

Pre-school Phase Report

September 2018 - December 2020



Contents

Foreword	2
Inspection findings: September 2018-March 2020	4
Context	4
Progression in learning	5
Language and communication skills	5
Problem solving and taking risks through play	6
Learning and teaching	6
Physical development	6
The Getting Ready to Learn Programme	6
Action to promote improvement	6
Leadership in Irish-medium settings	8
Sure Start evaluation	8
Safeguarding	9
Lessons learned during the Covid-19 response phase including a focus on remote learning: March – June 2020	10
Remote learning	10
The home learning environment	12
Partnership with parents matters	13
Wellbeing, care and friendship	15
Enhanced Leadership and Management skills make a difference	16
Lessons learned during the Covid-19 recovery phase including a focus on remote and blended learning: August – December 2020	17
Transition into pre-school	18
Learning and teaching	19
Planning and assessment	19
The use of digital technology	20
Outdoor learning	21
Leadership and Management	21
Organisation of the day and management of resources	21
Challenges faced by leadership	22
Development planning	24
Leadership and links	24
Care and welfare of children, staff and parents	25
Lessons learned	25
Considerations for all in pre-schools going forward	27

Foreword

The last year has brought challenges to education and training in Northern Ireland unlike anything we could have imagined. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) along with many others, had to re-think priorities quickly in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, including pausing inspection indefinitely.

Successful responses to the pandemic both, here and across the world have required understanding, adaptable and flexible leadership, underpinned by technological creativity; testing to the extreme the very attributes our education and training curricula endeavour to foster. Personal resilience is at a premium.

Maintaining operational integrity within and across the education and training system, continues to be a demanding, and increasingly exhausting undertaking for individuals and organisations. The long held ambition of providing access to education online had to be put in place virtually overnight.

Since March 2020, inspectors have been focusing largely on supporting leaders and practitioners to provide continuity of learning for children and young people and to support their wellbeing. Inspectors have shared their expertise and worked collaboratively with other key education and training stakeholders, to develop advice and guidance for a range of sectors.

This report is one of a series of seven individual reports (for Pre-school; Primary; Post-primary; Special; Education Other Than At School; Youth; and Further Education and Work-based learning) covering the period September 2018 to December 2020, replacing the previous biennial Chief Inspector's Report.

This series of reports sets out: to help to promote improvement in the interests of all learners; to identify, affirm, and share evidence of effective learning, so that all learners can benefit; and to provide a basis to continue the professional educational discourse between inspectors and educators, for the benefit of all children and young people.

The reports are intended to stimulate debate and discussion on what we are discovering about the nature of effective learning and teaching, that can not only support a swifter recovery but that can influence and shape the future of education in Northern Ireland.

The immediate future continues to be uncertain, but I feel privileged to lead ETI, in continuing to contribute our impartial and objective analysis, evaluation and expertise to the collective work of addressing the challenges facing the education and training system in Northern Ireland.

These reports mark a change of direction and a fresh start to our organisation and our work. I welcome your thoughts and contributions as to how we can continue to support learners and educators to adapt flexibly and quickly to changing and unforeseen circumstances in the future through capturing and building on the experiences of educators before and during the pandemic.



Faustina Graham

Faustina Graham
Chief Inspector

Inspection findings: September 2018-March 2020

Context

The Education and Training Inspectorate carried out 131 pre-school inspections during the period from September 2018 to March 2020¹. These included 109 voluntary/private pre-schools, 14 nursery schools and eight nursery units. During this period, pre-school inspectors also undertook 37 follow-up inspections, 41 interim follow-up visits, and four safeguarding follow-up visits.

Action Short of Strike across the school sector affected a small number of pre-school inspections, including eight of the nursery schools and all of the nursery units in primary schools. Just over four-fifths of the 131 pre-schools inspected (excluding follow-up inspections) were from the voluntary and private sector which means that the inspection outcomes included in this section of this report reflect mostly the evaluation of this sector.

The findings that follow are based on the available evidence gained through: inspections that were not impacted by industrial action; inspections of nursery units and schools that were impacted by action short of strike and in which there were varying levels of engagement with ETI; and all other district and survey/evaluation visits to pre-schools. Inspection was paused on 18 March 2020, owing to Covid-19.

Of the 131 settings inspected², 67% were evaluated as having a high level of capacity for sustained improvement, or having the capacity to identify and bring about improvement. A direct comparison with previous years is not provided due to the imbalance in the numbers of settings inspected in the statutory and the voluntary and private sectors during this period. Thirteen of the 109 voluntary/private pre-schools were evaluated as needing to address urgently the significant areas for improvement and 37 were evaluated as having important areas for improvement. One-third of the voluntary and private pre-schools inspected have important areas for improvement with 3% having urgent areas for improvement.

¹ The Education and Training inspectorate evaluate the quality of all pre-school settings that provide Department of Education funded places. These include statutory nursery schools, nursery units, voluntary and private pre-schools.

² for which an overall effectiveness evaluation was given.

FOCUS: INSPECTION LEADING TO IMPROVEMENT

CHALLENGE

A pre-school which was evaluated as *needing to address urgently the significant areas for improvement* entered the Department of Education (DE) formal intervention process.

RESPONSE

The pre-school received effective external support from the Education Authority (EA) School Improvement Service in the journey towards improvement. Through effective whole school collaboration, the staff and the governors worked to develop the indoor and outdoor learning environment. The staff worked closely with the parents to develop further their understanding of and use of support strategies to address the children's wide range of needs, ages and stages of development. The cycle of observation, planning, teaching and assessment were adopted as a natural part of day-to-day staff practice and informed an embedded process of reflection and self-evaluation.

