Prevention and early intervention in children and young people’s services

Children’s learning

CES
The Centre for Effective Services (CES) is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee (Company Number 451580 and Charity Number 19438 in Ireland). The work of the Centre is supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government

Copyright © The Centre for Effective Services, February 2013

Published by the Centre for Effective Services, Dublin
ISBN 978-0-9568-0376-4

The authors of this report are Dr Helga Sneddon and Michelle Harris

This report should be cited in the following way:

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of the copyright holder.

For rights of translation or reproduction, applications should be made to Centre for Effective Services, 9 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.

The Centre for Effective Services
9 Harcourt Street
Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel: +353 (0) 1 4160500
Email: office@effectiveservices.org
www.effectiveservices.org

and
65-67 Chichester Street
Belfast BT1 4JD
Northern Ireland
Tel: +44 (0) 28 90 438 433
Email: nioffice@effectiveservices.org
Acknowledgements

The Centre for Effective Services would like to thank the following people who have made important contributions to this project: the other members of the ‘Capturing the Learning’ project team (Nuala Doherty, Claire MacEvilly, Stella Owens, Susan Kehoe, Sarah Rochford and Liza Clancy); the staff of the organisations who generously shared their insights and evaluation findings; the funders, The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs; and Dr. Mark Dynarski and Dr. Karen Trew whose considerable expertise helped to shape this publication.
Contents

Executive Summary .................................................................................................................. 6
  Summary of key learning points.......................................................................................... 6
  Engaging parents to improve child outcomes................................................................. 7
  Improving practice in Early Years Settings ...................................................................... 7
  Delivering Interventions in Schools .................................................................................. 8
  Evaluating the work............................................................................................................ 8

Section 1: Overview ............................................................................................................. 9
  Introduction to ‘Capturing the Learning’ ........................................................................... 9
  Structure of report ............................................................................................................. 10

Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective .......................................................................................................................... 13
  Why children’s learning is an important area for investment .............................................. 13
  What are the long-term problems associated with poor educational outcomes? ........... 14
  What is the current situation? ............................................................................................ 15
    Policy in Northern Ireland ............................................................................................... 16
    Policy in Republic of Ireland .......................................................................................... 17
  What factors are associated with poor learning outcomes? .............................................. 18
    Disadvantage .................................................................................................................. 18
    Gender ............................................................................................................................ 19
    Ethnic groups ................................................................................................................ 19
    Looked-after children .................................................................................................... 19
    Children with social and emotional behavioural problems ............................................ 19
  What does successful learning mean? .............................................................................. 20
  When do problems start to manifest themselves? .............................................................. 20
  Summary ........................................................................................................................... 21

Strategies to support learning and engagement .................................................................... 21
  Helping children to learn from birth ................................................................................ 21
  The importance of parents in supporting children’s learning ........................................... 22
  Effective practice in Early Years settings ........................................................................ 23
  Interventions in school settings ....................................................................................... 24
    Common components in literacy interventions ............................................................. 26
    After-school programmes ............................................................................................... 27
    One-to-one tutoring ....................................................................................................... 30
  Linking school and home .................................................................................................. 31
  Summary ........................................................................................................................... 32

Section 3: The Programmes in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative ................. 33
  Preparing for Life (Northside Partnership) ........................................................................ 35
  Growing Child Parenting Programme (Lifestart) .............................................................. 36
  Eager and Able to Learn (Early Years, NI) ......................................................................... 37
  3, 4, 5 Learning Years (youngballymun) ......................................................................... 38
  CDI Early Years (Childhood Development Initiative) ......................................................... 39
  Incredible Years (youngballymun) .................................................................................... 40
  Incredible Years (Archways) ............................................................................................ 41
  PromotingAlternativeTHinking Strategies (PATHS) (Barnardos, NI) ............................ 42
  Write Minded (youngballymun) ....................................................................................... 43
  Doodle Den (Childhood Development Initiative) .............................................................. 45
  Time to Read (Business in the Community) ..................................................................... 46
Summary of main findings from the Initiative so far .......................................................... 47

Section 4: Discussion, key messages and implications ...................................................... 51
  Discussion .......................................................................................................................... 51
  Capacity-building in Early Years settings ................................................................. 53
  Working with schools .................................................................................................... 54
  Engaging families to support children’s learning ...................................................... 57
  Creating links between different learning and care environments ..................... 58
Summary ............................................................................................................................. 59
Conclusions ......................................................................................................................... 60
Key messages ....................................................................................................................... 60
Implications .......................................................................................................................... 61
  The need to engage parents .......................................................................................... 61
  Capacity-building in Early Years settings ................................................................. 61
  Delivering interventions in schools .............................................................................. 62
  Evaluating the work ....................................................................................................... 63

References ............................................................................................................................ 65
Executive Summary

For more than a decade, The Atlantic Philanthropies, sometimes in conjunction with Government and other organisations, has invested over €96m in 20 agencies and community groups running 52 prevention and early intervention programmes throughout the island of Ireland. These include a funding partnership between the Irish Government and The Atlantic Philanthropies to support three large-scale model prevention and early intervention projects in disadvantaged areas of Dublin (Childhood Development Initiative in Tallaght West, younballymun and Preparing for Life in North Dublin). The Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative supports services using a diverse range of approaches and working in a wide range of areas, such as parenting, children’s learning, child health, behaviour and social inclusivity.

All services funded under the initiative were required to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of their services in improving outcomes for children. These evaluations include randomised controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies and qualitative work. The goal was to help the communities in which they operate, but also to share their learning so that policy-makers and those who design, deliver and fund services for children can benefit from their experience and put it to work for other communities.

This report synthesises the learning that is currently available from 10 approaches to influencing children’s learning. It is the first in a series of reports on children’s learning and subsequent reports will be issued as more evaluations are completed between 2013 and 2015.

Summary of key learning points

Poor educational attainment (particularly with respect to literacy) is linked to a number of poorer outcomes through adult life such as unemployment, lower income, and poorer mental and physical health. Children who grow up in caring and responsive environments that encourage learning from birth arrive at schools with core skills and competencies that schools can build on. ‘School unreadiness’ is expensive and children who fall behind their peers at this early stage will find it difficult to catch up later.

The learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention initiative in Ireland, and that available in the wider research literature, shows that there are methods available that can improve children’s learning experiences and outcomes. The evidence base in Ireland of programmes and interventions designed to improve outcomes for children is increasing. We are learning more about what approaches work best for teachers, parents and children, and also how to implement these effectively so that the best outcomes can be achieved.

The local learning shows the importance of improving home learning environments by working with parents, especially with younger children; how to successfully improve practice and standards in Early Years settings; support for a school learning environment through capacity-building and training with teachers; and support for a community learning environment with a focus on core literacy skills, structured programmes and positive relationships with adults.

Programmes to improve children’s learning outcomes were successfully delivered in a broad range of settings and contexts, such as at home, in day care centres, communities and after-school clubs, in pull-out sessions during the school day or integrated into the school curriculum. They were delivered
by paid programme staff from a variety of backgrounds, including Early Years, youth work, speech and language therapy and teachers, as well as volunteers.

The programmes and interventions delivered as part of the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have demonstrated that they are able to replicate evidence-based programmes with fidelity and to show positive outcomes consistent with those produced in other regions and jurisdictions internationally. It was also possible to successfully develop new programmes and services that are underpinned by a sound and robust theoretical evidence base and that are showing positive results.

Children’s learning begins before birth and has to be supported in different ways depending on the age of the child, their individual needs and circumstances. Learning is not the sole responsibility of schools. Children experience a range of learning environments, including home, day care, pre-school and junior/primary school. Children thrive when they experience consistency in how people interact with and care for them. This can be improved by ensuring each setting understands what happens elsewhere and ensures that their approach complements the others. Transition points between the different learning environments experienced by children at different stages are important and need to be prepared for in advance. Good communication between settings and continuity in the approaches used between settings are important.

Often when we think about successful learning outcomes, we highlight specific competencies or skills, such as literacy and numeracy. These are useful indicators of learning, but we also need to encourage children’s ability to engage meaningfully in the world around them in ways appropriate to their stage of development, particularly in their early years. Placing a focus on giving children a love of learning, as well as on what skills they gain, would help to improve outcomes and support life-long learning.

**Engaging parents to improve child outcomes**

Parents are a key influence on their children’s learning. Parents need to provide healthy, stimulating environments for children during their early years, as well as supporting their more formal learning experiences when they start school. While many are engaged with their children’s learning, some parents may need encouragement and help with how best to do this. They may not know what approaches are being used in schools, they may have negative attitudes towards school or poor personal experiences of education which influence their children’s outcomes. The Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative showed it can be challenging to engage some parents. Beneficial strategies include showing parents developmentally appropriate and fun activities to do with their children and designing services to be accessible to parents. For example playing with children, reading stories, taking them to the library and talking to them about what they are doing in school can all be beneficial.

**Improving practice in Early Years Settings**

Existing evidence shows that integrating childcare and education (as well as high-quality preschool provision) can positively influence children’s cognitive and behavioural outcomes. Outcomes can also be improved by having well qualified staff who work with both children and family members. Children’s learning can be supported by experiencing quality day care.
This can be improved by offering professional development to staff to improve their skills and interactions with children. The Prevention and Early Intervention initiative highlighted the importance of providing ongoing support to create and sustain change in early years settings, particularly when implementing quality frameworks. Offering quality training and providing opportunities for staff to share their learning and experiences of best practice were seen to be helpful.

**Delivering Interventions in Schools**

Many of the programmes in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative were delivered in the school setting, either during normal class time or in afterschool classes. Integrating new approaches into schools takes time and sustained effort. Important enablers for success include active involvement of the school in the selection or design of the programme, specialised implementation teams to provide ongoing support, focused approaches that fit with the curriculum, professional development for teachers and leadership buy-in. There was also a need to balance having clear, developmentally appropriate lesson plans with some flexibility so teachers could use their professional judgement in tailoring delivery to their particular class.

Programmes to be delivered in school settings need to specify how they link to other work being done in the school environment. If the programme is to be mainstreamed, there should be clear links made to the existing curriculum. After-school programmes should complement the work done in school by using a range of interactive, fun activities rather than repeat the activities of the school day.

**Evaluating the work**

Interventions should be explicit as to which outcomes they aim to improve in the short, medium and long term, and how these can be meaningfully measured. Sometimes parents and practitioners perceived that the programme had positive effects on children’s outcomes that were not always found by the evaluations. This highlights the importance of comparison with children not taking part in a programme to show its true impact, as well as ensuring the right outcomes are being meaningfully measured. The local learning has also shown the importance of undertaking outcomes evaluations on programmes that have had a chance to ‘bed-down’ and become established. Some organisations have used the learning from the evaluations to further improve the delivery of the programmes (such as changing the frequency of sessions, refining training for practitioners and focusing programme content). Working with teachers and Early Years professionals can improve outcomes for the first group of children who experience the changes. If changes are sustained, subsequent cohorts of children may also benefit, which may yield a greater return on initial investment. Collecting information about possible cost benefits over time would be useful for interventions delivered in an education setting, where the initial costs for delivery may be incurred by the Department of Education, but the long-term cost savings are accrued by another Department such as those responsible for Employment or Justice.
Section 1: Overview

Introduction to ‘Capturing the Learning’

For more than a decade, The Atlantic Philanthropies has been funding an initiative to promote prevention and early intervention for children and youth in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This has involved investing, sometimes jointly with Government, in a cluster of organisations that have developed and delivered services based on evidence of what works. The Atlantic Philanthropies has invested some €96 million in 20 agencies and community groups running 52 programmes delivered through the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This initiative includes a funding partnership between the Irish Government and The Atlantic Philanthropies to support three large-scale model prevention and early intervention projects in disadvantaged areas of Dublin (Childhood Development Initiative in Tallaght West, youngballymun and Preparing for Life in North Dublin). The initiative supports services using a diverse range of approaches and working in a wide range of areas, such as parenting, children’s learning, child health, behaviour and social inclusivity.

A condition of funding required the organisations to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of their services in improving outcomes for children. The goal was to help the communities in which they operate, but also to share their learning so that policy-makers and those who design, deliver and fund services for children can benefit from their experience and put it to work for other communities.

The ‘Capturing the Learning’ project, led by the Centre for Effective Services (CES), involves a process of synthesising the collective learning from many of the projects in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative: collating data and information from multiple sources and perspectives, and distilling out overarching messages about ‘what works’. It is not a meta-analysis of the evaluation results. Rather it is a best-evidence synthesis which places the learning from the initiative alongside what is known broadly about influences on children’s learning. A website for the project, which can be found at www.effectiveservices.org/prevention/early-intervention, gives further details on each of the innovations, planning reports, implementation reports, evaluation reports and other useful resources.

The present report is the first in a series synthesising what we have learned from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative so far about influencing children’s learning. Further synthesis reports will be issued between now and 2015 when more evaluations on children’s learning become available from the initiative.

Other reports from the ‘Capturing the Learning’ project focus on what we have learnt from the initiative about influencing parenting\(^1\); child behaviour and conduct\(^2\); social inclusivity; and children’s health and development. A report is also available examining what the organisations learned about choosing, developing and implementing innovations and evaluating their outcomes.\(^3\)

---

\(^1\) Sneddon and Owens, 2013
\(^2\) Statham, 2013
\(^3\) Sneddon \textit{et al}, 2012
Structure of report
Following this Overview, the present report is structured as follows:

Section 2 contains an overview of the policy context for implementing strategies to improve outcomes for children. An outline is provided of the rationale for why prevention and early intervention work to support children’s learning is important now and in the future, and the evidence base for effective strategies/programmes to influence children’s learning is reviewed.

In Section 3, a brief description is given of the 10 programmes that currently have evaluation findings in the public domain. The approach of each is outlined, its key components are described and the main evaluation findings currently available are summarised.

The 10 programmes that support children’s learning are as follows:

- **Preparing for Life (PFL) (Northside)** is a home-based early intervention/prevention programme designed to support families from pregnancy until their child starts school. PFL focuses on child development and parenting. Child development supports relate to the stage of development of each child.

- **Growing Child Parenting Programme (Lifestar)** is a parent-directed child-centred learning programme on child development delivered to parents of children aged from birth to five years of age. It is a structured month-by-month curriculum of information, knowledge and practical learning activity for parents consisting of age-specific information on child development supported by art, story, music and movement resources tailored to suit each individual child and family. The programme is delivered by trained family visitors in the parent’s own home.

- **Eager and Able to Learn (Early Years)** is a comprehensive centre-based and home-based early care and education programme for children aged 2–3. The targeted outcomes include that children are motivated to learn; that they are socially and emotionally able to enter into relationships with adults and other children so learning can be promoted; and that cognitively they are able to take advantage of learning opportunities.

- **3, 4, 5 Learning Years (youngballymun)** provides active support and coaching for the implementation of the Síolta National Quality Standards and the HighScope curriculum in Early Years services, supporting children’s social and emotional development, and language and literacy skills.

- **CDI Early Years (Childhood Development Initiative)** is an early childhood care and education programme for children aged 2½–3. It is designed to develop and enhance all domains of children’s physical, psychological and social well-being, including their cognitive skills and language development, their social and emotional development, and their capacity for learning. It also seeks to support the child’s family by focusing on parents’ psychological health, building on their parenting strategies and encouraging a positive parent–child relationship.

- **Incredible Years Programme**—this is delivered by two different service providers in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative. Youngballymun takes a whole-school approach to supporting the social and emotional development of primary school-aged children through building their capacity, as well as that of their parents and teachers, and building community-based family support services. Archways has undertaken separate evaluations of the teacher,
parent and child strands of the Incredible Years Programme. In this report, the findings are reported of the Teacher Classroom Management Programme, which trains and supports teachers in classroom management techniques.

- **Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)** (Barnardos, NI) is a universal whole-school social and emotional learning (SEL) programme that seeks to change/build upon a school’s ethos and culture. It involves scripted lessons delivered by teachers during normal class time.

- **Write Minded** (youngballymun) is an area-based literacy strategy that works across schools and community to build children’s literacy and language competency through the following elements: the implementation of a balanced literacy framework; tailored capacity-building activities and coaching; an integrated family and school transition programme; rigorous data capturing and review; training and capacity-building of parents and community-based practitioners; and the integration of literacy across a multiple of community-based services and supports.

- **Doodle Den** (Childhood Development Initiative) is an after-school programme for children aged 5-6. It aims to improve children’s literacy, contribute to more frequent school attendance, encourage more learning outside of school and increase parental involvement in out-of-school time education. It also aims to enhance children’s relationships with their parents and peers.

