

START

A good start for all: Sustaining
Transitions across the Early Years

The Pen Green Team

A Parent and Professional Partnership to Ensure Continuity from Early Care & Education Centres to Primary School in England



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The case study outlines the work to date of the START Project: Sustaining transitions across the Early Years in relation to the Corby Partnership the project runs from September 2016 to April 2019.

In the context of a trans-national project it is important to consider the starting point for the project within England, as opposed to our European partner organisations. In England eligible children can access state funded education and care from two years of age, depending on their family circumstances. The statutory Reception year for children begins the September after the child's fourth birthday, this can be two - three years earlier than their European counterparts. This also means that there can be an almost 12 month age differential within a classroom. Offering an effective transition process for children aged four years - four years and eleven months poses many challenges. For vulnerable children this is often further pronounced, due to their complex individual circumstances.

The START partnership in Corby, England consists of:

- The Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families, comprising a maintained Nursery School, Early Years provision, Corby Children's Centres programme and a Research, Training & Development Base.
- Our Lady of Walsingham Primary School - part of a small local faith based Academy Trust.
- Rockingham Primary School - part of a large Multi-Academy Trust.

This Literature Review Scoping Exercise for the UK START Project (separate document) focuses on how pre-school children's transitions from their early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings are experienced by the children, their parents and carers, practitioners and reception class teachers, as children move into reception classes in primary schools. These transitions mark a very significant phase in the lives of these young children.

For some of the most vulnerable children the experience of their transition can be critically important in terms of their future learning, education and life chances due to them living in families characterised by complexity.

The 'school-readiness' debate

Elizabeth Truss, who was the Minister of State, in the Department for Education (2013) had a particular view of 'school readiness'. Having visited some early year's settings while she was minister she commented:

I have seen too many chaotic settings, where children are running around. There's no sense of purpose. In these settings where there aren't sufficiently qualified staff, and children are running around, we are not getting positive outcomes (*Chapman and Chorley, 2013*)

There is a considerable evidence-base which questions the assumptions underlying the idea that small children may be 'running around...with no sense of purpose'. Instead they may be engaging in highly focussed and motivated play which Chris Athey calls 'fitting not flitting' (2007). Athey's phrase captures the idea that children's drive to engage with the things that they are interested in enables them to see connections which may not be apparent to an adult at all. Drawing on her extensive research studies of children during the Froebel Project, which revealed the critical importance of understanding children's schematic play and learning, Chris Athey says:

One of the deficit accusations thrown at young children is that they are idiosyncratic and they 'flit' from pillar to post...However, 'flitting' is demonstrated only if the surface content of experiences is being analysed.' (*Athey, 2007: p6*).

Close observation of children's naturalistic play is required before adults can perceive and understand the range and depth of connectivity in the child's 'fitting' behaviour. Athey goes on to illustrate this by suggesting that children giving different names for the same thing 'can be taken as instances of "flitting" before providing an example of such behaviour by a three-and-a-half year old boy called Randolph who:

cut out a zig-zag pattern to which he attached three different names: 'a bird's wing', 'a fish tail' and 'a fan'. He was 'fitting' different but appropriate content into his latest 'form' (*Athey, 2007: p106*).

Understanding how preschool children can, and want to, lead their own learning is something that requires close observation of, and careful listening to, the children - 'noticing, recognising and responding' (Mitchell, 2008: p9) to what they do. Recording and reflecting on this process promotes the development of practice and provision which supports and facilitates the children's play and learning arising out of the things that they are actually interested in.

Truss called on support for a more structured, teacher-led practice by using France as a country whose preschool practice exemplifies the early years classroom as she would like to see it:

'What you notice in French nurseries is just how calm they are. All of their classes are structured and led by teachers. It's a requirement...(the children)...learn to socialise with each other, pay attention to the teacher and develop good manners, which is not the case in too many nurseries in Britain' (*Chapman and Chorley, 2013*)

However, notably, Truss did not mention other countries and approaches which have enviable educational outcomes but whose preschool practice is noticeably different from that of France; as the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years point out:

'...in France play is often confined to table-top games, with little focus on outdoor discovery play nor the provision of a wide choice of activities that are features of the Nordic pre-school' (*PACEY, 2013*).

Support for PACEY's position comes from Tess Bennett (2001) whose observations of the practice in Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy led her to say that:

'...children aged between one and five years of age seemed very independent...in making choices, getting dressed and eating. They had many opportunities to think for themselves, be creative and utilise resources and appeared happy and calm' (*Bennett, 2001*)

PACEY expresses its concern about the kind of teaching-and-learning approach practice in France, and which Truss and her supporters favour in the UK, saying that:

evidence shows that when the learning experiences flow from the children's ideas, there is more likely to be a good match between what the children are ready to learn and activities offered in the classroom than in a more adult-led approach (*PACEY, 2013*)

The reason for spending so much time up to this point with the inadequacies of ministerial observations

about preschool settings in the UK is because, sadly, they exemplify what many people outside the early years sector believe to be the case in preschool settings in England; i.e. that they are 'chaotic' places where, because no teaching and learning seems to be apparent, then neither of these things are happening and that indeed 'children are running around' and there is 'no sense of purpose'. As the PACEY response makes clear, is that nothing could be further from the truth. While many studies have demonstrated that there is variable quality of provision and practice in preschool settings of all kinds and in all sectors most preschool settings are providing an at least good quality of provision with the latest Annual Report from Ofsted stating that:

'For the sixth year in a row, the proportion of good and outstanding nurseries, pre-schools and childminders has risen and is now at 91%. These improvements have benefited the deprived areas of the country most of all. The proportion of good and outstanding nurseries is now almost the same in the most deprived areas of the country compared to the least deprived. (Ofsted, 2016; p21).

The fundamental problem with the notion of 'school readiness' is exactly that; it is merely a notion because there is no agreed definition of what it means. Consequently, all who are involved in children's transitions, find themselves inside a policy and practice vacuum. However, as in nature, institutions, politicians and policy-makers have rushed to fill this vacuum with their interpretations of what 'school readiness' is and how children can become 'ready for school'. The public discourse has veered very much to the side of the debate which favours the view that children should become 'school ready' rather than schools becoming 'child ready' with little or no consideration about the very real children who will be coming through their doors, as opposed to some kind of idealised child who can easily mesh in with the established structures and processes that the schools themselves have developed. As can be seen by the nature of the 'school ready' debate, ideas about what should be happening in schools have become identified as being somehow unchangeable.

