



Report of an Evaluation of Irish Medium Pre-School Settings

Inspected: 2008-2012

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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%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

1. Introduction

1.1 This report focuses on the quality of pre-school provision in the Irish Medium (IM) voluntary and statutory sector during the years from 2008/9-2011/12. During this time the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out 17 inspections (15 IM voluntary preschool settings and 2 statutory naíscoileanna) and 4 follow-up inspections (FUIs) of IM pre-school settings across the province.

1.2 All of the settings visited provide a pre-school programme of education as outlined in the Pre-school Curricular Guidance Document in accordance with the requirements of the government's funding provided through the Pre-school Expansion Programme (PSEP). These settings choose to deliver the pre-school programme of education through the medium of the Irish language.

1.3 In October 2011, the teachers and leaders of all IM pre-school settings in Northern Ireland (NI) were invited to complete a confidential questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire was to provide background information and an overview of the provision for IM education in pre-school settings. Of the 30 questionnaires issued, 17 were returned to the Department of Education (DE), representing a return rate of 57%. All of the returns were from leaders in the voluntary sector.

Table 1: Pre-School Enrolments

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Overall Numbers of Children in the Voluntary and Private Sector	6625	6744	7599	8149
Number of Children in IME Pre-school Voluntary Settings	436	435	434	473
Number of Children in IME Pre-school Statutory Provision	122	182	284	284

2. Main findings

2.1 Overall effectiveness

2.1.1 The IM sector continues to grow with the opening of new voluntary settings and statutory nursery units. There remains, however, variation in the overall effectiveness with ten (57%) of the 17 IM preschool settings evaluated as good or very good, five (31%) evaluated as satisfactory, and a further two (12%) evaluated as inadequate.

2.1.2 Four FUI inspections took place during the reporting period. A FUI is undertaken where provision is deemed to be satisfactory or below in original inspection. The FUI process focuses on the areas for improvement identified in the original inspection, which in turn reflect strongly the three main areas of leadership and management, the provision for learning and teaching, and the outcomes for children. Two out of the four settings re-inspected improved to a good level of performance; the other two remained at their original satisfactory level.

3. Achievements and standards

3.1 In a majority of settings, the achievements and standards of the children were evaluated as satisfactory to very good. In a significant minority of the settings the children's achievements and standards were less than satisfactory. None of the IM settings visited was awarded the outstanding performance indicator for the quality of the children's achievements and standards.

4. Provision for learning

4.1 In almost all of the settings, the staff work hard to provide an attractive and secure learning environment for the children. In a significant minority of settings, however, more needs to be done to display and celebrate the children's own work and achievements to create a more vibrant learning environment.

4.2 In a majority of settings, the organisation of the sessions observed was good or very good. A particular strength was the effective use that the staff made of all the time available for learning; there was often an appropriate balance between free choice of play activities by the children and activities organised by the staff. In a significant minority of the settings, there were good opportunities for learning outdoors. Healthy eating was given a high priority by the staff in most of the settings.

4.3 In most of the settings, the quality of adults' interaction with the children was satisfactory to very good. A key strength observed in these settings was their staff skill in promoting purposeful play and generating a sense of fun and enjoyment. In a minority of settings, the quality of staff interaction was deemed to be inadequate or unsatisfactory. In these instances, the staff were not skilful enough in exploiting the learning potential inherent in the activities. They were also less effective in listening to the children and building on their ideas.

4.4 The inspection findings also indicate that the quality of the staff interaction with children through the medium of Irish was variable. The Pre-school Curriculum Guidance document clearly indicates that the staff in IM settings should model language appropriately, and fully exploit the learning potential of freely chosen play, routine situations and unplanned activities. They should also use Irish in meaningful contexts and use simple phrases, sentences, rhymes and songs.

4.5 In the best practice observed, the staff demonstrated a skilful approach in promoting the Irish language and learning naturally through the play activities and various routines. In these settings, many of the children were able to respond appropriately to the staff and demonstrated that they had a good understanding of the Irish language and were beginning to use some basic Irish words in their interactions with the adults. In a small number of settings, the formal language teaching observed was inappropriate to the age and stage of development of the children.

4.6 Although, in approximately half of the settings visited, the leader had a good level of competence and fluency in the use of Irish, too often, the other members of staff demonstrated a lack of fluency and did not have sufficient Irish to extend the children's language and learning. The returns from the questionnaires also indicate that the majority of the leaders, and a significant minority of the assistants, have not continued to develop their Irish language through appropriate training. A sustained effort to improve their Irish language skills is therefore crucial in order to enable the staff in IM settings to exploit effectively the learning opportunities arising from the play activities.

