



**D.C.C.C.**  
Donegal County Childcare Committee Ltd.  
Coiste Cúram Páistí Chontae Dhún na nÓgal, Teo.

**NEYAI** National Early Years  
Access Initiative  
Promoting Better Outcomes for Children & Families

**pobal**  
government supporting communities



2011-2014

# A Reflection of Learning:

## Donegal's participation in the National Early Years Access Initiative

Donegal County Childcare Committee is the lead partner on the Donegal based project under the National Early Years Access Initiative called the Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP).

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# Donegal County Childcare Committee Ltd

Donegal County Childcare Committee (DCCC) Ltd. is a local Government supported agency that works for the development, sustainability and advancement of high quality early childhood care and education in County Donegal.






Established in 2000, DCCC's vision is to:



**excel in the development and support  
of quality early childhood care and education  
in County Donegal to bring about  
positive outcomes for children and families.**



## The core work of DCCC on an ongoing basis includes:

-  Implementing Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) childcare funding programmes at local level in County Donegal
-  Providing direct and indirect support to early childhood services, educators and parents
-  Promoting accredited training and continuing professional development opportunities to the early childhood sector
-  Supporting the work of local Parent and Toddler Groups and Childcare Networks operating across the county
-  Working in collaboration with local, regional and national partners for the advancement of services for children, parents and early childhood educators/ providers.





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Background

### What is the National Early Years Access Initiative?

The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) is a collaborative partnership between The Atlantic Philanthropies, The Mount Street Club Trustees, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Early Years Education Policy Unit, Department of Education and Skills and Pobal.

The NEYAI is a tailored initiative funding 11 projects nationally that collectively have the capacity to demonstrate innovative inter-agency responses to the provision of early childhood care, education and development, influence early years' mainstream practice and provision and contribute to the ongoing development of early years' policy.

### DCCC – The Lead Partner

Donegal County Childcare is the lead partner on the Donegal based project under the National Early Years Access Initiative. The *Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP)* is a framework of professional development and supports

encompassing a training programme and a variety of follow-on mentoring supports aimed at enabling early childhood service providers to make steady, quantifiable changes and improvements to their early education practice.

### A Consortium Model of Delivery

As the key agency for early childhood care and education in County Donegal, the overall management of the PPP drew upon DCCC's existing management structures and expertise of large scale project management. DCCC's role included the strategic, financial and human resource management of the PPP.

DCCC aimed to draw upon the expertise of local and regional agencies with an interest in early childhood care and education as Consortium Partners. Through their participation on a Project Advisory Sub-committee, it was envisaged that partners would guide and inform the project content and delivery and disseminate progress updates to their respective agencies.







## What are the Components that Made up the Professional Pedagogy Project?

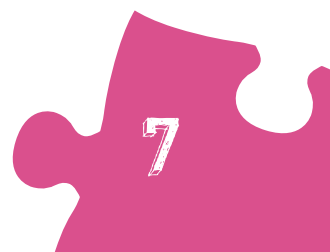
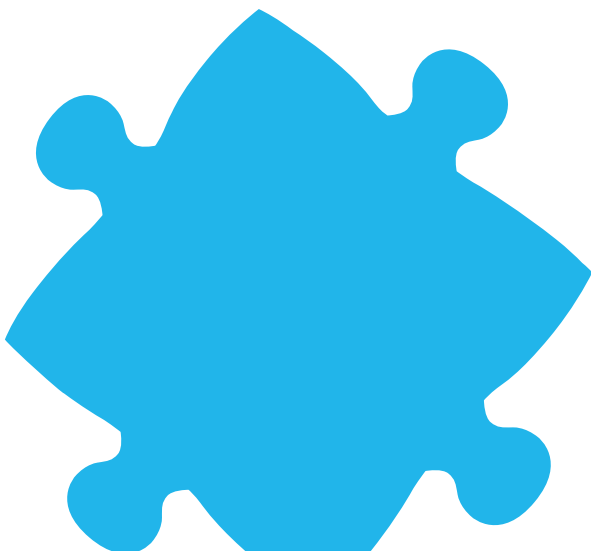
Two Quality Mentors and a Communications Officer were employed under the initiative to develop, deliver and promote a needs led training and mentoring programme on specific aspects of professional pedagogical practice. Other components of the initiative included needs led cluster sessions on topics of common

interest, information sessions for parents on the benefits of quality early childhood education and the Aistear curriculum. A discussion forum to enable PPP educators/parents to share ideas, generate queries and generally have access to peer support was also developed.

## What did the Professional Pedagogy Project aim to achieve?

Underpinned by Aistear, the PPP provided an in-depth focus on the areas of *Early Childhood Play and Curriculum, Planning and Reflective Practice, Assessment for Learning and Transitions*. This tailored programme not only incorporated training, but supported the transference of theory to practice through

onsite mentoring and peer networking through themed cluster sessions. The aim was to scaffold and strengthen pedagogical practice, to enable educators to take ownership of that change and to use self and team reflection to map progress.





### What made the Professional Pedagogy Project Innovative and Different?

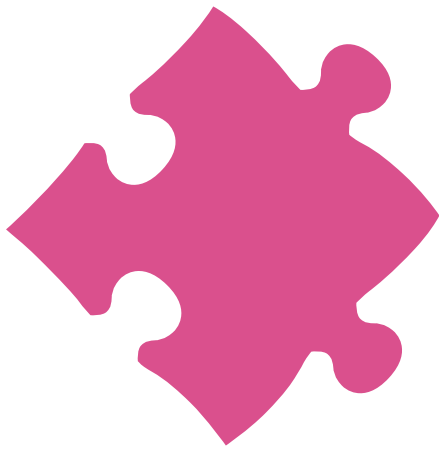
The PPP was innovative both in its content and delivery style.

- ✎ The PPP aimed to support the development of the 'whole child' with early interventions targeted at the early childhood service, educators and parents.
- ✎ The PPP was grounded in Ireland's practice and legislative frameworks *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006*. The respective frameworks informed the underpinning philosophy, delivery and practical application of the programme.
- ✎ All training and follow-on support was provided on a flexible basis to meet the needs and circumstances of the participating early childhood services as far as possible. For example, training was offered inside and outside service hours, on a full day or evening session basis.
- ✎ The PPP did not solely depend on the success of an isolated training programme. The PPP offered continuous follow-on support and information to participants long after the initial training had taken place.
- ✎ The PPP was targeted at whole staff teams as opposed to individual educators within a team. This enabled consistency of practice and approach across the early childhood service, promoting best outcomes for children.
- ✎ The parent links developed an appreciation of the type of learning that takes place in the early childhood service, the curriculum on offer and the importance of learning through play.

The Professional Pedagogy Project targeted a cross-representation of early childhood service staff and children in County Donegal as a primary target group. The project was delivered to early childhood services in various locations across the county over a two and a half-year period (approximately 66 educators). The secondary target group was parents of

children attending the participating early childhood services (approximately 800 parents). The rationale behind a cross-representation of services/families is due to the fact that the county as a whole is highly disadvantaged and it is not necessary to prioritise any one location over another.





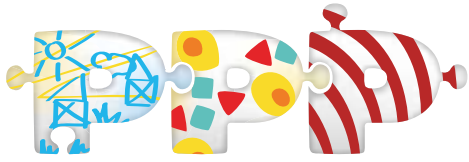
## Acknowledgements

Donegal County Childcare Committee as the lead partner in the NEYAI Professional Pedagogy Project would like to thank the following people who made the initiative a success.

- 👤 **Project funders, namely:** The Atlantic Philanthropies, The Mount Street Club Trustees, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Early Years Education Policy Unit, Department of Education and Skills and Pobal
- 👤 **The Donegal NEYAI Consortium and NEYAI Strategic Planning Group** 👤 **The NEYAI PPP Team:**  
Claire McMonagle and Catherine Cullen - *NEYAI Quality Mentors*,  
Orán Sweeney - *NEYAI Communications Officer* and  
Avril McMonagle - *Project Manager, DCCC*
- 👤 **The NEYAI Team at Pobal:** Bernie McDonnell, Nuala Kelly, Emily Cunningham and Siobhan O'Dowd
- 👤 **The National Evaluation Team:** Kieran McKeown and Trutz Hasse
- 👤 **Participating Early Childhood Services, namely:**  
Bizzy Bees Creche & Pre-school, *Clonmany*  
Bomany Nursery & Montessori School, *Letterkenny*  
Bundoran Community Childcare, *Bundoran*  
Crossroads and Killygordon Community Playgroup Ltd, *Killygordon*  
Donagh Creche Ltd, *Carndonagh*  
EMSC Creche Ltd, *Letterkenny*  
Little Stars, *Laghey*  
Little Stars Pre-School, *Moville*  
Quigley's Point Community Playgroup, *Inis Eoghain*  
Raphoe Community Playgroup, *Raphoe*
- 👤 **Primary School teachers** who took part in the Transitions Working Group

\* All images within this publication feature the children, staff and parents of early childhood services that participated on the PPP.

\*\* All resources, media packages, images, reports and publications in relation to the PPP Journey and Legacy are available for download from [www.donegalchildcare.com](http://www.donegalchildcare.com).



## Photo Gallery











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Developing and  
Shaping the PPP



## At the Beginning... Selecting Participants, Covering the County and Finding a Balance

The official launch event for the Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP) took place in September 2011 and was used to inform local agencies and stakeholders, early childhood service providers, parents and teachers of the rationale and objectives behind the PPP. The launch was used, not only to present an overview of the project and what it aimed to achieve; a call was also made for expressions of interest from early childhood services and the broad conditions for eligibility were outlined. Subsequently, 26 early childhood services across the county expressed an interest in taking part in the PPP.

### Balancing the Variables in the Donegal Early Childhood Sector

Due to the huge geographical spread of County Donegal, it was important to include a representative sample of early childhood services from across the county. It was clear from the outset that this would provide challenges for the location of training and stretch budgets for travel when carrying out onsite work; however it was felt that it was important that all locations of our county were represented as much as possible.

It was decided to provide a balance between community and privately managed services. In total, 12 early childhood services would receive the intensive Mentor-Service ratio of 1:6.

It was also aimed to include both sessional and full day care services, large services and small services with varying management structures and staff team sizes and structures. Although again it was acknowledged that this would challenge the project in terms of delivery, it was agreed that it was important to include as many variations as possible to try to identify if supports needed to be differentiated in terms of the service model or indeed if particular challenges or successes could be attributed to one particular service type.

### What Characteristics were Looked for in the Participant Groups?

Although the Professional Pedagogy Project had the capacity to make a huge impact on the quality of provision for young children, at a time of increasing accountability, time and work demands on early childhood services, the project was mainly dependent on the willingness of the sector to engage. Therefore, participating early childhood services would require a strong commitment to professional development over the duration of the project which would ultimately add to existing workloads with little or no added remuneration.

In an attempt to ensure insofar as possible that early childhood services would complete the programme, a criteria was drawn up which was used to inform the decision of reducing the 26 expressions of interest to the 12 participant services. The following characteristics were sought, some based on evidence and past experience of working with the service and some on a pledge basis from the participant service:

**Figure 1:** Additional Characteristics Used for Participant Selection



Early into the delivery of the PPP, 2 of the selected services did not continue on the initiative. However, ten of the initial twelve early childhood services completed the programme and are as follows:

- ✎ Bizzy Bees Creche & Pre-school, Clonmany, Inis Eoghain
- ✎ Bomany Nursery & Montessori School, Letterkenny
- ✎ Bundoran Community Childcare, Bundoran
- ✎ Crossroads and Killygordon Community Playgroup Ltd, Killygordon
- ✎ Donagh Creche Ltd, Carndonagh
- ✎ EMSC Creche Ltd, Letterkenny
- ✎ Little Stars, Laghey
- ✎ Little Stars Pre-School, Moville
- ✎ Quigley's Point Community Playgroup, Inis Eoghain
- ✎ Raphoe Community Playgroup, Raphoe

## Why a Focus on Professional Pedagogy?

**The overall strategic vision and objectives of the PPP were very much shaped by the evidence Donegal County Childcare had observed over the years as a result of working and consulting with early childhood services in Donegal. By listening to the struggles of educators, by observing their practice and building a picture of evidence based need, a framework of supports were tailored and devised to respond to as many of these facets as possible.**

It is by now well accepted that there is a direct link between the skills and knowledge of the early childhood educator and the effectiveness of the early learning experiences on offer in early childhood services. Over the years, DCCC have had a strong commitment to raising practice standards and have been proactive in developing and offering a range of in-house professional

development opportunities to the early childhood sector in Donegal. This has included programmes such as the *Building Pictures of Learning Assessment for Learning Programme*, the *Creating Lifelong Readers Initiative*, and the *Early Childhood Identity and Belonging Programme*, *Naoínáin le Chéile*.