- **Time to Read** (Business in the Community) is an in-school volunteer mentoring programme for children at primary school level. It focuses on supporting literacy and aims to make a positive impact on children’s self-esteem, reading ability, aspirations and expectations for the future, and enjoyment of education.

All of these programmes operate from a ‘prevention and early intervention’ perspective in that they work to effect change in children’s learning – supporting them in their engagement and attainment in their current stage of learning, and recognising the long-term potential benefits throughout their lives. Some of the programmes focus on improving children’s engagement and interest in learning, while others focus on specific skills such as improving children’s literacy.

Evaluations have been completed for most of these services. The Preparing for Life (PFL) evaluation is still ongoing and the results reported here represent the findings from participation in the first 12 months of a 5-year programme. More findings will be released from Preparing for Life approximately every 6 months between now and 2015. The Growing Child Parenting Programme evaluation is also still ongoing and the results reported here represent the findings from participation, on average, in the first 10 months of a 5 year programme. More findings will be released from the Growing Child Parenting Programme when the children are 2.5 and 5 years old.

In **Section 4**, discussion of the findings from the evaluations of these Prevention and Early Intervention programmes are presented, drawing out the commonalities and differences in the approaches and the effects of these. This is followed by the key learning gained from the evaluations and a summary of the implications for improving outcomes for children.

The report concludes with a list of **References** that informed the report.
This is the first report from CES in relation to the Children’s Learning outcome. Future reports in this Children’s Learning series will be issued between 2013 and 2015 as evaluations become available and will include further learning from *Preparing for Life* (Northside), *Ready to Learn* (Barnardos, NI), *Tús Maith* (Barnardos, ROI), *Wizards of Words* (Barnardos, ROI), *Growing Child Parenting Programme* (Lifestart) and *Out of School Time* (Rialto).
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective

Poor educational attainment is linked to a number of poorer outcomes throughout adult life and can even influence outcomes for the next generation. Often when we think about successful learning outcomes, we highlight specific competencies or skills such as literacy or numeracy. These are useful indicators of learning, but there is also an increasing recognition of the importance of encouraging children to engage meaningfully in the world around them in ways appropriate to their stage of development. This section includes a review of how to best support children’s love of learning as well as specific skills such as literacy. It begins with a brief overview of why children’s learning is an important area to invest in from a prevention and early intervention point of view. Levels of attainment in Ireland are outlined, as well as some of the recent policy initiatives in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that aim to improve children’s learning experiences and outcomes. Some of the problems associated with poor learning outcomes are described.

There is a substantial body of international and local evidence on ways to successfully influence children’s learning and attainment. The brief review of evidence presented here relates particularly to the approaches undertaken in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative in Ireland. It reviews evidence of the effectiveness of these types of approaches to improving children’s literacy outcomes and to their wider engagement in learning and attainment. This includes the importance of working with parents, Early Years settings and locating interventions in schools, such as after-school clubs, one-to-one tutoring and programmes that have been mainstreamed into the curriculum.

Why children’s learning is an important area for investment

Many of the problems which adults experience and which are the focus of a range of social policies have their origins in early childhood. It is no coincidence that the health services (particularly mental health, criminal justice systems and social welfare systems) are largely populated by people who have experienced multiple problems and disadvantage stemming from their early experiences. Prevention and early intervention polices and initiatives aim to ‘nip in the bud’ the early indicators of these problems and to support a trajectory to more positive outcomes, particularly for those in areas of social and economic disadvantage. Prevention and early Intervention initiatives support today’s children to become healthy, socially and economically engaged adults in the future. The interventions, programmes and practices employed today by schools, parents and community services can have far-reaching effects throughout the life course, which are beneficial not only to those children and families but also to their communities and the wider societal and political systems in which we live.

One of the building blocks for positive adult outcomes is a good education. Success in school sets children on a road to learning that can carry them through life. The social and economic costs of school failure are very high and can take diverse forms, including increased criminality, lower rates of economic growth, lower intergenerational effects on children and parents, higher public health spending, higher unemployment, lower social cohesion and even lower participation in political and civic activities. For children to succeed in school, they need to be engaged in the learning process and attain a good foundation in both literacy and numeracy. Both the school environment and home

---

4 Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2013
environment need to be supportive. Parental engagement and support is a key element in successful child outcomes.

Children who do not learn to read, write and communicate effectively at primary level will struggle in other academic areas and are more likely to leave school at a younger age. Literacy difficulties are linked to costly special educational needs provision, truancy and exclusion from school. This, in turn, has negative consequences for the individuals in the longer term in terms of their choice of employment.

**What are the long-term problems associated with poor educational outcomes?**

Poor educational attainment (particularly with respect to literacy) is linked to a number of poorer outcomes throughout adult life. Adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills are:

- four times more likely to be unemployed;
- if employed, more likely to be in a low-paid, low-skilled job;
- more likely to suffer from ill-health or depression;
- more likely to be dependent on State benefits;
- more likely to be in poor housing.

Both men and women with very poor literacy skills are two to three times more likely than those with good literacy skills to smoke heavily, drink alcohol more than once a week and be obese on a body mass index calculation. These findings are independent of social disadvantage. They are also more likely to suffer poorer mental health throughout their lives; for example, women with low literacy skills are five times more likely to be classified as depressed than those with good skills. Adults with low levels of literacy are also more likely to end up in the criminal justice system.

A recent UK study estimated how much these problems cost over time. The total resulting costs to the public purse to age 37 in the UK arising from failure to learn to read in the primary school years are estimated at between £44,797 (lower bound figure) and £53,098 (upper bound figure) for each individual. These conservative estimates take into account educational costs such as special needs support, behaviour, exclusions and truancy, cost of unemployment and low wages, health costs and estimated costs of crime.

Providing effective early intervention literacy support is shown to reap financial benefits over time. One review put the average economic benefits of early education programmes for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds at close to two and a half times the initial investment. The Reading Recovery Intervention Programme, used in Every Child a Reader in the UK, is aimed at struggling 6-year-olds: the return on investment for every £ spent in this programme is estimated to be in the range of £14.81 to £17.56 between the time of intervention at age 6 and when the participants reach the age of 37.

---

5 Torgesen *et al*, 1997
6 KPMG Foundation, 2006
7 Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2009
8 Bynner and Parsons, 1997a and 1997b; KPMG Foundation, 2006; French, 2012
9 KPMG Foundation, 2006
10 Public Health Agency, 2011
11 KPMG Foundation, 2006
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective

Within education, the costs of literacy failure are greater in the secondary phase (age 11 onwards) than in the primary phase (ages 4-11). In purely economic terms, the costs to primary schools of providing intervention outweigh the immediate economic benefits. The KPMG Foundation (2006) in its economic analysis of the benefits of literacy support suggests that in economic terms it may be difficult to persuade primary schools to shoulder the full costs of intervention without targeted top-up funding. KPMG concluded that when a long-term view is undertaken of the benefits of literacy support, employment-related costs form the largest category of savings. Cost to the education system and the costs of crime provide the next largest categories where return on the investment is likely to be shown over time.

What is the current situation?

In both the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, there have been several policy initiatives developed to tackle the issues of poor literacy and attainment. Although both jurisdictions have high standards of education, there have been serious concerns about the gaps in educational engagement and attainment, and subsequent poor outcomes, for children living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and the long-term adverse impacts.

In Northern Ireland, in 2010-11, about 9,000 pupils left full-time education having not achieved the required standard in literacy and numeracy. A recent report from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2013) reports that the situation is slowly improving, but the wide gap between the highest and lowest achieving children continues to be challenging. There are strong links between low attainment and social deprivation, as well as further disparities in pupil achievement according to gender, residence and religion. As pupils progress from primary to secondary school, performance declines:

- At the end of primary school (around age 11), more than 1 in 6 does not achieve the expected standard in literacy and numeracy.
- By Key Stage 3 (around age 14), more than 1 in 5 does not achieve the required standards.
- By GCSE (age 16), 2 in 5 fail to achieve standards necessary to continue to 6th Form studies at school, further education, training or begin employment.

A report by the Chief Inspector (2010) in Northern Ireland found poor quality teaching in just under one-fifth of primary schools and one-quarter of post-primary schools. The Northern Ireland Audit Office highlighted that while there are good practice mechanisms in many schools, these are not being consistently and systematically applied. It recommended that schools and teachers should be encouraged to continually evaluate the learning needs of their pupils; they should expand the repertoire of strategies to personalise literacy and numeracy learning, improve school leadership by sharing best practice, and boost the home learning environment by partnerships between communities and the education services. It highlights that ongoing organisational learning is needed not only at the level of the school, but also at the level of the system.

Findings from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 found that 1 in 6 students in the Republic of Ireland is now estimated to have poor reading skills and almost one-quarter (23%) of males achieved a score that is considered to be below the level of literacy. Results also showed that almost 1 in 5 of all Irish 15-year-olds and almost 1 in 4 teenage boys lack the literacy skills to adequately function in today’s society. Similarly, in a Barnardos study of Early

12 Perkins et al, 2009
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective

Literacy and Numeracy Matters, findings showed that 1 in 5 Irish teenagers did not have sufficient mathematical skills to get by on a day-to-day basis.\(^\text{13}\)

There are many common threads across both jurisdictions in terms of the recognition that there is a dire need to improve outcomes in children’s learning, attainment and engagement, and there is a commitment within Government in both jurisdictions to act to improve the current situation.

Policy in Northern Ireland

Following reports citing literacy and numeracy deficits by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, a Literacy and Numeracy Task Force was set up in 2008 to advise Government on developing a revised Strategy, building on the 1998 Literacy and Numeracy Programme. At the same time, following extensive consultation, the Every School a Good School Improvement Policy was launched by the Department of Education. Its overall aim was to ‘produce well-rounded learners, confident and mature socially, able to contribute positively to society and with, at the very least, the basic skills in literacy and numeracy’. It planned to achieve this through whole-school improvement and raising levels of attainment for all children.

This policy sits alongside and is implemented in conjunction with the 2011 Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, Count, Read, Succeed, which encompasses a number of the work strands known to contribute to improved literacy and numeracy. These include early intervention, training and support to teachers and recognition of their centrality in pupil attainment, engagement with families and communities, providing the revised curriculum (which has a strong literacy and numeracy focus), emphasis on assessment to support the curriculum, and identifying and disseminating best practice. Both these policies are driving change in the education system to improve outcomes for all children.

In December 2012, a new Early Years Strategy, Learning to Learn, was released by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland for consultation. This draft strategy is underpinned by the following principles:

- **The early years education and learning needs of all children is the key focus of provision:** The individual characteristics and needs of each child are recognised and respected, and early years education and learning provision helps them develop cognitively, emotionally, physically and socially.

- **Education and learning begins at birth:** The importance of the home-learning environment, and children’s overall experiences from birth, in improving educational outcomes is recognised and supported through working in partnership with parents and carers as the child’s first and ongoing educators.

- **Children and their families are entitled to high-quality, age-appropriate early years education and learning services and opportunities:** Delivered in safe and inclusive environments, led by a skilled workforce and evaluated against quality standards, where the importance of play in its own right and as a pedagogical tool is recognised.

- **The rights of children and their families are respected:** Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life and as such it should be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right and for the significant foundation it provides for future and life-long learning.

\(^\text{13}\) French, 2012
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention
and early intervention perspective

- **Equity and inclusion are essential characteristics of quality early years education and learning:** All children, regardless of their special educational needs, disabilities, gender, cultural, religious, socio-economic or linguistic backgrounds are provided with practical, challenging activities in a stimulating environment which help them achieve their potential.

- **Collaborative working among the statutory, voluntary and other relevant sectors and professional bodies will play an important part in securing improved outcomes for young children in their early years:** Recognising that children are provided with other opportunities to learn and develop outside funded and formal education provision (such as child-minding and day-care).

This draft 2012 strategy complements wider Executive policies and Early Years education and learning services that assist in the delivery of a range of outcomes for children and families, such as those set out in the Programme for Government 2011-2015, Children and Young People’s 10-Year Plan, Play and Leisure Policy, Child Poverty, Cohesion Sharing and Integration, and emerging themes and outcomes in the forthcoming child care policy, as well as the new Delivering Social Change Framework. Trying to engage parents to support their children’s learning is also a key principle of the Department of Education’s school improvement policy, *Every School a Good School*. The Department of Education supports a number of programmes to engage with parents through the extended and full service schools and best practice in pre-school, as well as through Sure Start programmes. The Department’s initiative entitled ‘Get involved, because education works’ aims to get more parents involved in their child’s education and provides practical examples to help parents read, count, play and talk to their children. The Department has also recently launched a public awareness campaign to promote parental engagement in children’s learning through posters and TV advertisements.

**Policy in Republic of Ireland**

In the Republic of Ireland, the importance of children’s literacy and numeracy skills has been most recently reflected in the Department of Education and Skills’ (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: National Strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people, 2011-2020*. This national strategy sets out a number of recommendations in relation to the curriculum, including building the capacity of school leaders, enhancing teaching skills through the provision of continuing professional development, strengthening and extending the duration of initial teacher education, and promoting a greater awareness among parents and the community of the importance of literacy and numeracy and their role in relation to literacy and numeracy.

In 2009, the Republic of Ireland introduced a free universal year of early childhood education available to all families. In addition to this, many schools in the Republic of Ireland in areas of social and economic disadvantage have been designated as part of the DEIS initiative (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). This was set up in 2005 by the Department of Education and Science, and brought together a range of national programmes to address educational disadvantage throughout the school system. Included in the initiative is an action plan for educational inclusion of 3-18 year-olds, which includes the provision of additional teaching resources and other supports for primary and post-primary schools, with a focus on improving literacy.

Several different policy initiatives are currently being developed in 2013, including a national policy framework comprising the next phase of the National Children’s Strategy, Early Years Strategy and
Youth Strategy. These build on The Agenda for Children’s Services\(^\text{14}\), which lists as one of the 7 National Outcomes that all children should be supported in active learning. This Agenda is a framework that applies the principles of the National Children’s Strategy (2000) to the implementation of policies through service delivery. The National Children’s Strategy was a 10-year strategy seeking to establish a ‘whole child’ perspective in the centre of policy development and service delivery. It highlighted, for example, a focus on the importance of childcare and early childhood education services in providing lasting cognitive, social and emotional benefits for children, particularly those with special needs or who are disadvantaged.

The establishment of a dedicated Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011 with a clear remit to drive the coordination of policy for young children, and the co-location of the Early Years Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills with the Department for Children and Youth Affairs, have strengthened the case for more coordination at national level.

**What factors are associated with poor learning outcomes?**

There is growing body of international and local evidence on issues that are associated with poor learning and attainment. Understanding of the wider influences on a child’s development, such as family, socio-economic background and the impact of barriers to learning, is increasing.\(^\text{15}\) A brief outline of some of these influences is given below.

**Disadvantage**

Children and young people living in disadvantaged areas are known to be at risk of poorer performance in school.\(^\text{16}\) Children being brought up in poverty are more likely to have less spoken language skills than children living in more affluent conditions.\(^\text{17}\) The attainment gap between children from rich and poor backgrounds can be seen before a child reaches 2 years of age and widens throughout the education system. For example, children from the lowest income homes are half as likely to get 5 good GCSEs at age 16 (General Certificates in Secondary Education) and go on to higher education.\(^\text{18}\)

The gap in reading performance between socially disadvantaged children and those who are not is arguably one of the most salient issues in education policy. The literacy performance of students in schools designated as disadvantaged continues to fall behind that of other students.\(^\text{19}\) In 2008/09 in Northern Ireland, the number of school leavers who achieved at least 5 GCSEs at Grades A–C ranged from 100% in more affluent areas to less than 30% in deprived areas.\(^\text{20}\) Similarly, in the Republic of Ireland one study found that over a quarter (27%-30%) of children in schools in disadvantaged areas had serious literacy difficulties.\(^\text{21}\) Another study of 12 disadvantaged schools in Ireland identified nearly half of the children as having very low reading scores.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{14}\) OMC, 2007  
\(^{15}\) Department of Education, 2012; Hanlon and Hayes, 2006  
\(^{16}\) Roulstone et al, 2011  
\(^{17}\) French, 2012  
\(^{18}\) Sharples et al, 2011  
\(^{19}\) Weir and Archer, 2005; Slavin et al, 2005  
\(^{20}\) Public Health Agency, 2011  
\(^{21}\) Eivers et al, 2005  
\(^{22}\) Department of Education and Science, 2005
This link with disadvantage may reflect several risk factors. For example, socially disadvantaged children are more likely to have poor communication skills and significant language delays, difficulties that become more pronounced as children progress through the educational system. Health and academic achievement are also closely linked, with failure to maintain at least a reasonable level of health very often a barrier to achievement, and low achievement being an indicator of poor health in later life. The Growing up in Ireland study also showed that 9 year old children from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to engage in the kinds of out-of-school activities which appear to enhance academic performance. They suggested that in the longer term, children’s recreation patterns may serve to widen the social class gap in achievement.

