

The Education and Training Inspectorate

An evaluation of the role of the Early Years Specialist

February 2014

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

Performance levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) use the following performance levels in reports:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

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GLOSSARY OF THE TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT	
Pre-school setting	Voluntary and private pre-school provision funded by the Department of Education (DE).
Leader	The person who provides operational leadership in the pre-school setting.
Staff	The persons who work with the children to promote learning, including the leader, assistants and staff in playgroups or day nurseries.
Management group	The management committee, proprietor or others responsible for the pre-school setting.
Early Years Specialist (EYS)	The qualified person providing support as set out in the DE guidance “The Role of the Qualified teacher or Early Years Specialist.”
Independent Early Years Specialist	Those EYSs who work independently and are not employed by either the Early Years Organisation or Altram.
The Early Years Organisation	A non-profit making organisation in Northern Ireland working with and for young children.
Altram	The regional support group for Irish medium early years projects.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims and objectives

1.1.1 The aim of this evaluation is to inform the requirements and development of the role of the early years specialist (EYS) in the context of significant change across the pre-school sector. The key objectives of the report are to:

- review the arrangements in place for providing EYS support to voluntary and private pre-school settings funded by the Department of Education (DE);
- evaluate the quality of support provided by the EYS;
- identify any factors that impact on the effective delivery of this support; and
- recommend changes required to improve the quality of support provided by the EYS.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 The evaluation of the quality of the EYS support provided to pre-school settings is informed by the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) inspection findings across the reporting period September 2010 to June 2013. A range of questionnaires were issued to all voluntary and private funded pre-school settings across Northern Ireland and the responses from leaders, managers, staff and EYSs were analysed to inform the report. In addition, inspectors visited a small sample of training sessions and held focus group meetings with staff and key stakeholders.

1.3 Context

1.3.1 The Department of Education (DE), Pre-school Expansion Programme, provided funding in 1998 for the first time to voluntary and private pre-school settings. The department's aim was for the settings to provide a year of quality pre-school education for every child whose parents wished it. At that time, the leaders in almost all of the voluntary and private settings did not have a higher education or teaching qualification, therefore a new role for a qualified teacher or EYS was introduced to provide support for these settings. Prior to 1998, DE funded pre-school education was provided by qualified teachers working in nursery schools or nursery units linked to a primary school.

1.3.2 At the start of the Pre-school Expansion Programme, the minimum qualifications set by the DE were; a national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 3 for leaders, and a NVQ level 2 for staff working within voluntary and private pre-school settings funded by DE. All voluntary and private settings were also required to employ a qualified teacher or suitably qualified EYS with the appropriate expertise, knowledge and experience to support the setting to develop and improve.

1.3.3 The guidance document *The Role of the Qualified Teacher or Early Years Specialist*¹ was first published by DE in 2001 and updated in 2009. The document sets out clearly the role and the qualifications required, with the key focus of the EYS being to support quality improvement and the raising of standards within the pre-school setting.

¹ *The Role of the Qualified Teacher or Early Years Specialist*, Department of Education, 2009, <http://www.deni.gov.uk/preschooleducexpanprog.pdf>

“In line with the Government’s emphasis on improving educational outcomes for all pupils throughout all phases of education, pre-school centres are expected to continue to improve the quality of their educational provision. Support from a suitable qualified teacher or suitable qualified early years specialist is regarded as the most effective way to ensure this emphasis on continuous improvement.”

The Role Of The Qualified Teacher Or Early Year Specialist, DE guidance.

2. MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Summary of key findings

2.1.1 The responses from leaders, managers and key stakeholders indicate clearly that they value and wish to retain the role of the EYS in some form, particularly to provide up-to-date information, guidance and training for staff.

2.1.2 The overall quality of support provided by all types of EYS shows an improving trend. Almost three quarters (73%) of the support provided by EYSs to settings which were inspected during the period 2010 to 2013 was evaluated as good or better. The variation in the quality of support provided by each of the different types of EYSs has reduced significantly across the period 2010 to 2013.

2.1.3 It is of concern that most of the EYS support no longer conforms to the original guidance issued by DE. In particular, there is an increasing trend to combine groups of staff from different settings for training and the sharing of practice, rather than providing monthly on-site visits. While cluster training may be beneficial for some settings who have developed and improved sufficiently in their practice, there is clearly a need for staff with lower qualifications and less experience to retain a higher level of on-site support.

2.1.4 Where an EYS has multiple settings to manage, or they frequently provide support on wider issues such as recruitment, funding or staffing; this can impact negatively on the level of support for their core work of improving the quality of the children’s experiences and raising standards. An audit is required of the different elements of the role of the EYS, as it is currently being delivered in practice, to inform and provide updated guidance on the support role.

2.1.5 Insufficient emphasis is placed by the EYSs on capacity building for pre-school staff, leaders and managers to embed effective self-evaluation in all aspects of their work to bring about continuous improvement.

2.1.6 Increasing numbers of pre-school staff have gained higher level qualifications which enable them to become their own EYS. Those who are appropriately qualified and choose to be their own EYS still remain a small percentage of the total number of EYSs, at 5%. However, the upward trend is likely to continue due to the revised minimum qualifications for leaders set out in the Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) standards published in July 2012². The increased minimum qualifications for leaders also raises questions about the need to review the minimum qualifications required for an EYS and if, in the future, there will be a need for an EYS in its current form.

² Regulation of Childminding and Day Care Services by HSC Trusts, Minimum Standards, July 2012.