The experience and learning that Donegal County Childcare has drawn from this work has highlighted the following:

- There are significant gaps in the practical application of pedagogical practice and working, teaching and learning strategies
- There is evidence of repeated patterns of training on the same programmes
- Despite repeated training, there is poor transference of theory to practice
- Previous changes made to practice as a result of professional development were too often temporary, they were not embedded or permanent
- There is observed inconsistency of levels of practice across different rooms in early childhood service's.



Historically, accredited training content in these areas has been weak and inconsistent across training programmes. This has resulted in a significant knowledge gap and ad-hoc pedagogical practice in some early childhood services. The potentially negative impact of this can lead to underdeveloped pedagogical practice, an inability to meaningfully engage with Síolta and Aistear and reduced outcomes for children.

Over the years, evidence of some components of pedagogical aspects of practice, such as Curriculum planning, Assessment and Documentation, Reflective Practice and Transitions have been largely missing from observed early childhood practice. Even

in cases where educators had undertaken accredited training, consistent gaps in these areas of professional practice were evident both on the ground in everyday practice and during continuing professional development sessions. The Pre-School Inspection Team made frequent referrals to DCCC over the years to request support for early childhood services to put procedures in place to address these areas.

DCCC further observed that educators were undertaking particular training repeatedly – for example, planning and assessment and although appeared to grasp the concepts during training, were unable to transfer this easily to their everyday practice.

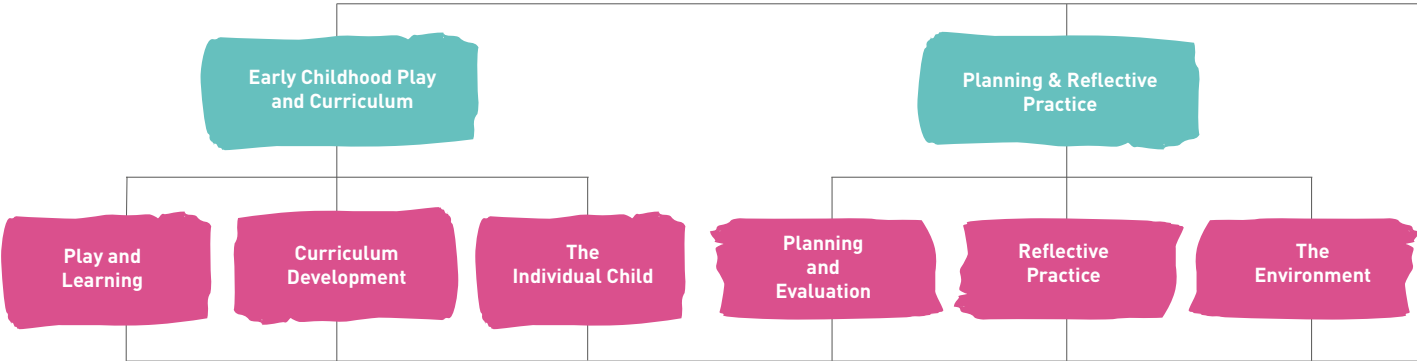
Deciding what Areas of Professional Pedagogy to Focus on

**Underpinned by Aistear, a pedagogical framework of supports was developed which consisted of four overarching themes, eleven pedagogical focus areas and a range of pre-identified observable features of good pedagogical practice.**

The **four overarching themes** were *Early Childhood Play and Curriculum, Planning and Reflective Practice, Assessment for Learning and Transitions*. Under these four themes, it was important to agree upon a range of **pedagogical focus areas** in order to target the

earlier identified gaps in general early childhood practice. It is important to note that these focus areas are not isolated/ stand alone areas of practice and are largely interdependent on effective early childhood teaching and learning practice.

Figure 2: Pedagogical Framework of Supports





## Pedagogical Focus Areas

### Curriculum Development

This aimed to embed the Aistear curriculum framework, its principles and philosophy, in all aspects of the learning opportunities planned for children in the participating early childhood services.

### Planning and Evaluation

Supporting practice through this focus area aimed to enable educators to plan and evaluate a child centred, child led programme of activities and learning opportunities in line with the Aistear curriculum framework.

### Interactions

A focus on interactions as a fundamental pedagogical strategy was central to all of the focus areas. This aimed to empower educators to engage in meaningful interactions with children, to follow the child's interests, to challenge the child appropriately and to extend learning and development.

### Pedagogical Strategies

The focus on a repertoire of pedagogical strategies was closely linked to interactions and aimed to introduce skill and technique to teaching practice to enable a richer and more meaningful interactive process between the educator and the child to enable learning to take place. The range of techniques and strategies included positioning, empowering, scaffolding, co-constructing and questioning.

### Assessment for Learning

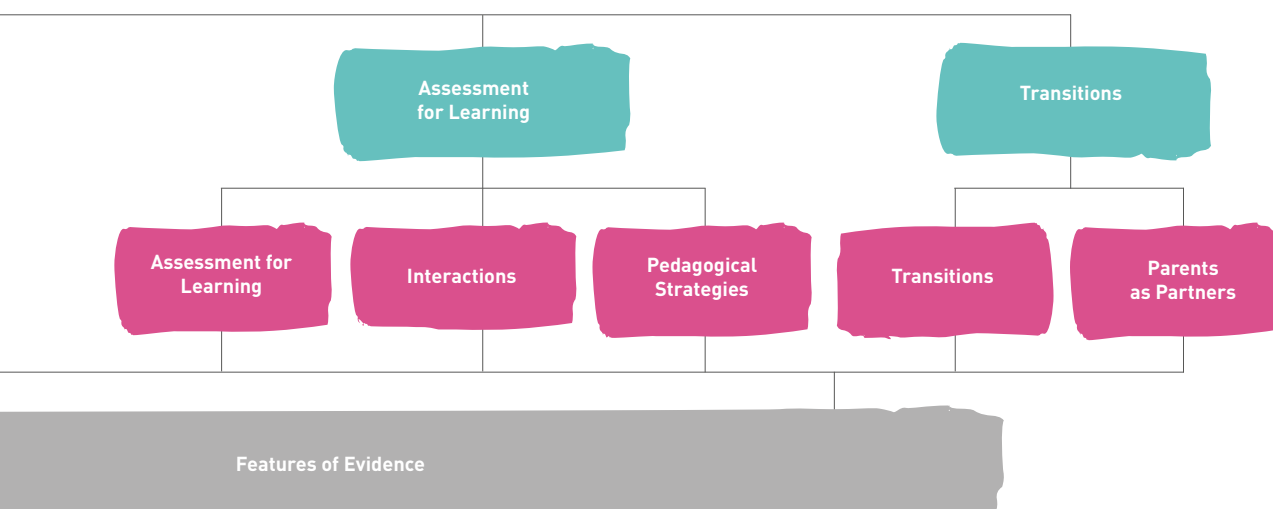
A focus on assessment and documentation practice aimed to challenge educators to tune into the individual child through the use of the Learning Story Approach. In line with the underpinning principles of Aistear, this approach enabled the educator to view the child as a competent, active learner and use assessment as a pedagogical tool to recognise, support and extend the child's learning and development.

### The Environment

A focus on both the indoor and outdoor environment aimed to prompt educators to afford the environment careful consideration as a means of promoting children's holistic health and well-being and in stimulating children's imagination, enabling them to experience success and developing positive attitudes towards learning.

### Reflective Practice

The focus on reflective practice aimed to enable educators to appreciate self-reflection as important for not only refining and improving day-to-day practice, but also for benefiting individuals in relation to their own professional development. A whole-team approach to reflective practice was promoted to develop a shared understanding of different roles within the early childhood service.



## Section 2 Developing and Shaping the PPP



### Transitions

The inclusion of the transition process as a focus area aimed to draw the educator's attention to the importance of effective and smooth transitions and change for children, families and educational services. As a considerable gap area in early childhood practice in Donegal, the focus on this area aimed to provide practical tools to support the documentation process of pre-school to primary school transitions as a legacy element of the PPP.

### Parents as Partners

The focus on parents as partners encouraged educators to see a shared approach with parents and families as an integral component of good practice for the benefit of the child, parents and the early childhood service. This was specifically aimed at informing parents about the Aistear curriculum, its components and the role of the early childhood service in nurturing positive dispositions to learning.

### The Individual Child

The central focus on the individual child, running through the focus areas, supported educators to view and respond to children as unique individuals with their own story, their own likes and dislikes, interests and preferred ways of learning. The overall aim was to 'see' the individuality of the child reflected in different aspects of the early childhood service, including differentiated provision for children with special educational needs.

### Play and Learning

Play as a focus area aimed to set play as a powerful vehicle through which children acquire various aspects of learning and development. In particular, the Aistear learning goals were framed against play and learning opportunities as a means of developing a range of knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes to facilitate the child's learning and development.

To assist the Quality Mentors in their support role, work was carried out to agree a range of **features of evidence** under each focus area to allow for consistency of delivery and impact assessment across early childhood services. For example, in relation to **Curriculum Development**, some of the observable features the Quality Mentors would have looked to observe were:

- ✎ Aistear learning goals visible in curriculum planning
- ✎ Evidence of planning with children and including their interests and needs
- ✎ Evidence of differentiation for children with special needs or disabilities
- ✎ A clear link between assessment for learning and curriculum planning

## Monitoring the Impacts of the PPP – Developing the Tools

One of the biggest and largely unseen challenges of developing a new programme like the PPP is developing the tools and resources that support the delivery of the project. A variety of new recording mechanisms were developed prior to the Quality Mentors going out on the ground to work with early childhood services. These tools were designed to support three types of onsite support visits –

**1. The Baseline Visit, 2. Impact Visits and 3. Mentoring and Support Visits.**

These included:

- 📁 An Impact Recording Database
- 📁 A Baseline Assessment Tool
- 📁 Impact Assessment Tool
- 📁 Impact Report
- 📁 Mentoring Visit Report
- 📁 Impact Reference Guide
- 📁 Mentoring and Support Visit Guidelines

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation was central to the success of the PPP. A tailor made electronic **Impact Recording Database** was designed and utilised to act as a centrally accessible information tool to provide evidence of the impact of the project that would be monitored both on an individual participating service basis and on an overall project basis. This database recorded a profile of the early childhood service, individual educators on the project, attendance at training and cluster sessions, as well as a range of visits and interactions between the PPP team and the early childhood service. This tool was developed by an external consultant and took a considerable amount of time to refine.

At the beginning of the project it was necessary to conduct a baseline assessment using the

**Baseline Assessment Tool** to give an indication of the point the group were starting at in terms of pedagogical practice. The eleven pedagogical focus areas were used, not only to define the areas to be worked upon, but also as a means of working consistently across all early childhood services.

An **Impact Assessment Tool** was developed to monitor and record progress at different stages throughout the project. The assessment tool recorded quality indicators as features of good practice under each of the 11 focus areas, to ensure consistency of information gathered by the Quality Mentors.

Once the Quality Mentors collated the data gathered using the impact assessment tool, an **Impact Report** was then disseminated to the ten early childhood services providing them with an account of progress made and areas to develop further.