Graham Allen (2011) who locates his definition of 'school readiness' with ideas about what he refers to as children's 'social and emotional bedrock', which means that children have:

the social and emotional foundation skills to progress in speech, perception, ability to understand numbers and quantities, motor skills, attitude to work, concentration, memory and social conduct; having the ability to engage positively and without aggression with other children and the ability to respond appropriately to requests from teachers (p9).

While Frank Field (2010) does not define what he thinks 'school readiness' is, he locates it firmly within a discourse about the positive outcomes of early intervention before school which would:

put taxpayers' investment in primary and secondary education to much better effect (as) most skills developed in early life stay with children into later life and are self-reinforcing (Frank Field, p10)

Preschool provision has particular benefits for children from disadvantaged families by ensuring that they enter their primary school just as 'school ready' as their more fortunate peers;

it is highly productive to invest in disadvantaged young children – there is no trade-off between the equity and the efficiency of investment for this group of children. (Frank Field, p40)

In her re-evaluation of the 'Statutory framework for the early years' foundation stage' (DCSF, 2008) in 2011 Dame Clare Tickell explores the notion of 'school readiness' in some depth saying that:

some people interpret the term 'school readiness' as implying that children could be pressured to learn to read and write at inappropriately young ages. Others have a wider concern about leaving children free to enjoy their early years without pressure, and argue that schools should be ready for children, not the other way around (Tickell, 2011, p19)

Tickell acknowledges that some people believe that 'we do children no favours if we fail to prepare them for the realities of the school environment, where skills such as literacy are at a premium (Tickell, 2011, p19) before going on to express her desire to 'avoid the more ambiguous and emotive connotations of 'school readiness' choosing instead to look at this issue 'from the perspective of its opposite: school *unreadiness*' (Tickell, 2011 p13).

Tickell says that 'for most parents and carers...school life begins' when their child enters the reception class aged four and that, if they are not ready for this transition, or the one into Year 1 aged five, due to not being toilet trained, not being able to listen and to get on with other children, then 'their experiences of school could present difficulties which will obstruct their own learning as well as other children's'.



Perhaps the time for reports such as Allen's, Field's and Tickell's to influence the structures and processes of early years policy-making has passed by and, for all of its powers, a body such as Ofsted cannot turn the 'ship-of-state' around as quickly as some might wish. In any case, it looks like the debate about what is meant by a 'school ready' child is set to continue for some time to come with the demarcation lines dividing those who look for a more traditional, teacher-led approach in the early years opposed to those who have adopted, and want the field to adopt, an approach in which parents and practitioners support, facilitate and encourage preschool children to be the leaders of their own learning.

Local Analysis of Need

Corby in Northamptonshire, England is a town that grew from a small village due to the investment of the steel industry. Corby suffered greatly due to the collapse of this industry and remains the fourth most deprived ward in the country according to the Social Mobility Commission's 2017 report with high levels of unemployment, poor health and multiple disadvantage.

The Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families

The Centre was established in 1983 with the belief that access to adequate early childhood services are a need and right for all families and communities. It was set up as an integrated service for families, staffed by a multi-disciplinary team including teachers, social workers, early year's workers and health practitioners. The Centre was initially jointly funded by the Local Authority Education and Social Services departments. In 2006 the Centre acquired maintained school status.

The ethos of the work was, and still remains, underpinned by the principles of community education, and the belief that all parents have a critical role to play as their child's primary educators. Parents and practitioners together created an organisation through which nursery education, family support, and adult community education could be combined under one roof as a comprehensive integrated service. A commitment to the children and families of the local community and encouraging their active voice and involvement in the planning of their services has remained a core value of the Pen Green Centre today.

Within the essence of this case study, the understanding of parental engagement remains as such. The fundamental rights of the child and their family, including the right to be heard, are upheld within the very many areas of the Centre. In circumstances where children and families are supported in work with external agencies the Centre will support children and families and undertake the role of advocate where required.

Our Nursery School and Early Years Provision have consistently been judged as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, the regulatory education inspection organisation for England. The Centre has one maintained nursery school, split into three pedagogical spaces with the capacity for 264 children on roll or 120 full-time equivalent places for 3 and 4 year olds and 24 places for 2 year olds. In addition there is an off-site Early Years provision that offers 15 full-time equivalent places for children aged 2-4 years.

These children are between the ages of 2- 5 and the offer includes the nursery entitlement including, 2 year funding, 15 & 30 hour nursery entitlement and the option to purchase additional hours across the day. In addition there are two education with care settings, the Nest and the Couthie which offer care and education for children aged 9 months-3 years offering a total of 30 places across morning and afternoon sessions. In recent academic years the Nursery has seen an average of 25% of children attending who are entitled to Early Years Pupil Premium and also a rise in the number of children attending with SEND, currently at 22% of Nursery places.

In addition to our provision for young children and their families, we provide support and training for parents including functional skills in Maths and English and CACHE 'Introduction to Childcare' courses, levels 1-4.

The Centre has previously been involved in the Local Authority Race to the Top initiative in 2015/16 which also focussed on transitions from Nursery to school. There is, therefore, already an existing cohort of children that the Centre has followed whose transitions have been studied. The START project built upon learning gained from that initiative.

The Pen Green Research, Development at Training Base opened in 1996, linking practice with research and working with practitioners as researchers. The START project team for Pen Green was unique within the Project as it combined both practitioners within the Nursery spaces and researchers working within the same organisation and to the same ethos and principles of parental engagement at all levels.

Our Lady of Walsingham Primary School

Our Lady of Walsingham Catholic primary school is a faith school located in Corby, Northamptonshire. The school converted to an academy in March 2015 and became part of the newly formed St Luke Academies Trust. The Lloyds housing estate on which the school is located sits within the 30% bracket of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

At present there are 320 children on roll. Over the past 6 years this is an increase of 50% as the school has moved from 1 form entry to 2 form entry.

The proportion of children with English as an additional language (EAL) has considerably increased over the past six years and is currently at 52% (whole school). In one of the reception classes this is currently at 72%. In addition there are a number of Traveller children who attend.

