questionnaire in order to identify any areas for development.

**Data analysis:**

1. EYFS data was entered onto the Local Authority’s online tracking programme (‘My e-Learning Picture’). This allowed the overall impact of *All Aboard* to be examined, and compared to a wider cohort of children attending a local Nursery. In addition it enabled the impact for specific vulnerable groups to be interrogated. Groups specifically highlighted included: boys, summer born children and children with English as an additional language.

2. Pre and Post intervention scores from the adapted ‘Boxhall profile’ were compared for the whole *All Aboard* cohort and any changes analysed. Qualitative comments were examined for emerging themes.

3. Content analysis was performed on the parent feedback questionnaires and emerging themes grouped to identify common areas of interest or concern.

4. A similar process of content analysis was performed on the practitioner feedback questionnaires in order to identify common areas of agreement or concern.
RESULTS:

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Data:

In total, EYFS data was collected on 33 of the children who took part in All Aboard, across five settings. Data was collected at the beginning and at the end of the project, but actual dates of collection varied across settings depending on their individual assessment cycles. Data from a local Nursery school showing progress of their whole cohort over two terms was also collected to allow for comparison, although this was not a matched group.

Nationally, children are expected to make one full point progress in each of the areas of Learning and Development over a twelve month period. This is regarded as ‘good’ progress. Proportionally this equates to approximately 0.3 points per term. As All Aboard ran for two terms, good progress would be shown by children making progress greater than or equal to 0.6 points.

All Aboard Cohort Progress And Comparison With Control Group

![Bar chart showing All Aboard Overall Progress Compared to Control]

Figure 1

Children in the All Aboard group made greater progress over a similar time period to the children in the control cohort. This suggests that there is a value-added element to implementing the All Aboard programme, and that All Aboard is successful in improving outcomes for vulnerable children.

The graph indicates that All Aboard children made above expected levels of progress (0.6 points) in all areas. Whilst most progress was made in the area of Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy, the difference between the All Aboard result and the control group is relatively small (0.1 point). Similarly although progress in PSE is higher than the control group, this is also by only 0.1 point. The progress made in the area of ‘Communication, Language and Literacy’ is significantly
higher than that of the control group, suggesting that All Aboard is a powerful intervention for supporting children’s language development in the early years.

**All Aboard Cohort EAL And Non EAL Comparison**

Figure 2 indicates that All Aboard children with English as an additional language made significantly greater progress compared to the All Aboard children from English speaking backgrounds. In all areas, progress of the EAL children taking part in All Aboard was greater than what would normally be expected (ie >0.6 points).

![Progress by Home Language](image)

Figure 3 (below) shows that comparing the progress of the All Aboard Children with English as an additional language to that made by the children with English as an additional language in the control group, All Aboard children made greater progress.

In contrast, All Aboard children with English as their first language made less progress than the similar children from the control group. The exception to this is in Communication Language and Literacy, where the All Aboard Children made greater progress.
All Aboard Cohort Progress By Term Of Birth

Average Progress by Home Language

- PSE average
- CLL average
- PSRN average

Average Progress by Term Of Birth

- Autumn
- Spring
- Summer

PSE average
CLL average
PSRN average
In total, 16 summer born children, 9 autumn and 7 spring born children took part in the *All Aboard* project. Due to this factor the results are liable to being effected by individual performance and as such must be viewed with caution. The graph indicates that children with spring term birthdays made more progress than summer term or autumn born children. This however requires further investigation.

*All Aboard Cohort Progress Gender Comparison*

Figure 5 indicates that boys and girls on the *All Aboard* programme made similarly good rates of progress which were significantly greater than those made by the control group.

![Average Progress by Gender](image)

**Feedback From Practitioners Based On 'Individual Progress Record'**

Data was returned for 45 children across six settings. At the beginning of the *All Aboard* project, the average total score on the Individual Progress Record was 64 out of a possible 150 points. At the end of the project, the average total score was 110 out of 150. This shows an average improvement of 73% between pre and post measures. This indicates that the practitioners noted a marked improvement in the social and emotional skills of children taking part in *All Aboard*. However, further investigation will be required to establish whether this relates to involvement in the programme itself or to other factors such as general attendance at nursery, or other maturational factors.

