

RECEPTION Case Study Ireland



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The Case Study Report – Ireland: Aistear –Play in Practice

Context

Education in Ireland is compulsory from age 6 to 16 or until students have completed three years of second level (post-primary) education. Since 2015, the Irish government has provided funding for two years of preschool education for children aged three to five years. First level schools (primary schools) may accept children on or after their fourth birthday. The majority of primary schools are state funded but are privately owned, the majority by the Catholic Church. The typical primary school enrolls pupils by age into eight year-groups or classes, ranging from junior infants to sixth class. The curriculum followed is a child-centred one and prescribed by the Department of Education although it allows for flexibility in timetabling and teaching methods.

Current Developments in Early Childhood Education in Ireland

The transition from preschool to primary school is recognised nationally and internationally as a very important time in children's lives. This transition is a priority area of work in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's Strategic Plan, 2015-2018.

As part of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020, the NCCA was assigned responsibility for carrying out a review of national and international transition policies and best practice and for developing reporting templates.

The main findings of the review confirm that **a positive experience during this important transition is a predictor of children's future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes and the probability of early school leaving.** Furthermore, the review notes that in addition to the transfer of relevant information, the roles of all stakeholders in the process must be considered in order to support children making the transition from preschool to primary school. From the child through to parents and family, preschool practitioners and primary school teachers, the emphasis currently is on supporting the stakeholders to communicate and collaborate.

Aims, methods and implementation

Two primary schools, in collaboration with Clare Education Centre, participated in this project.

Scoil na Maighdine Mhuire, Newmarket on Fergus, Co. Clare

Scoil na Maighdine Mhuire was founded in 1959. It is a vertical co-educational Catholic school catering for children from Junior Infants to Sixth Class. There is a special class for pupils with a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorders. At present there are 214 pupils, 13 full time teachers, 1 part time teacher and 5 Special Needs Assistants in the school. There is also a pre-school on campus which is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. It is an 'Incredible Years' school, where all staff try to catch children being good and promote positive behaviour management.

The school is set in the village of Newmarket on Fergus which is approximately 8 kilometres from Shannon Airport. A sizable percentage of the parents of the children in the school are employed in Shannon. Although the school does not have 'DEIS' status a significant percentage of families (46.5%) are in receipt of Social Welfare allowances e.g. Lone Parent allowance, Family Income supplement etc.



Holy Family Junior School, Ennis, Co. Clare

Holy Family School began life as the Convent of Mercy in 1854. The present school was built in 1965. Holy Family Junior School caters for both boys and girls from Junior Infants to first Class. The campus is shared with the Holy Family Senior School which is where the pupils move on to second class. There is a long established Montessori School on the campus and a recently developed Afterschool Facility.

It is designated as a DEIS band 2 school, which means that the school is recognised as having children who are disadvantaged based on social class background, parental education, household income and family structures. The Department of Education provides extra support for literacy, numeracy and parental involvement in DEIS schools.

There are 19 teachers, 9 Special Needs Assistants for pupils with special needs and 3 ancillary staff. It is also an 'Incredible Years' school, where all staff try to catch children being good and promote positive behaviour management.

There are three special classes in Holy Family Junior School, a Class for the Deaf, a Class for Pupils with Autism and a Speech and Language Class.



The main goal of this case study was to to facilitate a smooth transition from ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) to Junior Infants in both primary schools for each child and to improve arrangements for the transfer of information about the progress and achievements of pupils between the schools and the preschools on their campuses.

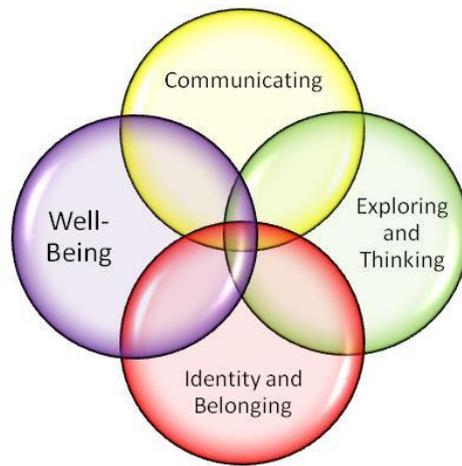
The following actions were identified:

1. Meetings between preschool and junior infant teachers *
2. Implementation of the Aistear Programme in the preschool and the junior infant classes *
3. Transition journal created, picture of teacher, principal etc. *
4. Visits to the class room, playroom, school yard and principal's office *
5. Pupil interviews
6. Adoption of 'Incredible Years' in our preschools *
7. Preschool pupils to attend events in both primary schools e.g. Halloween dress us and parade, Easter bonnet parade, Christmas concerts and carol services and assemblies at the end of the year. *
8. Parents' open nights and induction days.