IMPACT

The staff became confident in implementing learning through play and sustaining high quality interactions with the children to develop effectively the children's language and thinking. This was particularly important as the setting was in an area of social deprivation and the children's attention and listening skills were less well-developed. The staff worked as a cohesive team to evaluate the effectiveness of their planning and assessment methods. The impact of their work was evident in the children's records of progress and during inspector's observation of the children enjoying play and confidently using language to respond to staff and one another. The nursery was evaluated at the follow-up inspection as having a high level of capacity for sustained improvement.

Progression in learning

Across all settings inspected, almost all children continued to make good or better progress in all aspects of the pre-school curriculum. Outcomes for learners were evaluated as good or better in most of the settings inspected and, in the majority of these settings, the outcomes were very good or outstanding.

Language and communication skills

The development of children's language and their communication skills was a notable strength. There was discernible improvement in the quality of singing, performing with instruments and using songs and rhymes which had been an area for improvement in the previous reporting period.

Problem solving and taking risks through play

In the World Around Us area of learning, the skill of investigating and engaging curiosity requires more development; across all of pre-schools inspected, in just over one-fifth of settings, the children's natural curiosity is not promoted and developed fully enough to prompt them to investigate independently, solve problems and take risks in learning during play.

Learning and teaching

The overall quality of provision for learning and teaching was good or better in a majority (71%) of the pre-schools inspected. In settings where the quality of provision is very good or outstanding, a key feature is the high quality staff engagement with the children which creates a sense of excitement and enjoyment in learning. These staff exploit skilfully the learning potential of the planned activities in a stimulating learning environment. They have the professional knowledge, understanding and skills to enable active learning through play across the pre-school curriculum.

Physical development

In most settings, provision for physical development and energetic play was good or very good, with children observed moving their bodies with increasing co-ordination and balance, as they climb, run, stretch, jump, cycle and balance during indoor and outdoor sessions and through their independent use of small and large physical development equipment. In a minority of settings, there was a lack of progression in the planning for physical development, and, in particular, insufficient understanding of how to develop gross physical skills through energetic play. A small number of voluntary settings lack outdoor space suitable for this purpose.

The Getting Ready to Learn Programme

The Getting Ready to Learn Programme³ that supports DE-funded pre-school education settings is focused on engaging with parents to support them in creating positive home learning environments; this programme continues to be successful. The continued funding of the programme is welcome as further development of parents' skills to support their children's education remains an area of focus on many pre-school development plans.

Action to promote improvement

The quality of leadership and management was good or better in over two-thirds (69%) of pre-schools inspected; this represents a small decrease of seven percentage points compared with the previous period.

³ [Getting Ready to Learn](#)

The understanding, and process of, action planning, monitoring, and evaluation to effect improvement is under-developed in a significant minority (31%) of playgroups. In these settings, development and action plans are not focused sufficiently on developing curriculum provision, nor are they underpinned by evidence of better learning outcomes.

Within the voluntary and private pre-school settings, the consistency of the work to raise standards and improve the quality of provision, is impacted negatively by the high turnover in staff and changes in the membership of management committees and early years specialist support. An increasing number of leaders in voluntary and private settings have attained the level of qualification required to become their own early years specialist without external support. A review of the role of the early years specialist by the Department of Education is needed to ensure that guidance and professional development opportunities in the voluntary and private sector are comparable with those in the statutory sector.

In 30 out of the 36 follow-up inspections carried out by ETI during the period 2018-20, the settings improved their provision. However, six settings have not made sufficient improvement and have remained in the follow-up process for nearly five years and consequently the children who have attended these settings have not experienced a high quality pre-school education. The Education Authority's (EA) right to remove funded places from settings that are not improving, is under-used and there is no agreement as to how long settings, where the provision is not good enough, may continue before funded places are removed. One reason is that some of the under-performing settings are strategically important (as there are no other pre-school places available in the local area); the Department of Education (DE) is actively considering this position with the EA.

FOCUS: A PRE-SCHOOL SETTING WITH A SIGNIFICANT MINORITY OF CHILDREN FOR WHOM ENGLISH IS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

CHALLENGE

A rural pre-school setting had a significant minority of children with English as an additional language, the number of whom was increasing each year. The leader evaluated their practice to ensure that the setting was an inclusive environment providing high-quality education.

RESPONSE

Newcomer children are immersed in the English language in the setting, during daily interaction and promotion of language with the staff and their peers, in activities, stories, song and rhymes. The leader encourages the parents to speak to their children in English while attending the setting to embed learning and promote their

understanding and confidence, whilst also valuing their first language which is spoken at home; enabling the children to become fully bi-lingual and more confident when transitioning into Primary 1.

IMPACT

Almost all of the children, including newcomer children, converse spontaneously with one another and the staff. The pre-school setting now celebrates its diversity and promotes vigorously the inclusion of every child and family, with an emphasis on developing the children's understanding and expression of culture, attitudes, feelings and emotions.

Leadership in Irish-medium settings

Fourteen naíscoileanna were inspected during 2018-2020, three of which were evaluated as having the capacity to identify and bring about improvement. The remaining eleven had important areas for improvement, including their planning and assessment and the use of self-evaluation leading to improvement. Significant changes in staffing, including leadership and management, had impacted negatively on the quality of provision in almost all of these settings.

There is a correlation between instability in leadership of IME pre-school settings and low inspection outcomes. The reasons for the instability include staff turnover and the appointment of new leaders or deputy leaders and also changes to management committees.

Sure Start evaluation

A second Sure Start evaluation⁴ was published in September 2019. Key strengths included the collaborative work and effective leadership in implementing consistently and effectively, the bespoke Regional Speech Language and Communication Framework which was developed to meet the unique needs of children and practitioners in Northern Ireland. Almost all projects evaluated provided programmes with high quality, enjoyable experiences where the children who participated improved their speech, language and communication skills.

