## Chapter 1
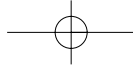
# Setting the scene for communication, language and literacy

## Introduction

Each phase of schooling, the Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 has its own distinctive characteristics and concerns. Some of the defining characteristics of the Foundation Stage are explored in this chapter and they provide the background to the teaching and learning of communication, language and literacy.

The curriculum, learning, teaching and classroom organization are important concerns in every phase but they are realized in ways that are particular to the age and needs of the pupils. The curriculum for the Foundation Stage, although separated into areas of learning, reflects the way in which young children's learning rarely fits neatly into one area of the curriculum. In the Foundation Stage the boundaries between different subjects are blurred and even in a single activity learning can take place in a number of curriculum areas. The concern with learning is perhaps more important to early years practitioners than to any other educational practitioners. Adults who work in the Foundation Stage are concerned with creating a bridge between the way children have learned at home and the way they will learn in the more formal and densely populated nursery and reception classes. They want to continue, as far as possible, the beneficial practices of the child's first educators, which have resulted in successful and rapid learning and confident learners. Play as a means of learning is most apparent in the Foundation Stage although it is also seen in Key Stage 1 and sometimes Key Stage 2 classes. The integrated curriculum, the awareness of children as learners and the centrality of play mean that nursery and reception classes are organized in ways that are distinct and different to the other key stages.

## The curriculum explained

Each of the four curriculum bodies in the UK – the Qualifications and Assessment Authority (QAA) in England, The Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales, the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum and the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment – have produced guidance about the curriculum for children aged between 3 and 5. There are minor differences between the practices and outcomes that are emphasized but for the most part the sort of curriculum that is advocated in each country is very similar. Although most of the references in this book will be to the English guidelines, readers across the UK and in other countries too should be able to relate the ideas to their particular situation.

### Integrating learning

In May 2000 the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000b) was published. This sets out what children aged 3 to 5 are expected to learn in nursery settings and reception classes in England. The guidance covers six areas of learning: personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development. This book is concerned with the second area, that of learning, communication, language and literacy. However one of the characteristics of learning is that it often ranges across and goes beyond individual subject areas. For example, learning about numbers will involve being able to use number names and may take place through joining in with number stories, rhymes and songs as well as discrete mathematical activities. So, although children's increasing understanding of number is an aspect of mathematical development, their learning will be supported by experiences in language, literacy and music as well as other areas of the curriculum. These cross-curricular links are an important facet of the curriculum in the Foundation Stage. Although the subject of this book is communication, language and literacy, in keeping with early years practice, links with other areas of learning will be explored.

### The statutory curriculum

The curriculum guidance for communication, language and literacy covers the education of children from 3 to 5. It is intended to cover a two-year
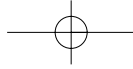
period, the year that 3- and 4-year-olds spend in nursery settings and the year that 4- and 5-year-olds spend in reception classes. The guidance is arranged as a series of learning objectives ordered by difficulty. There are four levels of difficulty, three of which are known as stepping stones. The final level contains the Early Learning Goals. The four levels are not age specific, but the first two sets of objectives are likely to be covered in the nursery and the final set of stepping stones and the Early Learning Goals will shape the curriculum in the reception class. Not all children spend time in a nursery or other pre-school setting and so, for some children, their first encounter with a planned curriculum will be in the reception class where their learning objectives will be taken from level 3 of the stepping stones, although objectives from the earlier levels may also be applicable. The final level of objectives, the Early Learning Goals for communication language and literacy, lead into the National Curriculum programme of study for English at Key Stage 1 (DfEE/QCA, 1999).

## Communication, language and literacy

The curriculum for communication, language and literacy broadly covers learning in and about speaking and listening, reading and writing. However the words *communication* and *language* encompass far more than oral communication or speaking and listening. They serve as a reminder that reading and writing are also communicative and social activities. They suggest that language is a key element of thinking and learning, and that language development should be considered when planning for learning across the curriculum. Therefore, to develop within this area of learning, children will need to learn about speaking and listening, reading and writing as well as learning to read and write and to extend their oral abilities.