*Only with pupils from the ECCE settings on our school campuses. This enabled us to evaluate the efficacy of the transition programme by comparing with pupils who came from other settings.

We found that during the first year, the main focus for this case study became the implementation and the evaluation of the Aistear Programme in the junior infant classes and the preschools on our campuses.

Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences, so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others. As a curriculum framework, with four main themes, Communicating, Wellbeing, Exploring and Thinking and Identity and Belonging, Aistear works as a guide for teachers in planning practical learning programmes for children in infant classes and preschools. Aistear, together with the infant curriculum, is used to plan fun and challenging experiences for the children in our classrooms.



Aistear is timetabled and structured and planning by teachers is collaborative and themed. Play is extremely important in the development of young children. It is meaningful, enjoyable and sociable. It also encourages the children to be adventurous and experimental in a safe environment. Problem solving skills are constantly being reinforced. Children are also encouraged to build relationships with one another and with the teacher.

Good quality play experiences impact positively on children's learning and development. Through Aistear in the preschool and infant class classrooms, children are learning to experience risk within safe and secure boundaries. Most of all they are having fun while learning.

For this case study, Aistear was implemented in the preschools and the infant classes of both schools.

Implementation

- Weekly Aistear planning meetings
- Monthly planning and reflection meetings
- Meetings with preschool teachers
- Parental questionnaires
- Teacher assesment of Aistear using checklists, teacher observation and self assessment
- Language Curriculum Progression Continuum Milestones for Oral Language
- Gathering of resources for enriched learning
- Completion of play diary for targetted pupils
- Organisation of school visits – assemblies, playroom, teddy bears' picnics etc
- Familiarisation visits to the junior infant classes

- Joint participation of preschool and junior infant pupils for Aistear
- Ongoing and relevant professional development for preschool and infant teachers
- Visits to other early years' settings to see Aistear in operation
- Agreed format for handover of information from one teacher to the next



Findings

Based on the comparison of pupils who had experienced Aistear and Incredible Years in the schools' preschools and of pupils who had come from other ECCE settings, we found:

- Pupils who had attended the partner preschools displayed a better ability to play, interact with imagination and creativity and were more aware of social conventions and others. The infant teachers in Scoil na Maighdine Muire noticed a marked difference in the acquisition and use of vocabulary.
- In Holy Family Junior School, where there is a significant EAL population, during the implementation of Aistear, language was identified early on as a serious cause for concern and based on the recently revised Language Curriculum, a pilot programme of Oral Language Station Teaching was developed in the infant classes. Pre and post testing results indicated improvements in all areas of the Language Curriculum and the pilot was extended to other classes. Oral Language help sheets were sent home to parents each month, based on the topics taught during Aistear and Oral Language station teaching.

- There were no significant behavioural differences in relation to gender where pupils had experienced the Incredible Years Programme in our preschools. Where pupils had not been exposed to IY, boys presented with more challenging behaviours initially. But by the end of September, having engaged in the IY programme, teachers found no significant differences between the two groups. The Incredible Years' Parents' Programme was offered to identified parents with very positive outcomes. (The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management programme focuses on strengthening teacher classroom management strategies and improving teacher-parent relationships. This leads to an increase in children's social, emotional and academic competence and reduces classroom aggression and disruptive behaviour.)
- Regular contact between the preschool teachers on campus and infant teachers ensured that pupils with special needs were identified early on and supports put in place before the start of junior infants. This was not always the case with pupils who came from other ECCE settings.
- In both schools this case study helped to develop and imbed best practice. The shared experience of two schools from different settings working together, in collaboration with Clare Education Centre, was a very positive and empowering experience for the teachers involved. Teachers had opportunities to engage with other teachers and to share ideas.
- Clare Education Centre offered support and ongoing professional development for the teachers. The centre also facilitates an Infant Education Support Group where the ideas developed in this project can be disseminated. There is also a very active Principals' Forum based in the Centre, meeting on a monthly basis. It is the intention of both principals to share our findings with our local principals
- There was more meaningful engagement with preschool teachers, with more focussed discussions and a better understanding of the needs of the pupils.
- We developed more resources for parents to use at home with their children

Conclusions

This project has been a very positive and useful experience for both schools. As a result of this case study, a formal transition programme, using the methodologies identified above, is being drawn up between our preschools and infant classes. We plan to extend this to other feeder preschools, not on our campuses, in 2019.

Sources:

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