Introduction

Anyone walking into an English primary school over the past decade would be forgiven for thinking that the learning needs of 5- and 6-year old learners in this country are very different. While Reception children are to be found engaged in playful and active learning indoors and outdoors, Year 1 children are frequently found sitting passively on carpets listening to the exposition of their teachers. While Reception children are following their own interests and preoccupations, the 6-year-olds are following careful and detailed planning which is concerned with the teachers’ intended outcomes and not their own. Why is this the case? What evidence is there that children in Reception – the year they become 5, need something so palpably different from those in Year 1 – the year they become 6?

The reality is that it is not the needs of children that have driven the wedge between Reception and Year 1 practice, but rather successive government initiatives that have at their heart conflicting beliefs about effective learning and teaching for children who are 5 and 6 years old. In actual fact, it is my belief that government ministers have not particularly thought about the needs of Year 1 at all. Successive initiatives introduced into primary schools over recent years have ignored the fact that the way in which children learn in Key Stage 1 is developmentally very different from the way in which they learn in Key Stage 2. There were good reasons why the education system in this country used to separate children in infant and junior schools. Children’s ways of learning alter significantly once they reach the start of Key Stage 2 as they become increasingly capable of learning in more abstract and teacher-focused ways. But the ‘primary-itization’ of English schooling has meant that initiatives suitable
for Key Stage 2 are indiscriminately applied to Key Stage 1 without sufficient (or sufficiently knowledgeable) consideration being given to whether they are suitable for younger primary children.

In order to decide what is truly appropriate for learners of this age, it is important to consider what has influenced the very differing practices in Reception and Year 1 classes and then examine this alongside what is known about the learning needs of 5- and 6-year-old children.

**The introduction of the Foundation Stage**

In 2000, the English government introduced a new ‘distinct’ phase of education called the ‘Foundation Stage’, for children age 3 to the end of the Reception year (the year children become 5). The introduction of the Foundation Stage was accompanied by the first national guidance for those teaching this age group. Entitled *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (DfES 2000), this document set out some key principles about the way young children should learn and the role of adults in supporting this learning. It also established goals for learning that most children should achieve by the end of their Reception year.

As well as setting down standards for the quality of the curriculum, the introduction of the Foundation Stage also had an impact on the teachers who were to be responsible for its implementation. Up until this point, Reception class teachers in schools had sometimes felt pulled between a pillar and a post. While being aware that their children were very young and needed learning experiences similar to those in nursery schools and classes, they were often seen as the first class of the ‘primary school’ and, therefore, expected to introduce more formal and certainly more teacher-directed approaches. But the introduction of the Foundation Stage brought Reception teachers firmly off the fence and established that they were to deliver a play-based curriculum with substantial amounts of child-initiated learning, and that their role was to facilitate and support learning rather than to direct it.

**The introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies**

At around the same time that Reception teachers were embracing a more child-centred way of teaching, their Year 1 colleagues were being moved in the opposite direction. In 1998 and 1999, for the first time national guidance was introduced not just about what children of primary age should
learn (the National Curriculum had established this in 1989) but how they should learn it. The National Literacy Strategy (DfEE 1998) followed by The National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE 1999) documents both laid down a model by which teachers were to teach these two core subjects. The models – the Literacy Hour in the case of the Literacy Strategy, and the Daily Mathematics lesson (45 minutes) – in the case of the Numeracy Strategy, were highly prescriptive and entirely dependent on teacher-initiated learning.

What was significant about the models for the delivery of the Literacy Hour and the Daily Mathematics lesson was that they offered little differentiation between a Year 1 class and a Year 6 class, between children who were (in some cases) just 5 years old, and children who were 11. Strategies that were seen as effective for Key Stage 2 children were assumed to be equally appropriate for Key Stage 1 children, and Year 1 teachers found themselves having to comply with school policies and approaches that were universally applied across the whole primary age range.

So it can be seen that, at a time when teachers of Reception age children were being expected to follow a play-based, learner-centred curriculum, teachers in Year 1 were being expected to introduce a prescriptive, teacher-centred formula for the education of 6-year-olds. It was inevitable, therefore, that as children moved from the early years to the primary phase of their education, the experiences of many would be abruptly different and create problems not just for children, but for their teachers also.