Qualitative feedback from the *All Aboard* practitioners fell into three key areas in which the practitioners felt the children had progressed. These were: increased confidence, improved social skills and increased attention and concentration.
Increased confidence was the most common aspect commented upon in relation to children’s progress. Comments were made about children’s social confidence:

“Jamila is quite different in the classroom to how she is during ‘All Aboard’ sessions and with mum in the reception area. Her language in the Nursery rooms is still not forthcoming but during ‘All Aboard’ sessions she has said a friends name and in the reception area will converse quite happily with staff showing she can speak in full sentences and hold a 2 way conversation. Her body language in class is much more responsive now and she looks happier – smiles, nods and also relaxed with both adults and children.”

Confidence also related to the children’s willingness to join in groups and speak in public:

“Thomas is a gentle boy who has always been happy to sit back and not say anything. He played mostly with the cars in one part of the Nursery. After about the third week of the programme Thomas started to ask questions about the stories that we were reading. He then contributed more at circle time. By the sixth session Thomas had become very chatty within the group. Then that expanded to him contributing to questions while at carpet time within the Nursery sessions. At this time his mum had stared to be aware that he had started to talk about what he had been doing at Nursery when he got home. Thomas had even started to talk about his friends. He is a very clever little boy who is very sensitive to the needs of others and is very curious about the world around him. This is something that we never knew about him because he was so quiet.”

Practitioners also commented that children were more confident about tackling new skills in the All Aboard group:

“Maddie never attempted to make marks or draw pictures. Her mum said that at home she would never entertain colouring or drawing pictures. Again it was nearly halfway through the programme when Maddie started to draw an M. Now she is making good progress when writing her name and she now spends time drawing pictures.”

Children were reported as having developed new friendships through the All Aboard group, and developed social skills that help them interact with the other children:

“Eve started out in the group as a child who would only talk about their own interests. She didn’t listen to the other children or join in with their discussions. She kept herself separate from the others in the group. Then during a circle time she was asked to take turns choosing a toy animal from a bag and say the sound of the animal. Eve found this difficult, and her eyes filled with tears but then she said the sound: the other children spontaneously clapped her efforts. This made Eve smile and from then on Eve not only contributed to the conversation but listened and responded to what the other children had to say”

Finally, practitioners commented that All Aboard had resulted in the children developing greater focus and concentration:

“Before starting the ‘All Aboard’ programme Cameron had some behavioural issues that had arisen due to a change in family circumstances. He also lacked concentration. All Aboard has made Cameron more motivated and he now enjoys new learning challenges. His behaviour has also improved due to the content of the circle time activities and ‘family’ time”.
Feedback From Parents

Evaluation forms were returned by 36 parents from five different settings. Key themes from the evaluations are summarised below.

For most parents, key reasons for taking up the offer of a place in the All Aboard group related to: their child being shy or quiet in Nursery; their child lacking confidence or their child needing help with English.

Parents identified a number of things that they thought All Aboard had helped with, including: working in a small group, learning to be more confident and extra help with language. It was also viewed by some parents as an intervention to help children who don't have English as a first language: "(Its) a small group of children have quality time with a designated teacher, on various topics in greater detail"

Most parents reported that their child talked about All Aboard at home. This usually related to the activities they had done or the songs or stories that they had learnt: "He talked more about All Aboard tasks and games, rather than what he had done in the normal setting." Some parents also commented that their children talked about All Aboard more when they were doing the home tasks: "She talked about it when we were doing the home tasks… Mummy we did this at All Aboard!"

Parents described seeing progress in their children across a number of different areas. In the area of language and communication, 84% of parents felt that their children had improved: "She talks a lot more of the time at Nursery, and her words are clearer". Parents reported that their children talked more and sang more during and after the programme. Sixty one percent of parents reported improvements in behavior and confidence: "Prior to All Aboard he lacked confidence in drawing but became interested and more involved in drawing and putting pen to paper." In relation to concentration and attention, 58% of parents commented that their child had improved in this area: "He can concentrate and work on his own for longer doing puzzles and books…"

The majority of parents commented that they enjoyed the home tasks. Sixty-seven percent of parents reported carrying out 'all' or 'most' of the home tasks. They commented that the tasks helped them to have 'special time' with their children. This also extended to building wider relationships within the family: "She worked with her brother and sister and was very proud…"

Parents also commented that the home tasks helped them to have a greater insight into what their children do at school and feel more involved in their schooling: "She enjoyed showing me at home what she did in Nursery - being in charge." A small number of parents seemed unaware of the home tasks - this needs to be followed up with the individual setting involved.

