

Summary of the Baseline Report on the Interim Evaluation of NEYAI and Síolta



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Background and Context of Study

This study brings together a substantial body of new evidence on the early years sector in Ireland. It comes at a time when the early years sector in Ireland, defined as the care and education of children aged 0-6, has experienced significant development in three main areas: introduction of the National Framework for Early Childhood Education (Síolta) and the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Aistear); introduction of the Free Pre-School Year for every child aged between three years two months and four years seven months; implementation of initiatives to improve quality and outcomes in the early years sector through the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP), the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI), and the formal Síolta Quality Improvement Programme. This document is a summary of the baseline report on the national evaluation of NEYAI and Síolta. Its purpose is to summarise the progress that has been made up to the mid-point in the evaluation and before the final report in 2014.

The care and education which children receive at home and in childcare centres before they reach school-going age is recognised to be crucially important for their development and their enjoyment of life, both in the present and in the future. A substantial body of scientific evidence shows conclusively that these early years are foundational to how children subsequently perform at school and college, their future employment and earnings, and their overall health and well-being as adults

Governments are increasingly taking stock of this evidence and recognising that their failure to make necessary investments during the early years of a child's life is a mistake which needs to be rectified, bearing in mind that spending on early years is disproportionately low compared to later years in a child's life but has a much higher rate of return. This recognition presents an important opportunity to consider how *additional* resources allocated for the early years sector, if and when it happens, could have maximum impact in terms of outcomes for children before they start school. This study is designed to produce evidence that will help clarify this important issue and support evidence-based expenditure on the early years.

In 2012, public expenditure on childcare services in Ireland was €266m, about two thirds of this on the Free Pre-School Year. If this is averaged across the 66,000 pre-school children in Ireland in that year, average State expenditure per pre-school child amounts to €2,629 which is about half the average OECD expenditure per child on pre-primary education in 2009 (€5,189).

The specific initiative which gave rise to this report is NEYAI. This is a three-year initiative (2011-2014) aimed at improving the quality and outcomes of services in the early years sector and, through this evaluation, producing evidence that will inform practice, policy and mainstream provision. NEYAI is a fund of about €5.25m created through collaboration between Atlantic Philanthropies, Mount Street Club Trustees, Department of Children & Youth Affairs, Department of Education & Skills, and Pobal which manages the initiative. There are 11 'demonstration projects' in NEYAI, each made up of a consortium of statutory and voluntary organisations, all of them in disadvantaged areas: seven in Dublin and one each in Cork, Limerick, Longford/Westmeath and Donegal.

Methodology

This study is an evaluation of NEYAI and Síolta, the latter comprising 23 of the 140 childcare centres in the formal Síolta quality improvement programme. In broad terms, the purpose of the evaluation is to identify the ‘active ingredients’ associated with improving staff capacity and child outcomes in early years services. Building on this understanding, the evaluation addresses two specific questions:

- Does NEYAI and Síolta have an impact on staff capacity and child outcomes, when all measured sources of variation are taken into account?
- If NEYAI or Síolta, or both, have an impact, what are the ‘active ingredients’ associated with improved staff capacity and child outcomes?

In order to answer these questions, the evaluation measures staff capacity and child outcomes at baseline and follow-up. Measurement is based on standardised instruments in three separate questionnaires: staff questionnaire, child assessment questionnaire, parent questionnaire. Full details of the methodology are in the main baseline report, and will be included in the final evaluation report to be published in early 2014.

Sample

In Ireland, there are approximately the 4,300 childcare centres. This study covers just 2% of these: 89 in total, 66 in NEYAI and 23 in Síolta. Similarly, the estimated number of staff employed in the childcare sector in Ireland is 21,000. This study covers just 3.5% of these staff with about three quarters in the NEYAI sample (543) and one quarter in the Síolta sample (204). The number of children in the Free Pre-School Year in Ireland in 2012 was around 66,000. This study covers less than 1% of these, just over half in NEYAI (257) and just under half in Síolta (207).