Children come to Our Lady's school from a number of different nursery settings across the town, however the two main 'feeder' nurseries are the Pen Green Centre and Little Learners, a private nursery which is based on the school site.

Prior to the START project the school was involved in the pilot project 'Race to the Top' alongside the Pen Green Nursery. This project focussed on easing transitions from nursery to school for more vulnerable children. Six children were identified who, due to individual circumstances, would find the transition process more challenging. This included children with EAL, children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), children in the care (CIC) of the Local Authority, children from a traveller background and children of parents with mental health issues.

The transition process for all children from Our Lady's School moving from Nursery to Reception, prior to the START project was for:

- Children to receive a home visit by the Reception class teachers in June
- Children to spend a day in their new class in July (Local Authority recommendation)

Additionally what we noticed was that there was low parental engagement, with parents only being spoken to by teachers, and rarely entering the class environment or school unless there was an issue. Discussions about this, and a recognition of the particularly low involvement for parents with English as an additional language led to the decision to enter into the START project.

Rockingham Primary School

Rockingham Primary School is a 280 place Primary School with 40 places per year group. From 2016 – 2017 Rockingham Primary School has increased to 60 places in the Early Years, this will continue year on year until the school reaches capacity in 2022. In Britain the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017) crosses the pre-school and foundation stage allowing for the same curriculum to guide the practice for all children aged three – six years. The school became an Academy in August 2013 as part of the David Ross Education Trust.

Rockingham Primary School was inspected by Ofsted in December 2016. The school was judged to be a 'good.' school across every category. As part of their report, inspectors noted that:

- The school has a caring ethos that values pupils and families alike. Staff know families well and pupils feel safe and secure.
- Pupils' personal development and behaviour are good. They work hard in lessons and take pride in their work. Pupils trust and respect staff and get on with each other well.
- Disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress from their different starting points. Effective teaching assistants make a particularly valuable contribution to the progress of these pupils.



The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is above the national average, as are the number of pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL). The school adopted the focus of their studies as parental mental health and the effect of this in the experiences and outcomes of the children both transitioning as new school members and the existing cohorts within the school.

Methodology and Ethics (development and implementation of the action plan)

It is not coincidental that the methodology and ethics section of this report into our study of children's transitions in the Corby locality is combined. It is a conscious choice because the ethics and methods which were followed and employed during the Project shaped and formed each other in a symbiotic way as practitioners and researchers responded to the needs and circumstances of those who participated in the research. Children, parents, practitioners and researchers were engaged in a research process underpinned by the ethical practices used and developed over several decades to support practitioners at the Pen Green Centre to research and evaluate their own practice (Whalley et al, 2017). This tried-and-tested model of ethical research has been used at Pen Green for:

- The annual evaluation cycles of the Corby Sure Start Project in which trained parent-researchers carried out the interviews with parents in the community and contributed to the data analysis, findings and recommendations in the Project reports (Tait et al, 2001;)
- Research work carried out with three settings in Corby funded by the Children's Workforce Development Council (McKinnon and Chandler, 2008)
- the Transforming Early Years Project which was funded by NESTA and supported by the Innovation Unit (NESTA, 2011)

The research ethics at Pen Green have always focused on working with children and families in ways that meet their needs so that their participation in any kind of project is carried out in ways that ensure that they feel they are taking part 'on their own terms'; that is, they engage in the research on the basis of it being 'done with' them and not 'done to' them.

The approach at Pen Green is captured in its own code of ethics which states that research at Pen Green should always:

- Be positive for all the participants
- Provide data that is open to, accountable to and interpreted by all the participants
- Focus on questions that the participants themselves (parents, children and staff) are asking
- Be based on a relationship of trust where people's answers are believed
- Produce results which are about improving practice at home and at nursery, or at least sustaining it (Whalley et al., 2007, p12).

This thinking spans the age-range and circumstances of children, parents and families so that their participation takes place in the context of their fully informed consent to do so based on the following tenets:

- In the case of children it is accepted that they are too young to give consent to take part in research due to their age so their parents and carers must give their informed consent for their child to be part of any research.
- However, it is also recognised that children can, and should be enabled to, give their assent when being asked questions, being observed or videoed etc.; researchers should ask permission of the child to do any of these things and if this is refused by the child saying 'No' or similar, shaking of the head, turning away to indicate that they are not assenting etc. then the research cannot take place. Where the child gives their assent verbally, by nodding their head or facial expression it is then the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the assent given is continued during the research process by noticing the child's facial expressions, gestures, body language and other forms of non-verbal communication to any point where these show that the child wants the discussion, observation or videoing to end. At that point, the research must be stopped (Arnold, 2015, p19-26).

- When conducting research work with adults the customary ethical considerations about anonymity and confidentiality of any information they share, are clearly explained to them. They are then asked to give their fully informed consent in writing for their participation, and that of their children, to take place. The possibility of their withdrawal, and that of their children, from the research, along with any of the information that they share, is also discussed with them and it is made clear that, should they choose to withdraw themselves and/or their children from the research process that this will not have any negative consequences for them.

Research conducted by the team at Pen Green is also informed (Please see Appendices 1 & 2 for templates for consent to participate from parents and practitioners.) by the codes of ethics of organisations whose ethical stances we subscribe to and support which are drawn upon as and when their particular ethical considerations are most appropriate, for example:

- Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011)
- Ethical Code for Early Years Researchers (EECERA, 2014)
- Code of Ethics (Early Education, 2011)

Selecting a 'Purposeful' Research Sample

The children involved in the START Project were moving from nursery to reception class within school. The cohort comprised vulnerable children at risk of social exclusion including children from the travelling community, children living in poverty, children with SEND, children known to social care or a combination of all of these factors. In addition some of these children also deferred their school place for a further academic year and therefore may have experienced losing their peer group at the previous year's school intake, and gaining a new peer group in their additional year at nursery.

The children and their families involved in the study are within the most vulnerable groups and most likely to be at risk of social exclusion. The very nature of their own particular circumstances influence their ability, or desire, to be fully engaged and participative at all times throughout the project.