2.1.7 There is an increasing trend to employ an EYS who is not aligned to a particular support organisation. There is also an increase in the number of settings where the leader is suitably qualified to be their own EYS yet they continue to employ an external EYS to provide up-to-date information and a challenge function to their work.

2.1.8 More effective methods need to be developed to maintain an accurate overview of the different models of EYS support, and to ensure there are effective lines of communication between the DE and the EYSs. It would be beneficial to explore ways of providing an easily accessible link to host up-to-date information for the whole early years sector. This might include, for example; information on changes in policy, legislation, current early years pedagogy, signposting to training and development opportunities, and a forum for sharing and disseminating best practice to support continuing professional development.

2.1.9 The main factors which impact negatively on the effectiveness of the role of the EYS include; a lack of continuity of support due to the turnover in EYS personnel, frequent changes in the pre-school staffing, and a lack of sufficient time or resources to enable the pre-school staff to implement the EYS advice fully.

2.2 Recommendations for improvement

2.2.1 The role of the EYS should be retained in the short to medium term until the upward trend in the number of leaders obtaining higher level qualifications is clearly established, at which stage the role should be reviewed again.

2.2.2 The type of support offered by the EYS needs to reflect more fully the increased variation in the level of experience and expertise of staff in different pre-school settings.

2.2.3 The current DE guidance document, *The Role of the Qualified Teacher or Early Years Specialist*, needs to be reviewed and updated as a matter of urgency in line with the findings within this report. In particular, it needs to; reflect the minimum qualifications for pre-school leaders in sessional care set out in the 2012 HSCT minimum standards, provide greater clarity on the types of activities which can be undertaken by an EYS, take more account of the increasing variation in the types of support required, and emphasise the important role of the leadership and management of pre-school settings in monitoring the overall quality of provision.

2.2.4 Those with responsibility for leadership and management of a pre-school setting need to be more rigorous in monitoring and evaluating the overall quality of the provision including; the contribution of the EYS to promoting improvement, the effectiveness of the staff in implementing the advice and guidance provided by the EYS, and the impact of the resulting quality improvement planning on raising standards.

2.2.5 The DE and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) need to work towards a more joined-up approach to the training, support, and dissemination of best practice and information to benefit all who are employed in early years care and education. The departments also need to identify and build on the best practice which makes meaningful links across the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will need to ensure that a robust training and support system is developed and sustained for early years education.

3. INSPECTION EVIDENCE AND EVALUATION

3.1 Changes that impact on the role of the early years specialist

3.1.1 Since the guidance document was published by the DE, a number of significant factors have impacted on the evolving role of the EYS. These factors, summarised below, indicate the need for a review of the role of the EYS and to update the DE guidance to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

3.1.2 Increasingly, those who hold leadership positions in voluntary and private pre-school settings have gained higher level qualifications. A small but increasing number of these leaders (5%), no longer employ an external EYS, but choose to fulfil this role themselves. There has also been a decline in the number of qualified teachers employed in this role mainly due to the difficulty they face being released from their teaching duties to give support at the time when it is required, and limitations in the experience of many teachers in primary schools of the pre-school curriculum.

3.1.3 While most EYS support was originally provided by the Early Years Organisation, this profile is changing. The proportion of EYS support provided by the Early Years Organisation has decreased from over 85% of those settings inspected in 2010-2011 to 54% of those inspected in 2012-13. An increasing number of pre-school settings are employing the services of an independent EYS. Independent EYSs are setting up their own networks and professional development programmes.

3.1.4 In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in the number of funded places allocated to some voluntary and private settings. This has implications for the nature of the support required by the leaders and managers of these settings, particularly in developing their skills to manage effectively the larger numbers of staff and multiple sessions.

3.1.5 Particular challenges to maintaining quality in the voluntary and private sector include; the high turnover of staff, the number of completely new settings entering the programme each year with limited experience, and the lack of resources available to settings that are allocated a small number of funded pre-school places. The gap between the levels of expertise and experience of the pre-school staff in new centres and those in the programme for many years has widened considerably and this has significant implications for how EYS support is best targeted to meet the specific needs of these groups. Evidence from inspections indicates that it is not effective to use the same model of support and training to support staff from different settings where there is a wide discrepancy in their knowledge, experience and expertise.

3.1.6 A review of the minimum qualifications for an EYS should take into account the HSCT minimum standards³ which were published in July 2012. The guidance sets new minimum standards for the qualifications of staff employed in sessional care which includes voluntary and private pre-school settings funded by DE. The new standards require new leaders within pre-school settings to hold a minimum of a level 5 qualification by 2016. This development raises key questions about the future role of the EYS:

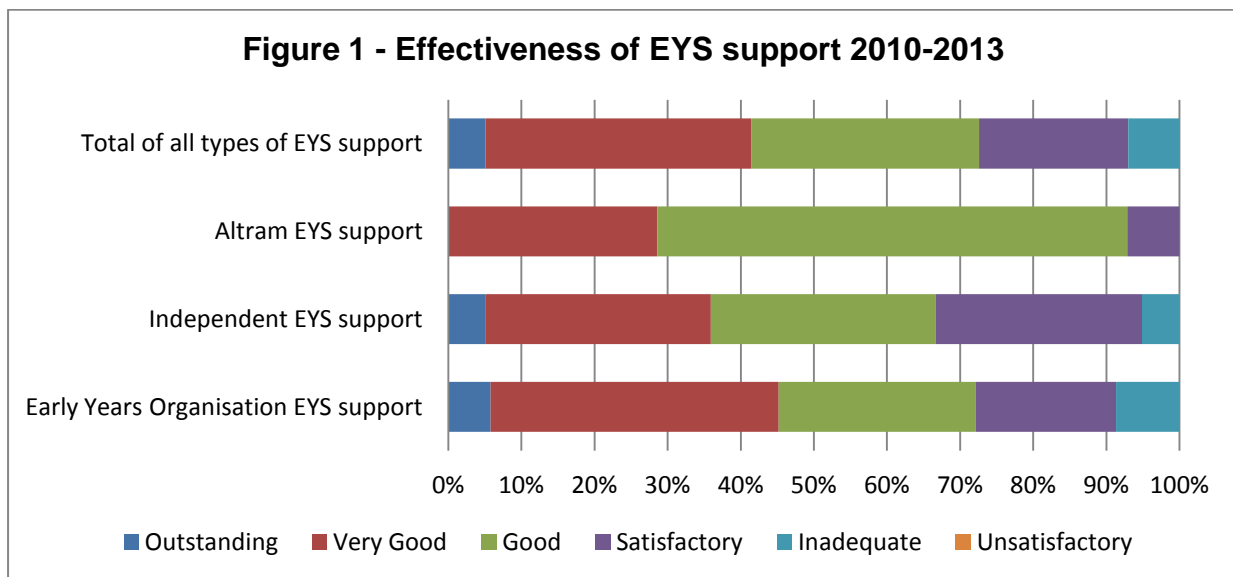
- will the current model still be required to support staff who have higher qualifications; and

³ See footnote 2.

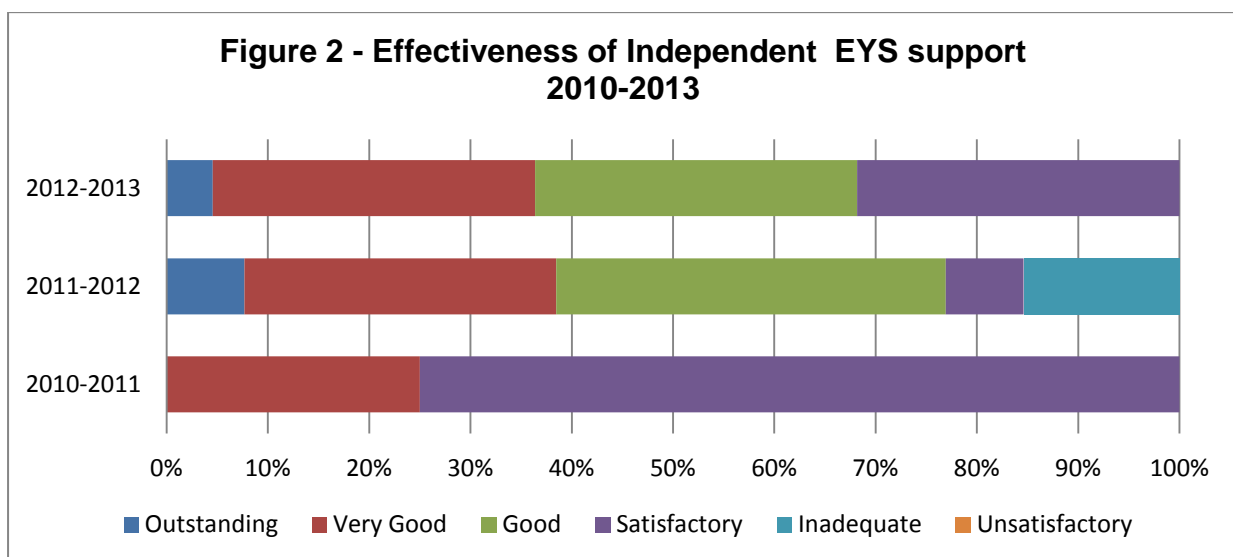
- if the role is necessary, will the minimum qualifications for an EYS also need to increase.

3.2 Inspection findings on the quality of support provided by early years specialists

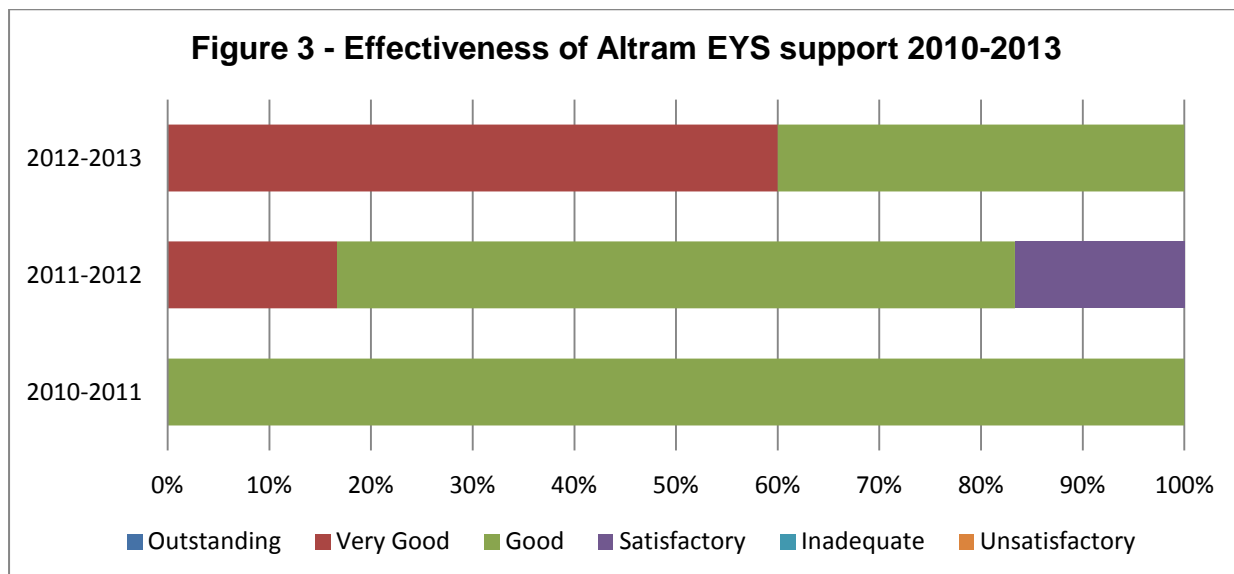
3.2.1 Across the period 2010-2013 there has been an improving trend in the overall quality of support provided by all types of EYS. The proportion of all EYS support evaluated as good or better has increased from 62% in 2010-2011, to 73% in 2012-13. The variation in quality of support provided by the different types of EYS has narrowed in the same three year period.