A small group of parents also commented that they would like to have been more involved for example: "a diary to go home so parents can communicate and discuss what happened at the weekend etc." Some parents also commented that they wished All Aboard had started sooner, and that it could continue into Reception.

Parents commented that All Aboard had helped them know what to do to help their child: "She never did sticking or taking photos and we do more of that now..." And also how to encourage and support their child: "It's the simple things that help your child talk more - like play dough!"

A significant number of parents commented that their children were happier and more confident at Nursery since All Aboard: "She seems more confident and happier to come to school". They also commented on their children's language and increased interaction.

None of the parents felt that there was anything they didn't like about All Aboard or that they would like to change. A number of parents expressed gratitude at having been invited to take part in the programme: "Thank you for allowing my son to take part. It has made so much difference. All the..."
family have commented on how much confidence he now has…” “I would like to thank the staff at All Aboard. You guys have helped my son build confidence. He is a stronger character and always active. This will definitely help him in school. Thank You!”

Feedback From Practitioners

Practitioners were largely pleased with the structure of the programme and the support and training they received in order to deliver it. However, a small number of practitioners commented that they would have welcomed more activities and teaching methods to be provided. Also, some practitioners reported practical difficulties for example finding a space in which to run the group and finding time to do the additional planning. A number of practitioners commented that the money given to each setting had been very useful in counteracting these difficulties as it had enabled them to purchase additional resources and fund supply cover if necessary to cover planning time.

Practitioners gave feedback on the individual elements of All Aboard. The ‘Family Time’ element was widely valued and practitioners commented that it was an excellent opportunity to build up relationships due to it being a small group and them being able to give more attention to children on a one-one basis. ‘Activity Time’ was received similarly well. Practitioners commented that this was the one area where I got the most conversation out of the group. They added that ‘Activity time’ was instrumental in building up confidence and useful in helping children to gain skills and qualities such as turn-taking and sharing. ‘Group time’ was seen as valuable by most practitioners although a number commented that the activities had been too hard and they had had to adapt the provided materials in order to make them appropriate for their group. Although some practitioners felt that the ‘Story Time’ session was too long, all practitioners commented that the use of props and the repetition of at the same story over a whole week had been very valuable. “Children engaged well with the stories and with repetition in different ways, became familiar and could talk to teachers and parents about them.” The ‘Home tasks’ received overwhelming support from practitioners. “Brilliant! The activities sent home all came back - much to our surprise! They were completed and most parents seem to appreciate what we were doing.” “From parents comments all children enjoyed the home activities… they felt proud taking them home to share with other family member.”

Of those practitioners who responded, all agreed that All Aboard had been a successful intervention for supporting the learning needs of the target group of children. ”Just through now knowing the children and seeing how they have developed is very successful and rewarding but also comments from teachers and parents were very positive. Also there is progress shown on the ‘My Learning Pictures.” Practitioners put this success down to a number of factors including the size of the group, the calm routine driven environment and the opportunity for the children to work as part of a small group: “The ‘nature / nurture’ element of All Aboard is very important with these children to give them the confidence to speak out and demonstrate a sense of trust.”

Practitioners were asked whether All Aboard would affect any element of their general practice in the Nursery. Comments suggested that this was the case, for example the use of smaller group work when doing speaking and listening tasks and the use of more props when telling stories.

Overall practitioners found the project worthwhile and fulfilling: “I have thoroughly enjoyed All Aboard and would love to do it again it was so rewarding.” “I have enjoyed being part of the project and being able to improve children’s development needs.”
DISCUSSION

On the basis of the data presented, it appears that All Aboard has had a significant impact on improving outcomes for vulnerable children. Most progress (compared to the control group – Figure 1) was made in the area of Communication, Language and Literacy. In exploring why this was the case, it is interesting to consider the feedback from the practitioners. Practitioners commented that the small group situation enabled them to support the children’s language development in a more effective way. One practitioner commented: “This was the one area where I got the most conversation out of the group as they did not feel like they were put on the spot. Again, this involved turn taking and we were able to use resources from the planning”. This corresponds with Wells’ (1986) finding that: ‘Adult input is most effective if it is child centred, semantically contingent and embedded in familiar routines.’ Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Mattock, Golden & Bell,( 2002) surmise that the quality of adult-child verbal interaction taking place, sustained shared thinking, shared open experiences and adult modelling of language all enhance children’s early Language development. This appears to have been the case in the All Aboard groups. “Children loved the activities even if they were not totally engaged every week. They were absorbed with the social side … children gained skills and qualities such as turn-taking and sharing.”

