

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

The Quality of Educational Provision for Reception Children in Primary Schools

Executive Summary 2004

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The report, "The Quality of Educational Provision for Reception Children in Primary Schools", presents the findings of an evaluation by the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) of the pre-school education being provided in reception classes and groupings¹ across Northern Ireland (NI). The findings are based on visits to a representative sample of primary schools (14% of the total providing reception places) and on information obtained from a questionnaire sent to all schools with reception children.

The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme (the Programme) has met its target of providing sufficient pre-school places to offer a year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it. The Department of Education's (DE) policy for the Programme² was to phase out reception places as alternative, good quality pre-school places became available. Although there has been a reduction in the number of schools providing reception places, in the school census of October 2003 some 1,044 children were still attending reception provision in primary and preparatory schools.

Seventy-eight percent of the schools which completed and returned the questionnaire reported that there was alternative pre-school education provision, funded as part of the Programme, within either the school grounds or up to a three miles radius of the school. In 47%, some of the reception children had been transferred during the year from a funded place in a statutory nursery or voluntary/private pre-school centre.

No accurate data was available about the total number of reception children enrolled after the October school census date; the Inspectorate found that, over a school year, there was an estimated increase of 45% in reception numbers. No funding was made available for these children, and their education was being subsidised from the budgets allocated for the other children in the school. Some schools had been 'zero-rated'³, which meant that they received no funding for any of the reception children.

¹ Primary schools may make provision for children under compulsory school age in reception classes (containing only reception children) or in groups within classes containing older children. When they are admitted, these children must have reached the age of 4 years.

² Investing in Early Learning – Pre-school Education in Northern Ireland, Department of Education 1998

³ When a school is zero-rated for reception children, it will not receive any funding for children under compulsory school age (i.e. reception children) in its budget allocation.

The Inspectorate's main findings were as follows:

A minority of schools (under 20%) was providing a satisfactory quality of pre-school education within the reception group or class. None of the provision visited was of an overall good standard.

The strongest aspect of the provision overall was the quality of the ethos, which was satisfactory or good in the majority of schools. The staff were generally caring and committed and provided a warm and friendly atmosphere with good relationships that promoted the children's settled behaviour. Other positive features noted during the visits included the arrangements for child protection, the provision of daily play sessions and the hard-working approach of the staff.

The staff were generally sensitive, supportive and encouraging towards the reception children. In a majority of schools (58%), however, the quality of the staff's interaction with the children did not promote learning satisfactorily. There was limited skill in developing learning through play-based activities. Sometimes the staff took an inappropriately formal approach to teaching the reception children alongside the older children in composite classes. The least satisfactory pre-school provision was almost always found in composite classes where the age range of the children exceeded two years (i.e. in classes that contained children in years groups beyond year 1).

A minority of schools (23%) was providing an appropriately broad pre-school programme. The provision made for language development was better than that for other aspects of the curriculum. Often, the children had insufficient opportunities to develop their own ideas through play, or to be independent, make choices or be creative. There was inadequate provision for their physical development.

Although a minority of teachers had relevant, written planning for the reception children, and made appropriate observations of the children's development, planning and assessment were generally underdeveloped. These shortcomings contributed to the limited breadth, balance and progression within the provision. The teachers made few links between their planning and assessment in order to identify and meet the children's individual needs.

In a majority of the schools (70%), the quality of the accommodation and resources used by the reception children was less than satisfactory. Some schools provided appropriate space for activities; generally, however, there were

inadequate resources, and the space was often limited or constrained by the needs of older children within the classes.

The leadership and management of the reception provision were less than satisfactory in a majority of schools (60%). Where there were strengths, these included a strong sense of team work and appropriate organisation, resources and staff training. There were important shortcomings in the schools' monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the provision made, and in the consideration given to the specific needs of pre-school children when decisions were taken about the organisation, resourcing and funding of reception places. There was insufficient recognition of the significant difficulties presented to some class teachers in trying to provide adequately for the range of needs within composite classes containing reception children. The demand from parents, and the views of boards of governors, were the reasons most frequently given by the schools for continuing to enrol reception children.

A majority of the schools (60%) considered that there were insufficient training opportunities in pre-school education available to reception teachers.

It is clear from the findings that the teachers were hard-working and had good relationships with the reception children. On the whole, however, the provision made in the reception groups and classes visited did not meet the standards expected of good quality pre-school education.

The report considers whether, in the case of a shortfall of alternative provision, a few primary schools might be recognised as pre-school providers. It makes recommendations about the improvements that are needed if an appropriately high standard of pre-school education for reception children is to be provided in a primary school context. These include the need for any such schools to:

- implement fully the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education and provide a curriculum designed to meet the needs of pre-school children;
- ensure that the programme is based mainly on learning through play;
- plan the programme effectively, and monitor carefully the children's progress;
- provide adequate and appropriate staffing, resources and space;

- ensure that the specific needs of pre-school children are given the highest priority in any management decisions about reception provision;
- ensure that the time of admission, and the size and type of class in which reception children are placed, provide the optimum conditions for good quality pre-school provision.

In addition, the staff should have access to relevant training and support in order to develop their skills and understanding of pre-school education.

Where schools cannot implement fully the recommendations in the report, it would be inappropriate for them to enrol reception children.

Some schools reported that, following the zero-rating process, they would cease to provide reception places from September 2004. Other schools intended to continue reception provision even after zero-rating was applied. Some small schools believed that, if they were not to admit reception children, their parents would enrol them in another school. Changes in DE policy are needed in order to support these, and all other schools, in making decisions which are in the best interests of the children. These issues are being examined as part of DE's review of pre-school education in NI.

If any pre-school provision within primary schools is to continue (other than in statutory nursery units), action needs to be taken by DE, by those providing advice and support, and by the schools themselves, in order to ensure that the necessary improvements are made and the overall quality of the provision is raised. The primary consideration must be to ensure that the needs of these young children are met effectively and that they receive the best possible start to their education.