

All Aboard in Bradford

Early Intervention in the Early Years

Dr **Ruth Dennis** explains how All Aboard - a Bradford based intervention - provides a model of enhanced early years provision in order to support children's learning, emotional and social needs.



If life chances are so indelibly struck for most children by the age of 5, then for any government wishing to rebuild the ladders to social mobility as a foundation for life long change, as well as to tackle the root of long term adult poverty, it must commit to a radical overhaul of a whole sweep of Early Years policies” **Frank Field, Atlee Memorial Lecture 2010.**

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

Despite this, certain groups of children, including those from poorer backgrounds continue to make less progress and there is a failure to ‘narrow the gap’ between the lowest performing 20% of children and their more affluent peers. This has been confirmed in a plethora of recent reviews which assert that poor children still grow up to be poor adults.¹ and that there is still a need for proactive instead of reactive intervention to improve children’s life chances.²

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

This article describes an innovative attempt to improve outcomes for children whose attainment appears to be behind that of their peers on entry to Nursery or Reception class. Rather than offering ‘more of the same’, All Aboard provides a model of enhanced early years provision in order to support children’s learning, emotional and social needs. Based on evidence of how children learn in the Early Years, children taking part in the project attend three ‘enhanced’ Nursery sessions a week, during which they work in a small group with a key adult. The enhanced sessions allow increased personalised learning and opportunities to develop language, social and early learning skills. The whole intervention lasts for 12 weeks in total.

All Aboard Under the Microscope

All Aboard combines a play based learning environment with a structured, routine led programme to develop language, social and early learning skills. Each one hour All Aboard session combines four key elements in order to address each of these areas for development.

- Each session starts with ‘Family Time’ during which the children and the All Aboard leader sit together for snack. During this time they have the opportunity to talk about things of interest to the children, revise previous learning and practice social and practical skills.
- Following on from this is ‘Activity Time’, during which activities linked to the children’s interests or to the class theme are carried out. This gives the opportunity for shared experiences, rehearsed learning and consolidation of basic skills in a small group setting.
- The third element of the All Aboard session is ‘Circle Time’. Addressing this in a small group enables the children to build their confidence in participating and practice skills such as turn taking and listening.
- Each session closes with ‘Story Time’. The same story is repeated over a whole week to give the children opportunity to become increasingly familiar with it and eventually lead the story themselves.
- The final but crucial element of All Aboard is parental involvement. Once a week, one of a series of ‘Home Activities’ is sent home for parents to complete with their children. These activities are intentionally informal and fun, with the express aim of encouraging parent child interaction and the development of positive relationships.

All Aboard roll out

Following a successful pilot project, All Aboard was delivered in a further eight early years settings during the academic year 2009 - 10. This included one children's centre, six maintained nurseries and one maintained reception class. The settings were all located in a small town in the north of the England. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in the schools was above average and all schools were in an area of social disadvantage.

After attending an initial briefing session about the project, nominated lead All Aboard practitioners attended a series of planning and implementation training sessions. These sessions aimed to ensure fidelity to the original All Aboard pilot project and to support the roll out of All Aboard in these eight different settings. Training included an overview of the background to and theoretical basis of All Aboard, organisational issues such as planning and delivering the sessions and evaluation procedures.



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

Results of the All Aboard project

Children's progress was measured at the beginning and the end of the project using the settings' 'My Learning Picture' data ([linked to progress on the Early Years Foundation Stage - EYFS](#))

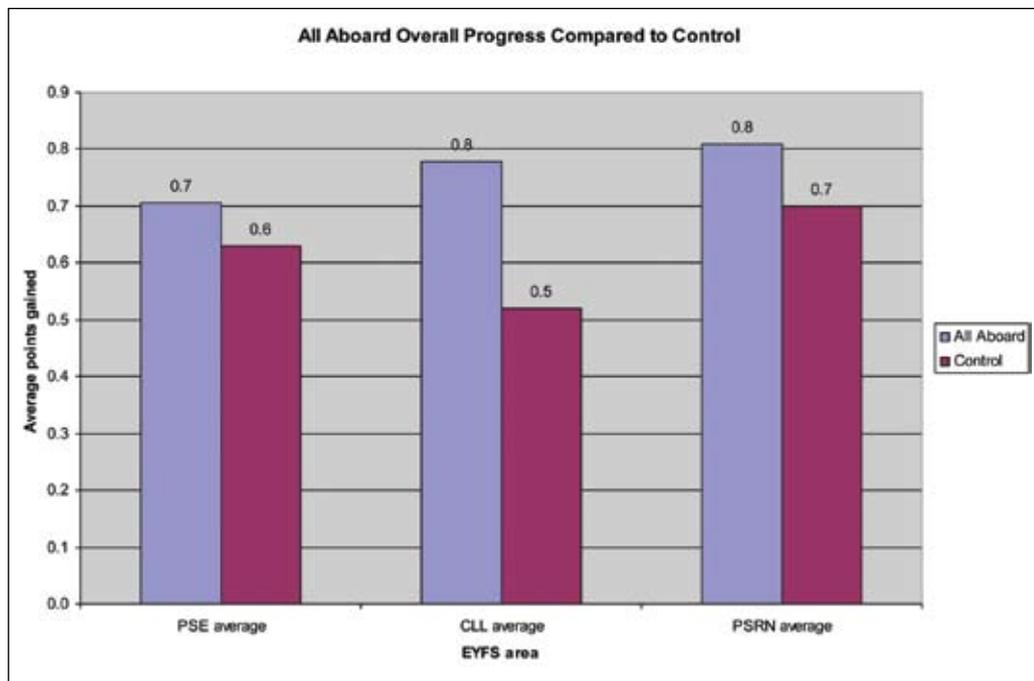
and comparison made with a parallel Early Years cohort. A qualitative statement was also provided by the teachers about each of the children's responses to the All Aboard intervention, and feedback gathered from the parents.