The following bullet points are salient aspects of the project, outlining what needed to happen and how it could be undertaken in a sensitive and ethical manner:

- The nature of the cohort of children required ethical sensitivity around the specifics of the individual children's situations.
- The initial interviews led to subsequent home visits where families were most likely to feel comfortable to engage in a 'flexible' semi-structured interview process with practitioners and researchers. The intention was that researchers would say as little as possible and offer the time to the parent to articulate their thoughts, feelings and opinions about their child's transition and how they experienced this process themselves. A standardised consent form was used with participants enabling them to give their fully informed consent for themselves and their children to participate in the START Project.

Other activities used to gather data and support the project team were:

- Focus groups, drop-ins and activities with parents and children
- Child observations including the voice of the child
- Well-being assessments using the Leuven scale (Laevers, 1997)
- Researcher training
- Strategic management briefings
- Gathering of baseline data
- Project review meetings and training.



Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families

The chosen method for gathering data from the parents of the children in the research sample was to carry out semi-structured interviews with them because of all of the advantages these offer in terms of their flexibility in the context of interviewing parents, some of whom may have been vulnerable in one way or another. The advantages of adopting this approach circulate around:

- Being able to follow up the parents' responses with other questions and queries which explored further what the parents had said
- Similarly, parents could ask for clarification and bring things into the interview conversation which they felt to be relevant.
- Three cycles of the interviews were carried out with each child's parents/carers:
 - Prior to knowing which school the child would attend
 - Once the school place was known
 - After the child had started school.

Practitioners

Data was gathered from the practitioners and professionals who worked with the children by using focus groups to engender discussion among them about children and their transitions in ways that would fulfil the objectives of the focus group method, i.e.:

- Potentially increasing the amount and range of data collected from several people at one time
- 'Natural quality controls' can operate on the data gathering as participants act as 'checks and balances' on each other during discussions and where this is not happening the focus group's facilitator can intervene
- Participants can express themselves in their own words, and feel empowered in doing so
- Group facilitators can sensitively support quieter members of the group to offer their views so that the others can listen and perhaps reconsider their own thinking
- People who may not welcome a one-to-one interview, or are reluctant to complete a written questionnaire - perhaps because they lack confidence in their own literacy, or have other difficulties - can take part in an open but focussed discussion regarding something that they may have to contribute (Robson, 2006).

Both of the other settings involved, Our Lady of Walsingham Catholic Primary School (Our Lady's) and Rockingham Primary School were happy to be guided by Pen Green in relation to the methodological and ethical processes required.

This did not take place in some kind of 'bolt-on' way because one of the practitioners from Rockingham Primary had worked in a family support role at Pen Green for several years and was well-versed in how practitioner-based research took place at Pen Green. The Reception class teacher from Our Lady's had taken part in professional development training at Pen Green and was also familiar with the research approach.

The Research Programme (implementation)

The research methods and timelines varied across all three settings involved in the project as they were specific to the demographics of each organisation and the needs of the participants within each of the organisations. This also ensured that individual starting points could be taken into account through the individualised methodologies. The individual research timelines can be found as Appendices, and evidence the individual activities that took place. Due to the iterative nature of this project, as issues and themes emerged, then interventions were put in place to respond at that moment in time. This often brought up new questions or dilemmas which became a focus of the project's next intervention.

The learning drawn from the two international training weeks reinforced the principles of the implementation plan and provided opportunities to share the challenges and dilemmas in undertaking action research with vulnerable families. The opportunity to have protected time to share and reflect the common themes arising from the Project were invaluable and the learning drawn from these occasions were then translated on an ongoing basis to the work of the Project.

Pen Green Centre for Children and Families *(full timeline can be found within Appendix 3)*

Within Pen Green post transition interviews were held with parents whose children had previously transitioned from the Pen Green Nursery to various schools within the town as part of the Race to the Top initiative. These were to elicit the previous success of transitions, according to parents, in order to inform the START project moving forwards. In addition focus groups were held with practitioners from Nursery and schools to further inform our thinking, through taking into consideration the parents responses to the post transition interviews. In effect we were advocating for the parents voices to be heard across the project.

As leaders in the field of parental engagement Pen Green (Whalley et al: 2017) facilitated a whole project training week for researchers and practitioners from the four participating countries (40 participants). This included training on 'Parents Involvement in their Children's Learning' and also 'Action Research' training, in order to support participants to utilise these approaches to engaging families in their own project work. The successful culmination of the week was the production of Action Plans for each country to progress their work.

Moving forward Pen Green engaged in undertaking a series of video observation of the six children involved in the project. It has long been evidenced that the use of video for observation is a powerful tool, giving the opportunity to revisit and review video material, often alongside other participants (Jordan and Henderson, 1995). The period of time in which the video observations were undertaken (March - August 2017) encapsulated the timeframe in which parents and families:

- Were choosing and making their application to the Local Authority for their preferred school
- Found out about which school they had been allocated
- Commenced the transition process

This allowed us a window into parents and children's reactions to events at the time they were occurring, and offered opportunities for individualised support according to circumstances and family need. Additionally during this time period parent interviews were undertaken prior to families knowing which school had been allocated for their child and also post confirmation of school allocation.

We held a 'Market Stall' event. This was an event to which all nurseries and reception class teachers in Corby were invited. The purpose of the event was to provide the opportunity for practitioners to share information and knowledge of the children who have been in their setting with their new reception class teacher.

Preliminary findings from the START project were shared at the European Early Childhood Research Association (EECERA) conference in Bologna in August 2017.

Once children had transitioned to Reception classes in the Autumn term a sequence of research activity took place in order to consider children's lived experience. The activities were:

- Post transition interviews with all parents involved
- Observations of children post transition in reception classes
- Focus groups with practitioners from both nursery and schools

Further dissemination of this project work was carried out with Specialist Leaders in Education within Northamptonshire, sharing and developing good practice.

Our Lady's Primary School *(the full timeline can be found in appendix 4)*

Preliminary work was undertaken to consider previous transitions into the setting. This involved post-transition interviews with parents (2016, giving the setting a realistic evidence based starting point.

Following this the Senior Leadership Team at the school met to discuss how to better '*engage with parents in the Foundation Stage*'. This prompted the development of a number of initiatives by the

Reception teacher including a consideration of how to reduce non-attendance of the most vulnerable children; and how to more successfully engage families with English as an additional language; and how to consider children's progress. The initiatives included:

- Drop-in sessions for parents, before school and after school
- Introducing specific parent involvement activities, ie reading sessions for parents
- Extending the home visiting programme to include Year One
- Parent and toddler sessions for families
- Support for parents with EAL

The newly introduced activities were followed up with formal questionnaires and informal conversations with parents regarding their engagement in the newly devised initiatives.