This is not a representative sample of the childcare sector in Ireland because it was not randomly selected and moreover, by virtue of constraints imposed on the research design from the beginning, could not have been otherwise. There are similarities and differences between the sample and the national childcare sector but, on balance, the differences outweigh the similarities in the areas where comparable data exists. This suggests that some caution is necessary in making inferences from the study to the childcare sector generally, particularly those parts of it which are under-represented in this study, notably smaller centres with less qualified staff, private providers, and those located in more advantaged areas serving the children of more advantaged parents. At the same time, the study aims to reveal underlying processes in the early years sector as a whole – particularly the ‘active ingredients’ associated with improved staff capacity and child outcomes - and since these are generic to every childcare centre, the issue of representative-ness is less important at this stage.

Some Findings on Staff

- Childcare staff in Ireland, as in this study, are predominantly female with only 2-3% male.



- Employment in the childcare sector in Ireland, and in this study, breaks down into those who are full-time (46%), part-time (40%), and on employment schemes (14%).
- Childcare staff are more satisfied with their job compared to workers in Ireland generally, with the exception of their earnings where the level of dissatisfaction is high (45%).
- The personal well-being of staff is generally more positive compared to a large sample of Irish adults.

Full Time 46%

Part Time 40%

Employment Schemes 14%

Some Findings on Children

- Child development was measured using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and the highest mean scores were for children's physical health and well-being while the lowest mean scores were for their language and cognitive skills.



- More than a tenth of children (13%) have special needs - much higher for boys (20%) than for girls (7%) – which is close to the 14% identified by teachers in the 9-year old cohort of the GUI using a similar question; GUI refers to Growing up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children.
- A majority of children who were identified as having special needs (66%) did not receive any special supports or services
- In the opinion of childcare staff, most parents are very involved (75%) or somewhat involved (22%) in their child's learning and education.
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Preliminary Conclusions and Emerging Issues

The baseline report provides an insight into the characteristics of staff and children and, more importantly from the perspective of the evaluation, illustrates that the instruments used to measure staff capacity and child outcomes are producing results that are consistent with those found in other populations and samples. The findings also give a flavour of some emerging issues which will be investigated more fully in the final report by analysing the combined baseline and follow-up data.

Measuring Child Outcomes

The Free Pre-School Year is a central focus of the study and we have defined its main child outcome as 'school readiness', measured by the Early Development Instrument (EDI). The results so far indicate that this is an appropriate way to measure child outcomes of the Free Pre-School Year.

Identifying Special Needs

The overall prevalence of children with special needs (13%) is particularly high among boys (20%). Many of these children were identified by staff as having a speech impairment, a behavioural problem, a learning difficulty or an emotional problem. However we also found that a substantial proportion of children in the 'at risk' category of the EDI (the lowest 10% of scores) were not identified as having special needs. This suggests that while these children are developmentally at risk, they are not being identified by staff, possibly because their condition may not be as observable as those with speech or behaviour problems. This does not imply that the observations of staff are mistaken; rather it draws attention to the way certain conditions are taken as indicators of special needs but other, possibly less visible conditions, are being overlooked. Given that observations tell as much about the observer as the observed, this draws attention to the frame of reference, implicit as well as explicit, that is operant when staff decide that a child has special needs.

More than a tenth of children (13%) have special needs

Influence of Place of Work on Place of Care and Education

A childcare centre is a place of work for staff and simultaneously a place where children receive care and education. The results reported here paint a positive picture of childcare centres as places of work for staff which suggests, other things being equal, that they are more likely to be positive places for the care and education of children. The personal well-being of staff is also an important part of the 'environment' of each childcare setting and all the indications are that this is high. Overall, these findings are reassuring not just because childcare staff are well and enjoy their work but also because this provides a positive environment for the care and education of children. In the final report we will assess the contribution which this makes to staff capacity and child outcomes.