In total, EYFS data was collected on 33 children. Nationally, children are expected to make one full point progress in each of the areas of Learning and Development over a twelve-month period. This is regarded as 'good' progress. Proportionally this equates to approximately 0.3 points per term. As All Aboard ran for two terms, good progress would be shown by children making progress greater than or equal to 0.6 points.

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

Graph 1

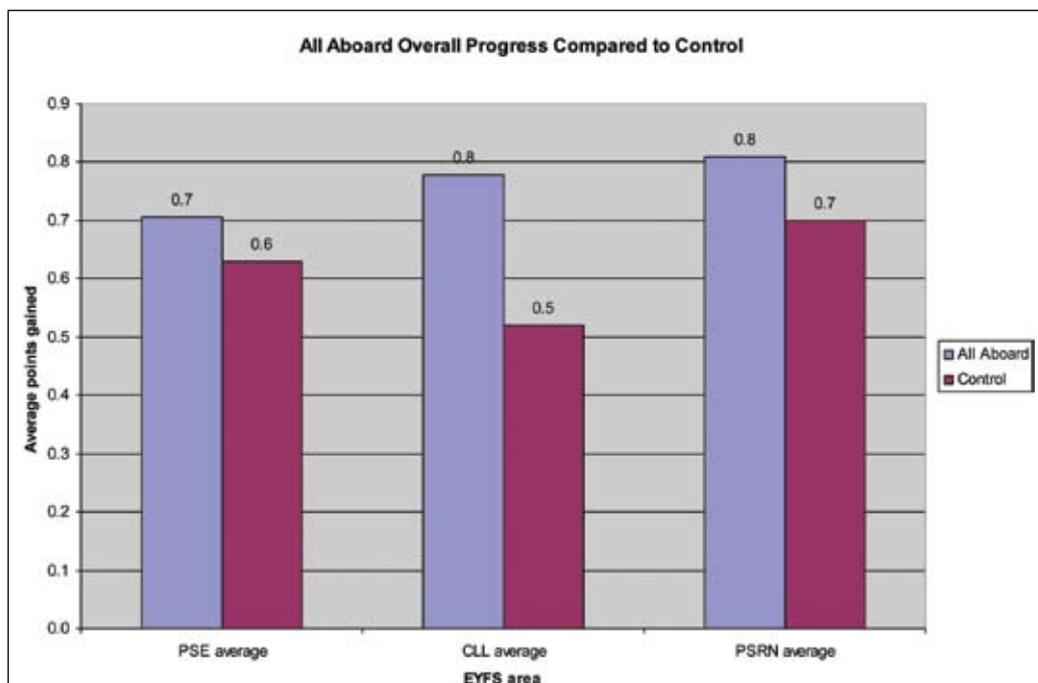
Graph 1 indicates that All Aboard children made above expected levels of progress (0.6 points) in all areas. While most progress was made in the area of Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy, the difference between the All Aboard result and the control group is relatively small (0.1 point). Similarly although progress in PSE is higher than the control group, this is also by only 0.1 point. The progress made in the area of 'Communication, Language and Literacy' is significantly higher than that of the control group, suggesting that All Aboard is a powerful intervention for supporting children's language development in the early years.



Graph 2

Graph 2 shows that comparing the progress of the All Aboard Children with English as an additional language to that made by the children with English as an additional language in the control group, All Aboard children made greater progress.

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



Qualitative feedback

This feedback was collected from the Early Years practitioners working with the children in the All Aboard group. Feedback fell into three key areas: increased confidence, improved social skills and increased attention and concentration.

Increased confidence was the most common aspect commented upon in relation to children's progress. Comments were made about children's social confidence:

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

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

"Mark never attempted to make marks or draw pictures. His mum said that at home he would never entertain colouring or drawing pictures. Again it was nearly halfway through the programme when Mark started to draw an M. Now he is making good progress when writing his name and he now spends time drawing pictures."