Rockingham Primary School (*full timeline can be found as Appendix 5*)

Rockingham Primary School had previously reviewed their transition process and had set up a 'move up, stay up' initiative. This was an initiative in which children move up to their new classroom prior to the summer holidays, with the intention that this will alleviate some anxiety about not knowing what their new class teacher or room will be like. For the START project the school sent out questionnaires to parents about their experience of this initiative. Additionally children starting Reception were able to all start at the same time and on the same day.

Previously children's intake was 'staggered' across time and days. Parents were also invited to answer questionnaires in relation to children beginning school in this manner and the new Admissions Policy outlining this. A further questionnaire was undertaken to consider families opinions about how they felt their child's transition was, and whether they felt they had been ready to start school. This was triangulated (McNiff, 2010) through questionnaires to the children to ascertain their opinion about their own transition (Malaguzzi, 1993).

To follow through the projects focus on vulnerable children further, Rockingham elected to consider what we can do for the children transitioning to us who may be affected by poor maternal mental health and families in which there is domestic abuse, in order to support the children most appropriately.

The school also wanted to ascertain if 'move up stay up' supports the children's transitions from the reception class to their year one class, and whether families thought this process was of benefit to their child.

Findings (Impact)

Pen Green Centre for Children and Families

The findings are drawn from the following data sources:

- Parental Interviews
 - both pre and post school place confirmation
 - post transition to school
- Children's video observations
- Practitioner focus groups, post transition

Through a process of open coding (Corbin et al, 1990) the primary themes emerging from the data were:

- Children not able to self-regulate, which manifested in different behaviours such as:
 - Lashing out, biting and spitting at other children, not tolerating other children interrupting their play.
 - Using patterns of constant running around, using physicality to 'fit in'.
- Children using objects to help themselves to regulate, such as:
 - Swinging on a swing when feeling overwhelmed
 - Carrying and playing exclusively with one set of toys (animals)

- Children's inappropriate and minimising responses when physically hurt
- Children repeating patterns in their play (schemas) (Arnold, 2012)
- Children, who because of their physical condition are too debilitated at times to be able to express their needs
- Parents, because of their own needs not being met, are unable to meet the needs of their children.
- Parents differing pre-conceptions about school, based on their own experiences
- Parents either being able to advocate well for their children, or not.
- Parents - Identifying their pre-conceptions of what school represents and the 'rules' that this involves. What further work is required to improve this experience for parents in order to further support their child in the move to Reception.
- Family Workers key role in establishing key relationships with very vulnerable children, the child naming objects within the home environment to linked to workers' names.
- Practitioners reported the challenges of responding to individual children's needs within the higher class ratio and the existing school culture.
- The impact of the shared video work with Practitioners, how they could best support children with their individual needs.

Overall themes:

- Understanding the impact for children, parents, practitioners and environments and the external factors which influence the transition process.
- Impact for children's rituals/routines for self-regulation during daily transition points taking into account 'horizontal transitions, those happening consecutively during the day between home and other carers and settings' (O'Connor, 2018) in addition to the vertical transitions made as part of their journey across age related milestones
- Time to reflect on own practices within a multi-disciplinary team.
- Ever increasing use of theory to help understand children's emotional lives and context.
- The current school perception of the transition process and the gulf between what is needed to support children and the school's attitudes and resources to do this.

As these themes emerged from the research data, it very quickly became apparent that staff teams were already working with individual children and families to consider how best to support them, and to gain a shared understanding of why children sometimes behaved in such challenging ways. This then became the 'nub' of what would be shared with the class teacher during the transition process. For instance, one particular child, who had been in three foster homes and was then to be adopted demonstrated repeated patterns in his play of containing and transporting. He in effect, carried his belonging around with him. It would be important that any school this child was going to would understand why he was doing this, in order to support him appropriately.

For a child who might be lashing out and hurting others it would be important for the new class teacher to understand the triggers for the behaviour and the strategies engaged to work with him effectively in nursery. This would be important for both the class teacher, in understanding the most appropriate way to engage with the child, and would provide consistency in the messages the child receives.

Teachers, from each of the schools the project children were transitioning to, attended the Market Stall event, to gain relevant, and in-depth, information about the children who would be transitioning to their schools from Pen Green Nursery.

Summaries of the individual findings and themes can be found as Appendix 6

Our Lady of Walsingham Primary School

The findings are drawn from:

- Parental Questionnaires on transition process for children starting Reception
- Post transitions survey for the children at end of Reception
- Baseline and comparative data for children in Reception including attendance and good levels of development
- Feedback from parents from new initiatives and informal discussions

In the *Parental Questionnaire* on transition parents were asked about the importance of a home visit by the teacher prior to starting school. 100% stated that it was important.

*'very important, it was lovely to meet the teacher and get to know her a little before the start of school';
'it is important it helped my child massively, know the face, the smile!'; 'Gran is happy, Mum is happy;'*

For starting school the main responses from questionnaires referred to children being *'nervous, anxious, emotional'*. When asked what school could do to make this better parents responses focussed on *'more communication from the teacher around child's experiences of the day'* (80%).

In the Transitions survey, 100% (32/32) of parents stated that it was valuable for their child to spend a whole week in their new class as opposed to the one day recommended by the local authority. All parents (100%) felt that the practice should be repeated next year.

Commenting on the benefits of this practice 81% (26/32) included the following comments:

'Child felt at ease and understands what is expected in September'

'My child is more confident about the next step in her life'

'helps the teacher get to know the child as an individual and how they learn best'

'one week is really much better than one day, children can prepare for their next year.'

'I think transition week is a great idea especially for younger children, after getting relaxed over the summer it is quicker for them to adjust knowing their new teacher and classroom.'

'my child felt more at ease and understands a little more of what is expected of her in Year One.'

For five of the most vulnerable children in class who were very much the focus of this project the following data was drawn:

100% (5/5) of responses from parents of focus group children stated that they felt valued and listened to. Comments for future practice have been noted- namely that parents were mostly happy with transition process but that they felt they needed more time with class teachers.

In response to the question in order to continue to support new parents would they find a weekly drop in session at school helpful 80% (4/5) said yes.