Staff Qualifications and Capacity

The concept and measurement of staff capacity is central to this study. The exact qualities or ingredients which constitute this capacity are numerous, not all of them are well-known or understood, and their exact measurement is a challenge. The precise way in which staff qualifications influence child outcomes, across the entire field of education and not just the early years, is a matter of debate. At the same time, the evidence is equally clear that educators are the most important determinant of child outcomes within all educational settings. In the early years sector, the OECD suggests that 'it is not the qualification per se that has an impact on child outcomes but the ability of better qualified staff members to create a high-quality pedagogic environment that makes the difference.' It is appropriate nevertheless to ask if the overall level of education and qualification in the childcare sector in Ireland is too low to fully achieve the potential that is possible through, for example, the Free Pre-School Year. If one adopts the view that staff in early years education require a relevant degree-level qualification, then the scale of the challenge becomes apparent. If one adopts a wider perspective on staff capacity – which includes a focus on skills and not just qualifications – then there are also significant challenges, as the baseline report documents. That is why the national workforce development plan for early childhood care and education in Ireland is important since its core vision is that: 'The ECCE workforce should be supported to achieve qualifications (appropriate to their occupational role and profile) that equip them with the skills, knowledge, competencies, values.'

Developing Children's Language and Thinking

The interactions of staff with each child are foundational to the work of childcare centres and this is recognised in the importance given to 'interactions' in both Síolta and Aistear. Specialists in early childhood education increasingly refer to these interactions as a capacity for 'sustained shared thinking' or 'extended purposive conversations' and numerous studies testify to their importance for child development. The findings suggest that there may be a gap between the type of staff-child interactions which are known to be beneficial for developing a child's language and cognitive ability – the area where children in this study have the lowest EDI scores - and the capacity of staff to sustain those interactions. On the basis of this evidence, it would appear that the developmental and educational potential of many staff-child interactions may be relatively limited, and below what could be achieved if the workforce was more skilled in holding purposive conversations. This finding is directly relevant to one of the objectives of the national literacy and numeracy strategy which aims to improve the professional practice of practitioners in early childhood care and education regarding the teaching of literacy and numeracy

Staff-Parent Interactions

The interactions of staff with parents, as envisaged by Síolta and Aistear, are a key aspect of the work of childcare centres. This is informed by evidence that centre-based childcare produces better outcomes when it also involves parents. Even without this evidence, it is important to note that the amount of time which most children spend with parents is a multiple of the time spent in childcare; for example, the Free Pre-School Year amounts to little more than 10% of a child's time during that year. Given the primacy of a child's interactions with its parent(s) – because interactions are 'the primary engines of development', to cite the often-cited bioecological perspective of Uri Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) - it follows that improving a parent's ability to support their child's development and learning has the potential to have benefits in excess of what happens during the Free Pre-School Year, or childcare generally.



Influence of Employment Structure on childcare as a Career

Employment in the childcare sector in Ireland, and in this sample, breaks down into those who are full-time (46%), part-time (40%) and on schemes (14%), excluding volunteers. In this respect, the childcare sector differs radically from the rest of the Irish economy even allowing for the fact that the vast majority of those employed in the sector (98%) are female and therefore tend to have higher rates of part-time employment. One of the questions which arises in this context is whether the full-time / part-time composition of the childcare labour force is inhibiting its development as a profession and reducing its attractiveness as a career option. This question merits further debate, including consideration of the social and economic forces which give rise to and maintain this employment structure. These forces arise from the fact that about three quarters of centre-based childcare is part-time but there may be also be a preference for part-time working among staff who are also parents (67%). It seems clear that if movement towards more full-time employment in the sector is deemed desirable, significant but not insuperable challenges arise in bringing this about.

Enhancing Impact of Childcare through Family Support

The OECD defines a ‘successful school system’ as ‘those that perform above-average and show below-average socio-economic inequalities’. This definition might also be applied to define a successful early years sector, and would be consistent with Government policy and its vision for children that: ‘growing up in Ireland means that you have the best start in life available anywhere in the world’. We will apply this perspective to our analysis in the final report. Pending that, it is useful to recall the conditions required for early years education to be effective in narrowing the outcomes gap between children from different social backgrounds: (i) early education must have a substantial impact on school readiness; (ii) the impact needs to be greater on those from more disadvantaged backgrounds; and (iii) children from more disadvantaged backgrounds attend higher quality centres since higher quality leads to better outcomes. These conditions also draw attention to the importance of understanding inequality from a child-centred perspective and not just a childcare perspective. This implies that, in order to reduce inequality and promote the full development of every child, it is necessary to address all the factors which inhibit some children from being well and doing well. Childcare is only one of those factors, important but not the most important.