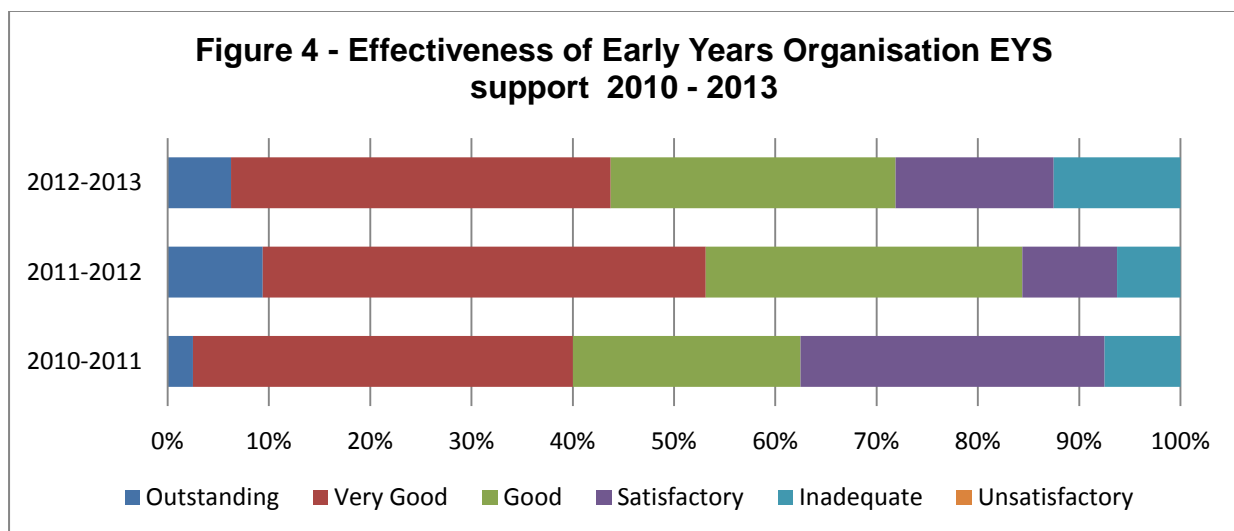
3.2.2 The most significant improvement in quality has been in the support provided by the independent EYSs (figure 2), which has increased from 25% evaluated as good or better in 2010-2011 to 68% in 2012-2013. This has in part been influenced by an increasing number of experienced EYS providing independent services and their co-ordinated development of independent networks of professional support over the last three year period (Figure 1).



3.2.3 The quality of support provided by the Irish-medium education EYSs through Altram has remained consistently high (Figure 3), with all of the support provided in 2012-2013 evaluated as good or better. There has been a significant increase in the proportion of support provided by Altram evaluated as very good, increasing from none in 2010-2011 to 60% in 2012/2013.



3.2.4 The quality of EYS support provided through the Early Years Organisation (Figure 4) evaluated as good or better has increased from 63% in 2010-2011 to 72% in 2012-13. The quality of support provided by the Early Years Organisation peaked in 2011/2012 when 84% was evaluated as good or better.



3.2.5 The Early Years Organisation and the independent EYS have both had an increase in the proportion of their support evaluated as outstanding, while the Early Years Organisation has also had an increase in the support evaluated as inadequate. The Early Years Organisation report that they are aware of this trend, influenced in part by staff turnover, and that they have put actions in place to monitor, evaluate and improve the consistency of the quality of the EYS support provided. They also report that systems are being developed to track the quantity and quality of support being provided by the Early Years Organisation EYSs and that they are working towards more robust methods to demonstrate the impact of their work.

3.3 Qualifications, experience and professional development

3.3.1 A majority (72%) of the EYSs have been in post for two years or less. All of those who support the Irish-medium education sector and those leaders who were also their own EYS have been in post for at least three years and some considerably longer.

3.3.2 The most common qualification held by EYSs is a degree in Early Childhood Education with a small number of the EYSs also holding a relevant post graduate qualification. A significant proportion of the EYSs, particularly those employed by the Early Years Organisation, hold an additional qualification relevant to teaching adults. Very few of the EYSs are qualified teachers.