# Children as learners
## Learning at home

By the time children enter the nursery or reception class they have already learned a tremendous amount. They have learned to operate socially within their own immediate and extended families. They have learned about their home and community environment. They know how to communicate with others, ask questions, act on instructions and understand explanations. Most children have experience of stories through encounters with books or via television and videos. They can manipulate physical objects as they play and meet some of their own needs. This list could continue for some time.
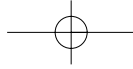
Suffice to say, young children have made rapid gains in learning in all the areas of learning that constitute the curriculum for the Foundation Stage, even though they have not followed a planned curriculum.

## How children learn

How have they learned so much in such a short space of time? They have learned from the adults around them, their environment and their experiences. Adults have provided them with models of behaviour that can be imitated, explanations of events and experiences and answers to questions. Family members and friends have treated the child as a cognitive being who can, will and wants to learn about the world and how to operate within it, and through their actions and interactions they have shared their own knowledge in ways that are appropriate to a young child's developing understanding. Many of the adults' interactions will have arisen from the child's curiosity about the world and their desire to learn about it. However, young children do not learn only from others. They will have learned by listening, looking, touching and engaging in playful activities with toys and objects. Their learning will have come from a number of sources. They will have developed knowledge, skills and understanding through a variety of learning strategies.

Much of a young child's learning will have taken place in an immediate context. Questions will have arisen from what is seen or touched. Explanations will have been given in relation to what the child is doing or using. As Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner all agree, young children learn in practical, concrete ways and their learning is located in directly purposeful and relevant situations (Wood, 1988). Abstract learning that is not directly related to the child's own purposes or the immediate and tangible environment, generally occurs after the age of 3 and children need to be led gradually into this next stage of learning. This is when the skills and understanding of those who work in the Foundation Stage are crucial as they begin to lead children away from the familiar and help them to explore the unknown.

Young children are active learners. They interact physically with the world that they live in and play their part in initiating teaching sequences as they try to do something or ask questions. They construct their understanding by taking in information and relating it to what they already know. Learning, particularly young children's learning, is usually mediated through social encounters and interactions. It is a social activity. In addition, what and how children learn is situated in a particular social or cultural context. Different communities and families within that community
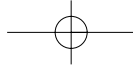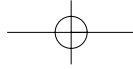
will emphasize different things. For example, in some homes politeness and good manners may be very important. If this is the case, it is likely that children will learn to be courteous.

The combination of these ideas, that children actively construct understandings and that learning takes place in social settings, has led to a view of learning that is known as social constuctivism (Hiebert and Raphael, 1998). The features of social constructivism are helpful when thinking about the organization of an early years setting and when planning the curriculum. Children will need access to, and opportunities to develop or construct, their learning by engaging in new experiences and then relating this new awareness to what they already know. To do this they will need opportunities to predict outcomes based on their existing knowledge, to evaluate new experiences and to compare new and old information. They will need to be able to ask questions and to follow avenues of enquiry that interest them. They will need opportunities to engage in meaningful exchanges with adults and other children as well as opportunities to see others demonstrate or use skills. They will also need opportunities to appreciate what their teachers value and to understand why those behaviours or practices are important.

## Dispositions and attitudes

Thinking about learning is not just about understanding how learning takes place but is also concerned with what should be learned. Children learn skills and knowledge but they also develop feelings and attitudes to what they learn. Katz has called these attitudes 'dispositions' (Katz and Chard, 1989). It is important that children are disposed to be curious, to explore and to enjoy their learning. These dispositions are present in young children when they first enter Foundation Stage settings but they may be damaged if the learning experiences that are provided for them are too easy, too difficult, dull or repetitive. Inappropriate activities may teach children that they are unsuccessful as learners or that learning at school is boring. Positive dispositions grow from experiences that children enjoy and are interested in. They also allow children to be in control and to experience success. In a review of the research about successful learners, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) found that children who believe in their own ability to learn and whose parents have high aspirations for them are the children most likely to succeed at school. If practitioners can help children to feel confident and have high expectations for the children they work with this will have a significant effect on children's achievement.

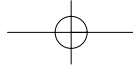## Using our understanding of learning to inform teaching

When adults understand how children learn before they embark on planned learning in the more formal setting of a nursery or reception class, they can appreciate the learning strategies that children already have. They can then incorporate these strategies into the learning opportunities they provide and the teaching methods they employ. The following lists suggest some principles which practitioners use to inform their planning for communication, language and literacy.