Gender
In the UK, most of the children (68%) with very poor literacy skills are boys. This over-representation is much greater for literacy than for mathematics, where only 55% of the very low achievers are boys. Boys in Belfast have the worst literacy levels in Northern Ireland expected for their age, with two-thirds failing to achieve expected levels for their age in reading and writing. The Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) study highlighted that pre-school and school staff should be aware that boys may be at increased ‘risk’ of developing special educational needs for cognitive development and aspects of social development. It suggested that increased focus on the needs of boys, as learners, linked with appropriate staff development may have long-term benefits and help reduce the gender gap.

Ethnic groups
In the UK, children with poor reading skills are more likely to be learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) than the population as a whole (15% compared to 10%) and slightly less likely to be of white UK origin (72% compared to 77%). Poverty, however, appears to be more influential than either EAL status or ethnicity.

Looked-after children
Looked-after children are more likely to experience speech and language issues and to have higher levels of disabilities and statements of special educational needs. They are five times more likely to be suspended from school than children from the general school population.

Children with social and emotional behavioural problems
A child’s emotional well-being impacts on his or her ability to concentrate and therefore to learn. Children with behavioural problems or anti-social behaviour are likely to also show reading difficulties and this link remains even when home background and general cognitive ability are taken into account.
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective

What does successful learning mean?

Often when we think about successful learning outcomes, we focus on specific competencies or skills, such as literacy and numeracy. How well can a child read compared to his or her peers? Can they count and successfully solve mathematical problems? Progress through our educational systems is demarcated by tests and examinations that assess how well we have acquired various skills. For many, two of the key indicators for successful learning are literacy and numeracy, and these are key skills throughout life both for daily living as well as for employment. Literacy development includes oral language, reading and writing. The beginning of literacy and numeracy development is embedded in the everyday actions, drawing, thoughts and communications of babies, toddlers and young children. Reading and writing begin with learning language and looking at books in infancy. Numeracy begins with hearing the language of mathematics in play by singing number rhymes (e.g. ‘One, two, buckle my shoe’), judging whether items are the same or different, bigger or smaller, developing spatial awareness and understanding patterns and sequences. Early childhood literacy skills that have been identified as strong predictors of later achievement include having a large vocabulary, being capable of explanatory talk, demonstrating some letter identification before the age of 5, understanding narrative and story, understanding writing functions, knowing nursery rhymes and showing some phonological awareness of how language sounds.31

There is a growing recognition that while specific skills like literacy and numeracy are important indicators of learning, we also need to actively encourage children’s ability to engage meaningfully in the work around them in ways appropriate to their stage of development, particularly in the early years. There is a need to focus on giving children a love of learning, as well as on what skills they gain, to improve outcomes and support life-long learning.

When do problems start to manifest themselves?

For many children, underachievement begins in primary school, when they fail to grasp the basic concepts of reading and writing. Children who fall behind on reading in earlier grades struggle to become fluent readers unless they receive support in the right environment. Longitudinal studies have shown that children who fail to gain adequate basic literacy skills at an early stage are unlikely to catch up later.

As children grow, they experience several key transitions during their school years. These include the transition from home life to possibly day care, pre-school or nursery school, primary or junior school, secondary school, college and possibly further education. Some of these transitions may be a consequence of the child reaching a certain age, while others, such as continuing with formal education after compulsory school attendance, are contingent on achieving a certain level of attainment in examinations. These transitions mark not only a change in location, often from small-scale to large-scale interactions, but also potentially a change from highly personalised to less personalised relationships and from environments with a limited range of ages to an institution with children of many ages. There may also be important changes to a different learning, education and care paradigm.32

31 French, 2012
32 Royal Children’s Hospital, 2008
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective

The child’s readiness when they first begin at school is a crucial milestone and the impact of ‘unreadiness’ can be long term, extending into adulthood. This is partly because skills develop cumulatively, so those that are acquired early form a sound foundation for those developed later. The transition to school is particularly problematic for vulnerable children.

**Summary**

Poor educational outcomes are often associated with poorer experiences throughout life. Even though there are high standards of education in Ireland, there have been concerns that children are not reaching their full potential in terms of educational outcomes. Several policy initiatives address these issues. The next section outlines the key components of evidence-based strategies, similar to those funded under the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative in Ireland, that have been shown to improve children’s learning outcomes.

**Strategies to support learning and engagement**

There is a substantial body of international and local evidence on ways to successfully influence children’s learning and attainment. In this section, a summary is given of evidence-based approaches that have been shown to successfully influence children’s educational outcomes and engagement in learning. It is not an exhaustive review, but relies on systematic reviews or quality synthesis of the evidence where possible. It focuses on similar approaches to those used in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative. The aim is to highlight the key components for each approach that are thought to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. These may be useful to consider when selecting or planning an approach in each of these areas.

Approaches include working with parents, improving provision in Early Years settings and locating interventions in schools, such as after-school clubs, one-to-one tutoring and programmes that have been mainstreamed into the curriculum. A small number of case studies are included as illustrative examples of how this approach is being used in Ireland. The selection of these as examples is not meant to imply these are any more successful or better than the numerous other examples of similar work underway all over Ireland.

**Helping children to learn from birth**

Children benefit from school most if they have been supported to learn and engage with the world around them from birth. The family environment and early childcare settings are critical. What and how children learn depends on the quality and nature of the relationships they have with their parents and caregivers. It also hinges on the richness and variety of the experiences they are provided with and how they are encouraged to interact with the world around them and learn. Children who grow up from birth in a caring, responsive environment that has given them supported, learning opportunities arrive at school with a history of learning behind them and a readiness to learn. They are more likely to have the core skills and competencies that schools are able to build on and the effects of this ‘school readiness’ can be seen beyond the initial years of school. School ‘unreadiness’ is expensive. Later attempts to compensate are less effective and may

---

33 Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005
34 Feinstein and Bynner, 2004; Sylva et al, 2004
35 Royal Children’s Hospital, 2008
be more expensive than providing the resources, programmes and supports needed to ensure that children start school ready to continue learning.36

A child’s readiness to attend school can be defined as having five dimensions: physical health and well-being; socio-emotional development; approaches to learning; language development and emergent literacy; and cognition and general knowledge. Language development at the age of 2 years has been shown to predict children’s performance on entry to primary school in the UK.37 The concept of school readiness is broader than just a case of individual maturation in the child. Readiness also reflects the environments in which children find themselves – their families, early childhood settings, neighbourhoods and communities.38 This broader concept of school readiness is now seen as having four interrelated components: children’s readiness for school, school’s readiness for children, and the capacities of families and of communities to provide developmental opportunities for their young children.

The importance of parents in supporting children’s learning

Parents play a critical role in supporting their children’s learning. It is what they do with their children that makes the difference to children’s learning outcomes, more so than socio-economic status per se.39 What a mother does during pregnancy can influence her baby’s development at birth, such as substance use.40 A key enabler is how the parent engages with their child and takes responsibility for learning from birth. A warm, loving and reciprocal family relationship with fewer life stresses in the home can facilitate children’s pro-social behaviour and ability to concentrate. A parent who takes part in child-centred activities, such as play, can influence their child’s social and emotional development and the behaviour that he or she shows in the classroom. Having a parent who reads with their child, provides a place in the home for educational activities, talks to their child about what they do in school and provides complementary learning experiences (such as trips to the zoo, library visits, sporting activities) can change the influence of poverty on the child’s language and literacy development and improve learning outcomes. This type of active support and encouragement can influence children’s motivation to learn, their attention, task persistence and receptive vocabulary, with the outcome that they are more likely to succeed in school. All parents, including those with low income and/or few qualifications, can improve their children’s progress and give them a better start at school by engaging in activities that engage and stretch the child’s mind.41

How parents engage with the child’s school is also important, for example, taking part in activities and being in regular communication. The home–school relationship can help buffer against the negative effects of poverty and is linked to children’s language, self-help, social, motor, adaptive and basic school skills, according to a study by the Harvard Family Research Project.42

However, the degree to which parents are able (or feel able) to provide active support to their child’s literacy development varies. Families are not always aware of the literacy practices and skills

36 Royal Children’s Hospital, 2008
37 Roulstone et al, 2011
38 Royal Children’s Hospital, 2008; Emig et al, 2001
39 Sylva et al, 2010
40 Kelly et al, 2009; Thapar et al, 2003
41 Melhuish et al, 2006; Fantuzzo et al, 2004; Christian et al, 1998; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003
42 Caspe and Lopez, 2006
valued by schools and there may be variations in the involvement and practice within families. Parents with very low levels of literacy tend to have children who also score exceptionally low in reading. Parental attitudes to school also contribute to literacy levels among their children. Close (2001) stressed the importance of raising the self-confidence of parents and carers in relation to their children’s literacy development.

**Effective practice in Early Years settings**

Pre-school education has been shown to be an effective means of improving outcomes in children. High-quality pre-school provision has been shown to positively influence children’s intellectual and social behavioural development. The type of pre-school centre is important and research indicates that better outcomes are associated with certain types of provision. The EPPNI Study in Northern Ireland found that children benefit more from nursery school, nursery class or playgroup than from other types of pre-school provision. Private day nurseries in Northern Ireland did not provide as much measurable benefit for children’s development as nursery schools, nursery classes or playgroups. Quality of setting has been shown to influence outcomes, as well as staff training and qualifications.

Best practice approaches that improve practice in Early Years settings have been identified:

- Integrating childcare and education (as well as high-quality pre-school provision) may have a long-term beneficial impact on cognitive and behavioural outcomes, at least up to the age of 11.
- Combined approaches to intervention that focus on both children and family members seem to be effective, but it may be the quality rather than the type of integration that matters in terms of improving outcomes. What is expected in terms of ‘quality’ needs to be clearly understood by all personnel and a common terminology used. To ensure success, there also needs to be an emphasis on planning for individual needs, promotion of cultural understanding and good leadership.
- The quality of the workforce is an important determinant of successful outcomes. For example, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Study in the UK found that settings with staff having higher levels of qualifications have higher quality scores and their children make more progress. A survey on the educational attainment of the childcare workforce in Ireland indicated that, in 2007/08, 41% of the workforce had attained a FETAC Level 5 qualification in childcare, while 12% of the childcare workforce held no formal childcare qualifications. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs recognised this lack of a fully qualified workforce in childcare settings as affecting the rate at which issues of child development (as opposed to child protection) could be addressed and moved forward.

One example of an approach that can be implemented in day care settings to improve children’s learning outcomes is HighScope (see Box 1).

---

43 Brooker, 2002; Nutbrown et al, 2005; KPMG Foundation, 2006; Evans et al, 2000; Sonnenschein and Munsterman, 2002; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002
44 Melhuish et al, 2006
45 Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2009
46 Melhuish et al, 2006
47 SQW, 2012
Box 1: HighScope approach

HighScope is an educational approach that emphasizes active participatory learning. The HighScope curriculum is based on active participatory learning, with children benefiting from direct hands-on experiences with people, objects, events and ideas (see www.highscope.org). The HighScope curriculum is broken down into a number of key areas: approaches to learning; language literacy and communication; social and emotional development; physical development, health and well-being; maths, arts, sciences and social studies. There is a predictable sequence of events with activities that are included every day. There are a set of 58 key development indicators against which a child’s progress is recorded over time. Pre-school settings implementing the HighScope approach are also evaluated in order to check whether they are delivering with sufficient fidelity. The US-based HighScope Perry Pre-school Project has been evaluated for over 40 years and has found that adults who had been through the programme in childhood are less likely to be benefit recipients, less likely to have been arrested, more likely to have graduated from High School and have higher monthly earnings. The evidence from the research suggests that for every $1 invested, $13 is saved by the taxpayer.48 The HighScope approach is used in many settings across Ireland.

Interventions in school settings

Schools provide a major focus for children’s learning. Sharples et al (2011) summarised the best available evidence on strategies known to be effective in closing the gap in educational achievement for children and young people, particularly for those living in poverty. They highlighted emerging research in the UK that suggested outcomes for children living in poverty could be improved by rigorous monitoring and use of data; raising pupil aspirations using engagement/aspiration programmes; engaging parents and raising parental aspirations; developing social and emotional competencies; supporting school transitions; and providing strong and visionary leadership. International research evidence based on experimental trials identifies some common classroom strategies that have been shown to work across different subjects and educational phases to improve outcomes for children:

- Adopting new curricula does not in general produce large improvements in learning outcomes.
- Whole-school reform models that tackle multiple elements of provision within a school can produce substantial improvements in academic outcomes.
- Using well-specified, well-supported and well-implemented programmes, incorporating extensive professional development, can result in powerful improvements in achievement.
- Children from deprived areas respond positively to opportunities that raise their aspirations for learning and future success.
- The quality of teaching makes the biggest difference to learning outcomes.
- Coaching teachers/teaching assistants in specific teaching strategies significantly improves outcomes. Successful evidence-based approaches include cooperative learning (structured groupwork), frequent assessment and ‘learning to learn’ strategies.

48 SQW, 2012
Many successful interventions use proven classroom management strategies, such as a rapid pace of instruction, using all-pupil responses and developing a common language for discipline.

Whole-class approaches for information and communication technology (ICT), such as the use of interactive whiteboards and embedded multimedia, show greater promise than traditional ICT, such as individualised, self-instructional programmes.

Individual children will vary in terms of how easily and quickly they develop literacy skills. A number of evaluations have been undertaken to explore what is the best way to support children to acquire and use these skills, and how to help those who are struggling. Some of these involve changes to the curriculum or teaching practices of the teacher during class-time. Others involve additional support to specific groups of children, such as those who are encountering difficulties, and these may be provided in pull-out or booster sessions during the school day or alternatively outside of school hours, such as in after-school clubs or homework clubs. Support may be given one-to-one with a child or provided in a group setting, and can be delivered by trained professionals or volunteers. Sharples et al (2011) concluded that the best ways to support struggling readers living in poverty included:

- Structured phonics-based approaches generally are more successful than non-phonics approaches.
- One-to-one tutoring by qualified teachers is very effective in improving literacy, but the cost may be prohibitive. An alternative may be tutoring by teaching assistants and volunteers who can produce successful results if they are well trained and use structured phonics materials.
- Intervening immediately is most effective for primary reading, where preventative whole-class strategies are adopted first, followed by tutoring for the small number of pupils who still need it.

An example of a school-based approach to changing how literacy is taught is given in Box 2.

---

Box 2:

The Enriched Curriculum Project

The Enriched Curriculum Project in Northern Ireland is an example of a strategy to change how literacy is taught and supported by teachers during class within the first few years of primary school. It was devised jointly by the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) to address perceived problems in the formal traditional curriculum for school entry, particularly in disadvantaged areas. This is a preventative approach aimed at avoiding literacy problems. It was characterised as a developmentally appropriate curriculum and was more play-based and activity-led than the pre-existing curriculum. In Primary Years 1 and 2 (ages 5-6), it involved postponing the introduction of formal reading schemes to concentrate on oral language and emergent literacy activities, and postponing formal recorded arithmetic in favour of activities that laid the foundations for understanding basic mathematical concepts. This approach has now been included in the revised curriculum in Northern Ireland.

---

49 Sproule et al, 2005
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective

There are a number of established literacy programmes demonstrating proven effectiveness. These may be delivered during class-time, in addition to normal activities or as substitutes for other activities. An example of one curriculum-based programme delivered in class-time is given in Box 3.

Box 3: Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery is one of the best known programmes internationally, supplementing classroom teaching with one-to-one tutoring and mostly delivered through pull-out sessions during the normal school day. The programme involves a range of the core components of reading instruction, including recognising sounds in words, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, writing motivation, oral language and independence. It has been shown to improve general reading achievement and alphabetic recognition, with potential positive effects for fluency and comprehension. Research suggests that the Reading Recovery intervention will lift 79% of children who receive it out of literacy failure. A cost-benefit analysis in the UK estimated the return on investment for the programme to be around £14.81 to £17.56 between receiving the intervention at age 6 and when participants reach the age of 37.50

Common components in literacy interventions

The common components identified in literacy interventions shown to be successful for struggling readers are shown in Figure 1. Slavin et al (2011) compared four categories of interventions aimed at struggling readers and concluded that instructional process programmes (a mixed-method approach that provided teachers with an additional curriculum and professional training on how to use it) had the most impact, with some of these programmes showing better effects than others; cooperative learning and phonics-focused professional development showed particular promise. Combined curriculum and instructional process programmes also indicated promising results. Reading curricula and instructional technology programmes appeared less effective, but still resulted in some improvements.

