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On the right track

Learning from investment in Prevention
and Early Intervention in Ireland

Children's Learning

About this summary

This summary outlines learning from programmes which aimed to improve children's learning outcomes. Programmes were delivered under the Prevention & Early Intervention Initiative. This summary identifies some of the features of effective programmes which are transferable to wider services dealing with children and young people. Key messages are based on findings from independent evaluations, but also draw from CES's experience of working with government and service providers in implementing a range of programmes and services for children and young people.

The final report **On the right track: Children's learning (2016)** and this summary will be of interest to policy makers, service commissioners and providers, agencies and organisations involved in the delivery of services which work with parents to improve outcomes for children and young people.

To read all of the reports produced in the **On the right track** series, visit www.effectiveservices.org

On The Right Track

Children's Learning

From 2004 to 2016, The Atlantic Philanthropies together with government and other organisations invested in 52 programmes aimed at improving outcomes for children across the island of Ireland. These programmes used prevention and early intervention approaches in various areas of children's lives, including learning, behaviour, health and development, parenting and inclusion. This investment was known as the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative.

Organisations receiving funding under the initiative were required to evaluate the programmes they provided. Since 2008, CES has liaised with organisations delivering the programmes, to summarise learning from the experience of implementing individual programmes. Individual evaluations from each programme were used to inform a series of initial reports in six outcome areas which CES published in 2012 and 2013. This summary is based on an updated report produced by CES in 2016, which now includes findings from evaluations of seventeen programmes focused on children's learning.

Learning from this investment has already been used to inform the design and delivery of new programmes in Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, an initiative introduced by the Irish Government in 2013 which aims to improve outcomes for children living in disadvantaged areas and the Early Intervention Transformation Programme, an Executive Office programme which aims to transform mainstream services in Northern Ireland.

Introduction

When commissioning services

- **Investment in the learning environment, such as staff training and capacity building, can have a long term positive impact on children's learning outcomes.** These developments can result in immediate benefits for children, but also for subsequent groups of children.
- **Children's learning outcomes may take longer to become apparent.** Commissioners need to be clear on whether they want to see changes in children's learning outcomes, changes to the learning environment, or both.
- **Investment in education starts from birth.** The first three years are a crucial phase for brain development and an opportunity to encourage and invest in children's learning. Approaches such as 'pooled budgets' can encourage departments to share the costs of this investment at an early stage.
- **Approaches that foster a love of learning at an early age will mean that children will seek out learning opportunities throughout their lives.**
- **New approaches or programmes should fit with the national curriculum and complement existing school activities.** While some adaptation may be needed for a local area, it is important to maintain consistency with the original programme.

"I have a whole different outlook on teaching... I find it easier – that probably has an effect on the children. I enjoy teaching, so they enjoy it more."
Teacher

Key Messages

When implementing services

- **Internal leadership in schools and early years' settings is important in implementing a new programme and ensuring that it is sustainable.** Engaging with education practitioners is important to generate 'buy in' and commitment to a new approach.
 - **Initiatives such as coaching and mentoring and practice networks can support staff to implement existing curricula and quality frameworks and create good learning environments for children.** Schools and early years settings need to plan how these supports can be sustained over time.
 - **Transition stages through the school system, and between different settings are important phases and can affect how children learn.** School policies, teacher training and continuity of approaches can help to support children during these transitions.
- Engaging with children, parents and professionals**
- **Parents are children's first educators, and need to be supported in this role.** Approaches which involve parents in their children's learning in the home, early years and school settings and during transitions are effective.
 - **Children thrive when they experience consistency in how people interact with and care for them, at home, in school and in community settings.**
 - **Children learn in different ways, through their interactions with family members and friends, and opportunities to play.** Social and emotional learning is an important part of their development along with literacy and numeracy skills.

"...if they haven't picked up how to read by the time they're in second class, by the time they hit first year when they get...geography books and history...they don't understand what they're reading and it can be very difficult...early intervention is key." Youth worker

Child behaviour – invest now or pay later?

One of the building blocks for wellbeing in adulthood is a good education. Studies show that children who do not learn to read, write and communicate well will struggle in other academic areas and are more likely to leave school at a younger age. Adults with poor literacy and numeracy are vulnerable to poorer outcomes in their physical and mental health, as well as their employment opportunities. As a result, the social and economic costs are very high for both individuals and society.

While both Ireland and Northern Ireland have education systems which perform well in international rankings, a number of studies show poor educational outcomes for children living in disadvantaged areas. Studies indicate that children living in disadvantaged areas are more likely to experience literacy difficulties and to have poor communication skills, problems which may persist as they go through the school system. This can create substantial costs across a range of government departments including social protection, health and justice.