3.3.3 In addition to their qualifications, the EYSs have considerable practical experience in a range of different areas such as health, education and early years work. Examples of prior experience include; playgroup leader, day care manager, teacher, social worker, Sure Start team leader or crèche worker. It is a concern that not all of the EYSs have experience that aligns directly to the current DE guidance for this role. The most frequent shortfall, for a small number of the EYSs, is the match of their prior training and experience to the requirements set out in the DE guidance. Examples include limited knowledge or experience of: the Foundation Stage; the day to day operation of pre-school settings; special educational needs (SEN) equality issues; and how to involve parents in their children's education.

3.3.4 It is appropriate that those who work in the Irish-medium education sector hold or are working towards additional qualifications in the Irish language.

3.3.5 It is essential that leaders and managers within pre-school settings are confident that the EYS they employ has the correct qualifications, background and experience, in line with the DE guidance.

3.3.6 The continuing professional development (CPD) for those involved in supporting early years settings is an important and necessary part of the role. The EYSs report that there are a range of ways in which they receive this support including; attendance at specific training on a wide range of early years and associated topics, meeting in clusters with other EYSs, attending early years conferences and other events, inspections, and guidance from their line manager. The most common current training needs identified for their own CPD were understanding self-evaluation and development planning, awareness of the new HSCT standards, and speech and language training.

3.4 The organisation of early years specialist support

3.4.1 The model of EYS support has widened to include an increasing range of approaches. No one model has been evaluated as consistently effective overall; strengths and areas for improvement can be identified in all types of approach. The range of models most frequently in use includes:

- an EYS who is employed, managed and supported through the Early Years Organisation to provide services to a number of settings;
- an Irish-medium education EYS who is employed, managed and supported through Altram to provide services to a number of settings;
- an independent EYS who is self-employed, and works independently across a number of settings;
- an independent EYS who is self-employed and is a member of an independent support network providing services across a number of settings;
- an independent EYS who is employed and managed by their management group to be both the leader and the EYS in their own setting; and
- a small number of qualified teachers who provide support to settings, usually if they are situated within the grounds of the school in which the teacher is employed.

3.4.2 The ratio of groups supported by each EYS varies considerably, ranging from one EYS to one setting; to one EYS supporting up to 27 settings. The average ratio is one EYS to 11 settings. The challenges in providing high quality support increase with: high support ratios, wide geographical spread, and a wide variance of pre-school staff expertise across the groups which any individual EYS supports.

3.4.3 The DE guidance specifies that the support should be provided *“5 hours over each month, involving two visits to the centre, in direct contact with the children.”* It emphasises the need for support to *“meet the needs of the staff and the children.”* It also specifies that, where a member of staff acts as their own EYS, an equivalent amount of time is to be allocated for appropriate *“developmental activities.”* The pattern of EYS support has generally moved away from this DE guidance. The EYSs report that this is mainly due to time pressures, particularly when they support a large number of settings.

3.4.4 The most common pattern of support provided is an alternating bi-monthly model of on-site visits one month, followed the next month by a cluster group meeting; where settings join together for training sessions and the sharing of their practice. Other models of practice involve less frequent clustering with other settings and more on-site visits tailored to individual needs. Additional support is usually provided for settings prior to an ETI inspection, and for any subsequent follow-up action required.

3.4.5 When cluster training works well, the staff report advantages such as having opportunities to share best practice and to visit other settings; they also state that it is effective use of the EYS's time and resources. The challenge with this methodology is to meet the needs of the widening range of staff experience and expertise within the cluster groups. The evidence from inspections, discussions with staff at cluster sessions and questionnaire responses, indicates that there is growing dissatisfaction among many of

those supported in this way. The concerns are more prevalent among settings with experienced staff who express the need for a higher level of support, training and development. In addition, those settings that do not attend the cluster sessions may not receive the full amount of EYS support to which they are entitled.

3.5 Evaluation of the quality of early years specialist cluster group support

3.5.1 Evidence for this evaluation includes visits by ETI inspectors to a small sample of the “cluster” training sessions. Of these, the most effective sessions were planned well, and the EYSs used a good range of teaching strategies that encouraged the full participation of the staff attending. They made effective use of case studies to highlight best practice and sign-posted staff to a very good range of additional resources for further reading and information. In addition, the staff were encouraged to think and reflect on their practice and there was a good balance of both theory and practical sessions which were matched well to the needs of the participants. In the less effective practice, there was minimal engagement by the participants and limited new learning for the more experienced staff. Across all of the cluster sessions visited, there was insufficient focus on using consistent criteria to help settings reflect and evaluate the quality of their own practice and that shared by others.

3.5.2 Overall, the EYSs need to be more effective in promoting and demonstrating meaningful self-evaluation that leads to improvement based on rigorous audits, well focused action plans, and evidence of the impact of these actions on the children’s learning and development. This remains one of the most commonly identified areas for development in the ETI inspection reports and in the Chief Inspector’s Report 2010-2012⁴. Inspection evidence also shows that there is insufficient follow-through on assessing the impact of the training provided by EYSs, in bringing about improvement within the participating groups.

3.5.3 All EYSs provide both oral and written feedback following their support visits. The quality of this feedback has steadily improved in recent years, although there is still some variation in the effectiveness of the written reports provided to staff. In the best practice the feedback is; evaluative and clearly focused on the strengths and areas for development based, on first hand evidence of improvement. It encourages the staff to be reflective, and it is communicated promptly to the leader, whole staff and management group. Due to the high turnover of EYSs, pre-school staff and members of the management groups in many settings, it is vital that comprehensive records of the support provided are available at all times and passed on when necessary to new staff members.