Young children:

- learn actively through looking, listening and doing;
- are motivated to learn;
- are curious and willing to explore the unfamiliar;
- learn through taking risks;
- learn through practice;
- can attend with intensity for considerable periods when they are interested;
- learn in collaboration with others;
- learn through asking questions;
- can take the initiative in learning;
- learn things that are relevant and enjoyable to them;
- remember things that are important to them;
- learn about the things that are prioritized by those around them;
- learn when they feel secure and confident;
- learn in different ways; and
- learn at different rates.

The adults who enable children to learn in informal situations at home:

- give children time;
- provide experiences and materials that stimulate children;
- provide children with models of how to do things;
- provide opportunities for children to practise and apply their skills;
- respect and attend to children's questions;
- provide answers to questions;
- provide explanations about social practices and activities;
- expect children to learn and acknowledge their learning;
- provide an environment in which it is safe to take risks; and
- respond and provide for children in ways that are appropriate to the child's understanding and interests.
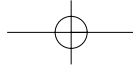
## Play

### Play as a context for learning

Play can provide children with valuable learning experiences. Although children can and do learn in other ways, play is an established and accepted part of the early years curriculum. It has become such a key part of provision in the Foundation Stage because it is pleasurable and practical, and so is attractive to young children. It gives children the opportunity to take control as they engage with activities and materials, and to decide how the resources will be used. They can express and explore their own ideas without pressure or censure. In play, adults are usually participants rather than being in charge of the activity or the outcome. Play is voluntary and in play situations children are able to take risks. During play there are no judgements about right or wrong answers or ways of doing things. Play provides a context within which children can construct meanings and understandings and develop positive attitudes to school and learning.

### Play and work

Not all play situations give rise to play. If children do not know what to do with the materials, if they find the materials or the activity dull or unappealing, or if the adult controls the situation leaving no scope for personal interpretation or creativity, play will not take place, or at least it will not be regarded as play by the participant. Play is as much an attitude of mind as it is an activity. Reading books can be an enjoyable activity that is undertaken voluntarily. Readers are personally involved, they interpret what they read in ways that link to their own experience and understanding. Yet reading is often thought of as work in school. Think of the delight that young children have in their nightly bedtime story and how some children choose to pour over a picture book long before they can read. Amongst our friends we probably all know someone who enjoys solving mathematical problems like those to be found in the weekend newspapers or tackling crosswords or other word games in their leisure time. Indeed, there are magazines dedicated to word and other puzzles. Yet letters, words and numbers in school may be considered dull and hard. Perhaps we need to examine the distinction that is often made between work and play. It might not be as straightforward as it seems. Work can be play if the conditions for play are met and the participant approaches the activity with eagerness and with an expectation of enjoyment. In addition to thinking of ways in which play can be used to foster learning, perhaps we could also give more time to consider-

ing how to present learning as an engaging and enjoyable pursuit, and how to reflect the qualities of play in learning experiences.

## Structured and unstructured play

Some purists might take exception to this blurred distinction between play and work believing that play should have no real purpose or goal and that children's play should be completely free from adult involvement. This point of view has led practitioners to question the play provision that they make for young children. They are sometimes anxious about structuring children's play by planning for it in ways that will develop children's learning. They worry that by interfering in children's play they will be devaluing play and transforming play into work. This is not a very productive debate, particularly if one accepts that work and play can overlap and if one acknowledges that all play is structured by the materials that are available to the participants. For example, the sort of clothes that are available for dressing up, whether in school or at home, will shape children's role play and exploration of other identities. When children put on yellow hard hats they are likely to become builders, firefighters or miners but are unlikely to consider themselves doctors or shopkeepers. We know, from children's productive learning experiences out of school and from the research, that young children learn well when they are actively interacting with others (Wood and Bennett, 1999). Without planning, careful selection of the number and type of resources and without adult interaction it would be very difficult to provide challenging, fresh and stimulating play opportunities for a class of 20–30 young children.

Accepting that all play is structured has implications for practitioners. It means that they need to take care when they make choices about the play opportunities they provide and how these are to be resourced. They need to provide resources that will appeal to children and to ensure that resources are changed regularly in order to provide children with a variety of play opportunities. The choices that they make will affect what children learn, so practitioners need to be aware of how the resources will support the children's play and guide their learning. Then these likely outcomes need to be matched to what would benefit the children.