**Reasons for reviewing the transition of children from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1**

While the paragraphs above have identified why there is currently an issue around children’s differing experiences as they make the transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1, it is important now to review the evidence about the impact of these different policy initiatives on children’s actual experiences.

The following pages are intended to give you, your senior leadership teams, governors and LAs a strong rationale for reviewing practice around the transition of children from the early years into primary schooling. We begin by looking at government reports about transition at this stage of education. Then we will look at national data from the Foundation Stage Profile outcomes and what this tells us about children’s achievements. Next we look at findings from one LA that consulted its children and
parents about their experiences of and feelings about transition into Key Stage 1. Finally, we will revisit what is known about child development at this age, and consider whether current practice meets children’s developmental needs. If you need to convince anyone – maybe even yourself – that transition is an issue worthy of attention, then the following pages should give you an unequivocal rationale for doing so.

**National reports about transition from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1**

During the early years of the millennium, it was not only individual teachers who were identifying a gulf between Reception and Year 1 practice. Nationally, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) were also identifying the issue as its inspectors moved from school to school.

In 2004, Ofsted produced a report entitled *Transition from the Reception Year to Year 1* (Ofsted 2004). Its findings suggested that insufficient consideration was being given to the relationship between the curricula in the Foundation Stage and in Year 1 and that transition to more formal approaches in Year 1 was sometimes too ‘abrupt’. In particular, inspectors highlighted that in some schools emphasis was given to the two national strategies at the expense of regular attention to other subjects.

In their recommendations, inspectors gave the following ‘Point for Action’: ‘Schools which admit pupils to the Foundation Stage should ensure that learning experiences in Year 1 build upon the practical approaches and structured play in Year R (reception)’ (Ofsted 2004: 3).

This report by Ofsted was swiftly followed by another. Commissioned by the government’s Sure Start Unit at the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and conducted by researchers from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), *A Study of the Transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1* (Sanders et al. 2005) found similar problems. These researchers identified the biggest challenge to transition being posed by the move from a play-based approach in the Foundation Stage to a more ‘structured’ curriculum in Key Stage 1. They reported that the introduction of the full Literacy Hour and the Daily Mathematics lesson were identified, by teachers, as challenging because it was difficult to get young children to sit down and listen to the teacher. The children, in turn, were reported as valuing their experiences in Reception and regretting the loss of opportunities to learn through play. Some children were worried by the workload expected in Year 1, found writing difficult and were bored by the requirement to sit and listen to the teacher.
As an antidote to these concerns, the government’s National Assessment Agency (NAA) produced a guidance document entitled *Continuing the Learning Journey* (NAA 2005), the purpose of which was ‘to support schools and local authorities in working towards improving transition between the foundation stage and key stage 1’. Here, it is recommended that schools ‘promote continuity in learning’ between the Foundation Stage and Year 1 by introducing a range of ‘key features of good early years practice’ into Year 1. But the messages from *Continuing the Learning Journey* were frequently overshadowed by the two national strategies with their conflicting messages about pedagogy and practice. While none of these documents were (or are) statutory, Ofsted paid more attention to the delivery of the national strategies than they did to *Continuing the Learning Journey*, with the result that the more teacher-directed approaches of the strategies gained a stronger foothold than those from the NAA that were promoting more child-initiated learning.

Two more recent national reviews have highlighted further proposals to improve transition to Key Stage 1. *The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: Final Report* (DCSF 2009), commissioned by the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families and led by Sir Jim Rose, has proposed a number of significant changes to the primary curriculum which will impact on transition at this stage. These include a move away from primary ‘subjects’ and towards new ‘areas of learning’ that are intended to be coterminous with those of the new EYFS* (see Figure 1.1).

In addition, Rose makes the following recommendation regarding transition and progression to Key Stage 1:

*Recommendation 15:* The QCA should make sure that guidance on the revised primary National Curriculum includes clear advice about how best to support those children who need to continue to work towards the early learning goals and build on the learning that has taken place in the EYFS.