3.6 The views of leaders

3.6.1 All of the leaders of settings that receive support from Altram, or independent EYSs report that they are satisfied or very satisfied with all aspects of the support provided. Most leaders of settings that receive EYS support from the Early Years Organisation are satisfied or very satisfied with the support being provided. The highest level of dissatisfaction (14%) reported was for the quality of written feedback provided by the EYSs; this was followed by the contribution made by the EYSs to improvement planning and development (10%).

⁴ The Chief Inspector’s report 2010-2012, ETI, <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/support-material/support-material-general-documents-non-phase-related/the-chief-inspectors-report/the-chief-inspectors-report-2010-2012.htm>

3.6.2 The leaders report the following as the key benefits of employing an EYS:

- access to information on new developments in legislation, policies and procedures and early years developments;
- general support, encouragement and advice for the staff;
- help to prepare a range of documentation including, planning, policies and record keeping;
- guidance on the inspection process for both ETI and HSCT inspections including guidance on the new HSCT standards;
- practical suggestions on a range of topics such as resources, room layout and the organisation of the daily routines; and
- support for specific early years approaches such as Highscope⁵.

3.6.3 A high percentage of the leaders also commented on the importance and value they place on the personal qualities of an EYS and in particular the need for; effective working relationships, high levels of professional expertise, respect for staff views, approachability, and enthusiasm.

3.6.4 The leaders who are also their own EYS reported the key benefits of this arrangement as:

- greater opportunity to provide a high level of regular on-site support and development for staff;
- the ability to assess the quality of the staff work and the impact of staff training and support on a daily basis; and
- the ability to develop a strong team approach between the EYS and the staff team.

3.6.5 The leaders identified a number of areas requiring improvement in the EYS support that they receive. They prioritised these as:

- increasing the frequency of on-site visits to include more observation and involvement of the EYS in the sessions;
- tailoring the cluster training sessions to meet the needs of individual groups and to be more sharply focused on training rather than sharing of ideas;
- improving the quality of the oral and written feedback; in particular, listening more to the staff and recognising what they have achieved, ensuring a closer match between the oral and the written feedback to the whole staff team and providing written feedback more promptly;

⁵ Highscope is an approach to early childhood care and education originating in America in the 1960s, <http://www.highscope.org> .

- providing more stability and continuity of EYS personnel, and related to this, the need to have more continuity in development planning to avoid confusion and mixed messages due to the potential for different approaches and advice from multiple EYSs;
- improving the links and communication between the EYS and the management committee; and
- building links across the early years sector to facilitate a more co-ordinated approach to training and the sharing of best practice between the statutory and voluntary and private sector.

3.6.6 The settings participating in the Early Years Special Educational Needs pilot report that they value the high quality of the training provided by the Education and Library Boards.

3.6.7 It is a concern that one fifth of settings indicated that they did not fully implement the advice provided by their EYS. The key reasons given for limited implementation were the lack of sufficient time and funding, or the leader's own evaluation that the advice did not fit their setting.

3.7 The views of the management group

3.7.1 The most common type of management in a voluntary pre-school is a management committee with members who are parents of the children who attend the pre-school setting. It is a challenge to maintain continuity of quality and continuity of practice and training when most management committees have a partial or full turnover of personnel each year. Other common models of management include proprietors in a day-care setting and the involvement of the principal of a school, particularly if the pre-school is situated within the grounds of a primary school.

3.7.2 The management groups report the following key benefits of employing an EYS:

- access to support and advice for the leader and staff regarding what constitutes best practice;
- up-to-date information about legislation, policies, procedures and the curriculum;
- general training, advice and support for the management group on early years matters; and
- support for the recruitment and selection of staff, employment law and help with grant applications and fundraising.

3.7.3 The responses from management groups indicate that most (84%) are satisfied with the quality of support provided by their EYS. A significant minority indicate that they have little or no contact with an EYS and therefore they were not in a position to comment. A small number (5%) of management groups are less satisfied with the provision. The most common reasons for dissatisfaction were; the frequency of changes in EYS personnel, insufficient communication and feedback, and insufficient support and training for the management group about their roles and responsibilities. In addition, they report a lack of value for money and limitations in the cluster training which was viewed as too generic.

3.8 The views of the early years specialists

3.8.1 While most pre-school staff implement the advice and guidance of their EYS, this is not always the case. The responses from the EYSs indicate that the major issues impacting on the successful implementation of their support are:

- the continuity of leadership and key staff within the settings;
- time-management by the pre-school staff, and
- difficulties in working relationships among the pre-school staff and the management committee.

3.8.2 While most of the factors reported are external to the staff team, in a small number of cases the pre-school staff are reported as lacking the capacity, experience or resources to take forward the advice and guidance.

3.8.3 The key factors which EYSs view as most important to the successful implementation of EYS advice and guidance are:

- an open and positive attitude from the pre-school staff who demonstrate commitment to improvement by putting the EYS training and advice into practice;
- the support of the leadership and management in investing the necessary resources;
- continuity of key staff; and
- effective leadership.