When children are no longer eligible to access Sure Start at the age of four, not enough is being done by the staff to prepare parents for the transition from what is often an intensive support structure into the next step of supporting their child in pre-school. More effective communication is needed between Sure Start and pre-school settings to ensure that the children's progress and the parents' participation is sustained and built upon. Consideration should be given to developing regular information for parents across Sure Start, pre-school and the foundation stage to reinforce a consistent message for parents on how they can best support their children's learning.

⁴ [Second Sure Start Evaluation Report](#)

In June 2020, a third ETI Sure Start evaluation⁵ was published which focused on how effectively Sure Start projects use self-evaluation to bring about improvement. The ETI found that almost all of the programmes outlined in the self-nominated case studies within the report were of a high quality. The Sure Start projects are developing a more consistent and effective culture of reflection and self-evaluation, combined with external evaluation, to bring about continuous improvement in the best interests of the children.

The monitoring and evaluation processes within the Sure Start projects would benefit further from an emphasis on direct observation of practice, by the appropriate leaders in the projects, to evaluate how effectively training is implemented and its impact. At a strategic level planned reporting systems for managers need to be kept simple, manageable and effective.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding were evaluated in 175 pre-school inspections during this reporting period. In almost all cases, the arrangements for safeguarding reflected, or reflected broadly, the guidance from the relevant Departments. Fifty-six percent reflected broadly the guidance and had areas for improvement which included: child protection policies not aligning with the latest guidance; risk assessments that are not robust; and, out-of-date safeguarding training for key staff.

Seven voluntary playgroups were evaluated as having unsatisfactory arrangements for safeguarding. The ETI returned to these settings within six weeks to follow-up on safeguarding at which point all but one setting (where the update training for safeguarding had yet to be completed) had improved and now reflected, or reflected broadly, the guidance from the relevant Departments.

The variation between the safeguarding requirements set out by the Department of Education and those required by the Department of Health over, for example, the number of designated safeguarding personnel and safeguarding training requirements for management committee members, results in implementation of arrangements for safeguarding falling below DE statutory guidance in some settings. The Department of Education, in collaboration with the Education Authority and Department of Health are currently developing an early years summary of the relevant safeguarding and child protection guidance materials to clarify the specific requirements placed on DE-funded non-statutory pre-school and early years' provision.

⁵ [Evaluation of Sure Start by the Education and Training Inspectorate](#)

Lessons learned during the Covid-19 response phase including a focus on remote learning: March – June 2020

Remote learning

Pre-school practitioners employed a range of remote learning approaches, designed to enable the children to progress in their learning and development and to continue to experience the pre-school curriculum based on the [Curricular Guidance for Northern Ireland](#). There was an understanding of the need to maintain a focus on personal, social and emotional development, to enable the children to develop positive dispositions for learning and to acquire skills and understanding across all of the curricular areas. Readiness to progress to their next stage of learning in year one at primary school was an ongoing development priority for the staff.

Remote learning began with the provision of **learning packs** in most settings, accompanied by practical resources such as a variety of papers, pencils, crayons, glue, scissors, dough and dough recipes. Most of the packs included guided curricular activities. To enable further continuity of learning, almost all settings progressed to begin the development of digital learning activities during April and May 2020 using a variety of online platforms. Consideration was given to the provision of learning packs where there was poor connectivity or no access to the internet or devices.

Learning packs were generally made up fortnightly/monthly and either distributed to the child's home by the staff, or collected by the parents at directed time slots from 'lending stations' or 'drive-through' stations at the pre-school setting.

Synchronous and asynchronous teaching online, learning packs and videos encouraged parental involvement in their children's learning. Many parents shared photos and some online videos of their children engaging in home learning ideas right up until the end of the academic school year in June 2020 and this became part of the 'new norm' for pre-school parents.

Children's videos and photos included home learning across all the areas of learning from the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education.

While remote learning strategies resulted in a reported strengthening of parental partnership and opportunities to promote home learning were utilised, pre-school providers acknowledged that it could not replace face-to-face teaching or provision for pre-school learning.

In addition, children's progress was negatively impacted in circumstances where there was insufficient access to digital devices and/or a lack of parental confidence or time (in the case of working parents) to home-educate.

FOCUS: UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF PARENTS TO DEVELOP FURTHER APPROACHES TO BLENDED LEARNING

CHALLENGE

To understand and reflect on the parents' experiences of blended learning to date, consider challenges arising and make improvements to these to ensure the approaches to blended learning are manageable and accessible to all parents.

RESPONSE

The Principal organised a Zoom meeting with a group of parents of children who attended the nursery school during 2019-20. Positive engagement resulted in the following key points being noted:

- parents do not always fully understand that pre-school learning takes place through play and everyday life activities;
- parents engage more on a private Facebook page than on any other online platform;
- communication needs to be two-way during blended learning to build up the relationships between staff and parents;
- children's achievements at home need to be shared with the nursery, where possible, so that the child feels a sense of pride in their activities; and
- it is reassuring for parents to learn that other parents were also struggling and knowing this gave them emotional support and confidence to keep going.

Reflecting on the key points above, the staff took the following steps:

- Parents of the children starting in September 2020 were invited to join a closed Facebook page, enabling their children to meet their teachers and talk about nursery in advance of starting.
- Staff set up a parent working group, made up of a diverse range of parents, who would help with ongoing two way communication.
- The Principal sought guidelines around Information and Communication Technology (ICT) safety, Facebook and the pre-school's website.