Following feedback from the educators another tool, namely, the **Early Childhood Service Impact Reference Guide** was designed to give educators the opportunity to alert the Quality Mentors to evidence of practice that could be missed on the day of the impact assessment visit.

To record interactions and targets during the mentoring and support visits, a **Mentoring Visit Report** was developed. This tool was used by both the educators and the Quality Mentors to record observations and discussions during a mentoring and support visit including key strengths, challenges and targets set. A section for each of the 11 focus areas were also included in this form to highlight the particular focus areas being supported during the visit.

The **Mentoring and Support Visit Guidelines** were also developed to clarify both the educator's and the Quality Mentors role during the mentoring and support visit.

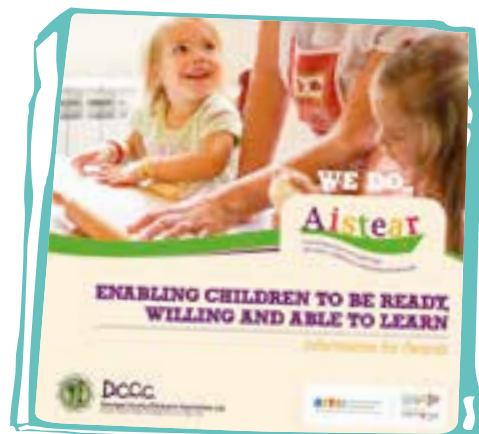
### Developing Practical Resources to Support Educators and Parents



#### Publications to Support Practice Implementation

An educators reference handbook called **‘Professional Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education’** was developed as both a core text for the training element of the programme as well as a reference guide for educators to support the implementation of theory to practice in relation to professional pedagogy practice.

**‘We Do Aistear’** is an information brochure aimed at parents. The leaflet demonstrates to parents that, by experiencing learning opportunities through the Aistear curriculum, their child will learn and develop dispositions, skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding. Tips on how parents can contribute to their child’s learning and development is also provided highlighting the importance of sharing information with educators and supporting positive transitions from home to pre-school and primary school.



#### Practice Bytes, Tip Sheets and Sample Documents

The Quality Mentors developed a number of **practice bytes** and **tip sheets** on different areas of practice to encourage educators to become more resourceful and creative. For example, guidance and tips around planning stimulating areas both indoors and outdoors for children to develop their problem solving skills and positive dispositions such as curiosity, perseverance and purposefulness. Using Aistear as a framework, **sample planning documents** were also created to provide guidance for educators who initially struggled to develop workable medium and weekly plans.

When developing the Transition Statement the Quality Mentors delivered a cluster session to ensure the educators completed the statement in the appropriate manner. The educators received **practical guidelines** explaining the Strength Based Approach and giving examples of strength based writing linking with the themes of Aistear.



## Support Mechanisms for Educators

### Educators Discussion Forum

One of the aims of the PPP was to improve communication between the early childhood services across the county and to encourage the educators to build up their own support network with each other. The PPP Forum was designed to meet this need and to assist the PPP participants with any queries they may have related to the project.

The PPP Team also used the forum as a communication tool to update the PPP groups on training, mentoring and impact assessment visits and events. Useful articles and links relating to particular areas of practice were also posted to support educators in strengthening elements of their professional practice and in developing and implementing changes to enhance their indoor and outdoor learning environment.

### PPP Resource Library

The PPP Resource Library was established as a resource to support educators in their professional practice – particularly those undertaking accredited early education training alongside the PPP. Books were kindly donated to the PPP Resource Library by both Donegal County Childcare and by Donegal ETB. A total of 112 books were available for educators to borrow from the library, which was located in the DCCC Office. The library contained a range of materials including books written by Irish authors referring to current childcare policy, practice and legislation in Ireland. Educators who made use of this resource found it invaluable as both a study support and in gaining new and practical ideas to complement their existing practice.

### Video Recording

During on-site visits Quality Mentors noted that educators were generally unaware of how they were interacting with the children, what pedagogical strategies that they were using, if any, and believed that educators would seek great learning from observing themselves from an external perspective.

In order to strengthen this, educators were encouraged to record their interactions with the children on video to help them reflect on how they were interacting with children and the effectiveness of their interventions to support children's learning.

As many of the early childhood services did not have access to a video camera, the PPP provided this resource to ensure that all services could develop this area of professional practice during their time on the project. At first educators found this experience daunting and at times were a little surprised at how they came across on the footage, however upon reflection, many changes were made and educators were able to critique their interactions and become more self aware when interacting with children.



A young child with glasses, wearing a blue patterned raincoat and dark pants, is standing outdoors. The child is holding a stick in their right hand and has some dirt on their face. The background is a chain-link fence and some greenery. There are yellow and teal decorative shapes on the page.

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# Delivering the Professional Pedagogy Project



The Professional Pedagogy Project was delivered using a multi dimensional support approach to make the best use of the resources available to the project. In order to provide a framework for the project, both for the purpose of making the initial funding application and in providing a three year and annual plan for the project, various components and timeframes for delivery were identified in advance. However, it was crucial that the project contained a level of flexibility in terms of the nature and timing of the delivery elements of the project. Despite initial delays around the recruitment phase and changes in staff six months into the project, Donegal County Childcare, as the lead partner, successfully kept the project on track throughout.

## What were the Components of the PPP?

There were a number of delivery components as part of the PPP that participants had the opportunity to engage with over the duration of the initiative. Educators from each service were offered training, cluster sessions, onsite support from Quality Mentors, assistance

with parent information sessions and were provided with a professional forum where they could share their thoughts and views with other educators on the PPP. Below is an outline of the various components:

## Training Sessions

A twelve week training programme focusing on the four overarching themes of *Early Childhood Play and Curriculum, Planning and Reflective Practice, Assessment for Learning and Transitions* was delivered by the Quality Mentors in three accessible locations, to accommodate the wide geographical spread of the participating early childhood services across the county.

The training element of the initiative offered the theoretical background to the pedagogical focus areas grouped under each of the key themes. The specifically devised educator's handbook entitled *Professional Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education* supported the training programme and acted as a reference guide for everyday practice.

## Cluster Sessions

Cluster training sessions took place over the course of the project and were delivered in a central location to facilitate all participating services as a follow up support to strengthen the initial training programme and also to respond to specific areas of need. Additional topics were also covered such as *Strength Based Writing*

*and Partnership with Parents*. The cluster session on planning was of particular interest to all participants as this was an area where the majority of educators requested extra support from the Quality Mentors during mentoring and support visits.

### Onsite Mentoring Supports

As part of the PPP a model of continuous wrap-around information and support to participating early childhood services was employed.

The professional development aspect of the programme was supported and reinforced by follow up on-site mentoring support.

Mentoring and support visits commenced once the initial training programme was completed.

The Quality Mentors visited each service and offered one to one and group support to the educators. These visits were aimed at supporting the educators to embed the training

received into their professional practice. The Quality Mentors discussed various elements of practice and set targets for the educators to meet within a set period of time. The mentoring visits provided a platform for every educator to voice their challenges and receive tailored advice to enable them to progress with the difficulty and try to overcome it. The Quality Mentors were flexible with the groups and visits took place when the children had gone home or within the working day in the full day care early childhood services, if staff ratios allowed.

### Parent Information Sessions

Parent information sessions were carried out with all participating early childhood services. Depending on location, some sessions were delivered with early childhood services clustered together, while others were delivered within individual early childhood services.

The sessions were delivered as a means of informing parents on the PPP and the importance of early education. The 'We do Aistear' leaflet was used as a framework for the session. This part of the session helped parents to understand the types of learning that early education focuses on, with a strong emphasis placed on the key function of early education being to develop the child's emotional toolkit for life. The concept of supporting the child to develop positive dispositions to learn

was highlighted and discussed. Feedback from parents was very positive and mainly related to their understanding of children not being 'taught just their letters and numbers'.

Educators were also asked to participate in the sessions as a means of gaining experience on delivering their own parent information sessions after the PPP. Although a daunting experience for some, educators said they found the parent information sessions beneficial in being able to portray their work in a professional manner to parents, and pledged to offer the sessions annually. They found that using photographs and video footage was an extremely beneficial way of helping parents to understand the importance of early education and what Aistear actually looks like in practice.







## What were the Deliverables of the PPP?

### Participation in the Various PPP Supports and interventions

Participation in the various components of the PPP varied depending on the type of intervention offered. For example, the figure

below demonstrates the various participation levels of early childhood services across four of the main components – training, cluster sessions, mentoring and support and parent information sessions.

**Figure 3: Delivery components of the PPP**

Type of deliverable	Number	Average Attendance
Training Sessions	12 Weeks	52 out of 76 staff - (68.42%)
Cluster Sessions	8 Weeks	37 out of 70 staff - (52.85%)
Onsite Mentoring Supports	6 Weeks	59 out of 66 staff - (89.39%)
Pre-School to Primary School Parent Information Sessions	6 Weeks	150 Parents of children in pre-school rooms attended

These statistics indicate that educators were more likely to engage with mentoring supports than training or cluster sessions. Even though this can be partially explained by the fact that mentoring took place on-site,

nevertheless, overall attendance at training and cluster session support was lower than would have been expected, given the commitment pledged by early childhood services prior to the project commencing.

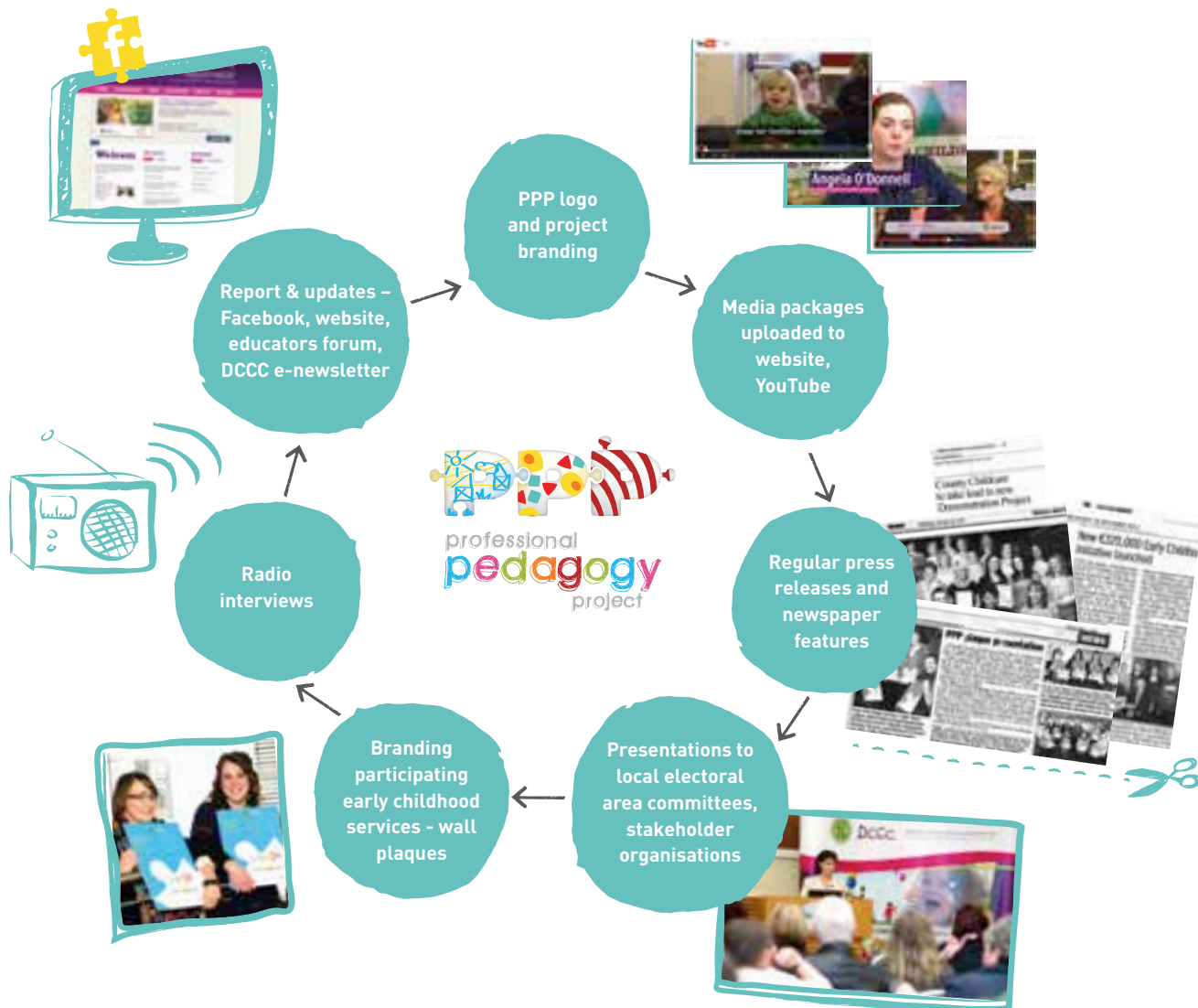
## Using a Communication Strategy to Profile the Professional Pedagogy Project

Ensuring that the PPP had a profile from the beginning of the project was important, both to acknowledge the effort of participating early childhood services and to ensure that the initiative was recognised as a unique opportunity for the early childhood sector in Donegal. From the earliest stage of the initiative, a PPP logo was developed to brand the project.