Whilst progress was noted for all children taking part in the project this was particularly marked for those children who had English as an additional language. Research into the characteristics of effective schools (DfES 1998, Ofsted 2004) and of effective leadership in multi-ethnic schools (NCSL 2005) found that schools which have successfully implemented strategies to raise the achievement of children from minority ethnic groups have: a curriculum which is broad, rich, inclusive and relevant; a clear focus for developing language across the curriculum; appropriately scaffolded and cognitively demanding learning opportunities; an ethos where everyone feels safe and valued; children who are encouraged to believe in themselves and take responsibility for their learning; and parents, carers and families who are seen as partners and actively involved in their children’s learning. All of these factors are central to the core principles of All Aboard and have been identified by both practitioners and parents as being strengths of the programme.

Most practitioners attributed the success of All Aboard to the fact that is a small group intervention. The small group situations were thought to have enabled children to feel more secure and confident to speak out. This confidence was then in most cases transferred to the wider Nursery environment, over the course of the intervention. The routine and predictability of All Aboard, starting with ‘Family Time’ and then working through the key areas of work, also provided stability for the children, which in turn was thought to boost their confidence. Such a routine driven environment can help to counteract some of the stress associated with entering Nursery settings (Lamb and Ahnart, Dettling, Gunnar and Donzella 1999). Lamb (2011) concludes that to reduce stress, practitioners need to ensure: “that care environments are developmentally appropriate” and that “… adult–child ratios in childcare must be kept low. Group size and composition also need to be considered as mediators of the quality of individual care provider–child relationships”

The approach to planning and learning within the EYFS is firmly focused on the needs of the child. Planning is informed by observations and assessments of individuals within a setting. Teaching and Learning (DfES 2007) describes the hallmarks of personalised learning and makes the case for why all schools need to work towards this vision. Personalised learning, tailoring teaching and learning to individual need, is essential in helping children to achieve the best possible progress and outcomes. It describes it as being critical in raising standards and narrowing the attainment gaps that exist between different groups of children. Working with the All Aboard group of children, practitioners were able to tailor the content of the sessions to the individual needs and interests of the children in the group. As such this may be one of the key contributory factors to its success.
Personalisation is the key to tackling the persistent achievement gaps between different social and ethnic groups. It means a tailored education for every child and young person, that gives them strength in the basics, stretches their aspirations, and builds their life chances. It will create opportunity for every child, regardless of their background.

Higher Standards, Better Schools for All (2006)

Consistency and repetition are valuable teaching strategies in preschool classrooms because they help children to identify patterns and exercise their memory. Practitioners particularly commented that the repetition of the same story over a number of sessions was helpful. “Children engaged well with the stories and with repetition in different ways, became familiar and could talk to teachers and parents about them. Repeating the story in different ways encouraged the children to participate. Children enjoyed very much as they listened well and participated.” Allowing children to return to topics in this way and gradually become ‘expert’ in them over time is accepted as being a way of ensuring deep or ‘mastery’ learning (Bloom, 1981).

Term of birth is acknowledged as being a factor that can potentially present serious consequences for relatively young children that put them at a clear and long-term disadvantage in the educational system (Sykes, Bell and Rodeiro, 2009). The youngest in a year group will be, on average, less mature – cognitively, socially and emotionally – than their older classmates, leading to unequal competition that could impact negatively on the younger group. Half of all of the children taking part in All Aboard (n16) had birthdates during the summer term. It may be that All Aboard was viewed as a way of addressing some of these developmental issues for this group of children and explain why so many summer born children were identified as being ‘vulnerable’ and put forward as potential candidates for All Aboard. Sykes et al (2009) found that a disproportionately high percentage of relatively young children in the school year are referred as having special educational needs but that many of these appear to be misdiagnosed. They suggest that the birthdate effect may operate in teachers’ identification of children in need of special education. Teachers may not be making sufficient allowances for the level of attainment against specific curriculum outcomes of the younger members of their classes.

From this, it might have been anticipated that the summer born children would be the group who benefitted most from All Aboard. The data from the ‘My Learning Picture’ does not however uphold this view. This may in part relate to the sample size. With such small numbers (16 summer born children, 9 autumn and 7 spring born ) the weighting of each child’s progress is different depending on their term of birth. As such, a spring born child making higher than average progress would have more impact on the overall scores for the ‘Spring Born’ group. Due to this factor the results are liable to being effected by individual performance and as such must be viewed with caution. Further investigation is needed in order to establish the relationship between All Aboard and term of birth.