50 KPMG Foundation, 2006
After-school programmes

An **after-school activity** is an organised programme that invites children and young people to participate in groups outside of the traditional school day. Some programmes are run by the school and some by externally funded non-profit or commercial organisations. Not all after-school groups focus on supporting literacy. However, those that do have several common elements, including access to writing tools and reading material; a lending library for children and their families; ‘enriching language environments’ with snack menus, thematic bulletin boards, posters and signs; separate areas for reading, with books displayed; and homework time on a daily basis.\(^5\)

The following advantages of after-school services as a vehicle for improving children’s literacy have been identified by Spielberger and Halpern (2002):

- they present a more relaxed environment for the child (who therefore feels safe and not under pressure);
- they offer good adult support for the child’s learning;
- they provide input in a social context that involves discussion, the sharing of ideas, collaboration, helping each other and problem-solving;
- drama, art and crafts can create informal learning settings that engage children and their parents by focusing on creativity and the visual evidence of what can be accomplished, all of which can have a knock-on effect on reading and writing.

---

\(^{5}\) Spielberger and Halpern, 2002
One of the defining characteristics of the after-school field is the sheer diversity of programme goals, activities and components.⁵² Children and young people who participate in after-school programmes can reap a host of positive benefits in a number of interrelated outcome areas – academic, social/emotional, prevention and health and wellness.⁵³ Some of the benefits associated with participation in quality after-school programmes are shown in Figure 2 (although not all show all of these outcomes and it depends on the focus of the after-school programme and its effectiveness). Key components of successful after-school programmes include the need to support a range of positive learning outcomes through hands-on experiential learning. Other common factors contributing to success are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 2: Range of outcomes associated with various after-school programmes

52 Caspe and Lopez, 2006
53 Harvard Family Research Project, 2008
Some research has noted that different groups of children use after-school programmes in different ways. Children whose families have higher incomes and more education are more likely to participate in after-school activities more frequently during an average week and take up a broader range of experiences. They are also more likely to participate in enrichment programmes, while their disadvantaged peers are more likely to take part in tutoring programmes, thus not getting the benefits associated with enrichment experiences.54

Research suggests that children and young people are likely to show greater improvements across a wide variety of outcomes if they take part more frequently (more days a week) and in a more sustained way over a number of years. However, a review of after-school programmes in the USA suggested that outcomes may be poorer if the service operates as a drop-in facility and attendance is sporadic. Literacy may also be slower to respond to interventions because it is so strongly influenced by family background. These caveats point to the value of concerted efforts to engage children and parents, and making the sessions longer than one hour, as well as highlighting why it is important to have modest expectations and to measure intermediate outcomes as well as literacy. Furthermore, care should be taken to ensure that the selected approach to enhancing literacy dovetails with the school curriculum.

Factors that may influence the results of after-school programmes for struggling readers include:55

- age – it may be most effective to target younger children in primary school;
- number of participants – there are benefits of one-to-one tutoring over group tutoring;

---

54 Harvard Family Research Project, 2008
55 Baker and Witt, 1996
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective

- **programme duration** – programmes with a duration of 44-84 hours and 85-210 hours are more likely to be effective than longer or shorter programmes;
- **frequency of participation** – there is evidence that the level of participation results in greater impact on those who take part more often.

After-school programmes may be new territory for providers. Despite this, funders are increasingly turning to the strategy to improve literacy outcomes, particularly for low and moderate income children. Some of the common implementation challenges are given below:\(^{56}\):

- The **quality of the staff** in the programme is a key issue and training may be needed. After-school staff may typically be on a low income and many will have had mixed experiences with literacy themselves.
- There may also be a need for **teacher training and support**.
- The **relationship between the school and after-school programme** needs to be considered, including issues such as shared space, aligning the curriculum to the school curriculum, and communication such as building shared trust between school and after-school personnel.
- There can be **challenges in programme complexity and delivering it consistently** (i.e. with fidelity). It is important to develop systems, structures and practices whereby the implementation of the programme can be monitored and reviewed on an ongoing basis.
- **Implementation takes time to embed** and positive changes may not be immediately apparent.
- There may be **transportation issues** if the programme is not delivered on the school site.

**One-to-one tutoring**

Another approach to supporting children and young people’s learning and development is the use of one-to-one tutoring programmes. These may include tutoring that focuses on a specific area or task (such as reading support) or focuses on the building of a supportive relationship with the young person. The tutoring may happen during the school day, with the young person being ‘pulled out’ from normal class activities, or outside of school hours in a variety of informal settings. Tutoring may be undertaken by paid professionals, although given the expense, volunteer tutoring programmes have become popular (for example, in the USA during the 1990s, a million volunteers were placed in schools to tutor children in reading). Volunteer tutoring programmes are intended to improve student performance, provide mentorship and improve student self-esteem as well as behaviour.\(^{57}\)

Interventions using trained volunteers or college students have been shown to be highly effective with elementary students at risk of reading failure. Students who work with volunteer tutors may be more likely to earn higher scores on assessments related to letters and words, oral fluency and writing as compared to their peers who are not tutored. It appears to be important for success that volunteers are trained and follow specific guidelines. Highly structured tutoring programmes have also been found to have a significantly greater effect on global reading outcomes than programmes with low structure.\(^{58}\)

Providing a positive role model for young people may improve their engagement with school and their aspirations for the future. It may encourage them to think about the relationship between

---

\(^{57}\) Wasik, 1998; Ritter et al, 2006  
\(^{58}\) Elbaum et al, 2000; Ritter et al, 2006
education and future opportunities in life. An improvement in attitudes towards school is a precursor to better school performance.

**Linking school and home**

Research shows that creating links between children’s different learning environments and care settings can improve outcomes. Complementary learning occurs when two or more institutions (including families, schools and communities) intentionally link work together to encourage consistent learning and developmental outcomes for children and young people. These linkages are continuously in place from birth through adolescence, but the composition and functions of this network change over time as children mature. These learning supports can include families, early childhood programmes, schools, out-of-school programmes and activities, higher education, health and social service agencies, business, libraries, museums and other community-based institutions.

As noted above, the family learning environment and parental support are huge influences on children’s literacy and learning (see section above on ‘The importance of parents in supporting children’s learning’). Creating links between what is done at home and what happens in school can be very beneficial. Research suggests that family engagement is a critical intervention strategy, which maximises return on investments in education. Early childhood education programmes that have demonstrated significant short- and long-term benefits for children often have family involvement components. Many interventions aim to involve parents in supporting what is being done directly with the child during school, after-school or mentoring programmes. Parental participation may include sitting in on sessions, reading with the child, doing supplementary activities with them to practise what has been learnt in a programme, and encouraging the parent to be actively involved in their child’s learning and to provide stimulating learning experiences, such as visits to the library or zoo.

Research suggests that the core district-level components necessary for systemic family engagement are:

- fostering district-wide strategies;
- building school capacity;
- reaching out to and engaging families.

Promising practices include:

- having a shared vision of family engagement by districts, schools and families;
- purposeful connections to learning;
- investments in high-quality programming and staff;
- robust communication systems to help stakeholders reach out to one another and share information in reciprocal and meaningful ways;
- evaluation for accountability and continuous learning.

An example of a project operating in the Republic of Ireland that links pre-school, primary school and home is given in Box 4.

---

59 Caspe and Lopez, 2006  
60 Westmoreland et al, 2009
Section 2: Improving children’s learning from a prevention and early intervention perspective

Box 4: Early Start Pre-school project
The Early Start Programme is a pre-school project established in 1994 in selected primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland. The programme is a one-year intervention scheme to meet the needs of children, aged between 3 yrs and 2 months and 4 yrs and 7 months, who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system.

The project involves an educational programme to enhance overall development, help prevent school failure and offset the effects of social disadvantage. The strengths and needs of each child are assessed in relation to language, cognition and social/emotional development. Young children experience a structured curriculum of play experiences designed to meet these identified needs and with an emphasis on high quality adult/child interaction. Parental involvement is one of the core elements of the programme in recognition of the parent/guardian as the prime educator of the child. Parents are encouraged to become involved in the planning, organisation and implementation of the work in each Early Start centre and this is intended to build their own capacity to influence and become involved in their children’s education.

The Early Start Units are pre-school projects located within primary schools. The teachers and childcare workers in Early Start are members of school staff and Early Start is regarded as an integral part of the primary school. Evaluations of the project suggest that it can be successfully incorporated into the Irish primary school system, parents are happy with the provision and engage. Although no effect has been shown on children’s cognitive and scholastic development, teachers reported that children who had been part of the Early Start programme showed a better transition to primary school than those who were not part of the programme.

Summary
Early childhood is a critical period for the development of skills that enable children to actively participate and succeed in learning, engagement and attainment. It is when the basic literacy skills are learned – those that equip children to communicate orally and in writing and to understand the written and spoken word, skills that will carry children into adulthood. The absence of these skills is a strong predictor of poor outcomes, not only in education but also in health, economic success and social relationships. Poor development in literacy and other learning skills are experienced across a number of sectors – education, health, social care, social welfare, justice and many others. The cost is considerable to individuals and also to the wider community. Governments, both in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, recognise the need to act to address the issue of failing literacy and are implementing strategies to improve the situation. We can identify children at risk of poor learning outcomes and we know that children growing up with poverty and disadvantage are at particular risk. In a climate of financial austerity, it is crucial that any new interventions to support children’s learning are based on best evidence of what is most likely to improve outcomes.

There have been many international evaluations of beneficial approaches to improving learning and some of the key learning from these were summarised in this section. The next section summarises the findings from the evaluations currently available from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative in Ireland.

---

61 Educational Research Centre, 1998; Kelly and Kellaghan, 1999; Lewis and Archer, 2002
### Section 3: The Programmes in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative

In this section, a summary is provided relating to each of the ten programmes that have been evaluated as part of the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative, covering the approach used (Table 1) and the main evaluation findings (Tables 2, 3 and 4). One of these programmes, Incredible Years, has been delivered and evaluated by two service providers in this initiative.

Prior to implementation, and in many instances a number of years before a child or family received a service, organisations engaged in a lengthy process involving the conducting of epidemiological studies, comprehensive needs analyses, literature and evidence reviews, preparation of logic models and programme exploration. All of the organisations engaged in extensive consultations with key stakeholders in the community. Three of the organisations selected evidence-based programmes (Incredible Years and PATHS), which they replicated with fidelity, with only minor adaptations primarily related to cultural context. Preparing for Life is a new programme developed in Ireland which has drawn heavily on the principles and theoretical components of evidence-based home-visiting programmes. Similarly the Growing Child Parenting Programme is an evidence-based programme developed originally in the USA, that has been adapted for use here with an additional home visitation component. The Doodle Den literacy programme, CDI’s Early Years, Mate-Tricks, Eager and Able to Learn and Time to Read were locally developed to address specific issues in children’s lives. Many of the programmes under discussion are delivered in areas of social disadvantage.

It is important to remember that the evaluations listed below did not all use the same evaluation methods to investigate learning. Six out of the ten programmes listed below used randomised control trials as part of their evaluation (Growing Child Parenting programme, Archways Incredible Years, Doodle Den, CDI’s Early Years, Eager and Able to Learn, PATHs and Time to Read). The remaining studies did not use randomisation but instead compared the outcomes of children to those who did not take part in the programme, to historical data or used qualitative methods of enquiry. It is important to be cognisant of the fact that the findings from the Preparing for Life and Growing Child Parenting programmes are interim results which represent the outcomes from the early stages of 5 year programmes.

The impact of the programmes were measured in several different ways, sometimes with respect to how they influenced children’s outcomes (such as reading behaviour) or how they changed the behaviour of key individuals, such as parents, Early Years professionals and teachers. Details are then given for each programme in more detail followed by a summary of the main outcomes found in the evaluations. More detail about each programme and how it was assessed can be found in the original evaluation reports (see [www.effectiveservices.org/prevention/all-publications](http://www.effectiveservices.org/prevention/all-publications)).

The costs reported for delivering the programme and cost-benefit information is given where available. It is important to note that these costs have not all been calculated in the same way so comparisons across the costs for the different programmes is difficult.
### Table 1: Overview of programmes in the report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Service/Programme</th>
<th>Target group(s)</th>
<th>Duration/intensity</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northside Partnership</td>
<td>Preparing for Life (PFL)</td>
<td>Pre-natal parents and parents with children aged 0-5</td>
<td>Monthly home visits and a range of other support for 5 years</td>
<td>A home-based early intervention/prevention programme that supports families from pregnancy until their child starts school. PFL focuses on child development and parenting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Child Parenting programme</td>
<td>Lifestart</td>
<td>Parents of children aged 0-5</td>
<td>Monthly home visits of between 30-60 minutes for 5 years</td>
<td>To help parents to support their child’s physical, intellectual, emotional and social development and to promote school readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years</td>
<td>Eager and Able to Learn</td>
<td>Children aged 2-3</td>
<td>Delivered over 8-9 months to children and 3 home visits to parents</td>
<td>A comprehensive centre-based and home-based early care and education programme. Aims to motivate children to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youngballymun (Ballymun Partnership)</td>
<td>3, 4, 5 Learning Years</td>
<td>Pre-school children, parents and early childhood service providers</td>
<td>During the course of a pre-school year</td>
<td>Provides active support and coaching for the implementation of the Siolta National Quality Standards and HighScope Curriculum in Early Years services supporting children’s social and emotional development and language and literacy skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write Minded</td>
<td>All school-aged children</td>
<td>Ongoing area-based literacy strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Area-based literacy strategy that works across school and community to build children’s literacy and language competency using multiple approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incredible Years</td>
<td>Children aged 3-12, their parents and teachers</td>
<td>60 Incredible Years lessons delivered over 2 years. Parents and teachers had 12 and 5 sessions, respectively</td>
<td></td>
<td>Implementation of the evidence-based Incredible Years school and family programmes, by taking a whole-school approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood Development Initiative (CDI)</td>
<td>Doodle Den</td>
<td>Children aged 5-6</td>
<td>1.5 hours per week for 36 weeks and 3 family and 6 parent sessions</td>
<td>An in-school and after-school literacy programme, including child, parent and family components.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDI Early Years</td>
<td>Programme starts when children are aged 2½-3</td>
<td>Pre-school and other types of support for 2 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Service for pre-school children, providing integrated healthcare, wrap-around supports and professional development elements. The programme also works with the child’s family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archways</td>
<td>Teacher Classroom Management (Incredible Years Programme)</td>
<td>Children aged 4-7</td>
<td>Teacher training was 1 day a month over 5 months</td>
<td>Trains and supports teachers in classroom management techniques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Service/ Programme</td>
<td>Target group(s)</td>
<td>Duration/ intensity</td>
<td>Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnardos NI</td>
<td>Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS)</td>
<td>Children aged 5-11</td>
<td>Delivered over 3 academic years</td>
<td>Universal whole-school social and emotional learning (SEL) programme that seeks to change/build upon a school’s ethos and culture. It involves scripted lessons delivered by teachers during normal class time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business in the Community (BITC)</td>
<td>Time to Read</td>
<td>Children aged 9-10</td>
<td>2 half-hour sessions every week during school time</td>
<td>An in-school volunteering mentoring programme for children at primary school level, focused on supporting literacy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Preparing for Life (Northside Partnership)**

The Preparing for Life (PFL) Programme was developed over a 5-year period between 2003 and 2008 by a group involving 28 local agencies and community groups. It is operated by Northside Partnership in several designated disadvantaged areas of North Dublin.

The PFL Programme is a home-visiting programme which aims to improve the school readiness of children living in disadvantage, by intervening during pregnancy and continuing to work with families until their children start school. It is a manualised programme, similar in approach to the Nurse Family Partnership. It is delivered by trained, paid mentors in the home.