3.9 The views of organisations which support early years specialists

3.9.1 The inspection team met with small focus groups from the Early Years Organisation, Altram and a representative sample of the Independent EYS. All agree on the value of the role of the EYS but are clear that it is timely that the nature of the support is reviewed and the DE guidance updated. In particular, they all report that there is a need for the DE guidance to provide a more flexible approach to the organisation and delivery of the EYS support and more emphasis on the important role of the management group. There is universal recognition that the increasing diversity of pre-school staff experience and expertise necessitate changes to the types of support that are offered. There is agreement that the type of EYS support provided to a setting evaluated as very good or outstanding on inspection, with staff and leadership which remains stable over a period of time, is different from that required by less experienced or qualified staff.

3.9.2 The Early Years Organisation report some of the key challenges to delivering effective EYS support as:

- a skills deficit among pre-school staff;
- limited non-contact time available for staff for important developmental work, particularly in day-care settings where staff often have multiple jobs;
- the need for groups to have both individual support and wider connections for training and professional development;

- the nature of the terms and conditions of employment for playgroup staff which can result in high staff turnover;
- the small number of funded places in some settings leading to a lack of sufficient funding to sustain quality; and
- lack of sufficient capital funding to improve essential aspects of the provision in the voluntary and private sector such as outdoor play.

3.9.3 Altram reported one of their distinct strengths as the development of the Irish language for both the children and the staff. The pre-school staff are required to complete an Irish-medium education immersion pre-school course. One of the key challenges identified by the Irish-medium education sector is the large geographical area covered by a small team of Irish-medium education EYSs.

4. IMPROVING PRACTICE

4.1 Any person employed to fulfil the role of an EYS in a funded pre-school centre must have the necessary minimum qualifications, experience and professional competencies set out by the DE guidance document and be appropriately vetted.

4.2 In the best practice, the leadership and management:

- have a shared understanding of the role of the EYS and agree a contract which sets out the nature of the support in line with the DE guidance and the needs of the setting;
- maintain effective lines of communication between the staff, the EYS and the management group;
- evaluate the effective implementation and impact of any EYS training and support provided and how this contributes to improvement in the quality of the children's experiences, achievements and standards;
- support the staff through effective development planning to implement appropriate areas for development recommended by the EYS;
- manage change effectively by ensuring the staff are supported adequately through transition periods such as staff changes, an increase in funded places or changes in accommodation, and that information is kept up to date and shared appropriately; and
- ensure staff have sufficient non-contact time to plan, self-evaluate, and assess the children's progress, and monitor the effective use of that time.

4.3 In the best practice, the EYS:

- builds effective working relationships with the staff and the leadership and management;
- keeps up-to-date through their own continuing professional development;

- focuses clearly on promoting effective self-evaluation with evidence of continuous improvement within the setting they support;
- has a clear view of the needs of individual settings and tailor the nature of their support appropriately;
- provides clear evaluative oral and written feedback on key strengths and areas requiring development to the staff, leadership and management;
- maintains effective records of support, and when there are changes to personnel, manage communication effectively to minimise the impact of the changes;
- delivers training and support in a manner that builds capacity within the settings for effective self-evaluation and reflection at all levels;
- reviews the effectiveness and impact of their work; and
- provides value for money.

4.4 In the best practice, the pre-school staff:

- have a shared understanding and expectation of the role of the EYS;
- build effective working relationships with the EYS;
- ensure effective lines of communication are maintained;
- contribute to the identification of the training and support needs of their setting; and
- use the training and support provided by their EYS to reflect on their practice and bring about improvement.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The role of the EYS is highly valued by the voluntary and private pre-school sector. The high percentage of good or better EYS support has made a significant contribution in supporting, developing and improving the quality of pre-school provision in this sector. This evaluation highlights strengths in the role of the EYS and also identifies aspects which need to be improved to make it more effective and fit for purpose for all pre-school groups.

5.2 As the whole early years sector continues to grow, develop and evolve, there are wider and longer term issues which need to be addressed such as resources, staff qualifications and CPD for all those who work in the early years sector. Consideration of these wider needs and changes will need to be taken into account to inform decisions on how pre-school settings can best be supported in the medium and longer term and where the role of the EYS sits within this evolving and changing landscape.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies are descriptive examples from EYSs of the types of support they provide. They represent a cross section across all types of EYS provision currently being used and described within this report. They have not been evaluated by ETI.

1. An example from an early years specialist employed by the Early Years Organisation

1.1 The use of the HighScope Pre-school Programme Quality Assessment (PQA) Tool, to support early years settings.

1.2 The playgroup is an example of a DE funded, HighScope group. It is situated in a rural community and provides pre-school services for Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) funded and non-PEAG funded children, including children with special needs. The playgroup staffing complement consists of 3 key workers and a one-to-one worker. All of the team had completed HighScope implementation training and they were, at that time, awaiting a HighScope Ireland accreditation assessment visit.

1.3 The HighScope EYS introduced the group to the PQA tool during their training, as it is designed to evaluate the quality of early childhood programmes and to identify staff training needs.

1.4 The EYS used part A of the tool as a baseline assessment at the end of course visit. This was followed by the staff team and the EYS developing the use of both parts of the PQA tool to inform the self-evaluation process.

1.5 The EYS observed and recorded evidence on PQA during a site-visit. Before feeding back, the EYS scored the evidence and recorded the strengths and modifiable issues that she would share during feedback time.

1.6 In this setting the EYS reported that, overall, the staff use very positive interactions throughout the session. The group would have scored an average 4 overall, but because the group had started to work towards HighScope Ireland Accreditation, further focused activity led to an increased minimum score of 4.5.