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

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

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

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

Parents described seeing progress in their children across a number of different areas. In the area of language and communication,

- 84% of parents felt that their children had improved: "she talks a lot more of the time at Nursery, and her words are clearer". Parents reported that their children talked more and sang more during and after the programme.
- 61% of parents reported improvements in behavior and confidence: "Prior to All Aboard he lacked confidence in drawing but became interested and more involved in drawing and putting pen to paper." In relation to concentration and attention
- 58% of parents commented that their child had improved concentration and attention: "He can concentrate and work on his own for longer doing puzzles and books..."
- 67% of parents reported carrying out 'all' or 'most' of the home tasks. They commented that the tasks helped them to have 'special time' with their children. This also extended to building wider relationships within the family: "She worked with her brother and sister and was very proud..." Parents also commented that the home tasks helped them to have a greater insight into what their children do at school and feel more involved in their schooling: "She enjoyed showing me at home what she did in Nursery - being in charge."
- A small number of parents seemed unaware of the home tasks - this needs to be followed up with the individual setting involved.

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Why does All Aboard work?

Based on these findings, it appears that All Aboard has had a significant impact on improving outcomes for vulnerable children. Most progress was made in the area of Communication, Language and Literacy. Practitioners commented that the small group situation enabled them to support the children’s language development in a more effective way. One practitioner commented: “This was the one area where I got the most conversation out of the group as they did not feel like they were put on the spot.” Researchers Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Mattock, Golden & Bell surmise that the quality of adult-child verbal interaction taking place, sustained shared thinking, shared open experiences and adult modelling of language all enhance children’s early Language development.³ This appears to have been the case in the All Aboard groups.

While progress was noted for all children taking part in the project this was particularly noticeable for those children who had English as an additional language. Research into the characteristics of effective schools and of effective leadership in multi-ethnic schools.⁴ Walker 2005 found that schools which have successfully implemented strategies to raise the achievement of children from minority ethnic groups have: a curriculum which is “broad, rich, inclusive and relevant; a clear focus for developing language across the curriculum; appropriately scaffolded and cognitively demanding learning opportunities; an ethos where everyone feels safe and valued; children who are encouraged to believe in themselves and take responsibility for their learning; and parents, carers and families who are seen as partners and actively involved in their children’s learning.”⁵ All of these factors are central to the core principles of All Aboard and have been identified by both practitioners and parents as being strengths of the programme.

Most practitioners attributed the success of All Aboard to the fact that it is a small group intervention. The small group situations were thought to have enabled children to feel more secure and confident to speak out. This confidence was then in most cases transferred to the wider Nursery environment, over the course of the intervention. The routine and predictability of All Aboard, starting with ‘Family Time’ and then working through the key areas of work, also provided stability for the children, and boosted their confidence. Such a routine driven environment can help to counteract some of the stress associated with entering Nursery settings.⁶ The research concludes that to reduce stress, practitioners need to ensure:

“that care environments are developmentally appropriate” and that “... adult-child ratios in childcare must be kept low. Group size and composition also need to be considered as mediators of the quality of individual care provider-child relationships”.⁷

Consistency and repetition are valuable teaching strategies in preschool classrooms because they help children to identify patterns and exercise their memory. Practitioners particularly commented that the repetition of the same story over a number of sessions

was helpful. Allowing children to return to topics in this way and gradually become ‘expert’ in them over time is accepted as being a way of ensuring deep or ‘mastery’ learning.⁸

The degree to which parents engaged with the ‘All Aboard’ programme was encouraging. Research found that the development of good relationships between home and school and the removal of barriers to participation are key element of successful engagement with ‘hard to reach’ parents.⁹ All Aboard was gradually able to engage parents from ‘vulnerable’ families, who are traditionally hard to reach. This may also relate to the type of tasks sent home as part of All Aboard. Rather than being traditional literacy or



numeracy type tasks, the home activities were aimed at supporting shared experiences, and building relationships, through parents doing things with their children – for example blowing bubbles together in the garden.

A number of parents also commented that All Aboard had helped them to feel more confident about what Nursery was doing and how they could help their children at home, suggesting that they would like to become more involved in future. This is a positive sign and suggests that All Aboard provides an important platform to building closer parental involvement.

Conclusions and recommendations

Results indicate that All Aboard is a valuable tool, which, combined with universal Early Years provision, and Children’s Centres could make a real difference in improving outcomes and life chances for children from poor families. At a time of reduced funding from central government to local authorities low cost interventions such as All Aboard will become increasingly valuable. While it is a small-scale pilot project, these results suggest it would be possible to make a number of recommendations about All Aboard and replicate it more widely.

Knowledge Trails

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Dr Ruth Dennis is a senior educational psychologist at Bradford District Council. She piloted the All Aboard project in 2008 and is now involved in its roll out across Bradford and beyond.