Two levels of the programme were evaluated – a high support group and a low support group. The progress of these families was compared to a matched comparison group from a different community who received no intervention. Both the high and low support groups receive facilitated access to enhanced pre-school, public health information, access to a support worker and €100-worth of child developmental materials annually. The first developmental pack includes a number of safety items, such as corner guards, angle latches and heat-sensitive spoons, plus a baby gym/play mat. Both groups are encouraged to attend two public health workshops or programmes in the community – the Stress Control Programme (which involves 6 one-hour weekly sessions) and the Healthy Food Made Easy Programme (which involves 6 two-hour sessions).

In addition to this, the high support group receives mentoring via regular home visits, during which they are provided with high-quality information about parenting and child development. The frequency of the visits depends on the needs of the families, with the majority of families receiving fortnightly visits and some monthly (of between 30 minutes to 2 hours). The mentors focus on 5 general areas related to child development: (1) pre-birth; (2) nutrition; (3) rest and routine; (4) cognitive and social development; and (5) mother and her supports. Tip sheets are used to facilitate the home-visiting sessions and kept by the parent. They are designed to be delivered based on the age of the child and the needs of the family; however, participants receive the full set of tip sheets by the end of the programme. Participants in the high support group also participate in the Triple P Positive Parenting Group Programme.

**Findings**

Impact has so far been assessed in 6-month old and 12-month old infants. Similar to other programmes of this type, after 6 months there were limited significant effects observed, although
most of the outcomes were starting to improve in the anticipated direction. Families in the high support group were showing improvements such as appropriate child eating patterns, high immunisation rates, more and higher quality parent–child interactions, and less parental hostility. The homes of the high support parents were significantly safer and the home environment was of a higher quality, with more appropriate learning materials and childcare. Mothers had higher quality and more frequent interactions with their child and were more patient. Results suggest that the PFL programme may be particularly beneficial to mothers with relatively higher cognitive resources, families with multiple children and families who have experienced familial risk. There were no significant effects at 6 months on children’s development, but by 12 months of age children in the high treatment group were showing a higher level of fine motor skills and less likely to be at risk for social and emotional difficulties than those in the low treatment group. Children in the high treatment group were much less likely to have parents who restricted their independence. Both the high and low treatment groups showed better child cognitive functioning than the comparison group, suggesting that some of the common programme components, such as the developmental and reading packs, may have a beneficial impact on all of those participating in the PFL Programme.

Further details of the evaluation to date are summarised in Doyle et al (2009a and 2009b, 2010a and 2010b, 2012 and 2013). The PFL Programme is ongoing and its impact will continue to be evaluated when the PFL infants are 18, 24, 36 and 48 months of age.

**Growing Child Parenting Programme (Lifestart)**

Growing Child Parenting Programme is a parent-directed child-centred learning programme on child development delivered to parents of children aged from birth to five years of age. It aims to help parents to support their child’s physical, intellectual, emotional and social development and to promote school readiness. It is a structured month-by-month curriculum of information, knowledge and practical learning activity for parents consisting of age-specific information on child development supported by art, story, music and movement resources tailored to suit each individual child and family. The programme is delivered by trained paid family visitors in the parent’s own home. It is offered to parents regardless of social, economic or other circumstances.

Every parent who joins the Lifestart programme receives a monthly issue based on the Growing Child curriculum ([www.growingchild.com](http://www.growingchild.com)) and a 30-60 minute home visit from a Lifestart family visitor. Together the issues of the Growing Child and the visit provide age-specific information on what parents can do with their child and what developmentally appropriate materials they might use. The home visit also offers the opportunity to discuss progress during the last month and focus attention according to the family’s needs.

**Findings**

A multi-site randomised control trial evaluation is currently being undertaken of the Growing Child Parenting Programme. Early stage findings available for effects after 10 months participation in the programme (when families had received on average 10 out of the 60 visits) are encouraging and suggest that the programme is showing the types of impact to be expected at this relatively early stage. Positive movements were seen with respect to seven of the nine outcomes tested. Most notably the parents in the intervention group were reported greater parental efficacy than the control group and the effect is approaching statistical significance. This finding is consistent with the Lifestart logic model that suggests the initial impact of the Lifestart programme is to improve
parental outcomes which includes confidence and efficacy. Although, as to be expected, there were no statistically significant effects on child outcomes at this early stage, there were consistently positive effects on cognitive development, fine motor development, language development and socio-emotional development. Further details of the evaluation are available in Miller et al. (2010). The progress of these children will be assessed again at 3 years and 5 years when a fuller picture of programme impact will be clearer.

**Eager and Able to Learn (Early Years, NI)**

Eager and Able to Learn is a comprehensive centre-based and home-based early care and education programme for children aged 2-3. It aims to improve the learning environment in the Early Years setting and further children’s physical, social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive development.

The Eager and Able to Learn Programme was designed by Early Years, Northern Ireland in 2007/2008 as a service targeted at 2-year-old children. It was piloted in 14 settings across Northern Ireland, comprising private day care nurseries and Sure Start programmes, between September 2008 and June 2009. The programme lasted 8-9 months. An Early Years specialist provides training to setting practitioners, in addition to workshops for parents and children.

The 4 key components of the Eager and Able to Learn Programme are:

- developmental movement experiences for children, delivered in a group setting;
- a home learning package (including parent workshops, home learning manual, resource pack and home visits);
- comprehensive training for the practitioners who deliver the programme;
- support from an Early Years specialist, including 5 on-site support visits and resource packs for the settings.

**Findings**

**Child outcomes**

Children who took part in Eager and Able to Learn had significantly improved social emotional development. Not all children showed the same changes. Those who started with higher scores in social and emotional development and play-related behaviours tended to show the largest improvements in these areas, whereas children who began the programme with lower scores on receptive communication, fine motor behaviour and social emotional behaviour showed positive effects in these areas. There was a negative effect on cognitive development, with the strongest effect being on emergent literacy skills such as recognising and naming shapes and colours and counting objects such as using fingers. There were no significant effects on the children’s gross motor development.

**Parent outcomes**

Eager and Able to Learn significantly affected parental behaviour. Parents who participated were more sensitive to how to support their children’s play and they also learned to play with their children in different ways (such as with song and dance, and using different materials). They showed more understanding of how play could be relevant to their children’s learning. They seemed to be more engaged and much more satisfied with their interactions with staff in the Early Years settings.
Practitioner and Settings outcomes
Practitioners showed improvements in how they interacted and played with the children. They were also more open to and positive about working with the children’s parents. Participating in Eager and Able to Learn improved the average quality for settings and improvements were most clearly shown in interactions between children and staff, interactions between the children, interactions between parents and staff, and between the staff themselves. Although settings were already scoring highly in these areas, Eager and Able to Learn provided an additional boost, with 20% of the settings moving into the ‘excellence’ range. Further details of the evaluation are summarised in Molyneaux et al (2012), McGuinness et al (2012a and 2012b) and Geraghty et al (2012).

3, 4, 5 Learning Years (youngballymun)
The Learning Years Service is designed to improve early childhood learning and well-being outcomes for children through the enhancement of existing pre-school services operating in the community. The 3, 4, 5 Learning Years Programme provides active support and coaching for the implementation of Síolta National Quality Standards and the HighScope Curriculum in Early Years services supporting children’s social and emotional development and language and literacy skills.

The Learning Years Service is provided by youngballymun in 8 pre-schools in a socially disadvantaged area of Dublin (Ballymun). Specially trained staff (an Early Years quality coordinator and a HighScope coordinator) work with pre-school practitioners and settings to support the implementation of Síolta and HighScope, including coaching, mentoring, information provision, training and resources.

A recent Value for Money study reported that for the economic year 2011, the running cost was €387,693. The cost per beneficiary was €697.

Findings
The evaluation showed that 3, 4 5 Learning Years resulted in improvements to the day care settings:
- quality ratings for child daily routines in the settings almost doubled post-programme;
- there were significant improvements in quality ratings for adult–child interactions and curriculum planning and assessment;
- reported improvements in interprofessional relations, working more closely with fellow-staff in settings, networking across pre-schools and taking responsibility for implementation of new practice;
- increased staff understanding of child development and quality early childhood care and education;
- increased staff confidence in giving feedback to parents and in identifying children who may benefit from additional support.

Settings that had engaged with both Síolta and HighScope found the two approaches to be complementary. As one practitioner said: ‘Síolta is about ensuring the quality of the service. HighScope helps you deliver that quality.’

The Early Years quality coordinator was seen as helping organisations cope with what otherwise would have been a complicated and daunting process and also in maintaining momentum. She helped to make the complex guidance for Síolta useable. Some settings reported that they would not have engaged with the process at all without the support of the coordinator.
Pre-school setting managers were enthusiastic about engaging with HighScope because they saw it as a positive opportunity to engage in curriculum development with dedicated resources, training and funding to help them develop their settings (e.g. physical improvements and new equipment). Both the HighScope coordinator and the HighScope trainer/assessor were seen as accessible and supportive, and their experience and expertise were valued.

The setting’s stage of development was seen to be important in terms of the type of support most beneficial to them. In a sector that has limited capacity and is in need of development (whether this be at a whole-setting level or among groups of staff), one may need the coordinator to perform a coaching role (rather than a mentoring role), which focuses on supporting practitioners to understand the concepts and theories that underpin models of early education and childcare services and to help them develop a concrete understanding of the characteristics of a quality service. Settings may need to build capacity first, for example, by engaging with the HighScope process (or another recognised curriculum) before engaging in a quality assurance process.

The Learning Years Service appears to have been successful in terms of helping pre-school settings:

- develop a common language of development, improvement and assessment, which is particularly evidenced in HighScope settings but also supports the implementation of Síolta;
- deepen their understanding of the concepts and theories underpinning high-quality early education and care;
- become more reflective in their practice and more committed to continuing professional development.

The role of the Learning Years’ team was seen to be important. Staff felt that the training had given them a deeper understanding of children’s development needs and an increased confidence in their roles as practitioners. They felt that their observation skills had improved, as well as their ability to identify when children need additional support and to respond appropriately. Interprofessional practice was seen to have improved in terms of working more closely with other staff in settings, taking responsibility for implementing new practice and networking across pre-schools. Further details of the evaluation are summarised in SQW (2012).

**CDI Early Years (Childhood Development Initiative)**

CDI Early Years is an early childhood care and education programme, starting when children are aged 2½-3. (Prior to 2012, it was called the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme.) This 2-year programme is designed to develop and enhance all domains of children’s physical, psychological and social well-being, including their cognitive skills and language development, social and emotional development and capacity for learning. It also seeks to support parents’ psychological health, build on their parenting strategies and encourage a positive parent–child relationship.

The Early Years Programme was designed to support and target all families living in an area of social disadvantage in Dublin (Tallaght West). It is operated by the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) and delivered through a combination of specialised staff located within existing services. The programme consists of the following components:

- Support within pre-school settings:
  - direct provision, over the course of 2 years, of a flexible and broad-based curriculum operating within the principles of HighScope;
Section 3: The Programmes in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative

- observation of children’s learning to enable practitioners to develop child-centred follow-up work plans in collaboration with parents during home visits;
- provision of nutritious food, physical play and recreation opportunities;
- specialist primary healthcare support in the areas of dental hygiene and psychological assessment;
- access to a dedicated speech and language therapist to support children in their language development.

- Parenting support by a dedicated parent/carer facilitator (who focuses on the self-identified needs of parents/carers and their educational interests), participation in the Parents Plus Community Course and provision of quality childcare and activities for parents based on their specific needs. Home visits are also undertaken by the parent/carer facilitator and key childcare workers.

Findings

Children and parents

Children were assessed at baseline, after one year and again after 2 years. The CDI Early Years Programme did not influence child cognitive and language outcomes. Fewer children who took part in the programme were classified as having abnormal behavioural problems compared to control children at the end of the intervention, but these differences were not significant. The more sessions the parents attended of the Parents Plus Community Course, the more improvements were seen in the children’s home-learning environment. Indeed, this parenting course was identified as a key component in improving the home-learning environment, even 2 years after the course was attended.

Settings

All the pre-school settings were seen to be of ‘good’ to ‘excellent’ environmental quality. The intervention resulted in significantly better curricular and planning quality. The quality of the literacy environment also showed some signs of improvement. Settings that took part in the programme were more likely to engage children in music-movement, nature/science and mathematics activities than settings that did not take part. Intervention schools had a significantly better range of topics that were targeted at promoting children’s learning and development, and intervention staff tended to plan more than control staff. Further details of the evaluation are summarised in Hayes et al (2013).

Incredible Years (youngballymun)

Incredible Years is being implemented in the Ballymun area of Dublin as one component of a complex community change initiative called youngballymun. This involves a number of services and strategies embedded in existing systems and delivered across the lifespan of a child. They aim to improve child outcomes and to create learning opportunities, as well as creating an impetus for services and institutions to change and enhance their own efficacy.

The Incredible Years Service takes a whole-school approach to supporting primary school-aged children’s social and emotional development through building the capacity of children, parents, teachers and community-based family support services. The three interlocking components of Incredible Years comprise the Child Programme, the Teacher Programme and the Parent Programme. All of these can be delivered as standalone programmes, but youngballymun views the programmes as a multi-component, multi-level, multi-year set of interventions linked to the culture
and ethos of the school. The school’s policies, systems and structures are used as vehicles to create an ethos (learning, social and physical environment) that promotes the principles of Incredible Years and supports the implementation of the programmes on a whole-school level.

Incredible Years is an evidence-based programme shown to consistently have positive effects on children’s outcomes, parenting and teaching behaviour. It has been extensively evaluated in other countries. *youngballymun* undertook an action research study to discover how the implementation of Incredible Years could be undertaken on a ‘whole-school’ level. The aim was to promote social emotional learning within school as well as fostering strong home–school partnerships by supporting and extending classroom learning, bridging home and school, and creating consistent expectations around social and emotional behaviour.

A recent Value for Money study reported that the running cost for the economic year 2011 was €349,295. The cost per beneficiary was €437. The total present value savings for the Incredible Years intervention is €3.1 million. For conduct disorder alone, this is a saving per child affected of almost €69,000.

**Findings**

The core implementation team of the Incredible Years Programme is made up of a Parent Programme Coordinator, Parent Group Leaders and a School Coordinator, all of whom were seen as vital components for the successful development of the programme. This involved a tailored and coordinated approach to building capacity within schools; providing ongoing implementation support (consultation, mentoring, peer support); fostering a supportive school environment and culture which encourages partnerships between school and community; establishing a structure to engage parents in the Parent Programme to integrate delivery across the school, community and family spheres; and building the profile of Incredible Years in the area through networking across agencies for both expanding and embedding Incredible Years in Ballymun.

Local and national partnerships were seen as fundamental to supporting Incredible Years in its capacity-building activities. These included collaboration between schools, educational support services, the Ballymun-based Community and Family Training Agency (CAFTA), Archways (the national promoter of Incredible Years in Ireland) and other relevant stakeholders.

*youballymun* actively established structures and processes to assist planning and preparedness for change. A flexible, responsive, independently facilitated planning and service design process involving key stakeholders provided facilitated planning and service design process involving key stakeholders provided a structure to provide the needs of the school communities; assess the fit between the programme (the Incredible Years training series) and community needs; and assess resources and capacity required to effect change. Close attention was also paid to the professional development of teachers and their engagement throughout the process. Further details of the evaluation are summarised in Morgan and Espey (2012).

**Incredible Years (Archways)**

As noted above, the Incredible Years series comprises a suite of comprehensive, specially designed programmes that target children aged 0-12 years and their parents and teachers, with a view to improving social and emotional functioning and reducing or preventing emotional and behavioural problems. It is one of the few ‘model’ programmes designed to directly tackle the issue of emotional
and behavioural difficulties in children. (Model programmes are those that have been subject to independent rigorous evaluation, which has produced scientific evidence of their long-term effectiveness.) The Incredible Years Ireland study involves a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous community-based evaluation of the effectiveness of different elements of the Incredible Years suite of programmes, including the Incredible Years BASIC Parent Training Programme and the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme.

The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme is a classroom-based intervention designed to strengthen teachers’ classroom management strategies, promote the successful management of classroom environments and improve children’s pro-social behaviour. It is a brief, group-based intervention guided by the principles of behavioural and social learning theory. It consists of 5 monthly sessions. Two group facilitators help deliver the programme and about 12 teachers participate in each group. The programme uses techniques such as group discussion, videos, role play and modelling to help teachers adopt positive classroom management strategies.

**Findings**

The short-term outcomes (6 month) of a randomised controlled trial (RCT) of the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme supported the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the programme. It was shown to benefit teacher practices and reduce behavioural difficulties among young children.