## Free and directed play

Rather than thinking about structured and unstructured play it is perhaps more productive to think about free and directed play. Free play is 'the opportunity to explore and investigate materials and situations for oneself' (Moyles, 1989: 14). Directed play is led by an adult who shows children
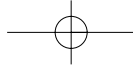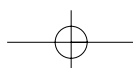
how to do something or joins in their play to guide it or move it on. The adult might take the lead in the children's role play in the vet's surgery. She might take on the role of the veterinary nurse engaging pet owners in conversation, making notes about pets' ailments and assisting the vet. She will be doing this with the intention of giving the children a model of behaviour that they can incorporate into their subsequent free or undirected play in the vet's surgery. Such interventions prevent the children's play becoming repetitive and stimulate the children to extend their understanding.

Productive play opportunities are usefully planned as a sequence containing both free and directed activities. The children's first encounter with a new set of materials or a new resource might be free. This allows the children to explore the properties of the materials or the possibilities of the situation. The second encounter might be supported or led by an adult in order to channel the children's behaviour. The next time the children access the same play activity they can try out this new idea for themselves and so extend their understanding. Moyles (1989) suggests that this balance of free and directed play can continue for some time, giving children opportunities to restructure their present level of understanding at each stage as they receive and experiment with new ideas.

## Types of play

There are a number of different types of play. Piaget (1951) distinguished between practice play, symbolic play and play with rules, and a further category, constructive play, was added by Smilansky (1968). Practice play includes such things as repeatedly rebuilding construction toys in the same way, repeating rhymes or the repetition of the same marks on a page when experimenting with writing. Symbolic play involves creating or using objects to represent ideas, situations or other objects. For example, a block could be used to represent a car or a child could pretend to be a superhero. Pretend, fantasy and socio-dramatic (role play involving two or more children) play are all forms of symbolic play. In constructive play objects are manipulated to create something new. A collage can be made from scrap or waste paper, cloth and other material, or homes may be built out of cardboard boxes or wooden bricks. The children themselves may decide the rules for play or they use or adapt rules from traditional games such as hopscotch or bingo.

Each of these different types of play can extend development and skills in the social, intellectual, creative and physical domains. They also have a part to play in communication, language and literacy. Socio-dramatic play involves communicating with one or more play partners and using lan-

guage to present an acquired identity. Through taking on a role, children may begin to develop empathy. Such play may also develop children's story-telling and story-making skills as they develop a narrative, located in a particular setting and involving a sequence of actions and events. Constructive play may, although it does not need to, involve cooperating and interacting with others. It develops motor skills and coordination. It can also be used to represent ideas and as a response to stories. Because children have the freedom to enter unfamiliar worlds and explore new ideas through their play, it might also be a means of enhancing their creativity and imagination. These are essential if children are to read with understanding and write with flair. Play with rules may encourage interaction and if the children set the rules of the play for themselves they may be developing skills of negotiation, appreciating alternative points of view and planning.

## Planning for play

Educators have a critical role in creating opportunities for learning through play. They need to provide play situations and to consider how they will support children as they engage with the resources they have provided. Practitioners need a high level of pedagogical understanding in order to create a challenging curriculum and respond to and develop children's learning.

The sort of play activities that are provided need to be carefully planned. Each one will need a clear purpose or expected learning outcome. When selecting activities practitioners need to think about the way each activity will help to extend children's experiences and learning. Do they build on previous activities? Do they have the scope to be altered so that there can be progression of learning during the life of the activity? At the planning stage it is also important to think about how the children's learning will be assessed, what will be assessed and who will undertake the assessments. It might also be possible to involve the children in making decisions about the choice of play areas. Certainly, thought will be given to the interests of the class and making play relevant to these particular children in this particular locality. The resources that are selected will need to support the intended learning, be enticing to the children and reflect the cultural and language diversity of the children in the class and the wider community. The activities and the resources will need to appeal to and be appropriate to boys, girls and children with special educational needs. When planning it is important to think about how far the resources will support children's independent play and learning. Will the children need support and, if so, how will this be provided? If adults will need to participate in the activity

or support some children by sensitively timed interventions, this too will need to be considered at the planning stage.