This ensured that all legacy documents, publications and reports attached to the PPP would be instantly recognisable. A comprehensive communications strategy was devised and it was one of the key roles of the PPP Communications Officer to plan and coordinate all profiling in relation to the PPP.

This continuous strategy consisted of multi-dimensional communications as illustrated in figure 4.

**Figure 4:** PPP Communications Strategy



To enable the legacy of the PPP to be available and accessible, the final report and end of project media messages around the successes and challenges of the initiative will be disseminated at the end of project event in May 2014. Following this, Donegal County Childcare will make every effort to share the key elements of learning from the project with all relevant stakeholders and early childhood policy makers going forward.

In addition, all of the tools, templates, publications, reports, photographs and media packages in relation to the Professional Pedagogy Project will be uploaded to a dedicated section on the DCCC website [www.donegalchildcare.com](http://www.donegalchildcare.com) or shared on request.





# 4

Monitoring Progress  
and Improving Practice  
in the 11 Focus Areas

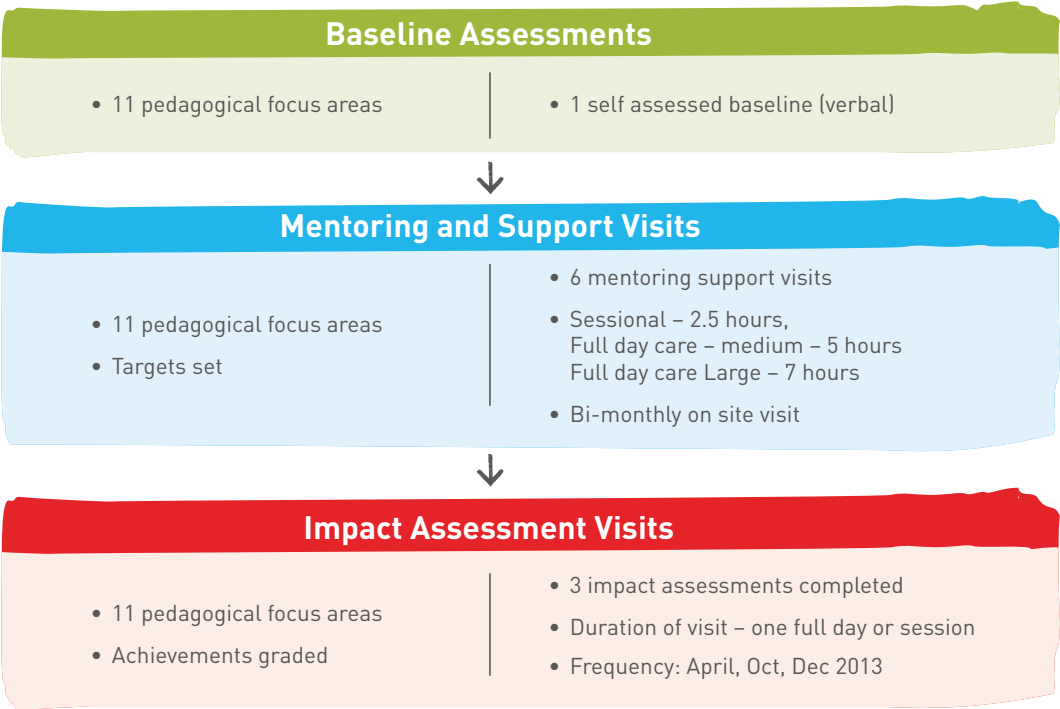
One of the most challenging aspects of the Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP) was the process of monitoring and measuring progress across the themes and pedagogical focus areas. This was for a variety of reasons not least because all the tools and mechanisms for measurement were developed from scratch to suit the unique nature of the project. As the project provided a specific focus on elements of pedagogical practice, existing measurement tools were not entirely suitable. This process required a significant investment of the Quality Mentors time during the development phase of the initiative.

An additional challenge was the difference between the educator’s perception of their practice and the level at which the Quality Mentors observed practice to be. Moving through a process where this was accepted by some of the educators, hindered the potential progress that could have been made in a small number of the early childhood services and was not properly achieved until nearing the end of the project.

In order to facilitate the process of monitoring progress and improving practice, three types of intervention were employed by the Quality Mentors to assist the monitoring and improvement of practice:

- Assessing the Baseline
- Mentoring & Supporting
- Monitoring Change

Figure 5: Monitoring and Improving Practice







## Assessing the Baseline

A self assessment approach was adopted with each of the participating early childhood services to enable educators to self reflect and to rate their own practice against the 11 focus areas.

A level of baseline information was needed to help the Quality Mentors strengthen, and provide a more in-depth focus on, some elements of the training programme and also as a means of enabling educators to appreciate the importance of honest, reflective practice to progress. This strategy proved productive on reflection at the end of the programme.

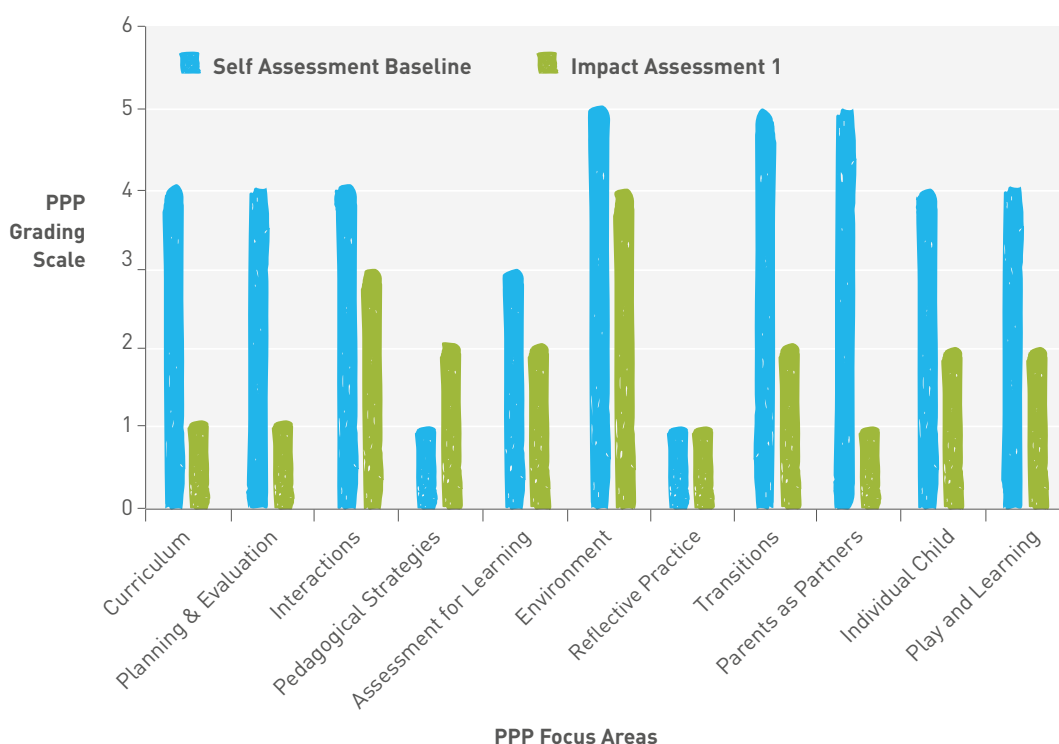
### What were the Main Findings of the Baseline Process?

The baseline process highlighted that educators were not confident in their professional practice

in the focus areas of Pedagogical Strategies and Reflective Practice. This may have been due to the fact that the majority of educators had received little or no training in these particular focus areas prior to their involvement on the PPP.

The baseline results also confirmed that the educator's perception of their level of practice in the majority of focus areas was over rated. This was evidenced by the Quality Mentors observed findings during the first impact assessment visit, which demonstrated little progression in their practice considering that training had taken place between the baseline assessment and the first impact assessment (figure 6).

**Figure 6: Self Assessment Baseline v Impact Assessment 1**





### Mentoring and Supporting

Mentoring and support visits were facilitated by Quality Mentors, who offered practical support and guidance to the staff team to implement new strategies and apply the theory and knowledge gained in the training into their daily practice. The Quality Mentors worked alongside the educators to identify and build on the key strengths of the early childhood service and agree a set of targets for the next visit.

The mentoring and support visits commenced once the initial training had taken place. When talking to the educators in relation to aspects of practice that they had implemented from the training, it became obvious that the theory relayed to them during the 12 week training sessions in a number of instances was not transferred into practice, which Quality Mentors had initially expected to observe during the initial observations.

This resulted in educators not having progressed in practice as much as would have been anticipated and Quality Mentors had to invest a lot of time readdressing the themes and topics previously discussed in the training.

At times, progress during each of the mentoring and support visits was slow, particularly if any of the early childhood services experienced challenges such as high staff turnover, limited non-contact time and poor communication with management (see section 6). Educator attitudes also impacted on the level of progress made, especially at the beginning of the mentoring and support visits as educators viewed the Quality Mentors as an inspector as opposed to offering a supportive role to develop their professional practice. Generally those educators who had adopted an open minded approach to welcoming support and advice to improve their practice made the most progress and gained the best results from the PPP initiative.

### Reflecting on Strengths and Challenges and Moving Forward

The significance of discussing the strengths and challenges during mentoring and support visits enabled educators to reflect on the progress they were making and also to identify practice that needed to be strengthened. This ensured that the targets then set for each of the early childhood services were unique to their setting. For example, a service that had listed curriculum planning as a challenge to them in the beginning had become much more confident in the structure and content of the plans by the end of the project. It was essential however that Quality Mentors guided the educators along the way to achieve this success. Some educators highlighted that they

became more confident in their professional practice due to this continual support from the Quality Mentors.

At times some of the early childhood services found it difficult to meet the targets, and on a number of occasions, targets had to be readdressed and explained once again to ensure comprehension, particularly in relation to planning and learning stories. As mentioned previously, when discussing the challenges that the educators had faced, staff turnover, time and the attitudes of educators had an impact on whether the targets were being met each month.

Figure 7: Professional Pedagogy Project Grading Scale

Professional Pedagogy Project Grading Scale	
1 - 2.99	Lack of knowledge and evidence
3 - 4.99	Adequate level of knowledge demonstrated by sufficient evidence
5 - 6.99	Broad level of knowledge demonstrated by detailed evidence
7 - 8.99	Substantial level of knowledge demonstrated by ample evidence
9 - 10	Extensive level of knowledge demonstrated by systematic evidence



## Monitoring and Supporting Change

Using the 11 focus areas as a framework, the progress of each early childhood service was monitored once training was complete and mentoring had commenced. The Quality Mentors used a grading system which was based on a rating scale of 1-10 (figure 7). This scale demonstrated where each of the services were in terms of progress throughout the project and highlighted which grade each service received in accordance with the findings from each impact assessment visit.