A longer term follow-up was undertaken at 12 months, including a quantitative follow-up with the intervention group teachers who had participated in the RCT and a qualitative study of a subsample of teachers to explore their views and experiences. The longer term outcomes at 12 months showed positive effects maintained over time for both children and teachers. Teacher classroom management skills were significantly improved at the 12-month follow-up, with teachers using more positive classroom management strategies and fewer negative classroom management strategies. Teachers found that they were able to easily transfer the skills learned to a new class and reported that the programme continued to be of use 12 months post-intervention. They described their classes as being a calmer, more pleasant place in which to work and learn. Post-intervention, the teachers were also more confident in their ability to manage their classrooms effectively and deal with disruptive behaviour. Although teachers generally regarded the strategies to be useful, they note that for a minority of children (e.g. children with special needs in mainstream classrooms), some techniques were ineffective.


**Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS) (Barnardos, NI)**

The Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS®) Programme is a universal whole-school social and emotional learning (SEL) programme that seeks to change/build upon a school’s ethos and culture. PATHS aims to support the pro-social skills, emotional understanding, social problem-solving and self-control of 5-11 year-old children.

It was delivered to children in an area of social and economic disadvantage (Craigavon) in Northern Ireland. It is a whole-school approach, consisting of scripted lessons delivered by class teachers over 3 academic years. These are age-appropriate and deal with recognising emotions, expressing
feelings, coping with negative feelings (e.g. anger) and reacting to social problem-solving situations. Barnardos, Northern Ireland adapted the PATHS Programme (which was originally developed in the USA) to make it culturally appropriate for Northern Ireland and developed an additional Mutual Respect and Understanding component, which deals with accepting people who are different and becoming part of a local and global community. The PATHS NI Programme was used by participating schools to replace the corresponding strand of the statutory Primary Curriculum in 6 schools. The idea is to create changes first in teachers’ behaviours, next in pupils’ attitudes and finally in pupils’ behaviours towards peers and adults.

**Findings**

PATHS was found to significantly improve younger children’s empathy, coping cooperation, actively helping others and decreases in showing negative effect. Teachers reported significant improvements in older children’s empathy and cooperation, reflectivity and perseverance, fighting and aggression. The teacher ratings of the younger cohort found significant advantages for the PATHS NI pupils over the control pupils’ on empathy, coping cooperation; actively helping others; and not exhibiting negative affect. Most school Principals reported that the programme was associated with improved attendance at school, resulting in fewer referrals to the Education Welfare Officer than prior to the programme’s implementation, as well as a decline in the general level of vandalism in the school community and a decline in the incidence of bullying. While they generally found it difficult to identify the specific impact of any one factor on improvements in children’s attainment, they linked improved behaviour and attendance to a greater disposition for learning.

Improvements were also seen in children’s ability to recognise and talk about emotions. Observations of classroom teaching and pupil behaviours showed only isolated and limited differences.

Principals, teachers, coordinators and parents were all positive about PATHS NI and wanted it to continue in future years. All groups of respondents observed improvements in pupils’ behaviour, self-esteem, interactions with adults and other children, awareness of feelings, and ability to deal with anger, frustration and social conflicts. Further details of the evaluation are summarised in Ross *et al* (2011).

**Write Minded (youngballymun)**

Write Minded is one of six integrated services operating under the *youngballymun* Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative. It operates in the Ballymun area of North Dublin, which experiences extremely high levels of deprivation. It integrates the Department of Education’s DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Strategy.

Write Minded is an area-based literacy strategy that works across schools and community to build children’s literacy and language competency through:

- the implementation of a balanced literacy framework (including developing DVDs on reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing and word knowledge, development of whole-school literacy plans, in classroom modelling, support for guided reading sessions, paired and peer reading);
- oral language support (including assessment undertaken by specialised staff, development of whole-school literacy plans, delivery of the Language towards Literacy Programme, which is a 20-week programme for teachers of Junior infants to help them develop children’s language
skills through topic-based activities that can be developed in the home, also involving parents);

- an integrated family and school transition programme (including a resource pack for teachers and children, work with community projects and families, a Summer Slide Programme to enhance children’s literacy ability over the school summer holiday period, and support to community organisations to enhance their capacity to better integrate literacy into their services).

Write Minded works with children and young people aged 4-18 in both schools and community settings. It operates with a core team of 3 staff (a Literacy Coordinator, an Oral Language Development Officer and a Family and Community Literacy Development Officer).

A recent Value for Money study reported that for economic year 2011, the running cost was €183,896. The cost per beneficiary was €324.

**Findings**

**Children’s literacy skills**
Write Minded showed possible benefits to children’s literacy. Schools reported that the programme had been very important in bringing a greater focus on literacy into schools and felt that through the support provided to them from the service, there had been a positive impact on children’s literacy.

**Skills for families**
Parents were very enthusiastic about their experience of the Write Minded service and, as a result, there was more reading being done in the home, reading was more interactive than before and more fun for the family. Parents had increased confidence in supporting their children to develop their literacy skills. They also valued the networks in which parents came together to support each other.

**Outcomes for teachers**
Teachers who participated in Write Minded adapted their styles of teaching and used new techniques in their practice. This included implementing a cross-curricular approach to teaching literacy, more frequent and improved assessment and pupil progress reviews, and a greater focus on writing and more interactive teaching approaches. Teachers also felt more confident in teaching literacy and had an increased enjoyment in their teaching. They valued the training and opportunities for professional development offered by participating in the programme. In addition, there was some evidence that teachers’ expectations of children’s achievements increased.

**Planning and transition outcomes for schools**
Primary schools in Ballymun engaged very positively with the Write Minded service, although engagement at post-primary level was more challenging. Schools experienced much support from Write Minded in implementing whole-school plans for literacy (as they are required to do as a condition of DEIS funding). Each school in the area now has a refined plan in place and teachers reported that this is now a central point of discussion in staff meetings. They believed Write Minded helped to bring increased clarity, continuity and consistency to the planning process and has strengthened the school focus on literacy.
The Ballymun Transitions Programme was set up to support the transition from primary to post-primary schools. Teachers were very positive about its impact, reporting greater confidence in delivering the programme to the children and increased awareness of the issues faced by children at this transition stage. They also stated that children were better able to manage the transition since their worries and concerns were now being addressed.

**Development outcomes for the wider community**

Community organisations have welcomed the support offered by Write Minded to enhance their existing services. They now have an increased understanding of literacy issues and the role they can play in promoting literacy skills in the wider community. There is evidence that the Write Minded service has had a positive impact on building the capacity and skills in the community sector around literacy support and the Write Minded service has led to new approaches being implemented in community organisations.

Overall, the Write Minded service has been positively received in Ballymun by teachers, parents, community organisations, children and young people, and is showing promising improvements in children’s literacy. Further details of the evaluation are summarised in SQW (2012).

**Doodle Den (Childhood Development Initiative)**

Doodle Den operates as part of the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) in an area of Dublin (Tallaght West) with high levels of social/economic disadvantage and unemployment. The programme is currently being rolled out in other sites in Tallaght West and in Limerick under the School Completion Programme.

Doodle Den is an after-school programme for groups of 15 children aged 5-6. It aims to improve children’s literacy by implementing a literacy framework in schools, homes and community settings; contribute to more frequent school attendance; encourage more learning outside of school; increase parental involvement in out-of-school time education; and enhance children’s relationships with their parents and peers.

The cost of this programme is €1,656 per child per annum.

The core components of the Doodle Den Programme include literacy development, letter identification, writing skills, phonics awareness and text comprehension. It aims to target the factors that influence children’s literacy, such as school attendance, nutrition, the learning and home environments, the training and experience of teachers, and parental involvement in children’s literacy. The evidence-based curriculum features a balanced literacy framework, with child, parent and family components:

- The child programme is intensive. Children attend three 90-minute after-school sessions a week throughout the school year. These sessions involve them in a range of fun activities aimed at enhancing their literacy skills, such as games, drama, music, art and physical activities. At each session, children are given a healthy snack.
- Doodle Den also offers 3 family sessions and 6 parent sessions. During these sessions, parents are encouraged to take part in such activities as sitting in on children’s sessions and sharing reading activities with them.
Doodle Den was operated by two service providers, City-wise Education and An Cósan, until 2012. School Completion took over this role in September 2012. The sessions are co-facilitated by a teacher and a youth/childcare worker. The cost of delivering the programme for 15 children for one year is €25,262.

**Findings**

The randomised controlled evaluation found strong evidence that Doodle Den achieved moderate improvements in children’s literacy. This was supported by the data gathered from the teacher assessments. The children had particularly improved in relation to the comprehension items: word choice, sentence structure and word recognition. They also showed significant improvement in concentration, reading at home, family library activity and a reduction in problem behaviours in school. There were promising indicators of success in other outcome areas too, such as school attendance.

The Doodle Den Programme worked just as well for children from different economic backgrounds or ethnic groups and just as well for boys and girls, although there did appear to be some additional benefits for boys in relation to improved concentration and behaviour in school. Children who participated in the programme more often showed greater improvements in their literacy ability, so it would appear that increased participation would lead to further improvements.

A wide range of stakeholders (including the programme’s facilitators, school Principals, parents and indeed the children) believed that Doodle Den had a positive impact. They cited improvements in literacy skills, as well as in children’s enjoyment, social skills and confidence. There were notable differences in these areas between the children who had participated in Doodle Den (intervention group) and those who had not (control group). Further details of the evaluation are summarised in Biggart *et al* (2012).

**Time to Read (Business in the Community)**

Business in the Community is an organisation with a membership of 250 companies in Northern Ireland. Its purpose is to ‘mobilise business as a force for good in society’. It supports a number of initiatives where businesses can contribute to the well-being of those in the community. It recognises that in Northern Ireland there are high levels of social and economic disadvantage and that many young people leave school without attaining formal qualifications or with the necessary levels of literacy and numeracy skills.

Business in the Community also supports the view that developing these skills at an early age increases the likelihood of longer term benefits, both socially and economically. To this end, the organisation launched its first educational programme, Time to Read, in 1999 in 5 primary schools in Northern Ireland supported by one company. The programme now operates in 130 primary schools, with the support of almost 120 companies and involves over 1,000 children.

Time to Read is an in-school volunteer mentoring programme for children at primary school level, focused on supporting literacy. The overall aim of the programme is to improve reading outcomes for the children involved by making a positive impact on self-esteem, reading ability, aspirations and expectations for the future, and enjoyment of education. This is particularly in relation to improving the core foundational skills of reading, decoding, reading rate, reading accuracy, reading fluency and reading comprehension.
The programme involves over 500 adult volunteers, acting as mentors and spending one hour per week in company time working with primary school children with the aim of improving their reading skills. Pupils in Key Stage 2 classes (Primary 5, about age 9) with below-average reading ability are invited to participate, with permission from their parents, on the recommendations of the child’s teacher. The mentoring support aims to complement the work of the teacher, with the emphasis being on the children discovering the enjoyment of reading and improving their reading fluency. The volunteer meets weekly with each of 2 children, reading from resource materials selected by the Education and Library Boards Literacy Advisors. Each child participating in the programme receives two 30-minute mentoring sessions per week. In addition, volunteers are encouraged to invite the children to visit their company. There are two reviews with volunteer and Business in the Community staff each year.

**Findings**

The Time to Read Programme has been subject to a series of evaluations since 2003, all of which concluded that the programme has had a positive impact on the children in terms of their reading confidence, their enjoyment of reading, their skills in reading and their appreciation of the world of work.

Randomised controlled trial evaluation has provided clear evidence that the Time to Read Programme is effective in improving reading outcomes for children, particularly in relation to the core foundational reading skills of decoding, reading rate and reading fluency. It also encourages improved aspirations for the future. The number of sessions provided impacted on outcomes, with children who received more of the programme reporting greater enjoyment of reading and better reading fluency than those who received fewer mentoring sessions. The programme worked equally well for girls as for boys, for those from different social-economic backgrounds and also those with varying initial reading abilities. There were no significant effects shown on children’s higher reading skills, such as comprehension or reading confidence.

The findings suggest that Time to Read is comparable with leading international literacy interventions as an effective way of improving literacy skills among children who are currently struggling as readers. Further details of the evaluation are summarised in Miller *et al* (2009 and 2011).

**Summary of main findings from the Initiative so far**

A summary of the programmes main outcomes is given in Table 2. As noted above, it is important to remember that not all of the evaluations used the same methods to investigate learning. Six out of the ten programmes used randomised control trials and different measures were used across the evaluations to assess outcomes. The findings from the Growing Child Parenting Programme and Preparing for Life also represent interim findings from the early stages of 5 year programmes.

A summary of the effects are given for children’s learning environment in Table 3 and children’s learning outcomes in Table 4. Table 3 attempts to summarise the overall impact on children’s learning environments (Early Years setting, home and school) in terms of categorisation as ‘significant improvement’ (which is a statistically significant effect shown on one or more measures of the learning environment) or ‘positive trend’ (which is a positive change shown in qualitative
measures). Table 4 summarises the overall impact on children’s learning outcomes in terms of ‘significant improvement’ (statistically significant improvement in one or more measures), ‘positive trend’ (positive effects shown but not reaching statistical significance), ‘mixed findings’ (some positive and some negative effects shown) and ‘no difference’ (no statistically significant effect shown).

Table 2: Impact of the programmes on measures of children’s learning outcomes and environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Impact on measures associated with child learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Preparing for Life               | • Higher quality home environment with more appropriate learning materials and childcare.  
                                 | • Mothers had higher quality and more frequent interactions with their child and were more patient.  
                                 | • No significant effects seen at 6 months of age on child development.  
                                 | • By 12 months of age, children in the higher treatment group had better fine motor skills and were less likely to be at risk for social and emotional difficulties.  
                                 | • Some evidence that the developmental and reading packs in particular may help to improve child cognitive development.                                                                                                                                 |
| Growing Child Parenting programme | • Improvements in parental self-efficacy and social support approaching significance  
                                 | • Reduction in parenting stress  
                                 | • Improvements in child cognitive development, language development and socio-emotional development                                                                                                                                            |
| Eager and Able to Learn (Early Years, NI) | • Significantly improved social emotional development.  
                                 | • Negative effect on cognitive development, particularly emergent literacy skills (such as recognising and naming shapes and colours and counting objects).  
                                 | • No significant effect on child gross motor development.  
                                 | • Improvement in how parents used play to support their children’s learning.  
                                 | • Improvement in levels of engagement between parents and child care settings.  
                                 | • Improvement in how the day care staff interacted and played with the children.  
                                 | • Average quality for settings improved, with 20% of settings moving into the ‘excellent’ range.                                                                                                                                              |
| 3, 4, 5 Learning Years           | • Objective improvements to day settings in terms of quality ratings for routines, carer–child interactions, curriculum planning and assessment.  
                                 | • Staff had better self-reported understanding of child development and quality early childhood care and education.  
                                 | • Self-reported improvements in interprofessional relations and networking.  
                                 | • Staff felt more confident in giving feedback to parents and identifying children who needed additional support.                                                                                                                        |
| CDI Early Years                  | • No significant influence on child cognitive and language outcomes.  
                                 | • No significant effect on behaviour problems, but trend towards improvement.  
                                 | • Parents Plus Community Course was shown to improve the children’s home-learning environment, even 2 years after the course was attended.  
                                 | • Significant improvements in curricular and planning quality.  
                                 | • Some improvement in the quality of the literacy environment in the pre-school settings.  
                                 | • Better range of activities targeted at promoting children’s learning and development.                                                                                                                                                         |
| Incredible Years Whole School approach | • The evaluation was a piece of action research rather than outcomes evaluation.  
<pre><code>                             | • Qualitative feedback suggested that taking a whole-school approach to implementing Incredible Years was beneficial.                                                                                                                                  |
</code></pre>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Impact on measures associated with child learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management | - Significant improvement in teacher practices at 6 months.  
- Significant reduction in children behaviour problems at 6 months.  
- Positive effects for children and teachers maintained 12 months later, including teacher classroom management skills.  
- Teachers reported being able to easily transfer skills learned to a new class. |
| Promoting Alternative T Hinking Strategies (PATHS) | - Principals reported improved attendance at school, with fewer referrals to the Education Welfare Officer than prior to programme implementation, as well as a decline in general level of vandalism and reduced bullying.  
- Significant improvement in children’s pro-social behaviour.  
- Few differences seen in direct observations of classroom teaching and pupil behaviours, although Principals, teachers, coordinators and parents all positive about the programme and want it to continue. |
| Write Minded                     | - Promising benefits shown to children’s literacy experiences.  
- Schools felt it had brought a greater focus on literacy, cross-curricular approach.  
- Teachers reported feeling more confidence and enjoyment in teaching literacy.  
- Ballymun Transition Programme perceived as helpful in supporting transition from primary to post-primary schools. |
| Doodle Den                       | - Strong evidence that the programme improved literacy. Children showed better comprehension, concentration, reading at home, family library activity and a reduction in problem behaviours in school.  
- Promising effect on school attendance.  
- Some additional benefits for boys in relation to improved concentration and behaviour in school.  
- Increased participation led to greater improvements. |
| Time to Read                     | - Strong evidence of improved reading outcomes for children, particularly with core foundational reading skills of decoding, reading rate and fluency.  
- Increased participation led to greater improvements.  
- No significant effects shown on higher reading skills, such as comprehension, enjoyment of reading or reading confidence.  
- Programme is comparable with leading interactional literacy programmes for children currently struggling as readers. |
Table 3: Summary of programme impact on learning environment (Early Years setting, home, school)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant improvement</th>
<th>Positive trend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(statistically significant effect shown on one or more measures of learning environment)</td>
<td>(positive changes shown in qualitative measures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for Life</td>
<td>Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eager and Able to Learn</td>
<td>Incredible Years Whole School Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, 4, 5 Learning Years</td>
<td>Growing Child Parenting programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDI Early Years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write Minded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doodle Den</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time to Read</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Summary of programme impact on children’s learning outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant improvement</th>
<th>Positive trend</th>
<th>Mixed findings</th>
<th>No difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(statistically significant effect shown on one or more measures)</td>
<td>(positive effects shown, but not reaching statistical significance)</td>
<td>(some positive and some negative effects shown)</td>
<td>(no statistically significant effect shown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management</td>
<td>Preparing for Life</td>
<td>Eager and Able to Learn</td>
<td>CDI Early Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doodle Den</td>
<td>Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time to Read</td>
<td>Write Minded</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growing Child Parenting Programme</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 4: Discussion, key messages and implications

Discussion
There is a growing international literature and a local evidence base in Ireland and Northern Ireland for programmes and interventions aimed at supporting parents and improving outcomes for their children.

In Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, a number of approaches and programmes are used to improve children’s learning experiences and outcomes. This report has examined the learning from 10 programmes and services evaluated as part of the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative. These varied according to whether they worked with the child, the parent, or both. There is a range of programmes delivered from the early years through to adolescence, and services were delivered at home, in school and in the community (see Table 1).

Six of the programmes were delivered in the Republic of Ireland (Preparing for Life, Doodle Den, CDI Early Years, Incredible Years, 3, 4, 5 Learning years, Write Minded) and 3 in Northern Ireland (Eager and Able to Learn, Time to Read, PATHS). Growing Child Parenting programme is delivered in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Programmes could be targeted or universal. The level of need and the way in which services were targeted varied. Some programmes were delivered on a universal basis in both socially advantaged and disadvantaged areas (Growing Child Parenting programme, Eager and Able to Learn, Time to Read). Some were delivered on a locality basis, where the catchment area was decided on the basis of levels of disadvantage (CDI Early Years, Doodle Den, Write Minded, 3, 4, 5 Learning Years, youngballymun Incredible Years, Preparing for Life). PATHS was delivered in an area chosen to be broadly representative of the Northern Ireland population. Some services were delivered on a settings basis. These settings were all chosen according to their readiness to implement the service (Eager and Able to Learn, Time to Read, 3, 4, 5 Learning Years, PATHS) and sometimes additionally according to social disadvantage (youngballymun Incredible Years, Doodle Den, Write Minded). Within these settings, some services were offered on a whole-school basis, so entire year groups received the programme (Incredible Years, PATHS). Alternatively, individual children could be selected by their teachers on the basis of struggling with reading (Time to Read) or by their parents showing concerns about their reading (Doodle Den, Write Minded).

The type of support offered was tailored to the children’s ages and specific needs. The programmes in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative spanned a wide age range of children, including programmes delivered before children start school to improve learning dispositions and school readiness (Preparing for Life, Growing Child Parenting programme, Eager and Able to Learn, CDI Early Years, 3, 4, 5 Learning Years), programmes focusing on skill acquisition or improvement during the first few years at school (Write Minded, Doodle Den) and services aiming to improve older children’s skills, aspirations and engagement (PATHS, Time to Read).

The approach was chosen on the basis of what would make the programme accessible and appealing to participants. Some programmes were delivered in the home (Preparing for Life, Growing Child Parenting programme) or in Early Years centres with additional home visitation (Eager and Able to Learn, CDI Early Years). Others were delivered in school settings, either as after-school programmes (Doodle Den, Write Minded), pull-out sessions during the normal school day (Time to
Read) or integrated within the school curriculum to be delivered as part of daily classes (PATHS, youngballymun Incredible Years).

It was important to engage parents. Some of these programmes also included additional components to engage parents to support the work being done with the children and to improve the connectedness between children’s different learning environments (youngballymun Incredible Years, PATHS, Doodle Den, Write Minded, Eager and Able to Learn). Often a key feature of these was the delivery of parent training sessions within school buildings, thus improving accessibility and connectedness between school and home (Incredible Years, Doodle Den, Write Minded). Other services sent materials home to parents (PATHS).

Using international programmes with minor adaptations yielded successful results. There were evidence-based programmes developed elsewhere and delivered locally, with fidelity to the original programme (Incredible Years, PATHS, CDI Early Years). The Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative has shown that it is possible to replicate evidence-based programmes in Ireland that have been developed elsewhere and achieve successful results. Results were consistent with those found in other countries or regions where these programmes have been extensively used. It was not as simple as just taking programmes shown to be effective elsewhere ‘off the shelf’ and rolling them out; it took time and effort to recruit and train staff and there were issues of organisational readiness that had to be addressed even after the programme had been selected. Some adaptations had to be made to language and content to ensure cultural appropriateness so that the programmes could be delivered in the local context. This appears to have been facilitated by active consultation with communities and key stakeholders, paying close attention to organisational readiness for implementation, recruiting, training and supporting staff, and monitoring service delivery (see Sneddon et al, 2012, for detailed discussion of these factors).

It was possible to develop programmes to meet local need. Other providers either developed programmes ‘from scratch’ (Eager and Able to Learn, Doodle Den, Write Minded, Time to Read, 3, 4, 5 Learning Years) or heavily adapted existing evidence-based programmes (Preparing for Life, Growing Child Parenting programme). Organisations used innovative methods to develop home-grown programmes and services based on assessed need and identified gaps, but, importantly, underpinned by a robust evidence base. These providers based the design of their new programmes on a clear understanding of local need and what the existing evidence base suggested would be effective. Engagement with users and other stakeholders was important to ensure the programme’s approach would be feasible and appropriate for the local context, especially for programmes that involved delivery in educational settings or using indirect service providers. It took time and effort to get these new programmes up and running. The role of specialised implementation support teams was seen as crucial to this, particularly when working with indirect service providers such as teachers or day care staff to deliver the programme. Many of these services have used the findings from the first randomised controlled trials and process evaluations to develop their approaches further. Examining the quantitative and qualitative information together has provided rich information for the service providers about how the programmes can be improved in the future.

Programmes benefited from having clear structures, curriculum and resources. Most of the programmes have a developmentally appropriate curriculum that builds cumulatively on what has been done before. Programmes delivered by indirect service providers, such as teachers or Early Years professionals, benefited from having clear lesson or session plans, resources and dedicated
implementation support teams. Programmes that engaged with parents found it useful to provide tip sheets and resources that the parents could refer back to, as well as building a respectful and supportive relationship with the provider. Approaches involving mentoring or tutoring (rather than the delivery of a formal curriculum) benefited from having structure to the interactions between the practitioner and child, staff training and monitoring over time.

**What outcomes changed?** The outcomes that the programmes have aimed to change have also been diverse, including improving the home as a learning environment; changing parental behaviour, children’s learning dispositions, school readiness and engagement; improving reading skills; improving connectivity between the home, school and community; and changing the practice of childcare professionals and teachers. Changes were most frequently seen in the learning environments experienced by children, such as improvements in the home learning environment, the quality of interactions in day care settings and learning environments in schools.

**Improvements in outcomes were also seen at an individual level.** Many of the programmes were shown to have positive impacts on children’s literacy. Successful approaches included structured after-school activity-based support, in-school individual support and a greater focus on literacy in the school curriculum. Approaches aimed at enhancing children’s literacy skills worked equally well for boys and girls, and for children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Some of the programmes showed some additional benefits for boys in terms of improved behaviour and concentration. Across the initiative, dosage emerged as being significant: overall, it was found that children who participated more frequently and regularly in the programmes did better. Improvements were also shown in children’s attitudes to learning, learning dispositions and engagement, as well as their social-emotional learning. It will be important to examine whether any improvements observed are sustained over time.

Sometimes, however, there were differences between the amount of difference that teachers and parents thought the programmes were making to children’s outcomes compared to that shown by the independent evaluations. It is not necessarily that the parents and professionals are wrong about the changes they can see in the children, but these changes may not be due solely to the programme and comparison with control children (with whom they would not necessarily be in such close contact) can create this disjuncture. It is also important to ensure the evaluation focuses on outcomes that the intervention can reasonably be expected to influence in the timescale under study. For example, it may be more appropriate to measure greater levels of interest and engagement in learning before an increase can be measured in levels of literacy or numeracy. It is also important to assess the appropriate outcomes in the short, medium and long term in order to examine how any effects change over time.

The following sections summarise what we have learnt from the initiative about how to support capacity-building in Early Years settings, locating services in schools, engaging schools to support programme delivery, engaging families in services and creating links between children’s different learning and care environments.

**Capacity-building in Early Years settings**

The importance of learning in Early Years settings, such as day care, is being increasingly recognised in both jurisdictions of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative highlights ways of improving standards in day care
settings and encouraging the provision of stimulating learning experiences for young children. Key learning from the initiative showed that:

- Programmes offered should be developmentally appropriate for the age of the child.
- Implementation support teams are important for creating and sustaining change in Early Years settings. This involves assessing organisational readiness for implementing programmes, support in training and coaching staff, providing ongoing constructive feedback on progress, support in monitoring fidelity of implementation and changes in practice. The professional knowledge and credibility of the implementation team, their practical understanding of the challenges faced by the settings, flexibility and availability are all important enablers for success.
- Each Early Years setting may require a different type of support from the implementation team at different stages depending on its stage of organisational readiness to implement changes to practice. For example, coaching support may be needed to improve practice before assessment against quality standards is undertaken. Mentoring support may be needed once an appropriate standard of service provision is attained.
- Management buy-in from Early Years settings is essential, as well as from individual practitioners, to ensure successful implementation of programmes and practice change. This can be facilitated by the provision of implementation support, clear documentation, quality training, providing cover for staff during training and provision of additional resources, such as equipment or materials required for a programme.
- Peer networks can be useful for encouraging implementation. During the initial stages when settings are deciding whether to use a programme, managers may find it beneficial to speak with other setting providers who are already using the programme about its costs and benefits. Once they have decided to engage with a programme, it can also be useful to bring setting managers together regularly and/or individual staff from different settings, so they can share their professional learning and expertise about using the programme.

**Working with schools**

Many of the programmes were delivered in the school setting, either during normal class time, in pull-out sessions for individual children or in after-school classes. There were several challenges experienced in running programmes within school settings and some of the key learning is summarised below:

- It often took a long time to negotiate delivery of the programmes in the schools but once engaged, schools reported very positive experiences and initiatives and teachers in particular welcomed the increased emphasis on literacy and opportunities provided to them for enhanced professional development. They welcomed the supports provided by the initiative and reported increased enjoyment in teaching, and in some cases reported participation in the initiative encouraged increased expectations of children’s performance.
- Programmes operating after school were also welcomed by teachers, who reported positive changes in children’s behaviour and confidence as a result of the programmes.
- The teacher training and ongoing professional development opportunities offered by the programmes were viewed positively by school Principals and teachers. Teachers highlighted such benefits from the programmes as increased confidence in teaching specific topics (such as literacy and improving social-emotional skills), increased enjoyment in teaching in general, developing new techniques in teaching, enhanced capacity of children to concentrate in class, better transitions planning and children better able to manage transitions, increased skills for children and positive changes in children’s behaviour.
In terms of locating services successfully within schools, gaining the support of different levels of management (including Boards of Governors, Principals, individual teachers and assistants) was seen as crucial to success.

Programmes adopting a whole-school approach to change found that full programme implementation required not just change of individual teachers (regardless of how many), but also a change in the norms, values and interactions of the staff (a change of school ethos). This was shown when programme elements were integrated into school policies and codes of conduct. Understanding school procedures and ways of working, as well as dedicated implementation support, were important enablers for success and changes often took time to negotiate and implement.

The learning from the initiative shows that gaining the support of schools is critical to the success of any programme delivered in after-school or during school time. The programmes varied as to whether they provided specialised implementation support teams or additional staff to support this, or whether they endeavoured to change the behaviour of the teachers already employed in the schools. For example, Doodle Den was delivered in an after-school setting using staff employed by CDI; Time to Read used volunteer mentors; and youngballymun Incredible Years and PATHS both offered training and support to existing teachers so they could deliver the programme.

Challenges to delivering a programme within a school environment include an already packed curriculum, which means that time is at a premium. It can be difficult to regularly fit in discrete programme-focused lessons with the addition of other curriculum priorities. Staff turnover also needs to be considered in order to plan for when key personnel leave. In addition, it can be challenging to keep programmes fresh in the light of educational changes and the constraints of the timetable.

Key learning from the implementation of the school-based programmes in the initiative suggests that the following factors supported the integration or ‘mainstreaming’ of the programmes into the school environment and changing teacher practice:

- Negotiating access to deliver the programme within a school can be a lengthy and time consuming process. Consultation is vital with the school before training is introduced and tailoring the training to teachers’ needs (e.g. location, scheduling and duration of the training). Professional development for teachers is an important focus to support successful implementation. This can be made more effective by using feedback about training to improve future training in terms of scheduling, content, relevance to recipients and cohesion with school policies.

- It is important to ensure that programmes can be slotted into the structure and routine of the existing curriculum. Making lessons available that had specific objectives and methodology was seen as beneficial, as was a Resource File with appropriate and well-structured content. Teachers may need to be reassured that the materials match the curricular requirements and are age-appropriate. There can be challenges in presenting year-specific content to composite classes which comprise more than one year group.

- Time needs to be allocated for training and resource preparation.

- Programmes were found to support a common vocabulary between the entire school community, which was beneficial to transitions for children between different learning environments, as well as for interaction between different professional groups.
School leadership needs to be engaged to take ownership of the programme. This could be encouraged by asking staff to contribute to service design, to have an ongoing involvement in monitoring implementation or to making the programme visible throughout the school (such as providing designated rooms, putting pictures of the programme up on the walls and including features of the programme in school policies, such as codes of discipline).

Teachers may need to be supported to make professional decisions about flexibility in implementation, so that they can adapt a programme to fit with their own classroom environment without taking away from the structure of the programme. Teachers also need to be confident in the programme terminology, programme goals and associated learning outcomes – this was seen to allow for more consistent implementation throughout schools.

Putting monitoring strategies in place to support implementation is essential for ensuring the quality and consistency of programme delivery over time, as well as maintaining momentum. Coaches, training, coordinators, forum meetings, resources and school support were all seen as enabling factors for successful programme implementation in school settings. There needs to be effective communication between programme delivery organisations, schools and coaches.

Factors seen to contribute to the successful delivery of sessions for parents in school settings included:

- Support of school personnel (e.g. school staff dropping in during the parenting programme’s coffee breaks to have a conversation with the parents, assisting with practical matters and the school offering dedicated room space to the programme which, in turn, assisted with the logistics of organisation and provided a consistent and stable base).
- Staff delivering the parenting programme understanding and being aware of school systems (such as appreciating the length of time it takes to build relationship with schools, designating one person in each school to facilitate this, being mindful of the many commitments and pressures of school staff and the rules and practices of schools).
- Consistent consultation of programme staff, communication and coordination of activities with other events in the school. This included actively establishing structures and processes to assist planning and preparedness for change. A flexible, responsive, independently facilitated planning and service design process involving key stakeholders can provide a structure to assess the fit between the programme and community needs, and assess resources and capacity required to effect change. Engaging with teachers during the service design process to identify what kind of programme might be best suited to the challenges they were facing and the earlier piloting of programmes locally can all influence how well teachers commit to a whole-school implementation process and the change process involved.
- It is crucial to understand the culture of the school and its constraints, and to assess the suitability of any programme against these, as well as gauging how organisationally ready the school is to implement the programme.
- Programme staff need to be flexible about times of attendance at meetings and have an understanding of other school commitments.
- Technical support offered by the implementation team to support, guide and organise the implementation process and maintain focus is an important enabler for success. Specific coordinator roles help to facilitate capacity-building activities tailored to the needs of the individual implementation sites, liaise with the outside training agency and implementers, provide ongoing support and encouragement for implementers, and maintain open channels of communication between schools and programme providers.
The implementation team can provide an infrastructure to facilitate efforts to integrate the programme at the community, agency and practitioner level. This can be helped by involving some of those from the service design stage within the implementation team to ensure consistent use of the knowledge accumulated during the service design process.