## Valuing play

Children need time to explore and engage with carefully planned play activities, particularly if one plans for a cycle of free and directed encounters as suggested by Moyles (1989). It is often easier to allow for lengthy blocks of time in nursery settings, but it can be more difficult in some reception classes where there is sometimes greater emphasis on more formal learning or where blocks of time are allocated to specific curriculum areas. Children's play can be interrupted by adult-directed sessions or routines. Sometimes routines can be flexible. For example drinks and biscuits can be accessed by the children when they are thirsty rather than being timetabled to occur at a particular time. Similarly, outdoor activities can be available for most of the day rather than being timetabled for all the class at the same time. As well as giving children time to concentrate and engage in periods of sustained play, more flexible arrangements give children the opportunity to make choices.

When play is frequently interrupted by adult-led activities, which often focus on literacy and numeracy, children may be learning that more formal activities or *work* is more important than play. This can be reinforced if adults are more frequently to be found seated at or guiding activities that are more obviously linked to literacy and numeracy. Towards the end of the Foundation Stage or in some reception classes, play may be allocated to the afternoon or a short time at the end of each day. Sometimes children are allowed to *play* after they have finished their *work*. This undermines the status of play in children's minds and reflects a true lack of understanding or confidence in the value and centrality of play to learning. When play is planned for in this way, both work and play can suffer. Children can rush through their work in order to play and, because they can see that play is not valued or that it is regarded as easy, they may not give their play serious attention and so fail to derive its full potential as a means of learning.

## Adult roles

Once play activities have been set up, adults have a key role in making sure that children gain the full benefit from them. They can support children's learning in a number of ways. It is important that their involvement focuses on supporting and extending learning through play rather than interrupt-

ing it. If adults join in without being tuned in to what the children are doing they can sometimes ask well-meaning but intrusive questions that focus on teaching, testing learning or that miss the point of what the children have been doing. For example, imagine that a child shows the adult a menu that he has written in the role-play area. If the adult responds by saying, 'That's very good' or 'Look at the beautiful C that you have made. Can you see any other Cs in the room?', a valuable opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the child, to listen to what he wants to say about his writing or to participate in and sustain his role play might have been lost. It is likely that interventions that are sympathetic to the children's endeavours and appropriate to their needs will have been preceded by a period of observation during which the practitioner can focus on the children, the strategies they are using as well as the learning that can be seen.

Involvement in play can take many forms from indirect to direct. The least intrusive of these is acting as an onlooker (Roskos and Neuman, 1993). Here the adult remains outside the children's play but offers acknowledgement or encouragement through brief verbal comments or non-verbal gestures. This may encourage children to sustain their concentration. Another indirect role is to facilitate further learning by changing the resources or suggesting new directions for the play. If children are left to play on their own without adults' observing them and assessing the quality of their experience, the children may repeat the same forms of play. Effective intervention through the introduction of new resources or the introduction of a new dilemma or challenge which channels the children's play in productive directions can motivate children and extend their learning. In order to help children remain in role or to encourage fuller participation, adults might model appropriate behaviour in role-play situations. This can be done by, for example, writing down a telephone message or reading a story to one of the dolls. This modelling can be carried out without fully participating in the children's play but it is likely that after seeing this model the children will imitate it. Sometimes the adult will intervene in order to monitor the way in which children are negotiating their ideas or formulating rules. This form of intervention will enable the adult to support individuals as well as groups. It will depend on the adult being available and keeping a check on activities to see if mediation or assistance are needed.

Full participation in play alongside the children is rarer than other forms of intervention but it is a powerful way of fostering learning. The adult can follow the children's lead and fit in with the direction their play is taking while also suggesting extensions and adding props. They can act as a catalyst and initiate new ideas, but in ways that fit in with the children's think-

ing. When adults join in with activities they can discuss ideas, model practices and behaviour, and introduce new vocabulary. Playing alongside children legitimizes play and encourages children to see play as something that is valued. It avoids the work–play divide that can arise when adult participation focuses more on formal *work* activities. The most directive end of the intervention continuum is when adults act as play leaders (Roskos and Neuman, 1993). They plan ahead with the intention of introducing specific props, demonstrations and explicit directions.