The main function of the grading system was to identify individual areas of practice which were strong, and to ensure that targets were appropriately set in areas of practice which needed strengthened. The grading system also played an important role in measuring progress and change across the 11 focus areas. This section offers an overview of the changes in practice across the 11 focus areas including examples of change and the common features of the most and least successful, in strengthening pedagogical practice.

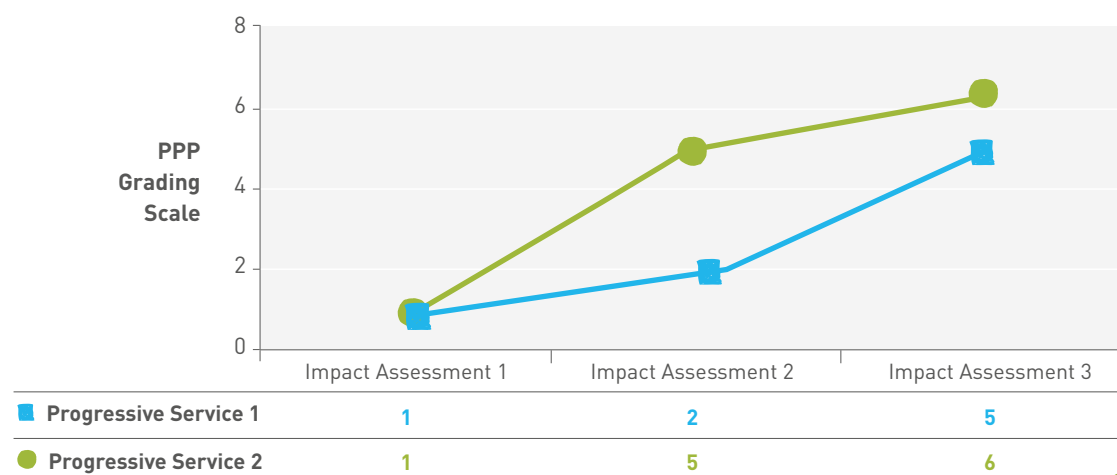
### 1. Improving Curriculum Development

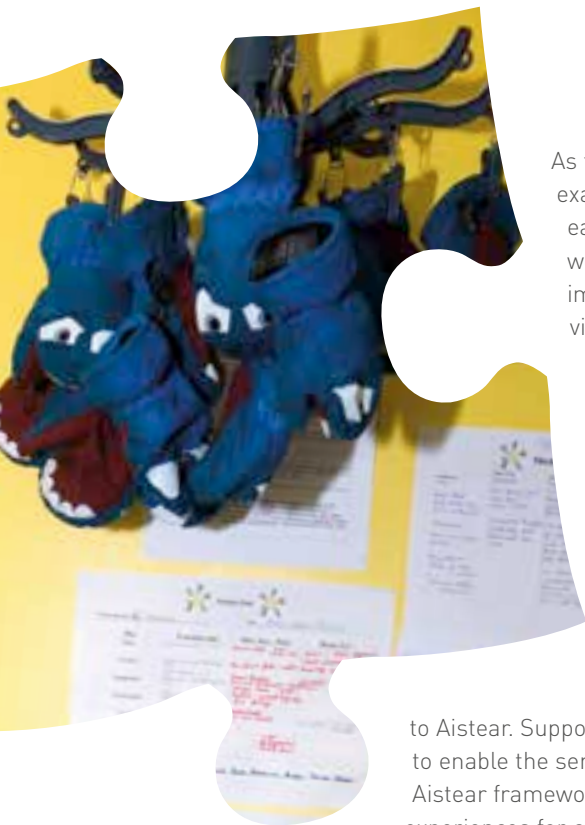
Each early childhood service was graded on the documentation and implementation of an established curriculum for young children. This included ensuring that planning was in place and up to date, that children were supported and consulted and their learning needs and interests displayed on the plans. Quality Mentors also observed experiences and activities offered to children during the daily routine and how the various areas of play enabled children to

direct their own learning and engage with the Aistear curriculum.

**Overall findings in the area of curriculum development demonstrate that two out of the 10 early childhood services made a dramatic improvement from impact assessment 1 to impact assessment 3 and only one service from the ten regressed to a lower level from the baseline to the first impact assessment visit.**

**Figure 8: Curriculum Development - Most Progressive Services**





As the most progressive examples (figure 8), two early childhood services were rated at the first impact assessment visit as a grade 1 and continually progressed, one early childhood service moved up four grades and one service moved up five grades. At the beginning of the project, both of these early childhood services had little documented evidence in relation

to Aistear. Support was provided to enable the services to use the Aistear framework to provide learning experiences for children across each of the rooms in the service and to include the child's individual needs and interests in the planning process.

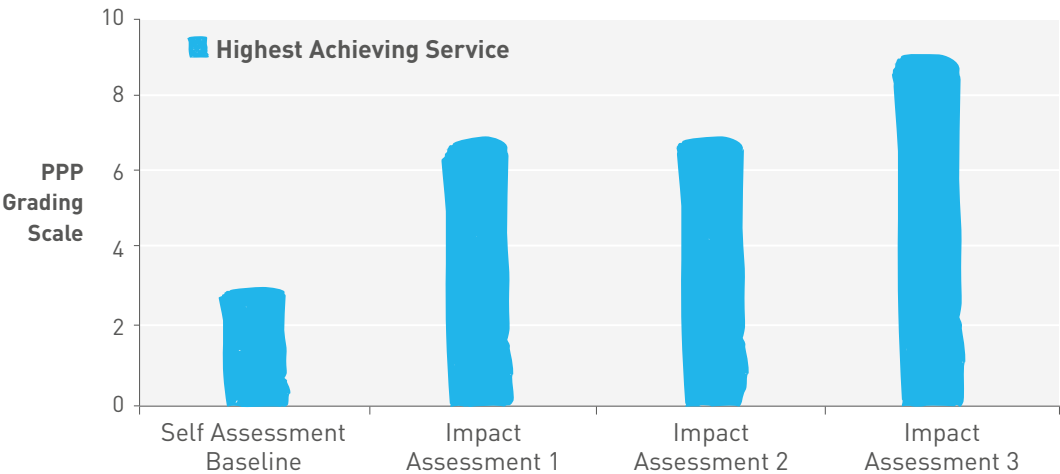
Another positive example of change was observed in two full day care services, where an early target was set to introduce a curriculum programme to all rooms within the service – from the baby room to the pre-school room. This was achieved in the timeframe from the first impact assessment to the final impact assessment, where all rooms in each service were documenting medium term and weekly

plans, which was not in place prior to the mentoring and support visits.

One early childhood service made substantial improvements between the baseline assessment and the final impact assessment, moving up 6 grades to achieve one of the highest grades within this focus area (figure 9). To achieve this grading, improvements were made in areas such as the structure and content of the medium and weekly plans, consulting and collaborating with children regarding the planning of activities and experiences available to them, offering a wide range of experiences both indoors and outdoors and ensuring that pedagogical strategies were being used to enhance the child's learning.

An example of an early childhood service that demonstrated a decrease in their grade, was because the service was not able to display extensive evidence in relation to curriculum development. Although a slight improvement was noted during the second impact assessment, in that educators had begun implementing medium term and weekly plans in the pre-school room, during the final impact assessment, no planning documentation was available to observe as evidence of progress. It was unclear, either in verbal or tangible terms, how the service was providing learning opportunities through the use of the Aistear curriculum framework resulting in a drop in the grade that this service obtained.

Figure 9: Curriculum Development - Highest Achieving Service





### What were the Common Features of Success and Challenge in Relation to Curriculum Development?

The features of practice highlighted between the highest level groups and the lowest level groups demonstrate the gap in observable features in practice during the impact assessment visits. Factors that seem to have influenced the ratings and progress of the early childhood services operating at the highest levels appeared to be their commitment to meeting targets set out in the mentoring and support visits, ability of educators to understand and grasp Aistear the curriculum framework and implementing it within their plans, acting on recommendations provided in the impact reports, providing planned rich learning experiences, both

indoors and outdoors and valuing the input of the child within the planning cycle.

Those services that made minimal progress in this particular focus area found planning and implementing the learning goals of Aistear challenging. In three full day care services in particular, progress was slow and it was a challenge to ensure that the planning in all rooms within the service was at the same level. The weaker rooms found it difficult to ensure the cycle of planning was in place to ensure the learning goals were planned in relation to the children's experiences and interests and reflective evaluation was poor. This had an impact on the overall grade that these services received as the grading was given for the whole service and not room by room.

## 2. Improving Planning and Evaluation

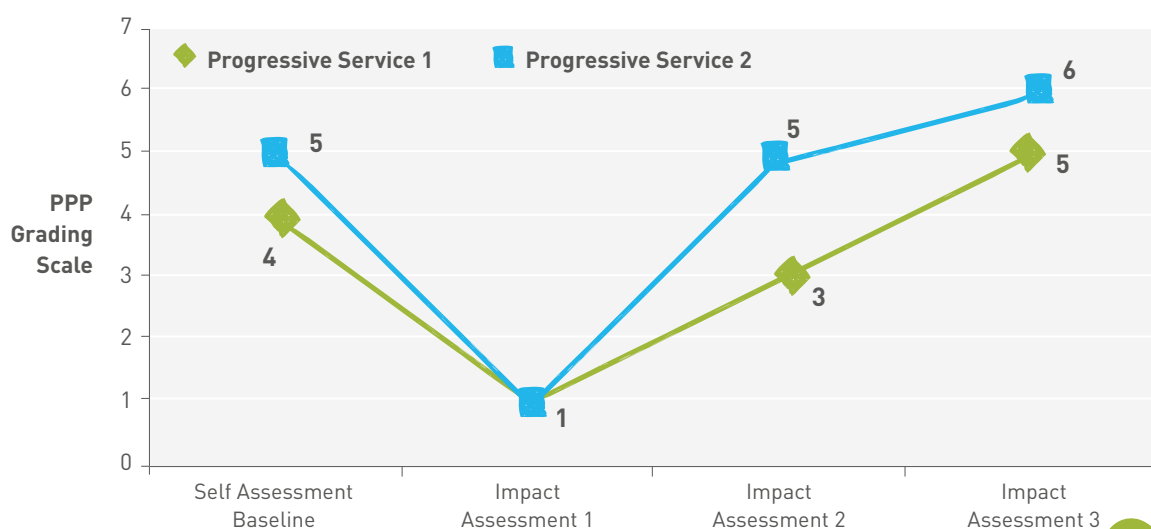
Educators were observed and graded on their understanding, development and implementation of long, medium and short term plans based on the Aistear curriculum. This included the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum which was child-centred and child-led and offered a wide range of age and stage appropriate resources, learning opportunities and experiences. Services were also graded on their ability to implement and evaluate their plans and use observations and learning stories to inform their future plans. To substantiate this, Quality Mentors observed full staff team involvement in planning and evaluation.

**Overall findings in the area of planning and evaluation demonstrate that 9 of the 10 services**

**made progress in this focus area with one group regressing significantly from a grade 4 to a grade 1.**

Interestingly, the self assessed baseline revealed that educators own assessment of their planning and evaluation was significantly high, with the educators grading themselves between a grade 4 and grade 5 as seen in figure 10. However, these ratings did not reflect what the Quality Mentors observed on the first impact assessment visit in terms of evidence of the rating, particularly in relation to two early childhood services who regressed to a grade 1. Both these services did, however, make significant progress from this stage of the project in their planning and evaluation with one moving up four grades and the other moving up five grades.