Engaging families to support children’s learning

For many years, children’s learning was predominantly seen as the preserve of the formal education services, such as schools. It is now recognised that a child’s learning begins much earlier than this and the environments they experience from birth in their homes and communities have a great influence on their learning dispositions and outcomes.

Several of the programmes recognised the importance of parents and families as ‘first educators’ and the need to support an active learning environment in children’s homes. Some of these preventative programmes began during pregnancy or soon after birth, to work over several years with parents to improve their children’s learning (Preparing for Life, Growing Child Parenting programme). Others availed of the opportunities offered in day care settings to work directly with the children as well as with their parents (Eager and Able to Learn, CDI Early years). Both of the after-school programmes that worked directly with children to improve their learning outcomes (Write Minded and Doodle Den) also worked with parents to encourage them to provide complementary learning experiences. This was done by offering a range of activities to parents to increase their confidence and skills in supporting the children’s learning. There was a combination of sessions offered to parents, as well as family sessions where both the parents and children were involved.

Key learning from the initiative showed that:

- Programmes that featured elements of parental engagement and support reported positive findings. Participating parents gained increased confidence and skills and were availing of the services offered. Parents reported a number of positive outcomes, including more reading was done at home, reading was more interactive, there was better use of library services and parents appreciated the added benefits of friendship with other parents during the programmes.
- It was sometimes challenging to engage parents with the programmes and often multiple strategies had to be used.
- Staff training was needed to improve confidence and skills in engaging parents, particularly if this was something that the organisation had not been involved with before.
- Holding parenting sessions in the school (Doodle Den, Write Minded, youngballymun Incredible Years) was seen as very beneficial by both school personnel, practitioners and parents. By encouraging parents to physically spend time in the school, they became more visible to the children there and the programmes also became a useful focus for changing the culture of a school to be more family-inclusive. Running parenting programmes within the school environment was seen as providing a message to parents that they are valued in the school and a method for maintaining parent involvement. Locating services within schools was seen as an important way to improve accessibility and ensure that parents could get information about how to support their children more quickly and efficiently than through traditional referral pathways.
- It was also beneficial to offer support to parents in family-friendly ways, such as through home visits or providing crèche services so parents could attend training sessions.
Parents valued being given specific information on activities that would help their children’s learning, as well as resources such as tip sheets that they could refer back to over time.

It may be beneficial to form local and national partnerships to support capacity-building activities, such as collaboration between schools, educational support services, family support and training agencies, service providers and other relevant stakeholders.

Further detail on the learning from the initiative about working with parents to improve children’s outcomes is given in the ‘Capturing the Learning’ report on Parenting.\(^62\)

**Creating links between different learning and care environments**

Transitions between services and the different learning and care environments experienced by children are a key issue. As noted in Section 2, these transitions often mark not only a change for children in physical location, from often from small-scale to large scale interactions, potentially from highly personalised to less personalised relationships and from environments with a small range of ages to settings with children of many ages. There can be important changes to a different learning, education and care paradigm. Children, particularly those experiencing social disadvantage, can often show problems during transitions or a decline in performance.

One of the anticipated outcomes of improvements in Early Years settings is a positive transition for children from pre-schools into primary schools. One concern is that adopting an approach that is beneficial in the Early Years settings may be at odds with the more pedagogical approaches adopted in primary schools where the curriculum is often more teacher led and desk based. A discontinuity in approach between settings may make the transition for some children from pre-school to junior/primary school more difficult than in the past. Similar concerns have been expressed in other countries when similar changes have been introduced, for example, in relation to transition from the play-based Foundation Phase (ages 3 to 7) to the subject-centred Key Stage 2 curriculum (ages 8-11) in Wales. In reality, the children in Wales seemed to adjust well but this most likely to occur where Key Stage 2 teachers fully understood the philosophy and approach of the Foundation Phase.\(^63\) It is important therefore to liaise between pre schools and primary schools to support this transition and supporting contact between professionals and the development of a common vocabulary may facilitate this.

Some of the programmes were part of community wide initiative with a strong emphasis on community engagement. Involvement with the community whether to promote a focus on children’s literacy and learning or to promote positive relationships with adults were seen as important in the evaluations. Promoting a community understanding of literacy support enhanced the capacity and skills of individuals and organisations beyond the home and school environment around literacy support. The use of local adult volunteers to support young people’s reading abilities showed positive results.

The notion of ‘complementary learning’ that goes beyond school settings but which supports the skills acquisition and the school based work on literacy runs through several of the approaches in this initiative. The delivery of programmes in community settings and by other professionals in addition to teaching professionals has shown positive results. There is a strong body of literature

\(^{62}\) Sneddon and Owens, 2013
\(^{63}\) SQW, 2012
which supports the effectiveness of after school programmes in improving children’s literacy and encouraging engagement in learning.

Summary
The learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative shows the importance of improving home learning environments by working with parents, especially with younger children; how to successfully improve practice and standards in Early Years settings; support for a school learning environment through capacity-building and training with teachers; and support for a community learning environment with a focus on core literacy skills, structured programmes and positive relationships with adults. The learning from this initiative in Ireland, and that available in the wider research literature, shows that there are methods available that can improve children’s learning experiences and outcomes.

The evidence base in Ireland of programmes and interventions designed to improve outcomes for children is increasing. We are learning more about what approaches work best for teachers, parents and children, and also how to implement these effectively so that the best outcomes can be achieved.

Programmes to improve children’s learning outcomes are being successfully delivered in a broad range of settings and contexts, such as at home, in day care centres, communities and after-school clubs, in pull-out sessions during the school day or integrated into the school curriculum. They are being delivered by paid programme staff from a variety of backgrounds, including Early Years, youth work, speech and language therapy and teachers, as well as volunteers.

The programmes and interventions delivered as part of the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have demonstrated that they are able to replicate evidence-based programmes with fidelity and to show positive outcomes consistent with those produced in other regions and jurisdictions internationally. It was also possible to successfully develop new programmes and services that are underpinned by a sound and robust theoretical evidence base and that are showing positive results. It will be important to follow-up and examine whether any improvements observed can be sustained over time.
Conclusions

In this section, key messages are highlighted and some of the possible implications outlined.

Key messages

- **Children’s learning begins before birth** and has to be supported in different ways depending on the age of the child, their individual needs and circumstances.

- Often when we think about successful learning outcomes, we highlight specific skills, such as literacy and numeracy. These are useful indicators of learning, but we also need to encourage children to engage meaningfully in the world around them. Placing a focus on giving children a love of learning, as well as on what skills they gain, would help to improve outcomes and support life-long learning.

- **Interventions should be explicit as to which outcomes they aim to improve in the short, medium and long term, and how these can be meaningfully measured.** There can sometimes be a difference in how much improvement parents and teachers perceive to occur in children’s learning compared to what is shown by independent evaluations. It can be useful to combine information from quantitative and qualitative evaluations.

- Learning is not the sole responsibility of schools. Children experience a range of learning environments, including home, day care, pre-school and junior/primary school. **Children thrive when they experience consistency in how people interact with and care for them.** This can be improved by ensuring each setting understands what happens elsewhere and ensures that their approach complements the others.

- **Transition points between the different learning environments experienced by children at different stages are important** and need to be prepared for in advance. Good communication between settings and continuity in the approaches used between settings are important.

- **Parents are a key influence on their children’s learning.** Parents need to provide healthy, stimulating environments for children during their early years, as well as supporting their more formal learning experiences when they start school.

- **Children’s learning can be supported by experiencing quality day care.** This can be improved by offering professional development to staff to improve their skills and interactions with children.

- **Integrating new approaches into schools takes time and sustained effort.** Important enablers for success include specialised implementation teams to provide ongoing support, focused approaches that fit with the curriculum, professional development for teachers and leadership buy-in.

- **Programmes to be delivered in school settings need to specify how they link to other work being done in the school environment.** If the programme is to be mainstreamed, there should be clear links made to the existing curriculum. After-school programmes should complement the work done in school by using a range of interactive, fun activities rather than repeat the activities of the school day.

- **Working with teachers and Early Years professionals can improve outcomes for the first group of children who experience the changes.** If changes are sustained, subsequent cohorts of children may also benefit, which may yield a greater return on initial investment.

- **Collecting information about possible cost benefits over time would be useful for interventions delivered in an education setting,** where the initial costs for delivery may be incurred by the Department of Education, but the long-term cost savings are accrued by another Department such as those responsible for Employment or Justice.
Implications
Learning is not the sole responsibility of schools. From birth, children experience a range of learning environments, including home, day care, pre-school and junior/primary school, as well as their experiences in the wider community. Children benefit from school most if they have been supported to learn and engage with the world around them from birth. Children who grow up from birth in a caring and responsive environment that has given them supported, learning opportunities arrive at school with a history of learning behind them and core skills and competencies that schools can build on. This ‘school readiness’ can be seen as having four interrelated components: children’s readiness for school, school’s readiness for children, and the capacities of families and of communities to provide developmental opportunities for their young children. Longitudinal studies have shown these factors to be crucial since children who fail to gain adequate skills at an early stage will find it difficult to catch up later.

Children also experience several key transitions during their lives. These can include the transition from home life to day care, pre-school or nursery school, to primary or junior school, and then later to secondary school, college and possibly further education. All these changes can include different learning, education and care paradigms, and are key stages when performance can deteriorate and problems can occur.

The need to engage parents
Parents play a critical role in supporting their children’s learning. It is what parents do with their children that makes the difference to children’s learning outcomes, more so than socio-economic status per se. Parents may not always be aware of how best to provide active support to their children’s learning. They may not know what approaches are being used in schools or they may have negative attitudes towards school which influence their children’s outcomes.

The Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative showed that it is challenging to engage parents in supporting the work being done with their children. Beneficial strategies include using creative and innovative methods, supporting parents to do developmentally appropriate activities with their children, and making services accessible. Some of the key implications for engaging parents in their children’s learning include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Work should be done to engage with parents to encourage them to support any work being done directly with children. A variety of strategies will need to be used depending on individual needs and circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Locating services for parents within school settings can help to improve the connections between the school, home and community. Locating health-related services for children in school premises can make them more accessible for families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Local and national partnerships should support capacity-building activities to improve children’s learning, including collaboration between schools, educational support services, family support and training agencies, service providers and other relevant stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Capacity-building in Early Years settings
Best practice approaches to improving practice in Early Years settings show that integrating childcare and education (as well as high-quality pre-school provision) can positively influence
children’s cognitive and behavioural outcomes, at least up to the age of 11. Having a well-qualified workforce improves children’s progress. Outcomes can also be improved by working with both children and family members.

The Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative highlighted ways of improving standards in day care settings and encouraging the provision of stimulating learning experiences for young children. These include the importance of tailoring activities to be appropriate to the developmental stage of the child and being flexible in approach for delivery. Day care settings needed ongoing support to implement changes. This was facilitated by assessing organisational readiness at the start of the process (including current service provision and fit against the programme, staffing skills and experience, and available resources), by using specialised implementation teams, by getting buy-in at all levels from senior management through to individual practitioners, by offering quality training and by creating learning networks of practitioners to share experiences and good practice. Some of the key implications for improving children’s learning in Early Years settings include:

**Implications**

- Learning programmes and services should be appropriate for the age and stage of the child.
- Ongoing support, such as specialised implementation teams, is important for creating and sustaining change in Early Years settings.
- Capacity-building should be undertaken to support the professional development of the Early Years workforce. This should include quality training as well as opportunities to share examples of best practice peer learning communities.

**Delivering interventions in schools**

Many of the programmes in the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative were delivered in the school setting, either during normal class time or in after-school classes. Programmes included supporting skills such as reading and building healthy relationships. They varied as to whether they employed their own staff to deliver the programmes or operated by changing teacher practice. Challenges included fitting discrete programme-focused lessons into an already packed curriculum, staff turnover and issues in keeping the programme fresh in light of educational changes and constraints of the timetable.

Local learning showed that integrating new approaches into schools takes time and sustained effort. Negotiating the support of schools was critical to success. Specialised implementation teams were useful for ongoing coaching and support. Organisations had to understand the culture and procedures within schools and tailor their approaches accordingly. Consultation with the school and actively involving staff in the selection or design of the programme was useful. Time had to be allocated for training and resource preparation. Programmes offered a good opportunity to change practice within a whole school and not just in individual classes. Programmes that supported the use of a common vocabulary within the different learning environments experienced by children, by the professionals operating in each, as well as parents, were seen to help support transitions. Some of the key implications for delivering interventions in schools to improve children’s learning include:
### Implications

- To implement a programme or intervention successfully, it is crucial to understand the culture of a school and its constraints, and to assess the suitability of any programme against these, as well as gauging how organisationally ready the school is to implement the programme. An implementation plan should be developed and specialised implementation teams can be useful in supporting change.

- Programmes aiming to be delivered in school settings should clarify how the programme links to the national curriculum, provide a sequential and integrated skills curriculum, and establish learning goals and monitoring procedures. It can help to use programmes that have clear, developmentally appropriate lesson plans, but that also allow for some flexibility for the teacher to use their professional judgement in tailoring delivery to their particular class.

- There should be a planned and integrated approach to changing practice with schools – one that takes account of future sustainability, as well as how to retain and further build on improved outcomes.

- The professional development of teachers and staff within schools should be supported through coordinated quality training pathways, ongoing coaching and support, and setting up peer learning networks.

### Evaluating the work

Although many policy initiatives and national monitoring procedures focus on improving specific skills such as literacy and numeracy, promoting a love of learning from an early age is also important. Several programmes showed a positive impact on the children’s learning environments as well as improvements in children’s abilities. It will be important to measure whether these short-term benefits can be sustained over time.

Some programmes were perceived by parents and practitioners to have positive effects on children’s outcomes that were not always found by the evaluations. This highlights the importance of comparisons with children not taking part in a programme to show its true impact, as well as ensuring the right outcomes are being meaningfully measured. Qualitative information about a programme’s effectiveness can be useful alongside the quantitative evaluations.

The local learning also showed the importance of undertaking outcomes evaluations on programmes that have had a chance to ‘bed-down’ and become established. As practitioners became more experienced and confident in delivering the programme over time, they expected outcomes to improve. Some of the organisations were also able to use the learning from the evaluations to further improve the delivery of the programmes, such as changing the frequency of sessions, refining the training offered to practitioners and focusing the content of the programme.

Working with teachers and Early Years professionals to develop skills can improve outcomes for the first group of children who experience the changes. Many of the teachers taking part in the programmes reported that they would find it relatively easy to transfer the new methods to the next year of children. If changes to practice are sustained, subsequent cohorts of children may also benefit, which may yield a greater return on initial investment.
Any study undertaken should incorporate a cost-effective element. This should include the true costs for setting-up and delivering the service, including training, resources and the costs of ongoing delivery. From a prevention and early intervention viewpoint, collecting information about possible cost-benefits over time would be useful, particularly for interventions delivered in an education setting where the initial costs for delivery may be incurred by the Department of Education, but the long-term cost savings are accrued by another Department, such as those responsible for Employment or Justice.

**Implications**

- Programmes should clearly specify the outcomes they expect to change and when these changes will occur; evaluations should assess these at the appropriate time using meaningful measures.
- There may be additional longer term financial benefits from programmes that are able to improve teachers’ and Early Years professionals’ practice. They may be able to apply their new skills to subsequent cohorts of children as well as those involved in the original intervention.
- Primary schools may need support to shoulder the full costs of interventions given that in purely economic terms the costs may outweigh the immediate financial benefits. There may need to be targeted top-up funding from other Departments.
References


References


References


Miller, S., Connolly, P. and Maguire, L.K. (2011) A Follow-up Randomised Control Trial Evaluation of the Effects of Business in the Community’s Time to Read Mentoring Programme. Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen’s University Belfast.


References