(DCSF 2009: 23)

This recommendation is particularly welcome in that the ‘Rose Report’ is the first official document to acknowledge that most children are not achieving all their Early Learning Goals by the end of the Foundation

*It should be noted as this juncture that in September 2008 the ‘Foundation Stage’ became the EYFS – a single ‘quality framework’ for children from birth to age 5, whereas the original ‘Foundation Stage’ was for children age 3 to age 5. There is more information about the EYFS in Chapter 2.
The second review to address transition is the Cambridge Primary Review led by Professor Robin Alexander. The review team has recently published a report entitled *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: A Report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 2: The Future* (available online at www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/CambridgePrimaryReviewrep.html). This report identifies the ‘top-down’ pressure of not just the Primary Curriculum but also the Secondary Curriculum on the early years of education and acknowledges that this is especially the case in relation to literacy:

> Whatever they have separately achieved, the expansion of pre-school provision and the KS1/2 standards agenda has made this vital point of transition increasingly fraught, for it has been squeezed by two very different views of what primary education should be about.

(Alexander 2009: 23)

The Cambridge Review also proposes a new model for the Primary Curriculum based this time on ‘domains’ which will build on the EYFS
areas of learning and lead on to the Key Stage 3 curriculum in secondary education. This review is equally concerned with how children learn as much as what they should learn and questions policy in England that appears to be premised on the ‘questionable principle’ that the younger children start formal schooling the better they will eventually do. While pointing out that the experience of those countries whose children start formal schooling up to two years later than in England manage to outperform their English peers by age 11, the review also asserts the following: ‘In a world where pre-school education and care are increasingly the norm the argument is less about starting ages than the nature and appropriateness of provision on either side of the line, wherever it is drawn’ (Alexander 2009: 5).

This book is entirely concerned with provision and practice that is appropriate to children who are 5 and 6 years of age, and so we move on to what national assessment data is telling us about children’s achievements at this age.

**National assessment data at the point of transition from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1**

Although the findings of official reports undoubtedly began to affect the way in which LAs and school leadership teams viewed the experiences of children in Year 1, there was one factor that had, perhaps, an even greater influence on attitudes towards current practice.

Since 2004, the government has produced national data based on the outcomes from the administration of the Foundation Stage Profile – the assessment of all children at the end of the Foundation Stage. This data has revealed, year on year, that while the Early Learning Goals are expectations for ‘most children’ to achieve by the end of the Foundation Stage (a phrase introduced in the original *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* and now perpetuated in *The Early Years Foundation Stage* – DCSF 2008), this is far from reality. The data have consistently shown that significant numbers of children move into Year 1 without having achieved all their Early Learning Goals. While none of the Goals are achieved by more than around 50 per cent of children, some Goals have proved particularly hard to achieve and in 2008, for example, the Goal for ‘Writing’ was achieved by only 24 per cent of all children and the Goals for ‘Creative Development’ and ‘Calculating’ were achieved by only 27 per cent. Figures vary about the percentage of children achieving all their Early Learning Goals, but in some LAs (which are nonetheless achieving ‘national expectations’) the
figure is reported to be around 10 per cent, which means that some 90 per cent of children are entering Year 1 classes still needing to complete their Foundation Stage education in certain areas of learning.

Put another way, this means that the vast majority of children across the country are entering Year 1 not developmentally ready to begin the National Curriculum. This has caused a radical rethink in many local authorities and in many schools, and the official institutional view of transition has become a key element of strategic plans for improvement.

Local concerns

Concerns about the experiences of children transferring from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1 have not only been expressed through government documentation and statistics. Across the country, many LAs have been conducting their own evaluations of children’s experiences as they make this transition, and documenting them in order to improve practice.

Most LAs that have undertaken such an exercise have been concerned to find out the views of their teachers, their children and their parents. One example of this is in Oxfordshire, where the LA supported a three-year research project about the transition of children from Foundation Stage to Year 1 (OCC 2006, 2009).

When Oxfordshire consulted its teachers it found many who were concerned about the appropriateness of children’s Year 1 experiences and how significantly they differed from those in the Foundation Stage. Teachers’ responses included many comments which were similar to these the following.

'It just doesn’t feel right. I can see the children are bored and need to be up and playing but we still have to do the Literacy Hour.’

'I just know in my bones that what children are getting isn’t right for their stage of development. I want to make it more child-friendly.’

'I can’t stand this any more. I just have to find a way of delivering the curriculum in ways that will engage the children.’
The voices of the teachers raised so many concerns that Oxfordshire then consulted its parents. Parents of both Reception and Year 1 children were asked how their children (and they) felt about the move into Year 1. As might be imagined, the parents’ responses were more disparate than the teachers’. There were a significant number of parents who were pleased that there would be a difference between Reception and Year 1, particularly among those whose children were yet to transfer.