IMPACT

The nursery staff are more prepared to use various blended learning approaches. They are more connected with the parents and would like to build further on this engagement. They report that the experiences during the period of lockdown resulted in the development of a positive community spirit between the nursery and the local community; something which the nursery has been trying to achieve for years.

The home learning environment

Pre-school practitioners, in the most effective practice, recognised the opportunity, as well as the necessity, from March to June 2020 to model learning and teaching strategies in order to enrich the home learning experiences. In particular, the development of speech and language through modelling story-telling, the use of puppets, singing, the use of action rhymes and fostering a love of books. Almost all pre-school staff began to develop their use of video tools to engage their children in curricular activities through synchronous and asynchronous teaching videos using various innovative teaching strategies. Advice and guidance was provided about how to manage family routines and organise a daily schedule for children in order to maintain the children's sense of responsibility and develop their self-regulation.

FOCUS: DEVELOPING MORE CREATIVE LEARNING APPROACHES

CHALLENGE

The playgroup leader and staff wanted to find more creative ways to deliver learning through technology and online platforms.

RESPONSE

The leader was confident in the use of Facebook and began with this platform to embark on online teaching. The whole staff engaged in Zoom and Microsoft Team meetings to discuss ICT safety policies and the possibility of using Facebook to facilitate learning at home. They sought consent from all parents to join their private Facebook and Messenger page. All parents signed up for the Facebook page. The leader and the staff posted daily activities on the page. The leader used private messages to all parents to let them know the times of the Facebook live session so that the children could actually participate in the event. These live sessions included a Mathematics trail around the pre-school's community where the leader walked from the setting around the immediate environment and asked the children if they recognised the places, as well as finding shapes in the environment such as road signs and directions (left and right). The leader also provided live nature walks, physical exercise sessions from the pre-school outdoor play area and the ongoing lifecycle of a butterfly through the lockdown.

IMPACT

Parents reported positively on the use of Facebook and said that their children really enjoyed the videos. Parents also appreciated that the videos were recorded, so that those who could not watch live could watch at a later time suitable to them. Children could also enjoy re-watching the videos. The page was very interactive and through Facebook Messenger, parents sent photos of their children engaging in home learning activities. The leader attached the children's symbols digitally to the photos of their creations, made a collage of them and posted it as a whole class digital display.

Partnership with parents matters

The pre-school sector practitioners made best endeavours to involve parents in their children's learning experiences. In many cases the pre-schools reported that parents who were experiencing difficulties with their mental health, approached the school to signpost them to health and welfare services.

Best practice examples included, emotional support offered to parents through private FaceTime video calls using a 'buddy system' and weekly online face-to-face sessions between children and staff. The staff reported the positive parental feedback that the children were delighted to get the opportunity to see their class and teachers, even if it was only in a virtual environment.

Through feedback conversations with the parents about the needs and interests of the children, staff reported opportunities to highlight the influence of the parent/guardian in shaping the future life chances for their children. There was a value placed on the role of the parent, to promote learning, through the ordinary family activities that promote a sense of fun, physical activity, self-worth and wellbeing and an eagerness to learn through exploration of the world around them.

Rainbows often feature in the paintings of pre-school children as they explore colours and develop fine motor control. 2020 brought a new and special meaning to the story of the rainbow for the early years and beyond. The World around Us curricular area provided an opportunity to highlight the National Health Service (NHS) as 'people who help us' and also the role children could play in keeping safe by washing their hands often and by keeping close to their parents and household bubble. Pre-schools encouraged the children to make rainbows to display at home as a symbol of thanks and hope. In a number of towns, local pre-school children contributed to a celebration of the work of the NHS with the artwork of the children displayed in montages outside school fences, in shops and at arterial roundabouts.

The progress and development of children with additional needs remained a challenge throughout the lockdown period. Children with sensory processing issues and/or autism spectrum disorder had varying responses to pre-school closure; some parents reported to practitioners that their children settled well at home, while others missed

the structure of the pre-school routines. Practitioners reported that meeting the children's additional needs was a significant challenge as individual children missed the one-to-one support of the familiar adult from pre-school. The loss of speech and language support services was a significant challenge as the face-to-face support was paused.

As District Inspectors ETI provided ongoing pastoral and professional support, throughout the period of closure, to all voluntary and private pre-schools, while also undertaking the role of Covid Link Officers in statutory nursery schools and units. Inspectors signposted leaders to appropriate pre-school curriculum resources, guidance to support the development of remote learning, special needs guidance and disseminated good practice and ideas for parental and pre-school links to aid a smooth transition to primary school.

FOCUS: ASSISTING PARENTS WITH THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING THROUGH THE ADOPTION OF APPROACHES TO BLENDED LEARNING INFORMED BY VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

CHALLENGE

Through parental feedback, staff had discovered that parents were overwhelmed with the quantity of materials and needed additional guidance and support on how the materials could best be used to support their child's learning across the pre-school curriculum.

RESPONSE

Staff met weekly to produce a weekly plan to be sent to parents including activities across the whole curriculum. Staff decided to continue to send this out to parents through their parent's WhatsApp group as parents were extremely responsive through it from the very beginning of the lockdown and it had built up a momentum. Staff decided to plan their week for blended learning in a clear and systematic way for parents.

On Mondays and Friday, the staff decided to provide activities that would not be too taxing on the parent's time. On these days, a member of staff read a story on the WhatsApp group and follow-up activities were suggested.

On Tues/Wed/Thurs--activities related to songs, rhymes, outdoor activities were suggested.

A decision to send out the weekly plan every Friday was made so that parents knew in advance what learning was coming up the following week.