The degree to which parents engaged with the ‘All Aboard’ programme was encouraging, and in many situations, parents who had not been expected to join in did so. “The activities sent home all came back - much to our surprise!” A research report by Carpentier and Lall (2005) found that the development of good relationships between home and school and the removal of barriers to participation are key element of successful engagement with ‘hard to reach’ parents. In gradually building the parents’ confidence in completing home tasks, All Aboard was able to engage parents from ‘vulnerable’ families, who are traditionally hard to reach. This may also relate to the type of tasks sent home as part of All Aboard. Rather than being traditional literacy or numeracy type tasks, the home activities were aimed at supporting shared experiences, and building relationships, through parents doing things with their children – for example blowing bubbles together in the garden.
Research from the National Child Development Study (NCDS) explored the effects of parents’ involvement on achievement at 16 in English and Maths and found that very high parental interest is associated with better exam results compared to children whose parents show no interest (DCSF, 2008). A number of parents commented that All Aboard had helped them to feel more confident about what Nursery was doing and how they could help their children at home, suggesting that they would like to become more involved in future. This is a positive sign and suggests that All Aboard provides an important platform to building closer parental involvement.

All of the settings that took part in the ‘All Aboard’ project were maintained nurseries or Reception classes. Government data suggests that in January 2009, 78% of four year olds and 37% of three year olds took up free places at either maintained Nursery or primary schools. This suggests that a small but significant number of children will be accessing their early Years provision in the Private or Voluntary sector. Sure Start Children’s Centres in the 30% most deprived areas in England are required either to offer or to provide access to integrated early education and care. This is often provided by PVI sector. This suggests that a number of children accessing their childcare in PVI settings will fall into the category of being ‘Vulnerable’ and on the basis of this research, would benefit from taking part in an All Aboard group.

All Aboard received overwhelmingly positive feedback from practitioners and many indicated that they would like to continue with All Aboard beyond the project period. The only consistent concern related to the additional time needed in order to complete the planning for All Aboard sessions. This was ameliorated to some extent by the provision of some additional funding (£500 per setting) from the Local Authority. Given the gains made by the children, this could be seen as extremely good value for money. As with any intervention, there needs to be support at organisational and management level in order to maintain momentum and motivation for the programme. Ensuring that there is strategic sign up to All Aboard at both school and Local Authority level will help to ensure that practitioners are given the time they need to prepare for the programme, and that it is given the same status as other ‘wave two’ interventions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

All Aboard was intentionally presented as a way of working to be adapted by individual schools to meet their own particular circumstance. Whilst this has the benefit of making the programme flexible and adaptable, the corollary of this is that it is difficult to obtain any level of consistency across All Aboard groups. The overall picture from the MLP data suggests that this has not been a major issue, as all of the children in the project made above expected levels of progress. However, this flexible approach makes it more difficult to pinpoint specific reasons for success, which would improve the reliability of the project.

Similarly in its current form, All Aboard does not address the issue of whether it is the All Aboard programme itself, the skills of individual teachers, qualification level or a combination of all of these factors that achieved these outcomes for the children. Evidence from the EPPE study (2004) indicates that there is a significant relationship between the quality of a pre-school centre and improved child outcomes and that there is a positive relationship between the qualifications of staff and ratings of quality. Further investigation of this would help to explore whether All Aboard was universally successful or whether there were variations depending on the practitioner carrying out the group work. Introducing an element of moderation through observing All Aboard sessions may help shed more light on this.

The data collected from the MLP is heavily reliant on practitioner interpretation of the EYPS. Whilst this is moderated within the wider Local Authority moderation programme, no moderation was carried out between All Aboard practitioners. This could lead to variations in which the children’s
progress was plotted. Similarly, the MLP data was largely completed by the practitioners involved in delivering the All Aboard groups. It is possible that through working closely with the children the practitioners inadvertently inflated the progress that they made (Hawthorne effect). This could have been ameliorated by practitioners other than those running the groups collecting the data.

In relation to children with an additional language taking part in All Aboard, a very broad definition was adopted, based on the Ofsted (2005) definition that recognises the fact that many children learning English in schools in this country already know one or more other languages and are adding English to that repertoire. Ofsted (2005) also use the term ‘Advanced learner of EAL’ to describe children who have had considerable exposure to English and are no longer in the early stages of English language acquisition. These are children, often born in this country, who appear to be fluent in ordinary everyday conversational contexts, but who require continued support in order to develop the cognitive and academic language necessary for educational success. In the All Aboard research, no differentiation was made between these two groups. Provision of this information would have contributed to the interrogation of the very positive results for children with English as an Additional Language.