In relation to their concerns around their child transitioning to Year One 80% (4/5) said they didn't have any concerns, 20% (1/1) was a little nervous however stated *'after the week's transition event, I am not as nervous'*.

When asked if they felt they were included enough over the year in relation to their child's learning 100% (5/5) confirmed they felt included.

Attendance Data (October 2017 half-term)

In the period of the Transitions Project for 2 children whose siblings/ cousins had continuously had poor attendance records (less than 70%) for the Summer and Autumn term 2017 their individual attendance records now show as 98.5% for Child 1 and 92.4% for Child 2.

Baseline data (July 2018)

In relation to Good Levels of Development (GLD) there was a graduated increase, year on year, in children's personal, social and emotional development scores, across the course of the project. More investment in the transition process has contributed towards children settling in more positively and achieving better outcomes in Good Levels of Development. Interestingly, three children whose families were not able to engage in the transition process did not make the same good levels of progress

Feedback on new initiatives.

Reading with parents - 20 parents engaged with this initiative, unfortunately this did not include some of the vulnerable families that the teacher had been trying to establish relationships with, reasons for non-attendance included transport and anxiety over parental literacy skills.

Teacher being available at end of the day to mingle with parents - this has supported parents to feel confident in approaching the teacher and asking them about their child's day. It is a more positive experience for them as opposed to only speaking to them when something is wrong.

Parent drop in session (Oct 17) – parents from Reception & Year 1.

'A group of parents from our new reception classes and our Year 1 classes met together today to share their experiences on how their children were settling into the new school year. All seemed quite happy that their children are settling although they have anxiety around separation between parent and child which was significant for some. Other parents shared their experiences and their praise for the teachers who have helped to reduce their anxieties they feel school is a safe place for them to leave their child'.

Through the various initiatives there was an increase in informal opportunities for parents and teachers to further develop their relationships, resulting in increased two way communication with regard to the children.

Rockingham Primary School

The findings are drawn from:

- Parental Questionnaires on transition process for children starting Reception
- Post transitions survey for the children from the Move Up, Stay Up initiative

To gain a wider picture from all parents whose children had recently started school (September 2017), questionnaires were sent home which explored if the family felt their children were ready to start school, and how they felt their children coped with their transition.

The findings from this questionnaire revealed the following:

The total number of Reception children was 40, with 60% (24) being returned. Within class there are 10 children in receipt of Pupil Premium, and are therefore considered as disadvantaged due to economic status. 7/10 parents whose children are eligible for pupil premium returned their completed questionnaires (70%). This cohort includes 1 child with SEND and no children with EAL.. 4 out of 10 have had cause for concern slips or EHA in the past term. Of the remaining 17 returned questionnaires 4 are SEND and 6 are EAL and 2 have had cause for concern slips in the past. Within these questionnaires 1 child was identified for the main case study.

All the questionnaires returned were positive about the transition experience both for their child and their wider family.

Many felt that it was emotionally easier for their children to settle when they came for the whole day and felt that part-time days set the children back, especially if they were used to attending nursery. They felt that getting into a routine early was beneficial and had made their child independent.

Several parents stated that it had helped to improve their child's attendance, which had previously been poor in nursery because they only had a couple of hours before they were going to pick their children up, so some days they would keep them off so that they could get important things done outside the home.

Parents also felt that their children had made great strides in their writing and reading, as well as in their behaviour. They felt the structure of school and routine had been beneficial and made their child more relaxed.

They stated that the following had helped their child to feel prepared;

- Information received prior to starting
- Home visits
- Open afternoons and workshops



- Having been to nursery previously
- Preparing the child themselves by teaching them to write their name
- Having older siblings at the school

As parents they felt that the process had benefitted their family because they were now able to get a job. Some parents felt that it would give them some 'me time' to recharge their batteries and also some 1:1 time with their younger children.

They all felt that they had had sufficient time to get to know and feel comfortable with the class teacher and felt that the home visits had helped with this. They felt that the school 'dojo' system had helped to continue this relationship between home and school especially when they were working parents who did not always bring or pick up their children.

Many felt that everything had gone really well but there were a couple of suggestions for enhancing the transition further:

- *'Maybe if the children could have some school visits while they are in nursery so they get more contact with the new place, faces and situation'*
- *'The nursery maybe try routine visits in the last term'*
- *Comments by teachers on how they felt transition could have been improved*
- *'The only thing I feel we need to do next year is to stagger the first day. With everyone arriving at the same time we didn't have long enough to chat with the parents before they left.'*
- *'We will think about how many children come in at each time throughout the morning'*

For the 36 children taking part in their experience of Move Up, Stay Up, survey the following data was extracted. 38% felt happy about the experience, with 19% feeling okay, another 19% feeling sad about leaving their teacher, 11% felt worried and 11% felt scared, 2% didn't respond. When asked if they wanted to move to Year One 58% said they did, 42% said no, with one child saying *'they didn't want to go but got used to it.'* When asked if they felt moving up before the summer holidays helped them to get to know their teacher, 86% said yes and 14% saying no, one child said *'they had forgotten their name while they were on holiday but remembered it when they saw her again.'*

As further information please see 'Case Study: Child A' - Appendix 7

Parent involvement continues throughout the year with a weekly drop-in for 'Book and Biscuit' on a Thursday morning and termly workshops for parents.

Changes that have been implemented from the findings of the research

- An hour stay and play session offered to each nursery provision attending the school in September
- Key named worker for each Reception child that the child can go to if they need to

Challenges identified throughout the Project

Pen Green Centre for Children and Families

The children and their families involved in the study are within the most vulnerable groups and most likely to be at risk of social exclusion. The very nature of their own particular circumstances influence their ability, or desire, to be fully engaged and participative at all times throughout the project to date.

Complexity requires staff time - The staff time invested in our regular meetings and the days spent together analysing and putting together the case studies their commitment to effecting changes to improve children's outcomes was significant.

This work has created an opportunity for the team to reflect on their experiences of being involved in the Project and, to this end, a reflective writing day is to be incorporated into our schedule, to consider how we might have better conceptualised this work, taking into account the complex and emotive nature of the subject matter.