Knowing what to plan for and knowing when and how to intervene depends on knowing the children and being aware of the processes and strategies that they use during their play. This information is gained through observing children as they play. Observation also enables adults to evaluate the success of the planned activities, to assess children's needs and to plan for progression of learning and the development of the activity.
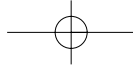
Play is a valuable means of learning in early years classrooms. It offers opportunities for children to develop their learning in enjoyable ways. If the potential of play as a means of learning is to be realized, it needs to be carefully planned and supported by sensitive and well-timed adult interventions. The nature of play means that it fits easily into the socio-constructivist view of learning and encourages the development of positive dispositions such as curiosity, perseverance and imagination that are excellent strategies for learning.

## Organizing for learning in nursery and pre-school settings

### Types of pre-school provision

Provision in the Foundation Stage covers nursery settings and reception classes. In some schools nursery and reception have been combined to form early years units. However, in many cases reception classes and other forms of pre-school provision are separate. The organization and staffing of nursery and other pre-school settings is often significantly different to that of reception classes. This makes a difference to the curriculum that is offered and the way that it is taught. There are many types of pre-school provision available for children to attend between the ages of 3 and 5. These include:

- nursery classes in state schools;
- reception classes in state schools;
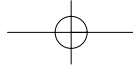- state nursery schools;
- childminders;

- pre-schools;
- playgroups;
- private nursery schools;
- day care centres; and
- workplace nurseries.

Children may attend part time or full time and some children, particularly those who go to day centres, may spend an extended day there. This often matches the working hours of their parents. Whatever the setting, if it receives nursery education grant funding it is required to offer provision that enables children to progress through the stepping stones towards the Early Learning Goals (QCA, 2000b).

## Layout and resources

Different forms of provision will have different levels of resources and facilities available. Some pre-schools may have limited space and resources because they do not receive the same level of funding as nursery schools and they may not be the sole users of the building in which they are based. The particular philosophy of some nursery practitioners may influence the way that space is used. For example, in Montessori nurseries there is probably less emphasis on developing children's relationships with each other and on group work than in local education authority (LEA) nurseries. This is because Montessori thought that working alone helped children to become independent learners. She considered that when children were completely absorbed in what they were doing this was learning at its best. Montessori nurseries also have specialized equipment and resources designed by and advocated by their founder. In Steiner schools there is a strong emphasis on natural materials. The amount of commercial equipment is minimal and outdoors children will have logs and tree trunks for climbing and balancing. Story-telling rather than story-reading is an important part of the Steiner curriculum, and this impacts on the activities that are offered and the resources that are used.

In most pre-school settings the room or rooms that are used are divided into areas. A large open space in which children can gather together as a class or in a large group is important for listening to stories, listening and speaking, shared reading and shared writing. There will normally be a reading and library area, a mark-making or writing area, an imaginative play area, a construction area, an art or creative area, a sensory area, and sand and water containers. Information and communications technologies (ICT)

equipment, including computers and tape recorders, will be placed around the room and may be found in the reading, writing and role-play areas. Some nurseries may have large indoor equipment such as benches or a ball pool for physical activities. Many nurseries have such equipment plus wheeled toys in the outdoor area. The outdoor area is an outdoor classroom and so should provide opportunities for learning that mirror those provided indoors. Outdoors there can be a sandpit and a water trough, a wildlife area, and covered areas for reading, drawing, painting and construction. The outdoor area can be used as much as indoors when it is planned for and resourced well, even in poorer weather. There is a Danish saying which reminds us that 'it's not the weather that's the problem, it's the clothes we wear'! Both indoors and outdoors there will be tables and chairs where children can work on group and independent activities using a variety of resources.

## Organization of the day

In most nursery settings a typical session lasts for two and a half hours and most children attend for one session each day. At the start of the session children will come into a room where activities have already been set up. They may select one of these and it is usually possible for the adult who has brought them to join in with them for a short time if they wish. At some point during the session all the children will gather together for a shared activity such a story or rhymes or music. This may also be a time when new or unfamiliar activities are pointed out to the children. The children may then return to their activities. The outdoor area is usually opened once all the children have arrived and is available until about half an hour before the session ends. The last half an hour of the session is spent on tidying things away and coming together as a whole group or in smaller adult-led groups to engage in a quiet, reflective activity. There are variations in this pattern and nurseries devise a framework that suits the number and availability of staff and the resources that are available. In some nurseries, particularly those following the high scope principles, at the start of the session children plan their time by selecting more than one activity from those available and recording their choices on a noticeboard. They will then do their first activity. At the end of the session there will be an opportunity to talk about what they have done during the session and reflect on their experiences and their learning.