1.7 During the feedback session, the staff and the EYS used the tool to guide discussions on aspects of the practice which were identified for further development. This included guidance on; how to support a child in the transition from home, the adults role during group times, acknowledging children's efforts, and supporting children to find resolutions and share. At the end of feedback meetings the EYS agreed with the staff, that they will use PQA part A section III to address the areas for development .

1.8 The action points were subsequently followed up by the EYS during the next visit by scoring evidence observed at that time.

1.9 Between the EYS visits, the staff team supported each other through peer observations, with a particular focus on interactions linked to items discussed with the EYS.

1.10 The staff team state that the Highscope strategy of "praise versus acknowledgement" led to significant discussion. It was difficult for staff to stop using praise such as 'good boy/girl'. They decided to display encouragement/acknowledgement statements on the wall to prompt staff to use them instead of praise.

1.11 The EYS support developed the staff capacity to reflect and evaluate as a result of the training session, and to implement improvement in the quality of their interactions with the children.

2. An example from an independent early years specialist

2.1 The leader and the independent EYS identified early literacy and communication skills as a priority area for development within the pre-school where she works. She used information from two ETI publications; the Chief Inspector's Report 2010-2012, which highlighted the need to raise standards in literacy and numeracy; and An Evaluation of the Development of Children's Language and Communication in Pre-school Settings 2011.

2.2 To bring about improvement, the staff and the EYS began using the ETI quality improvement framework, Together Towards Improvement (TTI). The EYS led a staff development day to audit the provision and obtain a baseline of the quality of teaching and learning and the staff team's own self-evaluation and support and supervision records. The staff also reflected on information from the session on the development of children's language and communication facilitated by ETI in 2012.

2.3 The EYS led lengthy discussions by asking the staff to reflect on what areas of the curriculum they felt were working well and what might need to be modified or developed. This process identified limited use drama and of props at story and rhyme time.

2.4 The next stage of development was to focus on one area of the curriculum, taking an in depth look at the teaching and learning by reviewing; current research, training needs, staff understanding of practice and implementation, how the children learn and progress, and the quality of the staff interaction.

2.5 Early literacy and communication skills were prioritised in the group's development plan. Training was provided for the full staff team on extending literacy through drama and stories by the EYS; an interactive session which included using resource props. The staff evaluated and implemented their training and reflected on their new practice. They were able to demonstrate clearly what they needed to do as result of the training and development. For example they said, *"We are now beginning to put drama into our storytelling which has engaged all the children's attention and allowed more of them to recall events from the story."*

2.6 A new member of staff was signposted to speech and language therapy training by the EYS. She successfully completed the training and research on early literacy and communication was shared with the staff.

2.7 Improvement in the provision was evidenced by subsequent observations of the children acting out their own stories using various props both indoors and outside. The children and adults increasingly used props, sounds and musical instruments during story and rhyme time. The displays took more account of the children's own language and the children developed an interest in print, repeating what had been written. The independent EYS observed the staff; using appropriate open ended questions that encouraged the children to think, waiting for the children's answers, and providing prompts to extend children's responses. The improvements led to children listening more attentively, not only at circle time, but during play to the staff and each other.

2.8 The improvements were documented and reported back to the staff and to the management committee. The provision was subsequently evaluated as outstanding by ETI, endorsing the improvement activity.

3. An example from an early years specialist employed by Altram

3.1 The EYS identified a need for the staff to more effectively implement self-evaluation into their work to promote improvement. The EYS and staff started to use the TTI framework's key questions and quality indicators to promote discussion and to prioritise a number of actions to promote improvement, including the greater involvement of parents and the more effective use of children's responses. The roles and responsibilities of each staff member and the resources required were identified.

3.2 The staff arranged to meet the management committee to discuss their role which enhanced communication between the committee and the staff team. The committee agreed to support supervision meetings for the staff each term to provide feedback to staff on their work and annual appraisals. The committee also worked with the staff to produce a four-year development plan with a linked action plan. The EYS observed staff and reported back to the committee on the progress made against the action plan. The leader and staff were involved in the discussions with the EYS after each session and a written report was shared with the staff and the committee.

3.3 A subsequent ETI inspection report found that the EYS had provided good, focused advice to the group and is supporting them well in the ongoing improvement of the Naíscoil.

4. An example from a leader who is qualified to be her own independent early years specialist

4.1 The quality of the learning environment both outside and indoors was the focus for improvement. The setting staff wanted to answer the key question, *"how would we know if we were being effective in promoting skills and learning to all"*.

4.2 Improvement planning within the setting is based on the ETI TTI framework. At the start of the process, the staff were overly reliant on the daily direction of the EYS and leader to identify and address issues. The staff were supported by the EYS to reflect on their practice and to be more self-evaluative in all areas. Following the targeted support, the staff report that they feel much more confident and that this is reflected in their work. The independent EYS reports that, to develop the staff capacity for self-evaluation, she had to be much more specific about the areas that needed to be improved and to be more assertive about what needed to change.

4.3 The changes and improvements made to the learning environment over a period of two-three years include; a new roofed area to allow for more outdoor provision, a tiled wall area and lots of other writing areas outdoors to promote mark making from the shoulder stance (easier for early mark making), and new digging areas in two outdoor locations. This has led to much better opportunities for child-led play and more space for children to develop their role-play in the enhanced environment that includes a construction area with large play blocks. The children were observed by the EYS engaging in higher levels of sustained purposeful play and the staff were able to see areas being used in child-led activities that they had not expected. The EYS reported back to staff at weekly meetings and they agreed that they could also see improvements in the quality of the children's learning experiences.

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