4.7 Overall, the level of pastoral care provided for the children, in nearly all of the settings visited, was a strength. In a majority of the settings, the staff provided a warm, caring atmosphere. High quality working relationships were characterised by the mutual respect shown between the staff and the children.

4.8 In a minority of the settings, the safeguarding arrangements were very good. In the majority, where the practice was satisfactory, the staff often needed to develop an appropriate code of conduct and be able to demonstrate a clearer understanding of the child protection policies and procedures for safeguarding the children. In a small number of the settings, staff needed to ensure that the behaviour management policy was implemented fully, shared with parents and that risk assessments were drawn up for planned trips. On occasions, insufficient attention had been paid to ensuring that premises were secure when children were present or the staff required more training and support in relation to safeguarding the children.

4.9 The quality of the curriculum experienced by the children ranged from good to very good in a significant minority of the settings visited. While in a majority of settings the quality of the curriculum was satisfactory, in a small number of settings it was inadequate. In the best practice, the curriculum was broad and balanced and provided good opportunities for the children's learning across all or most areas of the pre-school programme. Where the practice was less effective, the programme provided by the staff lacked progression in the use and type of resources and there was insufficient challenge in the activities provided. Too often, there were insufficient resources of good quality to support the children's imaginative development and learning. Greater use could be made of a wider range of natural and authentic items to create a more stimulating and interesting learning environment to encourage the children's curiosity about the world around them.

4.10 In over half of the settings visited, the planning for the delivery of the pre-school educational programme was not good enough. In the very best practice, in a small number of settings, the staff had identified clearly the learning potential of the activities, outlined progression in the learning and evaluated the programme regularly to take account of the children's responses.

4.11 In the best practice, the staff also regarded assessment as an integral part of the planning process. In a significant minority of the settings, the staff used their observations appropriately to assess the children's learning and progress. The assessment, recording and reporting of the children's progress in learning was not good enough in more than half of the settings.

4.12 Whilst the returns from the questionnaires indicate that the majority of the settings have developed appropriate pastoral links with their receiving primary schools, the children's learning and development could benefit further from greater curricular links between most of the settings and their local primary schools. Only a minority of the settings visited were effectively seeking support from, and liaising with, other early years' professionals such as speech therapists, health visitors, and educational psychologists. The absence of such links makes it very difficult for settings to provide a joined-up approach to supporting each individual child.

4.13 In a majority of settings, the staff used the information collected through their observations of children to inform parents about their children's progress. The overall effectiveness of the links with parents was mostly satisfactory; for example, helpful newsletters highlighted relevant Irish vocabulary to support children's current learning within

the setting. In most settings, parents are encouraged to participate in Irish language classes to support further their children's language and learning. Overall, the work with parents needs to be extended further to include the provision of other courses related to children's learning and development and which encourage parents to support their children both in their pre-school setting and at home.

4.14 The inspection findings indicate that there is a need to build the capacity of staff in the settings to identify and access support for the children with additional educational needs. During inspections, it was often found that the staff in a significant minority of settings had limited or inadequate training opportunities to develop their expertise to help them to address the wide needs of the children who presented as having difficulty with aspects of their learning and development. The responses from the staff questionnaires also reflect the lack of experience and knowledge of staff in supporting children facing barriers to their learning.

4.15 In the majority of the settings visited, good efforts had been made by the staff to provide a clean, hygienic and well presented learning environment for the children. In a significant minority of settings, however, the playrooms and resources were neither clean nor hygienic. The management group of these settings need to provide better caretaking arrangements and ensure that, at all times, their premises are maintained to a high standard of cleanliness in the best interest of the children's health and well-being.

5. Leadership and management

5.1 In 50% of the IM settings inspected the quality of the leadership and management was evaluated as good or better; in almost 16% it was evaluated as inadequate or unsatisfactory. In the best practice observed, the leader was a good role model for staff and set a positive tone for the work of the setting. In the less effective practice, the leader did not have a clear vision for the development of the work of the setting and lacked the professional expertise and understanding of children's development and the pre-school curriculum. A priority for the sector remains the need for the promotion of enthusiastic and skilled leaders who can give the staff a clear view of what they are aiming to achieve and also be a role model for good practice in working with young children. It is notable that the responses to the staff questionnaires indicate that over half of the settings have had a change of leader and assistants in the past seven years. A variety of reasons were provided for staff leaving their post, for example, lack of proficiency in the Irish language, personal reasons or to further their own professional development.