‘I think S. is getting bored with playing now. She’s ready to do harder work and to do more reading and writing so I’m pleased she is going into Mrs XX’s class.’

‘I really think the children have too much freedom in Foundation. I know they learn when they play but I’m not convinced that’s what school is for.’

‘I can see how anxious Josh is getting. He loves outdoors in Foundation and there isn’t any outdoors in Year 1.’

‘My child doesn’t want to go to Year 1. He knows that it’s the end of play and he’s not ready to sit and listen all the time.’

‘I wish the Year 1 class could be more like Reception. I know they have to learn harder things but need it be so boring?’

But such responses were not the majority view. Many parents were already expressing anxiety about their child’s transition.
Interestingly, these concerns were voiced most consistently by parents of children who had already made the transition into Year 1. Here, the messages were more in line with those of the teachers.

‘My son was in Year 1 last year and he just got so bored with sitting on the carpet all the time. He needs to be more active if he is going to stay interested in school.’

‘All he seems to do is literacy and numeracy. I remember doing projects and topics when I was his age and he doesn’t do those at all.’

‘I think there should be more time to play in Year 1. They’re learning at the same time and it is a better way to learn than sitting and listening to the teacher all the time.’

Finally, in Oxfordshire, the LA consulted the children. Every child in the Reception year in all of the county’s schools was sent a questionnaire which asked broadly the same question as the one posed to their teachers and parents. It asked: ‘Show us how you feel about moving into Year 1’ (see Figure 1.2).

There was space for a drawing and, at the bottom of the paper, some lines above which was written: ‘While drawing, the child talked about this . . . to give the teacher the opportunity to record any significant responses that the drawings might not have portrayed.

In total, 2381 questionnaires were returned. The majority of children wrote about ‘looking forward to’ Year 1. They drew pictures of what they were looking forward to and wrote about why they were feeling positive. The most frequently cited reasons for this were:

- ‘being older’ – ‘I felt tall because we were going into Year 1 and very happy’;
- being able to go onto the big playground – ‘I can play football in the big playground and Roger will play’;
- doing harder work – ‘I would like to learn more difficult spellings’.
The playground featured significantly in the responses, for as many children spoke about this with trepidation as they did with anticipation. However, a significant number of children qualified their ‘looking forward to’ comments with concerns, while some wrote only negatively about their feelings. Nearly a quarter of the responses were either partially
or entirely negative, with children talking about ‘being sad’, ‘worried’, ‘scared’, ‘nervous’ and ‘shy’. Other words such as ‘frightened’, ‘angry’ and ‘cross’ were used, but less frequently.

The negative words used by the children seem to fall into two categories: those about feelings of ‘leaving behind’ what was loved and familiar, and those about feelings of ‘anxiety’ about what was to come. Being sad about leaving things behind is entirely natural and shows that staff in the Foundation Stage had established the warm and reciprocal relationships that typify good early years environments. So there was regret about leaving:

- teachers and teaching assistants – ‘I’m sad because I love Miss XXX and I don’t want go’;
- friends who may be going to another class – ‘I’m sad because Gemma is going to another class and I can’t go with her’;
- toys, equipment and environments – ‘I’m sad because I’m going to miss the teepee and the sandpit’.

However, the remaining half of the negative responses expressed fears about what was to come and gave the class teachers greater cause for concern.

The children’s responses spurred on the class teachers to think more seriously about transition from the children’s perspective. Many of the Project teachers realised that they had assumed how children would be
feeling – and that, in some cases, their assumptions had been wrong. There were children whom they had thought would be looking forward to the move who were expressing anxieties and, conversely, children whom they thought would be apprehensive about transition who were anticipating it with eagerness.

The questionnaires led teachers in the Project to come up with a variety of ideas about how to improve transition for their children, and the results of their thinking can be read about in Chapter 3. In addition, the questionnaires had such an impact on their practice that many of the teachers decided that they would consult every future class in the same way, because they understood that each class is made up of differing individuals with different feelings about transition.