Our Lady of Walsingham Primary School

- Engaging traveller families.
- Engaging parents once activity has been offered. Not being able to get all parents involved at key moments.
- Time constraints, Time – logistics- when in teacher’s day? When in parent’s day? (Involving whole team/ parents).
- Persuading Senior Leadership team of benefits of activity to be implemented. Persuading colleagues to get on board; Other teacher’s workloads; Convincing colleagues to “buy into it” in long term saves significant time and improves quality of experience; Changing the school culture.
- Realistic costs of supply cover for teacher to undertake Project activities. Cost of implementation of new ways of working versus long term savings in relation to additional resources/services for individual child and improving overall quality for all.
- Challenge – cost of transcription service – Pen Green Centre transcribed for us as this is a service we cannot provide in school.
- Slow burning, Things are slow to get started. No instant results. Small incremental steps and changes which may be imperceptible but changes in practice become embedded in attitudes as well as actions.
- Small changes are hard to evidence (being out in the playground each morning before school and after school, being more visible and available - showing a face, especially for EAL parents).

One of the initial challenges regarding the transition to school for children from traveller families was transport, which had been provided by Pen Green to enable children to attend Nursery. Practitioners and teachers were able to advocate on behalf of these families for the transport to be provided by the Local Authority and cover the journey to and from primary school.

Unfortunately the lack of transport also meant some parents were unable to access the ‘stay and play’ sessions, designed to encourage parents to see their child in the school setting and discuss their learning and development with staff. They were also missing informal opportunities to chat with the reception class teacher. Instead the schools Family Support Outreach Worker was able to build a rapport with the mothers, who were then supported to provide written feedback, in the form of a questionnaire, about their daughters’ transition and progress.

These scenarios exemplify the ‘done with’ rather than ‘done to’ approach, which informed the research and ultimately impacted on practice. Alongside this the benefits of practitioner-led action research were recognised across the school, not only by the researcher (reception class teacher), but also across the school more widely. The research offered opportunities to uncover things that affected the whole school.

Rockingham Primary School challenges

There were challenges within the Reception school year and the move into Year One for sustaining consistent staff members within the team. There was a change in the schools leadership team from the end of the foundation stage academic year, also the resignation of the schools family support worker, who worked in supporting the families of the study children. This may have had an emotional impact on the families that she supported.

Unfortunately at the end of April a big change for the Reception cohort was the Early Years Lead leaving the school. The data shows a decline in progress for 10 pupils, (including three children in receipt of pupil premium - evidencing their vulnerability).

During the ‘Move up stay up’ initiative the focus study children did not have their class teacher with them for the two weeks. He was unable to take up his role in the school until the September. The class had a higher level teaching assistant teaching them for these two weeks, who would still be in the classroom in September, ensuring consistency.

Unfortunately the teacher left after a short period of time. This was detrimental to sustaining a positive transition for the children. Parents were supported during this time by receiving a letter explaining what had happened and by having the opportunity to attend a drop in session to discuss any concerns. We were then able to appoint a supply teacher who has remained with the class since this time.

Key positives from the work of the project.

A broad perspective with regard to the experiences of a wide range of groups of children and their families has been gained. In addition we have gained useful insight into the various different perspectives of local primary schools, in relation to transition.

The activities undertaken, and the data collected, have provided a rich source of information and understanding of the complexities involved in the transition process for young children and their families. The learning drawn from the challenges in the engagement, or non-engagement of both families and practitioners and the collecting of data have required us to revisit our planning and time allocation of activities.

We now understand the support required for parents to engage in schools' processes, and are able to advocate for families in this. This project has enabled our practitioners to reflect on their own experiences of children's transitions and has given us the opportunity to hear the voice of the child in relation to their own transition.

There have been opportunities for increased information sharing with teachers in school for the most vulnerable children in order to more effectively support their transitions. This includes helping professionals to understand what the individual child's needs' are in order for them to transition successfully. Family workers have successfully supported parents to become advocates for their children when possible.

Pen Green Centre for Children and Families

Highlights:

One of the major highlights has been the increased links between Pen Green Nursery and the schools across the locality, evidenced at the market stall event in which twelve local primary schools were represented.

Practitioners being able to build and share practice across the phase, in particular between Nursery and Reception and vice versa, allowing increased opportunities for Nursery teachers to meet regularly with partner Reception Teachers.

It has increased the collaborative nature of working between the Research Base and the Nurseries. The use of 'consultancy observations' within the nursery, carried out by researchers, has impacted on both the practice in the nursery and the teaching in the Research Base. Learning drawn from the work of the project at Pen Green has influenced practice within external nursery settings through the Early Years Initial Teacher Training programme, in relation to a more coherent understanding of transition and how to most appropriately support children.

This project has supported the building of trusting relationships between children, parents, practitioners and a range of other professionals involved in the life experiences of young children in helping them to understand how best to meet the needs of the individual children.

There have been possibilities to extend on the project learning through dissemination, in particular the national conference held at Pen Green in 2018. Moving forward it will be exciting to consider how to further influence practice at a local and national level. Please see Appendices 9- 11 for details of the presentations delivered at this conference.

Our Lady of Walsingham Primary School

Highlights:

The focus by the whole school on increasing parental engagement has culminated in the creation of a Nurture hub, improving experiences for the most vulnerable children. Additionally there are better relationships across the whole school, rather than just in the foundation stage due to this work.

The increase in baseline data for those children and families engaging in the transition process evidenced the power of considering children's wellbeing and experiences as a prior requisite for academic success. This was evidenced for the most vulnerable and socially excluded children. For instance, whilst the child from the traveller community didn't get her Good Level of Development

(GLD) in reception due to one area in EYFS she has now passed her phonics screening test in year one indicating that the time and effort invested at the beginning of her school career has enabled her to “catch up” (See Appendix 8 for an in-depth portrayal of the experience of working more effectively with the Travelling Community).

We are able to demonstrate improved attendance across the class, especially for the most vulnerable children. Our last Ofsted Report made particular reference to Reception Year experiences.

Our Lady of Walsingham Ofsted Report – February 2018

‘Almost all children enter the early years with skills that are well below those expected for their age. The proportion of children who achieve a good level of development has increased over the past three years. However, by the end of Reception, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development is below the national average.

Reception Year Leaders have strengthened links with local nurseries. Staff visit children at home and they invite parents into school before children start school. As a result, staff have a good knowledge of each child when they begin Reception. This helps children to settle quickly and make good progress. Staff focus strongly on children’s personal and social development. As a result, children’s personal development outcomes are above the national average.