**Figure 10: Planning and Evaluation – Most Progressive and Least Progressive Service**



Two early childhood services highlighted planning as a significant challenge during mentoring and support visits. As a result the Quality Mentors offered more intensive one to one guidance and support to enable educators to make improvements in this area. Targets were set at each visit to encourage the educators to move forward and strengthen their evaluations and plans. This resulted in a steady increase in ratings for these two services over the duration of the project.

In relation to two early childhood services in particular, their self assessed baseline rating of grade 6 reflected a sound knowledge of this focus area which was confirmed by the Quality Mentors on the first impact assessment visit.

It is worth noting that a number of educators from these early childhood services had already completed the Donegal County Childcare 'Building Pictures of Learning' training programme prior to their participation on this project and reinforced this learning by repeating the training as part of the overall PPP training component. Both these groups continued to progress with continual support during mentoring and support visits that focused on strengthening their planning to make it more child-led and child-centred and to ensure the linking of observations and learning stories, evaluations and planning was a continuous cycle being implemented effectively. As a result both groups improved to grade 8 and 9 respectively.

One early childhood service regressed from a grade 4 in the first impact assessment to a grade 1 in the final impact assessment. A number of factors may have contributed to this decline. However, a notable weakness in this early childhood service was their lack of reflective practice which may have impacted on the team's ability to plan. It is worth noting that the service environment offered good play and learning opportunities for the children and the educators were engaging in assessment for learning using the learning story approach. However, this information was not being utilised to document plans. The Quality Mentors were unable to observe any evidence of planning or evaluations taking place at the final impact

assessment, resulting in the service only receiving a grade 1 at the end of the project.

### **What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to planning and evaluation?**

A common feature consistent across the stronger performing services in this focus area was a full team approach to planning and evaluating the plans together. These services adopted a child-centred approach to planning ensuring the children's interests were incorporated into the plans using assessment for learning information gathered through learning stories, observations, consultation with the children and involving them in the planning process.

The planning and evaluation focus area was one of the most challenging for educators across all participating services, despite receiving training through the Building Pictures of Learning programme and attending the cluster on planning. At these sessions, Quality Mentors supported the educators through the planning process and disseminated sample plans and tip sheets as an aid to practice in this area. The Quality Mentors spent a considerable amount of time during mentoring and support visits, working in pairs and on a one to one basis with the educators to support them with their planning.

One of the challenges the educators reported was not having time to plan together as a team. The educators also found it difficult to link the assessment for learning into their plans. The educators found it challenging to keep up to date with children's portfolios containing their learning stories. As a consequence this impacted on their ability to include up to date information into their plans to move each child's learning forward. Effective evaluation of the weekly and medium term plans also proved challenging and resulted in lack of progression and continuity in planning from week to week. On a positive note, those educators who consulted with the children and incorporated their needs and interests into the planning, found their planning much easier and reported the children were more engaged in their learning as a result of this.





### 3. Improving Interactions

Educators were observed and graded on the validity and effectiveness of their interactions with the children and on the strategies educators used to promote interactions and deal with conflict resolution. The Quality Mentors also assessed how the environment was set up to encourage peer support and promote one to one and small and large group interactions. Interactions with parents, the community and relationships within the staff team were also observed.

**Overall, findings in the area of interactions demonstrate that from the baseline assessment to the final impact 3 assessment, a total of six early childhood services made slight improvements, three services regressed and one service made no change in this focus area. However, when looking at the changes made to practice from the first impact assessment, steady improvements were made in practice around interactions across nine early childhood services with only one service remaining unchanged.**

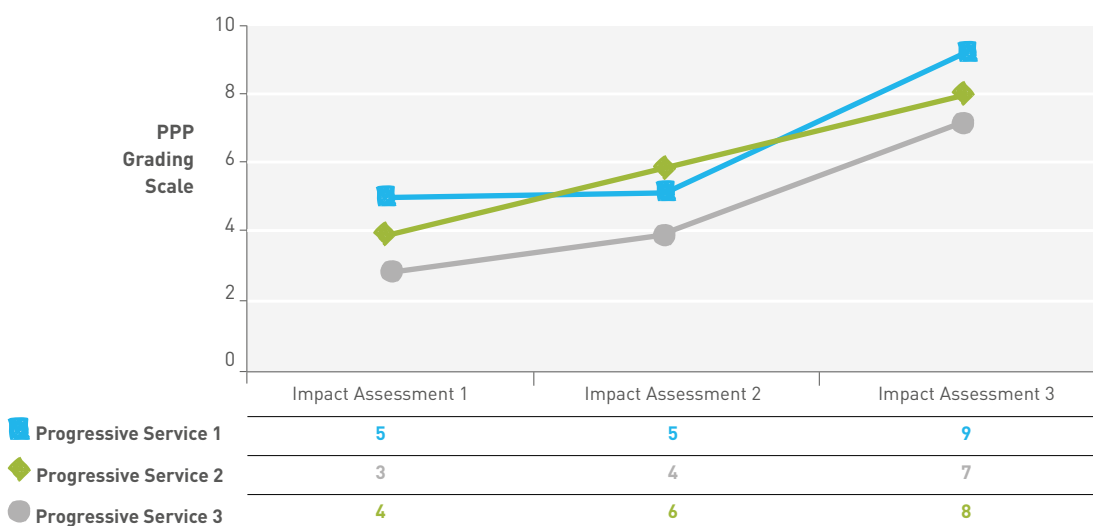
During mentoring and support visits all services were advised to reflect using a video and to use Aistear guidelines for good practice, Síolta and the PPP educators handbook as tools to assist them to reflect on interactions with the children and on their role in promoting positive interactions.

One particular area the Quality Mentors highlighted as an area in need of extra support across the majority of groups was the educator's awareness of when to intervene sensitively to promote positive interactions. Support was offered to encourage the educators to be more in-tune with each child and how to use suitable strategies to achieve this. Educators were also made more aware of their use of meaningful praise and allowing time and space for the children to respond to questioning. The Quality Mentors also noted the educator's tendency to direct and lead conversations with the children and were advised to encourage the children to take the lead. Some educators tended to act in a supervisory role with the children failing to see their role as a facilitator in promoting and encouraging positive interactions with, and between, the children.

#### What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to interactions?

Overall, those educators who were able to conduct an honest reflection of their practice in how they interacted with children and across the staff team, reported that they could actually see a positive difference in the depth of their interactions and relationships.

**Figure 11: Interactions - Most Progressive Services**





Three early childhood services made significant progress by moving up four grades in the eight months from when the initial impact assessment took place (figure 11). A common factor across these three services was their openness to reflect on their pedagogical strategies which is integral to effective interactions. Two of these early childhood services actively used a video camera to record and reflect on their effectiveness in engaging with the children in order to identify their strengths and

weaknesses and target areas for improvements across the whole staff team.

In relation to the service that made minimal progress in the areas of strengthening interactions with children, the Quality Mentors observed a lack of confidence regarding conflict resolution when dealing with children's behaviour. This coupled with an inability to grasp the pedagogical strategies and to provide evidence in this area, and a lack of reflective practice, may have contributed to their lack of progression in this area.

### 4. Improving Pedagogical Strategies

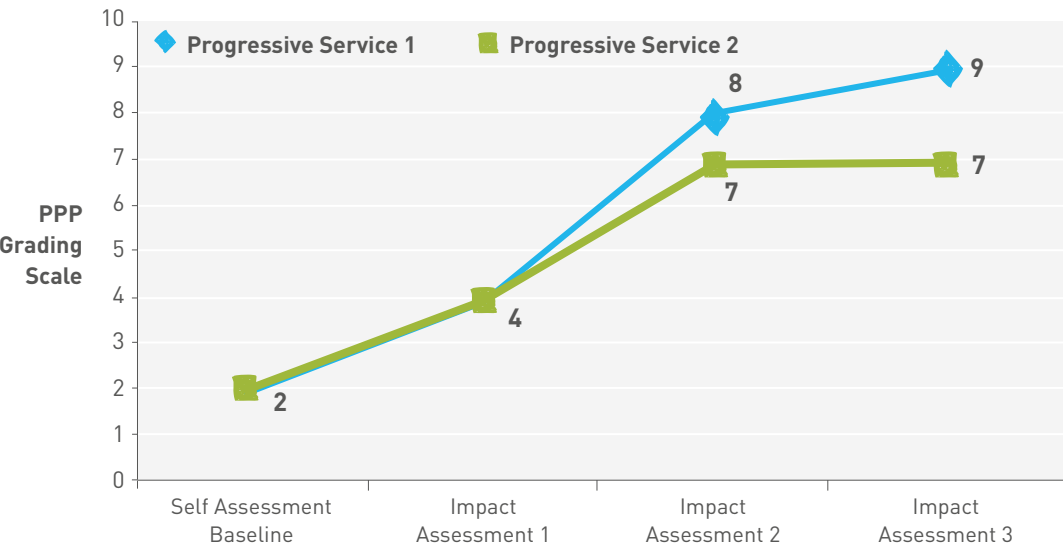
During the impact visits, each early childhood service was graded on their understanding and practical use of pedagogical strategies as a means of supporting and extending children's learning and development. As evidence to support this grading, Quality Mentors reviewed reflective journals from each of the educators to ascertain their level of understanding in relation to each of the strategies. Quality Mentors also observed which strategies were evident when the educators interacted with the children during various activities within the daily routine of the session.

Due to the weaknesses in the practical application of pedagogical strategies observed by the Quality Mentors during on-site visits at the beginning of the project, it was not surprising that big improvements were made

in this particular focus area following the intensive mentoring and support that the educators received.

**Overall findings in the area of pedagogical strategies demonstrate that there were improvements in this focus area within nine of the early childhood services on the PPP, with only one service regressing to a lower level. There were significant improvements within two of the early childhood services with one service moving from a level 2 to a level 9, which resulted in this service receiving the highest grade in this particular focus area. A further service progressed by moving from a level 2 to a level 7. When looking at the findings, the Quality Mentors attributed a number of possible reasons relating to this dramatic improvement.**

Figure 12: Pedagogical Strategies - Most Progressive Services



### What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to pedagogical strategies?

Of the early childhood services that made most progress in this area, the ability to test out the pedagogical strategies in everyday practice, reflect on the training and mentoring guidance and use group reflection on each strategy appeared vital to their success. Two early childhood services in particular took this even further by adding particular pedagogical strategies to their planning documents to make other educators more aware of the strategies that they were using (figure 12).

The educators ability to repeatedly seek clarification, to be open about needing further guidance and ideas during mentoring and support visits was also a common characteristic in those most successful in using pedagogical strategies. Across each of the three impact assessment visits, Quality Mentors observed an improved frequency of use of the strategies within these early childhood services as the educator's confidence grew and developed.

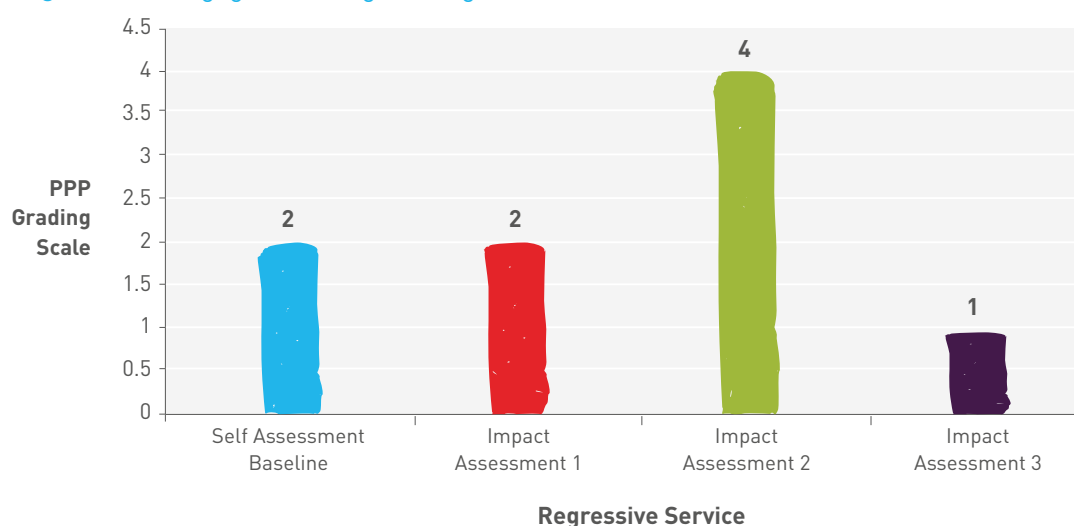
This appeared to have an overall positive knock on effect on the educators motivational levels to improve in this area as these services



continued to meet the targets set at mentoring and support visits in relation to continuous reflection on pedagogical strategies.