The child-centred perspective which we are highlighting – and which moreover is already part of official thinking - implies that measures to reduce inequality through the education system, including the pre-school sector, need to build on prior and parallel supports for those parents who have multiple vulnerabilities and who, without practical, psychological and wider community supports, are unable to provide the quality of care which will enable their children develop to full potential. The new Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the new Child and Family Agency (CFA) open up possibilities for integrating supports in this way, while the new Area Based Response to Child Poverty Initiative launched in April 2013 also gives practical expression to this approach. This is in keeping with a recent synthesis of evidence on how to improve the well-being of children in the context of CFA: ‘services to improve the well-being of children need to take account of the fact that these are likely to have greater impact when they simultaneously support and enhance the well-being of parents and children. In other words, services are more likely to produce large and sustainable outcomes when they adopt a holistic family approach rather than focusing solely on either the child or the parent. To some extent, this evidence is already well known but its implications need to infuse the vision of CFA and inform its practice of how services are designed and delivered.’

Next Steps

The next step in this study involves collecting follow-up data on staff and children on whom we already have baseline data. This takes place in June / July 2013, coinciding with the end of the 2012/13 Free Pre-School Year. Data analysis will be undertaken throughout the second half of 2013 and the first quarter of 2014. It is expected that the final report will be completed in the first quarter of 2014.



Acknowledgements

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The collection of data was made possible through coordinators and managers in NEYAI (National Early Years Access Initiative) and Síolta (National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education), the two programmes that are evaluated in this study. We thank them for the qualities they displayed in contributing to this part of the study, particularly their patience and persistence. Their names are:

Name	NEYAI Organisation
Carina Fitzgerald	Early Years Language and Learning Initiative: Ballyfermot
Marian O'Connell	Canal Communities Family Welfare Initiative Bringing It All Back Home: Dublin
Sheila Dillon	Happy Talk – The Glen/Mayfield Early Language and Learning Project: Cork
Ciara Monaghan Delia Goodman Lisa Kavanagh	Addressing gaps between training and practice: South Dublin County
Josephine Bleach Aoife O'Gorman Catriona Flood	Early Years Numeracy Project: Dublin Docklands
Avril McMonagle Orán Sweeney	The Professional Pedagogy Project: Donegal
Gráinne McKenna Adrienne Streek	Fingal Parenting Initiative: Fingal
Eimear Carron	Tus Nua Project: Longford, Westmeath
John Buttery Maria O'Dwyer	Start Right: Limerick
Sharon Moore Jenny Hayes Nicola Keeler	Dublin South West Inner City Integration of Services and Continuum of Care Demonstration Model for children 0-6 years: Rialto
Dara Hogan Maura McMahan	Professional Education & Training Programme to implement Fledglings Early Years Manual: Tallaght
Name	Síolta Organisation
Máire Corbett Fiona Kelleher Carol Duffy	Early Childhood Ireland: Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Westmeath
Jean Currid Imelda Graham	Barnardos: Limerick, Waterford, Westmeath
Noel Kelly Joanne Waters Kathleen Tuite	Prevention and Early Intervention Programme: Dublin
Michelle Hart Sharon McGuire	Border Counties Childhood Network: Donegal
Ulrike Farnleitner	Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association: Kilkenny, Clare

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Name	Organisation
Tony Crooks (Chair)	Adjunct Professor of Applied Social Studies, NUI Maynooth
Marjorie Smith	Professor of the Psychology of the Family and Co-Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London
Áine Hyland	Emeritus Professor of Education, University College, Cork
Bernie McDonnell	Pobal, Programme Manager, Equality Programmes
Gail Birkbeck	Strategic Learning & Evaluation Executive, Atlantic Philanthropies