The leader of early years has an accurate view of the provision’s strengths and is aware of areas that need developing. For example, teachers have recently focused on improving children’s writing skills. Children’s journals show they have moved from simple mark making to writing in structured sentences. From very low starting points, children are making stronger progress in their writing than when they joined school.

Parents value the support that their children receive from the school staff. Parents receive frequent information about how well their children are progressing. Teachers encourage parents to contribute to their children’s learning at home. Children’s attendance in Reception has improved due to leaders’ positive relationships with parents.’

The following quotes evidence the impact of the project across the school:

Head teacher quote:

“Our school’s participation in the START Project has resulted in us completely altering the way we perceive transitions to our school and within the school. Whilst the project has been focussed on ensuring that the children transition into Foundation Stage smoothly, it has also made us change our practice with regards to other Year Groups and their transitions from one Year Group to another. We have always valued our relationships with parents and participating in the project has ensured that we are constantly evaluating and adjusting our ways of communicating with parents and families to maximise their involvement with their children’s life at school.”

Year One Class Teacher quote

‘Spending an extra week with my new class down in reception was fantastic, I was able to engage in the children’s learning in a familiar environment’. Having home visits with my new class meant I felt more ready as a teacher for the upcoming year, getting to know children and parents better’.

Inclusion Manager

‘This one week transition that took place in July for all children to get to know their new class teachers and classroom environment was a success across the whole school. Most importantly it has supported class teachers and a Year 3 Cohort with a higher than usual level of social, emotional and mental health needs, to have a calm and positive start to Year 4.

Parent Link Worker

‘A group of parents from our new reception classes and our Year 1 classes met together today to share their experiences on how their children were settling into the new school year. All seemed quite happy that their children are settling, although their anxiety over separation between parent and child is significant for some. Other parents shared their experiences and their praise for the teachers who had supported their children.



Review and Critical Evaluation (evaluation and sustainability)

Through working on the project we were able to identify the following critical issues:

- The fragmentation of educational systems at different level (split ECEC systems as well as the splits between pre- and primary school) produces discontinuity in pedagogical approaches and practice implemented within such institutions.
- During transitions from one setting to another children are required to make great efforts to adapt to new relational and learning environments. This has negative repercussions on children's learning and socialising experiences which, in turn, have a detrimental impact on their school achievements in the long term.
- Children belonging to vulnerable/marginalised groups are particularly at risk of experiencing negative transitions which lead to lasting relational difficulties and poor educational performance.
- Practitioners and teachers are rarely supported to develop new practices for individual transitions, often due to the time and resource restraints.
- The breadth of the research study has been debated and consideration given to ensuring future research is not as too 'narrow' but to encompass children's journeys from day one at the Pen Green Centre. This may include new born babies attending the group work programme during paternity/ maternity leave, entering the Couthie/Nest/Kingswood and then moving onto the Nursery.
- Discussions have included reference to children with SEND being 'dual registered' at both special schools and mainstream, leading to them having more options rather than less. It was felt that the focus should be on flexibility for children with settings & schools working in partnership. The process of deferring a school place should be more widely known. It was also agreed that much more information and support around transition be made available to parents and enable them to make more informed choices.
- It has been most useful to value the exchange of good practices elaborated in different contexts, the challenge has been to hold in mind that it is not advisable to simply transfer best practices from one context to another, without taking into account the cultural context, including the diversified needs of the children, families, practitioners, teachers and communities in each context.
- The implementation of the high quality training offered by Pen Green (Dec 2016) was dependent on the individuals who attended the training, their interpretation of the training and their ability to share their learning with colleagues, ensuring that the work would be responsive to the needs of children, families and communities in each location.

Implications for policies (national, local)

Give time and resource to ensure the voice of the child is central to all decisions made. Understand that all behaviour is a communication and it is the communication we need to understand well, in order to respond appropriately to the individual child.

The dissemination of key programmes to all early care and education settings in order to develop a holistic, philosophically coherent approach to working with children and families, aiding their transitions. Programmes such as:

- Learning to be Strong – supporting children to be safe and secure in their own decision making, particularly during the transition process.
- Parents Involvement in their Children's Learning (PICL) – sharing theory with parents to understand children's behaviours and develop a shared language.
- Making Children's Learning Visible (MCLV) – an age related progress tracker, encompassing all seven areas of learning.
- The Foundation Degree and BA (Hons) Top-up in Integrated Working with Children and their Families in the Early Years – providing a qualified workforce offering best practice to the youngest and often most vulnerable children.

- The development of a Transition Programme drawing on key elements of the START project findings including parents, early childhood settings and schools, ensuring that schools are ready for children as opposed to child being for school. Expectations of all parties to be a key component of this training programme. Supporting the family to understand the very different pedagogies demonstrated by staff in an ECEC and school environment; enabling the parents to challenge when appropriate.
- Developing a robust supervision programme to enable practitioners and teachers to effectively contain the parents and children they are working with (Bion, 2005).
- The further dissemination of the (Independent Panel for Special Education Advice) IPSEA training programme (already developed at Pen Green) to train up parents/carers as effective, well-informed advocates for their children with SEND. Offer IPSEA training to all named SEND co-ordinators within early years and school settings nationwide, to further support their engagement with parents/carers.
- Ensuring that the parents and extended family get the advocacy and support they need in an ECEC environment, developing their capacity to cope with the more rigid schools processes such as choice of schools and the application process including appeals.
- All early years and school settings to offer a flexible transition programme, allowing for all parents, ie, those who are working, those who have younger children, those with access issues etc. to be able to participate fully in the process.
- Change of national policy with regard to deferral, ensuring it becomes open to all children (not just those who are summer born) who would benefit in respect of their personal, social and emotional well-being. This policy would ensure that children enter school in reception year, as opposed to year one, as is currently the case in some schools. The removal of autonomy from the trust or head teacher to the policy initiative.
- Elimination of the dual application process for children with SEND, allowing for immediate application to attend a Special School when appropriate. The development of continuity in the process of the education health care plans and associated funding from Nursery to Reception year. To remove the current reassessment that occurs on transition into school.
- Local Authority Transport policy to be amended to ensure immediate qualification for specialist transport for children with SEND on entry to Reception class within whichever locality they live.

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