# Organizing for learning in the reception class

The statutory age for starting school is at the beginning of the term after the child's fifth birthday, so some children with summer birthdays could begin school in Year 1 and if their parents wished miss out on the Foundation Stage altogether. Most children do spend time in reception classes, and many and increasing numbers of children spend time in one or more pre-school settings. Figure 1.1 shows the differences in provision found in nursery and reception classes.

| | Nursery | Reception |
|---|---|---|
| Attendance | Mostly part time | Full time after the first few weeks |
| Number of hours spent at the setting each day | 2 hours 30 minutes | 6 hours |
| Number of adults | 1 teacher + 1 full-time nursery assistant to 26 children | 1 teacher + 1 part-time teaching assistant to 30 children |
| Curriculum planning | Often linked to areas/resources Follows the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* | Beginning to become subject focused Follows the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* The literacy hour and numeracy sessions are in place in the summer term |
| Layout | Children do not have allocated seats Outdoors and indoors used daily | Every child has a seat at a table Most equipment is indoors |
| Resources | Large equipment available most of the time | Large equipment available some of the time |
| Grouping | Small groups, individual work, a small amount of whole class | About 50% of the time in small groups and individual activities and 50% of the time as a whole class |
| Types of groups | Generally flexible, selected by the adults, friendship groups, child initiated | Some flexibility but children may be in fairly fixed ability groups for CLL |
| Pupil autonomy | Most children choose most of the activities themselves There is a large range of activities to choose from | The children are likely to be directed to activities The number of activities offered at any one time will be limited and probably no more than 5 |

**Figure 1.1** *The differences in provision in nursery and reception classes*

The amount of time, the type of equipment and the adult support available varies considerably between settings, but they are all expected to help children develop their knowledge and understanding of communication, language and literacy. One of the key differences between reception classes and other forms of pre-school provision is that during the reception year children are prepared for and then allocated a dedicated hour each day for literacy. This does not have to result in formal ways of teaching children. Practitioners have resisted the pressure, sometimes exerted on them in the early days of the National Literacy Strategy, to relinquish a practical and play-based curriculum in favour of one that prioritizes pencil-and-paper tasks. The value of the Foundation Stage approach has been recognized and in a recent report (Sanders et al., 2005) the authors recommended that some of the practices should be extended into Year 1.

> The amount of time children in Year 1 spend sitting still and listening to the teacher should be reduced. Year 1 teachers should be encouraged to increase opportunities for active, independent learning and learning through play.
>
> Schools should encourage staff to adopt similar routines, expectations and activities in Reception and Year 1. School managers should allocate resources to enable children in Year 1 to experience some play-based activities that give access to opportunities such as sand and water, role play, construction and outdoor learning. (Sanders et al., 2005: 9.5)
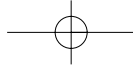
## Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to describe the curriculum, teaching style and organization that can be found in the many settings that provide for children in the Foundation Stage. This provides the context for the activities and suggestions about developing communication, language and literacy that are outlined in the remaining chapters of the book.

## Further reading

Anning, A. and Edwards, A. (2006) *Promoting Children's Learning from Birth to Five: Developing the New Early Years Professional*. 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
In this book the authors focus on literacy and mathematical development to illustrate ways of working with young children.

Bruce, T. (ed.) (2006) *Early Childhood – A Guide for Students*. London: Sage.
  This book was written for students on early childhood courses and is an
    ideal introductory text.

Edgington, M. (2004) *The Foundation Stage Teacher in Action: Teaching 3, 4 and 5
  Year Olds*. 3rd edn. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
This is an up-to-date and practical examination of the role of practitioners in
  the Foundation Stage.

Smidt, S. (2002) *A Guide to Early Years Practice*. 2nd edn. Abingdon: Routledge/
  Falmer.
This is a practical and accessible guide to learning and teaching in the
  Foundation Stage.