Overall responsibility for NEYAI rests with a Steering Group. Our dealings with the Steering Group have been mainly through its Chair, Noel Kelly, who has been solid, generous and understanding in his support of our work. We have had separate contacts with Catherine Hynes in the Department of Education & Skills regarding the Siolta sample and she did everything to facilitate this part of our work. We also had contacts with Albert O'Donoghue in the Department of Children & Youth Affairs and greatly appreciate the access we have been granted to the Department's database of childcare centres. We thank these and all members of the Steering Group:

Name	Organisation
Noel Kelly (Chair)	Preparing for life, Northside Partnership
Noelle Spring (Vice-Chair)	Katherine Howard Foundation
Albert O'Donoghue	Department of Children & Youth Affairs
Catherine Hynes	Early Years Education Policy Unit, Department of Education & Skills
Mary Cunningham	National Youth Council of Ireland (Former Steering Group Member)
Charles Delap	Mount Street Trust
Jane Forman	Atlantic Philanthropies
Tony Crooks	Adjunct Prof of Applied Social Studies, NUI Maynooth
Gretta Murphy	Kilkenny County Childcare Committee
Heino Schonfeld	Centre for Effective Services (Former Steering Group Member)
Aisling Gillen	HSE Office Director of Children & Family Services
Denis Leamy	Pobal
Bernie McDonnell	Pobal

Throughout the study, we have been in regular contact with the staff team in Pobal who are responsible for NEYAI and its evaluation. This is a team of exemplary, dedicated and hard-working public servants and they have done everything to make our work as good as can it can be. It has been a pleasure to work with them and we are grateful for their continued support:

Name	Role
Bernie McDonnell	Programme Manager, Equality Programmes
Siobhán O'Dowd and Nuala Kelly	Co-ordinator - National Early Years Access Initiative
Emily Cunningham	Administrator - National Early Years Access Initiative

The collection of data for this report was a major undertaking. Some of the data, notably the staff and child questionnaire, was collected on-line through a website which we designed for the evaluation: www.neyai-evaluation.ie. Insight Statistical Consulting set up and managed the on-line system of data collection and provided us with regular updates of progress. We particularly thank its CEO, David Harmon, for providing us with an excellent service at every stage of this process.

Some of the data, notably from parents, was collected through face-to-face interviews. This was highly sensitive work but also required impressive logistical ability to set up and carry out hundreds of interviews throughout the country at relatively short notice, at a time and place that suited each parent. This work was carried out by Fieldwork Future who are experts in the field. It was managed by its Fieldwork Manager, Torsten Valbert, who also did some of the interviews, and we express our appreciation to him and his team for the fine personal and professional qualities which they brought to this work.

We acknowledge our gratitude to the funders of NEYAI for the generosity that made this initiative and its evaluation possible. These are: Atlantic Philanthropies, Mount Street Club Trustees, Department of Children & Youth Affairs, Department of Education & Skills, and Pobal.

In the now time-honoured tradition, we assure everyone who has contributed to this report, particularly those named above, that they are not responsible for any errors of omissions or commission which the report may contain. Kieran McKeown and Trutz Haase take full responsibility for the report.

Finally, we recognise that this study is a small part of a larger work, inspired by the Government's vision for children that: 'growing up in Ireland means that you have the best start in life available anywhere in the world'. Everyone named and unnamed, in these acknowledgements is a co-author of that larger work. It is our service, as individuals and a society, to do all we can so that children 'stand in the glow of ripeness', to borrow a phrase about giving service from Polish poet and Nobel laureate, Czeslaw Milosz¹:

*'Then he wants to use himself and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves:
Who serves best doesn't always understand.'*

Kieran McKeown & Trutz Haase

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1. Miłosz, C., (2001). Czeslaw Miłosz was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980. He once wrote: 'The child who dwells inside us trusts that there are wise men somewhere who know the truth.' Writing at the centenary of his birth in 2011, Seamus Heaney Nobel Laureate in 1995, wrote that Milosz 'has become one of those wise men' (The Guardian, 7th April 2011).