IMPACT

Parents reported that the plans enabled them to make the connection between the activities and the potential learning taking place. This motivates and equips them to match their expectations and input to an appropriate level linked more closely to the age and stage of their child. The staff now make more effective use of regular feedback from parents as part of their self-evaluation of the impact of their remote learning approaches.

Wellbeing, care and friendship

Parents reported to the pre-schools that the children not only missed their friends from pre-school but also the staff and the staff reported missing the children. Many pre-school staff engaged in online videos, so that they could enable connection and security for the children. Practitioners reported that online presence had up to 100% uptake for the story sessions that helped to promote wellbeing and sustain connections beyond the family bubble.

FOCUS: SUPPORTING THE PARENT OF A NEWCOMER CHILD WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

CHALLENGE

By monitoring the levels of engagement of parents and children in the online activities, staff became aware that a parent of a child with special needs was not participating.

RESPONSE

The principal and the nursery teacher held a virtual meeting to consider the developmental delay and learning needs of the child. The child had been receiving support through the provision of a classroom assistant. The classroom assistant and services were no longer available during the nursery school day due to lockdown and the parent was struggling to manage and was feeling overwhelmed at providing for the care of her family and herself.

The staff decided to look for alternative support within the community. The principal had well-established links with a community support organisation and signposted the parent to counselling, family support and practical food provision for the family.

IMPACT

As a result of the principal's links with community services, there was a responsive network for localised need in the community. The specific needs of the newcomer family were referred to the hub and support was readily available. The actions taken by the principal to support the child's and parents' wellbeing was the initial priority until both were ready to engage in the provision for learning offered by the nursery. The

principal's pastoral focus on the mental health and wellbeing of the parent was key to motivating and building the confidence of the parent to work with the staff to meet the needs of their child. Subsequent work is ongoing with the external educational agencies to progress the statementing process for the child.

Enhanced Leadership and Management skills make a difference

Supportive leaders working in the best interests of the children, parents and staff developed enhanced leadership and management skills at community level. These leaders displayed a vision beyond the boundaries of their pre-school team to extend capacity through partnerships within a cluster or network of leaders from nurseries, primary schools and playgroups. Professional development and sharing of good practice to upskill staff in the use of digital platforms was implemented quickly and is one of the aspects that practitioners report that they want to retain. Placing the child at the centre underpinned staff resilience and determination to develop their own skills in order to support the children's learning.

Leaders had to respond quickly to the changing health and educational directives to ensure that they implemented an amended transition process from pre-school to primary school and a new induction process for the intake of children in September. In addition, operational planning for restart and the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the use of sensory materials were acknowledged as challenges to the holistic pre-school learning experiences.

FOCUS: SUPPORTING THE EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND PARENTS DURING THE RESTART AND INDUCTION

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

To ensure that the children and parents will cope well with the induction procedures in the nursery school and that they will feel pastorally supported amidst all the new Covid-19 adaptations to normal pre-school entry procedures and will settle well into nursery school.

RESPONSE

The principal issued an online questionnaire to gain initial background information from the parents. The pre-school planned a drive-in Induction event for new parents to collect information packs to share with their children over the summer months.

The nursery school Facebook page and Homeroom had been used over the lockdown, with Homeroom having the advantage of being divided into separate classes and more personal; it was used to send home videos of the staff and of their classrooms. Videos of the classrooms were also posted on social media platforms.

The children were introduced to the staff through photo puppets to play with at home and photographs of the routine of the day so that they and their parents had lots to talk about before starting.

The principal sourced additional books to add to the class library; both to inform staff and to help the children cope with stress and anxiety. These include: 'Their name is today' [Reclaiming childhood in a hostile world] and 'Nurturing Success' [How to create run an effective nurturing group].

Staff plan to incorporate books that deal with real life concerns in a way that suits young children to help them talk about their feelings.

IMPACT

Due to Covid-19, the staff are very focused on the emotional health and wellbeing of the children and plan to prioritise the children's personal, social and emotional development for the first term as everyone learns to cope with the impact of the pandemic on individual families and staff.

Leadership and staff teamwork, including governors and management committees, were required to enable the development of revised policy and procedures and financial support to enable compliance with safe practice measures. The voluntary sector had, in addition to compliance with the DE New School Day Guidance, to adhere to Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) Minimum Standards. The DE and Department of Health (DoH) collaborated to ensure that the two sets of guidance were aligned for settings reopening in September. Pre-schools, including non-statutory, were included in the drafting of the New School Day guidance which included pre-school specific guidance. The completion of risk assessment requirements to enable re-registration and a safe re-opening ensured that almost all of the voluntary and private pre-school centres were re-registered for opening at the beginning of September.

Lessons learned during the Covid-19 recovery phase including a focus on remote and blended learning: August – December 2020

These findings are based on information gained from a combination of district Inspector (DI) visits and virtual visits/phone calls made to nursery schools, nursery units and voluntary and private pre-school settings across all regions in the period from the beginning of September to the end of November 2020. It also includes information gained through ETI consultation with three focus groups of leaders representing all types of pre-schools.

During this restart and recovery period, staff worked diligently, in the best interests of the children, to manage a new and constantly changing situation. Safety for children and staff was a priority, while endeavouring to provide a rich and stimulating pre-school programme. Staff identified many strengths, issues and challenges and have reflected on the lessons learned about what has worked well during school closures in order to inform their future practice.

Transition into pre-school

In almost all of the settings, the staff have supported the children to make a smooth transition: as a result, the children are well-settled, they have adapted to the new hygiene and safety measures and are gaining confidence in managing their daily routines. Overall, this has exceeded the expectations of staff who have commented positively on the resilience of the children in adapting and adjusting so well. Staff noted, in particular, a reduced level of children's separation anxiety from parents/carers in the first week of settling in and are reflecting on how to build on this success for future intakes.