One early childhood service regressed in their grade during the process, making little progress in relation to their professional practice around pedagogical strategies. From the baseline assessment and impact assessment findings, the service remained at grade 2 (figure 13). This was due to the educators demonstrating no awareness of pedagogical strategies when interacting with the children and little frequency of observed strategies by the Quality Mentor, during the impact visit.

**Figure 13: Pedagogical Strategies - Regressive Service**



There was a noted improvement following the second impact assessment with the early childhood service moving from a grade 2 to a grade 4. Educators displayed a range of strategies when interacting with the children during this period and there was an improved frequency and meaning in the strategies used. However, during the final impact assessment,

the service regressed and received a grade 1. This was due to a minimal use of pedagogical strategies when interacting with the children, no documented reflections on the strategies being recorded and no progress was made from recommendations outlined in the previous impact report or targets set during mentoring and support visits (figure 13).





Although educators in this particular service did display some strategies when interacting with the children, they had not actually been aware that they had used them, demonstrating a lack of knowledge of how the strategies are used in practice and also how these could have been strengthened with a heightened awareness. Educators did not respond to the Quality Mentors advice in regard to adding the strategies to the plans and on the final impact visit no plans were documented to view.

It is evident from this information that the early childhood services that were graded higher were using, understanding and reflecting on the pedagogical strategies each day in comparison to those who received a lower grade. Each of the participating early childhood services received training and intensive mentoring support and advice in relation to the pedagogical strategies. Again, those educators who repeatedly asked questions, clarified thoughts and responded to the mentor's advice to use reflective journals and planning documents to assist with the comprehension and practical application of the strategies continually improved.

## 5. Improving Assessment for Learning

The procedures in place around assessment for learning, in documenting information about the child, and in using the information they had gathered to support the individual child's learning and development was reviewed and graded in each early childhood service. Quality Mentors assessed learning stories, parent's contributions and term reviews within the child's portfolios and also how the child's unique interests and needs were linked to, and observable in, curriculum planning.

**Overall findings in the area of assessment demonstrate that there were improvements in this focus area, within all ten of the early childhood services on the PPP. Two early childhood services in particular made the most significant improvement by moving up 4 grades from the baseline assessment, one of which reached the highest grade across the ten early childhood services in this particular focus area.**

### **What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to assessment for learning?**

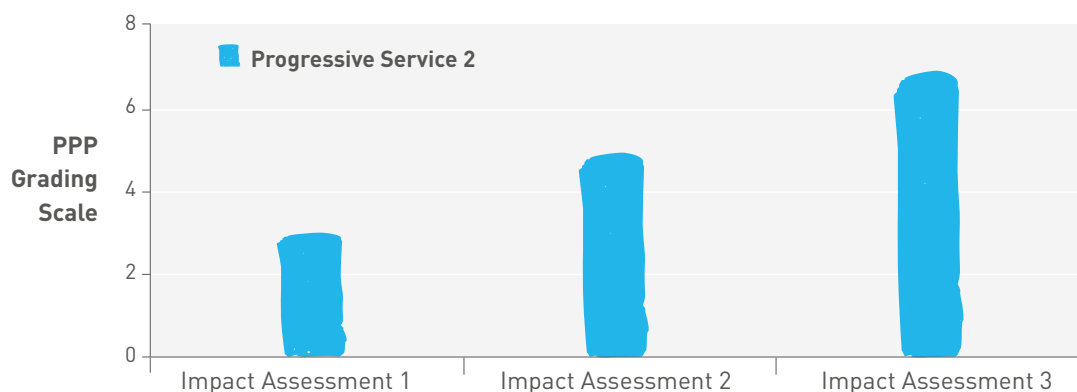
Features that enabled such progression to occur within the most successful early childhood services included strengthening and including children's interests in the planning process, displaying the children's own plans, including parents in the assessment process by meeting them and showing parents the child's portfolio and creating comprehensive portfolios

of the child's unique learning journey in the early childhood service.

Figure 14 demonstrates the dramatic improvement made by one of the early childhood services between impact assessment 1 and impact assessment 3 by progressing from a grade 3 to a grade 7. Although assessment for learning procedures were observed to be in operation at a basic level during the first impact assessment, this was not consistent from room to room with the pre-school room being the strongest in this area of practice. There was no correlation between the child's observations and what was planned for within the medium and weekly planning to extend and enhance children's learning.

However, educators rose to the challenge of developing their practice from the recommendations made by the Quality Mentors in the impact visits and advice given during mentoring and support visits. This enabled educators to strengthen the structure and content of their plans, ensure that each child in all rooms within the setting had a portfolio including term reviews, child's work and the parent's voice and also made some improvements in the structure and content of their learning stories, although this was a continuous target to improve. Educators also became more aware of the pedagogical strategy of questioning, to ensure children reflected more on their learning and experiences.

**Figure 14: Assessment for Learning - Progressive Service**



The early childhood service that received the lowest level in this area had a complexity of issues to deal with, which no doubt impacted on the ability to progress in this area. The service made improvements and progressed two grades from the first impact assessment by developing learning stories and providing portfolios for some children however, this process moved slowly due to funding and staffing issues. As the educators were only becoming accustomed to learning stories and planning, the time set aside was sometimes not ample enough for them to complete all documentation.

#### **Assessment – A Challenging Area of Pedagogical Practice**

Educators generally found this particular focus area quite challenging to implement in their service. Each educator received Building Pictures of Learning training at the beginning of the project, to enable them to complete meaningful assessment within their early childhood service.

Each service also received the opportunity to attend a cluster on planning during the project and Quality Mentors worked with individual educators within the early childhood services on structuring their plans and guiding them on how to incorporate the child's interests and learning needs into the plans.

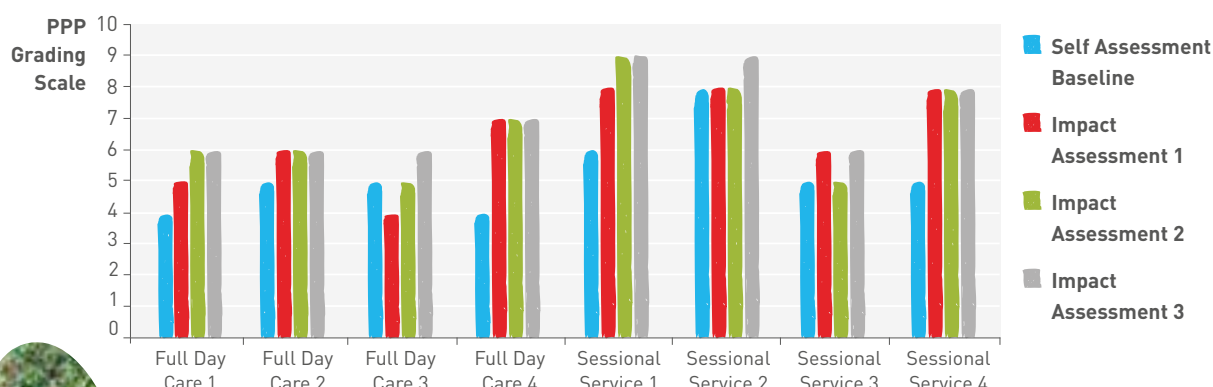
Despite this intensive support, educators continued to find it difficult to merge the observation, assessment and planning cycle together. Educators initially could not see the correlation between the learning stories and the planning and had viewed these as two separate documents that were not connected with one another. The shift and change of practice to ensure this was achieved took quite a while longer and a much higher intensity of support than was anticipated at the beginning of the project.

**Some of the reasons cited by educators themselves were as follows:**  
**(it is noteworthy that most reasons provided are in relation to inadequate non-contact time)**

- 🔧 Not having ample time to complete the planning process
- 🔧 Not being able to complete the planning in consultation with other educators in the room so that all key children's needs could be included in the plans
- 🔧 Not having the time to keep up to date with the learning story portfolio which also had an impact on the child notes section of the planning
- 🔧 Persistent confusion as to what needed to go into the medium term plan in comparison to the weekly plan.



**Figure 15: Indoor and Outdoor Environments in Full Day Care and Sessional Services**



## 6. Improving the Indoor and Outdoor Environment

In this focus area early childhood services were graded on the provision of a safe, accessible and developmentally appropriate indoor and outdoor environment offering a variety of stimulating and challenging experiences that reflected the children's interests and background. The Quality Mentors also assessed the definition of play areas and the use of space for individual and small and large group play. The use of natural and open ended resources and materials was also observed and the addition of these would also prove of particular benefit to children with special educational needs or disabilities.

**Overall findings in the area of environments demonstrate improvements across eight of the ten early childhood services as seen in figure 15, from the baseline assessment to the final impact assessment with two early childhood services making little progress only moving up one level overall.**

All early childhood services began the project with a good knowledge of the provision of an adequate environment in terms of a safe and accessible space for the children to explore and engage with. A cluster session on 'play and the environment' before the first impact assessment, offered the educators advice on the use of more natural and open ended materials and how to develop interesting spaces outdoors. This was further supported during follow up mentoring and support visits.

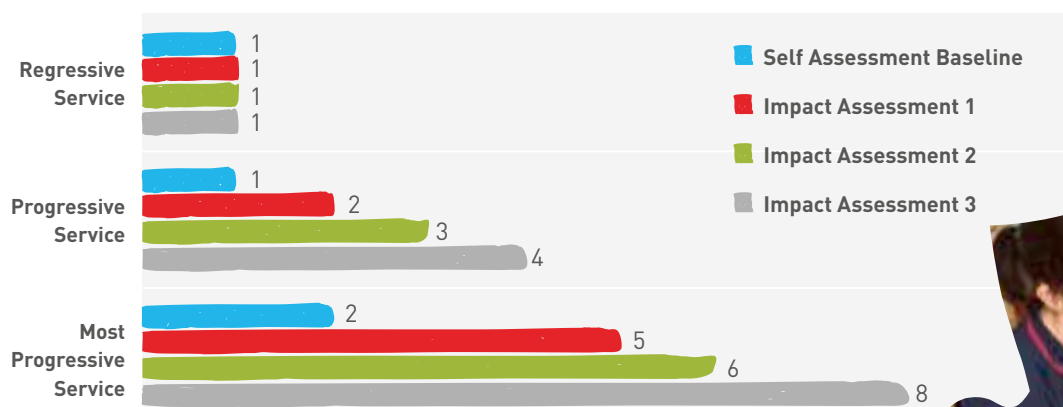
### What were the Common Features of Success and Challenge in Relation to Environments?

Common areas for improvement in the lowest scoring early childhood services included the need to provide more open ended and natural materials and also the need to have the children's interests and their background reflected in the environment. Although the educators were now more aware of the importance of outdoor play, the opportunities and experiences made available still needed strengthening.

The highest achievers in this focus area made a conscious effort to reflect the children's interests and backgrounds in their environments and worked in partnership with parents to achieve this. These educators planned and provided lots of open ended and natural resources, in both the indoor and outdoor areas, for the children to explore and a wide range and variety of experiences were provided. The addition of a good range of sensorial experiences also provided effective learning opportunities for children with special educational needs. Through reflecting and evaluating on the layout and definition of the spaces within their environments, richer learning experiences were provided for the children and more opportunities made available to promote stronger interactions within the service. The strongest early childhood services in this focus area incorporated outdoor play consistently into their daily routine. Their outdoor area was seen as an extension to their indoor environment where the children's learning and experiences flowed between both, rather than just an add on extra.