The term ‘control group’ has been used to describe the group of children in the mainstream setting, to whom the progress of the All Aboard children was compared. This term was used loosely as there was no matching of participants and as such, the interpretation of the compared results may not accurately reflect reality. In order to address this, further cohorts would need to be compared with a matched group of children who had a similar level of need in the first instance, so that the added value of All Aboard as compared to the standard Nursery experience in that particular setting could be measured.

The data collected provides a snapshot of the progress made by the children following an All Aboard intervention. However it is only a small scale study and it would be unwise to draw absolute conclusions from it. As such there is need for further data collection in order to increase the evidence base about the potential success of All Aboard. Also, it is not possible from the data collected to establish whether there are any lasting or long term benefits to the children. A future longitudinal study would provide more information about the longevity of the effects experienced following an All Aboard intervention, and tracking the children throughout their primary school would allow the long term effects to be explored.
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All Aboard is a small group intervention aimed at children in the Foundation Stage (aged 3-5) who are classed as vulnerable and are showing limited progress in their Early Years setting. The approach has been led by a specialist Early Years Educational Psychologist and is based on current research about how children learn best in the Early Years.

Children who took part in the All Aboard project made greater than expected progress in ‘Personal, Social and Emotional Development’, ‘Communication Language and Literacy’ and ‘Problem Solving Reasoning and Numeracy’ as measured by My Learning Picture. This progress was greater than would be expected based on national expectations, and greater than that achieved in a parallel Nursery group who did not take part in the All Aboard project.

Progress was particularly marked for children who had English as an additional language suggesting that All Aboard is a powerful intervention in improving outcomes for this vulnerable group. The successful parental involvement aspect of All Aboard was also welcomed by practitioners and by parents themselves. The link between parental involvement and children’s attainment in school is widely recognised and it appears that All Aboard is a successful strategy for cultivating this involvement from an early age.

Whilst acknowledging its limitations as a pilot project, on the basis of this evaluation it is possible to make a number of recommendations about All Aboard, in order that the progress achieved by children in the pilot study might be replicated more widely across the district.

Strategic Implications:

As a low cost, high impact intervention All Aboard should be adopted at a strategic level within the Local Authority as part of their strategy for narrowing the gap for children in the Early Years.

Based on its success in improving outcomes for vulnerable children, All Aboard should be rolled out more widely across the district, including private, voluntary and independent settings, as well as maintained settings.

All Aboard should be adopted as a suite of measures aimed at improving parental involvement in education, particularly for hard to reach groups.

All Aboard should be particularly encouraged in settings where there are a large number of children with English as an additional language, as this group seem to have benefitted most from the intervention.

Practical Implications:

In order to ensure the success of All Aboard in a setting, it is vital that it receive the support of the management and governing body of a setting and that practitioners are given the support and time they need to prepare for and deliver the intervention. As such it should become one of the range of Wave Two interventions offered by the school and be reflected in their progress towards providing personalised learning for all children.

All Aboard should continue to be delivered by a specialist team who are able to combine practical knowledge of the Early Years with an in depth knowledge of how children learn in the early years and how this process can be enhanced.
Increasing the Evidence Base for All Aboard

Data from successive All Aboard cohorts should be collected and evaluated in order to build on the preliminary evidence collected as part of this evaluation. A follow up study should also be initiated in order to explore any long term effects of All Aboard.

Validity of future data should be strengthened by ensuring that:

- There is a matched control group;
- Assessment data about the children involved in the All Aboard and control groups is collected by someone other than the person delivering the groups;
- Information is available about the qualification and experience level of the practitioner running the group.

Reliability of future data should be improved by ensuring that:

- Children taking part in All Aboard have a similar experience in terms of group size, number of sessions etc;
- There is moderation of practitioner input across All Aboard groups
- There is moderation of the My Learning Picture data to ensure that similar decisions are being made about the level of development of the children taking part in All Aboard.

Other questions arising from the pilot project which could be investigated as part of future cohorts include:

- Is there a difference between the progress made by children with English as an additional Language and those who are ‘Advanced learners of EAL’?
- Why were so many of the children chosen for All Aboard summer born children? Why was the progress for these children no greater than that for children with dates of birth in other terms?
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