In almost all of the pre-schools visited during this period, the children were observed engaging in productive play and enjoying the activities being provided which were suitable for the time of year. Children were involved in energetic physical activity and the tasks encouraged them to become independent, creative and co-operative. In addition, they enjoyed small group sessions of stories and rhymes. Due to the constraints of following the necessary safety guidance linked to Covid-19, children are less independent than usual for the time of year in managing their own snack and dinner routine; however, in the best practice the staff used these times to develop the children's language and communication skills.

In a minority of settings, the lack of some shared equipment such as larger sand trays and sensory materials, has impacted negatively on the development of aspects of the children's collaborative play and their investigative skills. In a small number of the settings visited, a lack of sufficient resources or the provision of activities that were poorly matched to the children's needs and interests resulted in the children being less settled and co-operative.

Staff have noted a small but increasing number of children requiring additional adult support with self-regulation, self-help skills and toileting. In addition, they report a continued increase in the number of children presenting with delays in speech, language and communication skills. The extent to which these delays are directly related to their experiences during lockdown, or due to a general increase in the number presenting with a developmental delay, is unclear at this stage. While most children are reported as making progress with the planned and sensitive support of staff, others require more specialist professional assessment and assistance to make the necessary progress.

Learning and teaching

In a majority of the pre-schools visited by district Inspectors, the learning environment, both indoors and outdoors, was well-organised and well-presented, with due cognisance given to the necessary guidance to minimise risk. The environment was enhanced with displays of the children's own artwork and child friendly signage to encourage routines and self-help skills.

There was a very good range of activities available to support all areas of the pre-school curriculum. Despite the many challenges being faced by the staff and their initial anxieties around safety, there was a positive 'can do' attitude and commitment to provide for the children. In particular, staff:

- support well the children's social skills, and independence in their daily routines;
- use a range of resources and activities to explore feelings, emotions and wellbeing, including stories, puppets, visual prompts on emotion boards, and relaxation techniques;
- engage in informal and group songs and rhymes both indoors and outdoors;
- create a sense of fun and enjoyment as they join in activities with the children; and
- model and extend language and vocabulary through their interactions with the children, encouraging and building upon the children's own ideas at a pace that is appropriate to their age and stage of development.

In the less effective provision observed, in just under one-third of settings visited the children were less engaged in learning because the planned activities or staff interactions and engagement were not as well-matched to the children's needs and interests. In particular: the learning environment lacked interesting and stimulating resources and the activities were too table-bound; the adult engagement was overly adult-directed, restricting the children's own imagination and creative ideas; and, the children were sitting for long periods or there was no suitable outdoor learning.

Planning and assessment

Staff continue to plan the learning and observe and assess the children's progress, but a significant minority report that there is insufficient time, within working hours, to meet and discuss their work as a team and complete the associated paperwork. There is an increased emphasis on short-term planning for the immediate needs of individual children, the early identification and referral of children with additional needs and planning for the increased use of the outdoors.

Staff are appropriately focused on the development of the children's personal, social and emotional development, including providing opportunities for the children to recognise and talk about their feelings and emotions and how to keep safe.

Planning sufficient sensory experiences for the children, within the limitations on the use of materials and the cleaning guidance has been a challenge for staff. Ensuring that the children can experience the important sensory, therapeutic and collaborative experiences these resources provide is an emerging issue.

Where a setting has a high percentage of younger children in their penultimate year, or has children identified with additional needs, the demands on the staff have been exacerbated further with the Covid-19 guidance which requires enhanced routines for toileting and cleaning. This is particularly evident where there is a lower adult to child ratio and/or where children with high levels of need have not yet been assessed.

The use of digital technology⁶

During this restart and recovery phase, there continues to be a rapid and significant increase in the use of online platforms/digital technology to communicate with parents/carers and to engage with children in their learning at home. Over one-third of settings use online platforms and private messaging Apps to assist parents in supporting their children's learning, they have found that parents engage more readily with social media than with emails.

While most settings had undertaken self-evaluation of their experiences during the period of lockdown, a small number of settings had not reflected on the use of digital technology to support learning and had no contingency planning for the its use in any potential future closures.

Most settings also provided learning packs to support a range of practical learning at home linked to language skills, creativity, physical energetic play and fine motor skills. A significant minority of settings continue to support their parents with learning packs supplemented by using resources from the Getting Ready to Learn⁷ Programme funded by DE. For others, this work has been developed in direct response to an identified need to support children who may be self-isolating, ill or at home for longer periods due to school closures.

⁶ Digital technology in pre-school includes the use of any technology such as phone calls, websites, social media, phone Apps and online platforms.

⁷ The Getting Ready to Learn project seeks to support pre-school education providers with DE-funded places to encourage and develop parental involvement in children's early learning. It is focused on improving outcomes for children in pre-school by engaging and empowering parents to help them create and sustain positive home learning environments.

Outdoor learning

There is a significant increase in the use of outdoor spaces to support the children's learning, physical development and wellbeing. Settings either provide suitable outdoor clothing or encourage parents to have their children dressed appropriately so that they can go outside for longer periods of time in all types of weather. Staff have planned for, managed and supported, learning outdoors in a range of creative ways. Daily schedules now include longer outdoor play sessions and in most of the settings staff report that as a result, the children are more settled and engaged both indoors and outdoors.

In a small number of settings, there have also been additional challenges to overcome including a lack of or no suitable outdoor space or a reduction of space for energetic play due to zoning and social distancing. While the children had opportunities to develop friendships and to interact socially within the protective bubble of the same group of peers and adults, the normal play interactions within 'open plan' pre-school provision of the social mixing of more than one group of children was restricted to a smaller group of children and adults. In addition, the zoning, led to a reduction to the breadth and variety of play activities and ultimately limited aspects of the children's sensory play.