Children's learning begins before school. Children who have the right support in family and early childcare settings are more likely to be 'ready' for school, and to do well as they progress through school. If children are not ready for school, they will find it difficult to catch up. Investment in learning in home and early years' settings can help children to be ready for school.

Programmes which were delivered aimed to support children to develop their literacy and numeracy skills but also their social and emotional learning and included both universal and targeted programmes.

Programmes were primarily delivered in communities experiencing social disadvantage. Most of the evaluations were based on programmes in pre-school and primary school settings, while a smaller number of programmes were delivered in post primary and community settings.

Programmes used a range of approaches to support children's learning, such as involving parents and educators in supporting children, training and capacity building in early care and education settings. Programmes for children focused on the development of language and literacy skills, teacher training, and mentoring initiatives. Some international programmes with an existing evidence base were adapted for use in particular communities, while other providers developed programmes 'from scratch' to respond to local needs. Programmes were delivered in a range of settings including the home, early years' settings, schools and after-schools activities by both paid staff and volunteers.

What programmes were delivered to improve children's learning?

Nine of the programmes evaluated changes in learning outcomes using Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) whereby people are randomly selected to either receive an intervention or be part of a control group who do not. Three were evaluated using quasi-experimental approaches which compare the outcomes of people who receive an intervention to a group who do not; assignment to the intervention and control group is not random. The remaining five programmes were evaluated using non-experimental designs which incorporate a range of quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods approaches.

Fourteen of the programme evaluations directly assessed children's learning outcomes as part of their evaluation. Five of these showed a significant improvement in children's learning outcomes, three showed positive trends, four showed mixed findings and two showed no difference.

Fifteen of the programme evaluations assessed the impact on the learning environment. Nine showed a significant improvement to the learning environment, and six showed positive trends.

"We had a watered down version of preschool before. Now it is much more at their level and activities which they are engaging in and developing."
Early Years practitioner

“You can actually see the changes happening in front of you, even the way they want to read the book, they want to choose the book, they even want to do the writing, they want to play the game.” Volunteer

“I feel I have grown some confidence even by just speaking out when doing activities in our class time.” Student

Evaluations of seventeen programmes under the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative indicated that both children's learning outcomes and a better learning environment were important factors in programmes demonstrating positive results.

Findings from the evaluations suggest that programmes which have a positive impact on children's learning and the learning environment include the following five features:

- They involve parents in their children's learning and support professionals, such as teachers
- They offer a range of activities which respond to the needs of children themselves, their age and development stage
- They allow children to participate in programme activities frequently and regularly
- They work in partnership with, and complement rather than duplicate the approaches in other settings where children learn
- They fit with the existing curriculum and school activities and are sustainable within the service.

Five features of effective programmes

These evaluations provide useful insights for service providers, commissioners and practitioners involved in designing programmes and services to improve children's learning and the environments where children learn.

Children's learning in the home

1. Programmes which were accessible and which encouraged parents to engage in fun learning activities with their children showed positive results. Providers found it challenging to engage some parents.

Children's learning in early years' settings

2. The quality of the learning environment makes a difference to children's learning.

Providing training and support for staff improved the learning environment, and helped staff to implement existing quality frameworks and curricula (e.g. HighScope, Aistear and Síolta).

3. While the impact on the learning environment may be immediately visible, it may take longer before the impact of programmes on children's learning emerges. Providers stressed the need for evaluation at different stages, to investigate the impact of a programme as children grow older.

4. Implementation teams were highlighted within organisations as a useful structure to guide and advise new initiatives or programmes in early years settings. Assessing organisational readiness, encouraging 'buy in' from management, planning training and mentoring and supporting change were just some of the tasks undertaken by implementation teams.

5. Peer networks were seen as particularly valuable in developing the capacity of early years' professionals, as they encouraged sharing of experience and learning about implementation.

Children's learning in school

6. Integrating new approaches into schools takes time and effort. Schools need to be involved in selecting and designing the programme or approach, consider how it fits with the curriculum, encourage leadership buy in and set up appropriate structures for implementation.

7. Sustainability after a programme has ended is important. 'Whole school' approaches were identified as an effective way of ensuring ongoing consistency across school policy, procedures and practice.

8. Programmes which targeted children with reading difficulties who do not qualify for formal learning supports in school helped to improve their literacy and enjoyment of reading.