5.2 The quality of development planning within the settings ranged from inadequate to very good. The process of development planning remains an important area for improvement in a majority of the settings. A minority of the settings had developed good methods of self-evaluation and could demonstrate improvements in aspects of their provision. A further minority of the settings were making satisfactory progress in developing self-evaluation leading to improvement while a minority of the settings have yet to embark on the process of self-evaluation. The settings' early years specialists need to prioritise support for the staff in the areas of self-evaluation and development planning in all settings.

5.3 The quality of the organisation and teamwork within the settings visited ranged from unsatisfactory to very good. In the best practice, there were regular meetings between the leader and the staff to plan an appropriate pre-school programme and/or to evaluate the quality of the setting's work to inform future action-planning. In the less effective practice, staff were not involved in planning the programme, assessing the children's needs or in the ongoing evaluation of the setting's overall provision in order to promote improvement. The management groups of these settings need to ensure that appropriate time is allocated for staff to work together to bring about the necessary ongoing development of the setting's work.

5.4 In line with DE's emphasis on improving educational outcomes for all children, voluntary and private pre-school settings are expected to avail of support and advice from a qualified teacher or a suitably qualified early years specialist (EYS). All of the settings inspected and all of those that returned the questionnaire employ the services of an EYS from ALTRAM; two settings also reported that they receive additional support from the Early Years Organisation while one setting receives support from a local school principal. The staff in all of the settings generally reported that relationships between themselves and their EYS are good and that they appreciate their support. The majority of respondents reported that the support provided by ALTRAM did help to bring about changes within their setting. A small number of staff expressed a wish to be consulted more by ALTRAM regarding the nature and scope of their staff development programme/activities.

5.5 Evidence from inspection indicates that the quality of the support of the EYSs ranges from outstanding to satisfactory, with most of the support being evaluated as either satisfactory or good. In the best practice, the EYS gave the staff clear guidance in well constructed action plans which led to improvement in the setting's provision. In the less effective practice, the guidance to the setting was not provided within an appropriate framework for implementation.

5.6 As part of the evaluation of IM settings, members of the inspection team attended two ALTRAM annual conferences and a variety of courses and cluster group meetings organised by ALTRAM. At all of the events, the EYSs provided information and ideas on activities that the staff could use with children in their settings. On occasions, invited guest speakers made a very valuable contribution to extending the staff interest in aspects of their provision. The senior management in ALTRAM need to continue to develop their training programme in order to facilitate the staff in the IM settings to become more reflective practitioners. All IM settings need to be encouraged to collaborate with other local settings, including those from the wider pre-school sector, in order to ensure the dissemination of existing good practice.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Key strengths

The key strengths of the IM settings visited during the reporting period include the:

- friendly, caring ethos and supportive staff;
- organisation of the each pre-school session which was good or very good in a majority of settings;
- very good working relationships between staff and the children;
- acquisition of the children's emerging Irish language; and
- commitment of staff to the promotion of immersion education.

6.2 Key areas for improvement

The key areas for improvement include the need for:

- the leaders to develop more rigorous methods of planning and assessment to provide a high quality pre-school programme based on observations of the children and their responses;
- all staff to continue to develop their competency in the Irish language in order to improve the interactions between themselves and the children through Irish;
- all management groups to ensure they develop an accurate knowledge of the quality of all aspects of the work of their setting, provide relevant staff development and promote effective strategies to improve the quality of learning for all children; and
- senior management of ALTRAM to develop further their programme of training in order to facilitate all staff to become more reflective practitioners.

List of Settings Inspected - 2008-2012

Naíscoil Mhic Reachtain
Naíscoil Colmcille an Charraig Mhór
Naíscoil Neachtain
Naíscoil Ard Eoin
Naíscoil an tSeanchaí
Naíscoil an Bhaile Bocht
Naíscoil Dhún Pádraig
Naíscoil an Chreagain
Naíscoil Choin Rí Uladh
Naíscoil an Traonaigh
Naíscoil Mhachaire Ratha
Naíscoil Mhaol Iosa
Naíscoil na Banna
Naíscoil Uachtar Tíre
Naíscoil na Fuiseoige
Naíscoil na bFhál
Naíscoil Dhoire

List of Follow-up Inspections

Naíscoil Uí Chleirigh
Naíscoil Éanna
Naíscoil Mhic Reachtain
Naíscoil na gCrann

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