Leadership and Management

Organisation of the day and management of resources

Pre-schools have had to consider the organisation of their day and the use of resources to minimise risk and adhere to the guidance from the Public Health Agency, Department of Education and the Health and Social Care Trust. The implementation of this planning has worked smoothly in most cases and, where it has not, staff have reviewed their practice and made the necessary adjustments. Staff communicated the changes to parents and children in advance of restarting and report that almost all parents have co-operated well with them during this recovery period.

The classroom layouts have had to be reviewed to take account of guidance. This has resulted in less choice, or slower introduction of resources for the children; and less use of smaller carpeted rooms and open plan nursery schools reverting to single classes to protect the integrity of separate "bubbles" of children.

All settings have made some adjustments by either reducing the overall amount of resources available to the children or presenting them in a different manner. Staff have taken considerable time to plan for the cleaning and rotation of materials in a manageable way, while seeking to maintain a stimulating learning environment that provides sufficient choice for the children.

The changes made to the provision and resources have had both positive and negative impacts on various aspects of the provision.

Positive impacts include:

- increased use of songs and rhymes to manage routines and transitions;
- staff placing more emphasis on social skills and language development during snack and dinners;
- having fewer resources available to choose from has helped some children to focus more fully during the settling in period; and
- smaller amounts of sand in separate trays being used effectively to promote language, individual exploration and pattern making.

Negative impacts include:

- the time taken for staggered arrival and departure and hand washing reduces the time for learning and is particularly noticeable in part-time sessions;
- zoning areas of play to keep children in separate bubbles has minimised the amount of time and space available for each group at some activities;
- children have less opportunity to practise self-help skills and be independent during snack and dinner routines;
- where no alternatives are planned for, the smaller amounts of dough and lack of larger sand trays reduce the opportunities for investigative and collaborative play; and
- less availability of resources for dressing up reduces the experiences for imaginative dramatic role play.

Challenges faced by leadership

All leaders report additional pressure on their time and responsibilities related directly to the management of Covid-19 safety measures. They have had a dual role of ensuring the safe return of staff, children and parents, while also taking responsibility for the continuity of the children's learning. While all reported feeling under pressure, a minority reported feeling overwhelmed and stated that the workload had impacted negatively on their work/home life balance and affected negatively their emotional health and wellbeing.

The challenge most frequently reported by leaders is the additional time required to clean the learning environment, in line with current guidelines, to maintain the safety of the children and staff. This is impacting significantly on various aspects of their work and is particularly pronounced where there is: a small staff team; a dual day with two part-time sessions needing to use the same room consecutively; or a group who are located within shared community facilities. Leaders have welcomed the additional funding that has been made available centrally (or through local funding), to alleviate the pressure with additional paid hours for staff or the purchase and use of specialist cleaning equipment. There is, however, a wide variation in how effectively this is managed and many staff are still working above and beyond their contracted hours. Closures and self-isolating staff or children present additional pressure on leaders to manage staffing, disrupted routines and continuity of learning experiences for the children.

All types of pre-school settings have identified the need for further professional learning to help staff to use digital technology more effectively to communicate with parents and support home learning and ensure that they are less dependent on the leader for most of this work.

Factors that increase the points of pressure on leaders include:

- the high volume of guidance to read and apply and associated paperwork required, in particular for the voluntary/private sector with guidance from two different Departments DE and DoH;
- interpreting guidance and advice that was considered to be ambiguous, subject to change, contradictory; or at short notice and often issued on a Friday at the end of a working day;
- the responsibility and expectation on leaders to ensure a Covid-19 safe environment for staff, children and parents as well as themselves;
- the great amount of work involved in organising and maintaining class 'bubbles' particularly for those in shared accommodation;
- a lack of suitable indoor space for staff to meet safely and remain socially distanced;
- the difficulty in finding suitable substitute staff and assistants to allow settings to remain functional and open if staff are ill or have to self-isolate;
- insufficient time for planning the curriculum, assess learning and focus on whole school improvement work; and
- the pressure on leaders to manage online communication with a lack of access to ICT for all staff or a lack of confidence by staff members.

Development planning

Leaders welcomed the guidance and flexibility of the advice provided in the DE circular, Curriculum planning 2020/06, to reduce and re-focus their action planning for 2020/21. They have revised their development plans to prioritise a safe restart; the emotional health and wellbeing of staff and children; developing outdoor learning; and, developing further approaches to remote support for learning at home.

Leadership and links

Leaders found new ways to develop and maintain links with others during this restart period.

Links with parents including communication about induction, learning at home and information on children's progress were transferred from face-to-face meetings and paper documents, to online methods of communication and have been improved and developed in response to parental feedback.

There is variation in the experience of settings' **links with other professionals** to support children with developmental delays. A small number of staff, while welcoming assessments by other professionals such as Educational Psychology, also raised concerns about assessments being carried-out remotely and based on information from discussions with parents and staff without seeing the child in person. Others reported that there has been a quicker response from Educational Psychology in responding to children's need for assessment. A minority of the settings represented in a focus group who met with ETI, reported that they had a combined approach to supporting the children with external agencies; however, a small number of leaders had concerns about delays in the necessary support and links for those children with additional needs. There are, in particular, reported delays for children being assessed and supported by outside agencies for children with speech, language and communication delays. The impact on the 3+ Review⁸ Health Visitor assessments is as yet unclear.

In the voluntary and private playgroups, **early years specialist support** has, in the main, moved to online support in the form of webinars, phone calls and online clusters. The impact of this has yet to be evaluated.