Children's learning after school

9. Many programmes showed improvements in children's literacy, particularly those which targeted children of primary school age who were already experiencing difficulty. Successful approaches involved structured after school activities delivered by paid staff or trained volunteers.

10. After schools programmes worked best where they complemented rather than repeated school activities. Some after school programmes had mixed findings. After school programmes which were structured, had clear goals and well trained staff had a more positive effect on children's learning.

What can we learn from the programmes which were implemented?

	Who did the programme work with?	Age Range	Setting	Programme Duration	Change in Learning Environment	Change in Learning Outcome	Main Evaluation Approach
Preparing for Life (PFL) Northside Partnership	Children, families & practitioners in participating centres	0 to 5	Home	Monthly home visits & other supports from pregnancy to 5 years	Significant Improvement	Significant Improvement	Randomised Controlled Trial
Growing Child Programme Lifestart	Parents in the catchment area	0 to 5	Home	Monthly home visits from birth to 5 years	Positive Trend	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial
National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) (Nat.Evaluation Pobal)	A range of groups including children, parents & teachers	0 to 6	Early Years Settings	Programmes of varying duration		No Difference	Quasi-Experimental
Eager & Able to Learn Early Years	Children, families & practitioners in participating centres	2 to 3	Home	8-9 months with 3 home visits	Significant Improvement	Mixed Findings	Non-Experimental
CDI Early Years Childhood Development Initiative (CDI)	Children & their families in a disadvantaged area	2 to 5	Home	Various supports over 2 years	Significant Improvement	No Difference	Randomised Controlled Trial
3,4,5 Learning Years youngballymun	Pre-school children, parents & early childhood service providers	3 to 5	Early Years Settings	1 pre-school year	Significant Improvement		Non-Experimental
Tús Maith Barnardos	Children in disadvantaged areas	3 to 5	Early Years Settings	1 year	Significant Improvement	Mixed Findings	Quasi-Experimental
Suite of Incredible Years Programmes youngballymun	Whole school approach, with children, parents & teachers	3 to 12	School	Delivered throughout school year	Positive Trend		Non-Experimental
Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme Archways	Teachers & children in participating schools	4 to 7	School	6 days over 5 months	Significant Improvement	Significant Improvement	Randomised Controlled Trial
Ready to Learn Barnardo's NI	All children in participating classes & their parents	4 to 8	School	3 x 1hr weekly sessions after school over 3 school years	Positive Trend	Mixed Findings	Randomised Controlled Trial
Time to Read Business in the Community	Children in participating schools	9 to 12	School	2 x ½ hr weekly sessions over 3 school years	Significant Improvement	Significant Improvement	Randomised Controlled Trial
Doodle Den Childhood Development Initiative (CDI)	Children & their families in participating schools	5 to 6	School	4.5 hrs per week for 36 weeks, with parent & family sessions	Significant Improvement	Significant Improvement	Randomised Controlled Trial
Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) Barnardo's NI	All children in participating schools	5 to 11	School	1-2 hours per week over 3 school years	Positive Trend	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial
Wizards of Words (WoW) Barnardos	Children in participating schools	6 to 8	School	3 x ½ hr weekly sessions for one school year		Significant Improvement	Randomised Controlled Trial
Out of School Time (OST) Rialto Partnership	Young People	11 to 14	Community	Various after school activities throughout the school year	Positive Trend	Mixed Findings	Quasi-Experimental
Big Brothers Big Sisters Ireland Peer Support Foróige	Young People	12 to 14	School	1 x 40+ minute session weekly for 1 school year	Positive Trend		Non-Experimental
Write Minded youngballymun	All children, parents, teachers, school & community in an area	4 to 18	School	Throughout primary & secondary school	Significant Improvement	Positive Trend	Non-Experimental

This table provides an overview of the programmes evaluated & the changes reported in learning outcomes & the changes reported in learning evaluations. While the evaluation studies used a range of methods, this table shows the main evaluation approach relevant to this particular outcome area.

More details about the findings within individual evaluations are available in the longer report on Children's Learning. The On the right track series is available on the CES website www.effectiveservices.org

Changes in learning outcomes & the learning environment are presented as follows:

- Significant Improvement**, if the evaluations reported a statistically significant improvement on one or more measures of children's learning or the learning environment
- Positive Trend**, if there was a positive result on one or more subscales of measures of children's learning used, or improvements shown but not reaching statistical significance

- Mixed Findings**, if there were some positive & some mixed effects for measures of children's learning
- No Difference**, if there were no statistically significant effects observed for measures of children's learning
- Negative Impact**, if there were one or more significant negative effects on one or more measures of children's learning

Home Early Years Settings School Community

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