**Child development**

All of the concerns raised above have been based on evidence gleaned from observation of some kind. In some cases, the observations were carried out by official figures such as Ofsted inspectors or researchers. In some cases, the observations were undertaken by teachers or parents. In other cases, the observations would contribute to the completion of the Foundation Stage Profile. But it is important to remember that there are other assessments that have been made of children over time that have impacted on our understanding of how children develop and have contributed to the profession’s knowledge about how all children develop and how all children learn.

Effective practice is usually effective because it harnesses approaches that are developmentally appropriate for children. This means that planning will start from the current needs, interests and capacities of children, rather than from a certain page in a file that suggests that all children receive the same ‘diet’ because they happen to be in the same class. It means that planning is rooted in ongoing, systematic observation of each child as a learner rather than being rooted in a sequence of units of work that move on relentlessly regardless of children’s learning needs or their levels of understanding. It is concerned with the developmental stage each child has reached, rather than making assumptions according to a child’s age.

A core principle of the EYFS is that children are ‘unique’. It acknowledges that ‘children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates’ (DCSF 2008: para. 1.11) and practitioners are expected to take this fully into account when they plan for children’s individual learning
experiences. How can this be the case when children are in the Reception year and not when they are in Year 1? How can it be that a Reception child is entitled to ‘be supported individually to make progress at their own pace’ (DCSF 2008: para. 1.13) when Year 1 children are often required to meet universal outcomes to whole-class objectives?

If we are looking to strengthen our rationale for reviewing current practice in Year 1, then it is crucial to remember (or reconsider) the following facts from the child development literature.

1. A class of children is not a homogeneous group of learners. Every teacher knows that within their class there is a vast range of children with a vast range of learning needs and abilities. It is simply not sensible to suggest that teachers plan for a whole class as though all the children need the same thing at the same time. Chapter 4 will look in greater depth at the issue of whole-class teaching and its relevance for Key Stage 1 children but, for now, suffice to say that children are just as ‘unique’ in Year 1 as they are in Reception, and should be treated as such.

2. The learning of young children is neither linear nor predictable. Young children’s learning journeys are individual and idiosyncratic. Sometimes children have a spurt of development; sometimes they come to a grinding halt and remain on a plateau; sometimes they go back and revisit something in order to sort out a misunderstanding. They do not do this in synchrony. When one child is shooting forwards, another may be consolidating and revisiting; when one child understands something, another may need several additional experiences and opportunities to come to a similar level of understanding; while some children have previous experiences or knowledge to draw on, for others a concept or skill can be completely new. Every child is a complex fusion of experience (from home far more than school), aptitudes, attitudes and interests. How can we suggest that all children in one class who were taught ‘X’ today, will all need ‘Y’ tomorrow?

3. Developmentally, there is very little difference between a Reception child and a Year 1 child. All of the child development literature that concerns children of this age says that the key changes in children’s development come around the end of Year 2 when children approach the age of 7. Nowhere in the literature does in say that suddenly, at age 6 children prefer to learn by listening to the teacher. Nowhere does it say that children learn best when they are sitting on a carpet. Nowhere does it say that children no longer need play and no longer like learning out of
doors. In fact, the literature is unequivocal in saying that children’s learning needs at age 6 are pretty much the same as at age 5, so as teachers we need to be asking whether current practices and opportunities in Year 1 classrooms reflect the active and interactive children we see learning in the Foundation Stage. Chapter 2 explores how children learn at this age in greater depth. It also introduces Year 1 teachers to the basic principles of the EYFS on which their practice should build.

Conclusions

The difference between current practice in Reception and Year 1 classes has largely been brought about by successive initiatives that have not taken the developmental needs of children into account. In particular, children in Year 1 have been subjected to initiatives that have been introduced for the whole ‘primary’ age span without sufficient consideration being given to whether these initiatives are appropriate for 5-year-old learners. Child development tells us that children’s learning needs in Year 1 are broadly similar to those for children in the Reception year and that children should not go from being seen as a ‘unique child’ (DCSF 2008) to a ‘Year 1’ in one small step down the school corridor.

Things to discuss in your school

- What are the similarities and differences between children’s experiences in Reception and Year 1?
- Are these differences based on what you believe about children’s learning?
- What evidence is there, from Foundation Stage Profile outcomes, of the range of learning needs of children moving into your Year 1 class(es)?