Links between pre-school leaders have been reported as a strength in some regions and valuable for support and collegiality during these challenging times. Leaders have been proactive and creative in their use of technology to start and maintain links across statutory and voluntary settings to provide pastoral and practical support for the leaders and staff within their geographical area. Examples of these are included in the ETI publication [Pre-School Examples of Approaches to Learning and Teaching during the Covid-19 recovery phase](#).

⁸ The 3+ Review involves the pre-school child, the parents/carers, named health visitor, health care assistants and pre-school education practitioners, working together to build a picture of the child, inform planning and identify any areas for development.

Care and welfare of children, staff and parents

Staff have focused during this period on the care and welfare of the **children** through the promotion of a safe learning environment, building trusting and positive relationships with them and their parents and providing continuity of learning through activities in pre-school and learning at home.

In the majority of settings, leaders reported that the health and wellbeing of their **staff** was a priority. Before the restart in September, the majority of pre-school leaders reported that that staff were very anxious about their return and how they would manage effectively the new transitional procedures and regulations.

A majority of leaders also reported the biggest challenge for them during the autumn term was the concern about staff having to self-isolate/being ill/shielding which then impacted negatively on the required ratio of adults to children. Difficulty in recruiting suitable substitute staff and the concern about additional adults crossing the 'bubble' added to the level of anxiety.

Pre-school leaders were aware, through feedback from **parents** that they needed to respond to the challenges that parents were facing during this period of time. If parents are emotionally struggling, anxious or stressed with family issues, this can have a direct impact on the health, wellbeing and development of the children.

Lessons learned

Despite the additional demands and challenges that staff experienced during the Autumn term, a majority reported that there have been many positive lessons learned which they are reflecting on and will use to inform their future practice. Staff have gained confidence to 'have a go' to try a range of online and digital communications with families. They recognise potential longer term benefits and are planning to develop further the skills of the whole staff team to use technology to a greater extent in the future.

The preparation for and implementation of changes in the Autumn term has also initiated robust professional discussion and self-evaluation around familiar aspects of the provision, thereby providing the staff with opportunities to test, evaluate and plan new ways of working. From these evaluations they have considered for example, new priorities and approaches to outdoor learning⁹.

⁹ [Pre-School Examples of Approaches to Learning and Teaching during the Covid-19 recovery phase](#)

The successful induction and settling-in period caused much reflection among staff members. Many are considering how they might integrate some of these changes to their future induction processes. The sharing of virtual tours of the pre-school, staff introduction videos and the entry/drop off routines into the pre-school aided the transition from home to the pre-school. The videos helped parents and children to be familiar with the routines in advance of starting pre-school and staff report that the children had less separation anxiety and were well-settled in a shorter period of time in relation to previous years.

Despite the uncertainty and demands they face on a day-to-day basis, leaders and staff remain positive and motivated to provide a safe and stimulating pre-school experience and are encouraged by the resilience of the children.

In order to sustain and build on the successes and address the ongoing challenges of the Autumn term, leaders and staff need continued support and guidance on how to progress further the children's learning and development while at the same time having realistic expectations of themselves about what is manageable in their own context.

FOCUS: DEVELOPING ONLINE SUPPORT FOR LEARNING AT HOME

CHALLENGE

The principal identified the need to introduce a blended learning approach to support parents in their children's learning at home.

RESPONSE

The principal had introduced the Class Dojo app during lockdown as an online communication tool for parents during the restrictions. The Principal shared some practical activities, positive affirmations and signposting three days a week. Parents shared pictures of children actively enjoying and completing their activities. The staff used the tool to post relevant information for parents from the NSPCC, Parenting NI and Getting Ready to Learn information. Parents' responses to the questionnaires issued at the end of term were positive. They asked for further support for managing their children's behaviour and to support their concentration and listening skills. In response to this request for more support, the principal reviewed her communication and sharing of information and changed from issuing a monthly newsletter to a weekly update to parents on the focus for the week. In September, the nursery school continued to use Class Dojo to share the children's work in nursery with parents and post support to other agencies as they identified that some families remained vulnerable. The monthly song sheet was sent home for parents so they could sing songs with their children related to their learning. To promote some support for managing behaviour and concentration and listening, the staff shared weekly bedtime reads through Class Dojo so that parents could use these as part of their bedtime routine. The staff through modelling reading, promote the importance of, and the skills parents need for, reading with their child.

IMPACT

Parents now have a regular starting point for discussion with their children on the activities of the week and can practise their songs and rhymes with them at home. They also have practical strategies to draw on to support them in managing behaviours and routines at home. Parents have reported that this has had a positive impact on the bedtime routine and that children are more engaged listening to the stories read by the nursery staff. The books being sent home as part of their story packs promote further discussion, and support for parents and the children in their home environment.

Considerations for all in pre-schools going forward

Learning and teaching is adapting, evolving and changing as the disruptive impact of Covid-19 continues; pre-school leaders and staff are developing professional solutions to a wide range of educational challenges. The Education and Training Inspectorate through its ongoing monitoring and evaluation of work in pre-school has identified key areas of focus for the remainder of the year to support the sector in identifying how learning and teaching can be supported in the future.

Key considerations going forward include:

- evaluating the effectiveness of provision for learning all areas of the pre-school curriculum and assessing the lessons learned that can be integrated into future provision;
- evaluating the impact of the extended use of outdoor learning to support children's learning, physical development and wellbeing;
- analysing the effectiveness of digital technology in bringing about progression in the children's learning and for communicating and working with parents; and
- assessing the quality and impact of the support provided for the emotional health and wellbeing of pre-school leaders, teachers, children and parents.

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