**Figure 16: Reflective Practice – Regressive v Progressive v Most Progressive Service**



## 7. Improving Reflective Practice

Improving reflective practice focused on the educator's use of their individual reflective diaries, reflecting as a team, collaborating with other early childhood services and the use of reflective tools such as Sólta and PPP Educators' Handbook to evaluate their professional practice. The educators were also graded on their ability to achieve targets set during mentoring and support visits and the evaluation of their overall service.

All educators received an initial mentoring and support visit as an introduction to using a reflective journal. This was followed up by a cluster session on reflective practice and subsequent mentoring and support visits, which offered support and advice to build on the educator's reflective skills and techniques.

**Overall findings in the area of reflective practice demonstrated that nine out of the ten participating early childhood services made significant progress in their ability to reflect on their practice and their ability to use this learning to improve outcomes for the children they were working with. One service in particular made a dramatic improvement moving from a grade 2 the self assessment baseline to grade 8 at the end of the project (Most Progressive Service, Figure 16).**

### What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to reflect practice?

Analysis of findings indicates the early childhood services that made significant progress acted on advice given by the Quality Mentors and began using a reflective journal

to record reflections on different aspects of their professional practice and on targets set by themselves and the Quality Mentors (Progressive and Most Progressive Services, Figure 16). Early childhood services that displayed steady and continuous progress in their ability to effectively reflect on their practice employed a strong team approach to evaluating and reflecting as a team on a daily basis. A number of educators also used a video to critique their pedagogical strategies and interactions with the children and embraced the benefits of reflecting on all aspects of their practice to make improvements.

Educators also visited other early childhood services and used these visits to both share their own ideas and gain new ideas. Targets set during mentoring and support visits enabled steady, practical improvements and by the final impact assessment, the majority of educators had developed a natural ability to reflect on their work throughout the day.

Overall, Quality Mentors observed the highest achieving groups in this focus area as those having reflective skills embedded in their daily practice through documenting and discussions as a team and on an individual basis.

One early childhood service made no progress in their reflective practice throughout the project in this focus area, despite attending the cluster on reflective practice and receiving four mentoring and support visits in this particular focus area (Regressive Service, Figure 16).





Although evidence from the first impact assessment suggested the educators were making an attempt to begin a reflective journal this did not continue. The educators did not act on advice given by the Quality Mentors despite targets being set relating to reflective practice on a continual basis at mentoring and support visits. Evidence observed at the second and third impact assessment indicated that reflective practice was not occurring.

A similar pattern was observed in another early childhood service where an initial commitment to reflective practice was reduced over the course of the programme, resulting in a reduction in overall grades in relation to a number of focus areas. Although this improved following mentoring and support visits, it raised concern as to whether or not reflective practice would continue to be present without the support and motivation provided by the Quality Mentors.

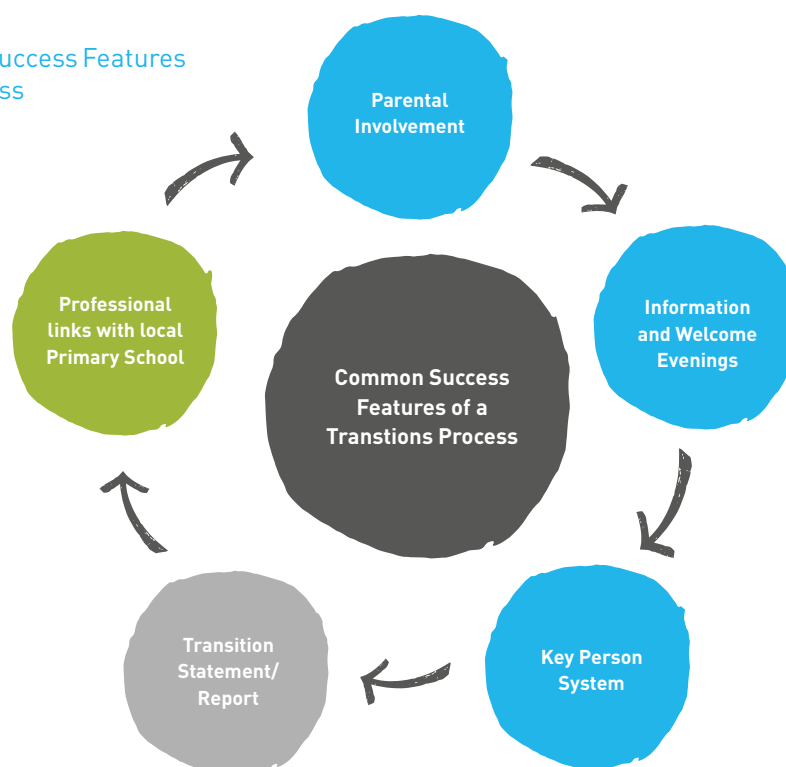
### 8. Improving Transitions

Each early childhood service was graded on the procedures in place for supporting transitions within the early childhood service and from pre-school to primary school. Quality Mentors assessed the content of child portfolios, including settling in and term reviews, the completion of transition statements and parent's involvement within the setting and with assessment for learning procedures. Information sharing and involvement with parents and primary schools in relation to transitions was also assessed. Implementing a comprehensive Key Person System and ensuring appropriate curriculum planning for transitions

including the addition of family and cultural backgrounds in the learning environment and documenting individual education plans for children with special educational or additional needs were also important factors within this focus area.

**Overall findings in the area of supporting children's transitions demonstrate that there were improvements in this focus area within seven of the early childhood services with three early childhood services receiving a lower level than initially reflected during the self assessed baseline assessment.**

**Figure 17: Common Success Features of a Transitions Process**



### What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to transitions?

Analysis of the evidence collated from the two highest performing services in relation to transitions highlights that progression was made due to significant changes to practice, such as involving parents in the transition process through meetings and by providing information and welcome evenings for them to attend. Both of these early childhood services continued to build a relationship with their local primary schools and the teachers were consulted in regard to the development of the transition statement prior to receiving the completed statements from the service in June.

The highest graded service in this focus area concentrated on developing a robust key person system that involved all partners - the parents, child and educators. The educators ensured that communication and information regarding the child's learning filtered from the voice of the child through to the family and back to the plans within the service. This service has also continued to collaborate and develop their professional relationship with the local primary school and this was apparent in their partnership through the project.

The services who made the most progression and those who were awarded a high level upon completion also made improvements with parental involvement in the transition process, sharing term learning reviews and meeting with parents regarding their child's learning.

The common trend highlighted by three early childhood services who regressed most in their ratings from the initial self assessed baseline until the final impact assessment was an under developed Key Person System. As a result this had implications on the documentation accumulated for the children with information regarding their learning not being continually assessed or added to the plans to extend and strengthen their learning. Links with parents and schools in these services was also not strong and there was little improvements made to establish these relationships during the project. These services were also graded the lowest in this particular focus area and had no local representation from primary teachers on the transition working group, although one of the early childhood services did make successful verbal links with their local primary school which previously was not achieved.

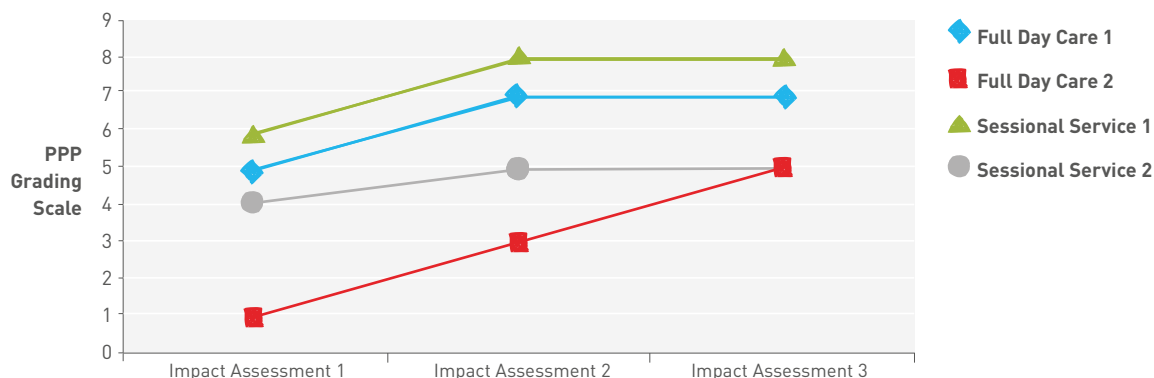


## 9. Improving Parents as Partners

The educators were graded on their communication with parents on a formal and informal basis with regard to their child's learning and development. The Quality Mentors also assessed information sharing with parents, including the curriculum and quality frameworks being implemented, namely Aistear and Síolta, and the Professional Pedagogy Project itself. The Key

Person System was also an important factor and how educators and parents shared their knowledge and skills to contribute to their child's learning in the transition process from home to crèche/pre-school to primary school. The Quality Mentors also observed how the early childhood services promoted parental involvement and consultation with parents.

Figure 18: Parents as Partners – Full Day Care vs. Sessional Service from Impact Assessment 1 – 3



As demonstrated in figure 18 above, overall findings in the area of parents as partners demonstrate that the majority of early childhood services made the most significant progress between the first two impact assessments. One reason for this may be the fact that the Moving On-Pre-school to Primary School Transition Statement was completed in the intervening time between the first two impact assessments when the educators and parents worked together to complete the Transition Statement.

The Transition Statement offered an opportunity for both educators and parents to interact and discuss their child’s learning and development as they worked together to complete the statement. During this period the Quality Mentors also supported all ten early childhood services to facilitate parent information sessions as a means of educating and informing parents on the PPP and the importance of early education using the ‘We Do Aistear’ parents leaflet as a reference and information brochure, which parents took away with them.

**What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to Improving Parents as Partners?**

The highest performing groups continued to strengthen their partnership with parents as a result of this. Common factors across the higher achieving groups include rich consultations with parents regarding their child’s learning and development. There was also a strong sense of parental involvement in these groups, with warm and friendly interactions between the educators and parents and parents contributing resources and their own knowledge and skills to the early childhood service.

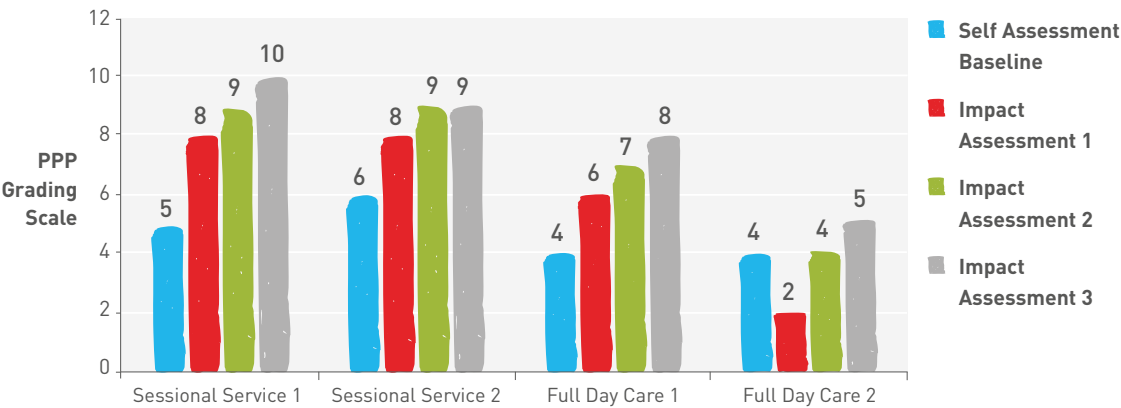
In relation to the lowest performing early childhood services in this focus area, richer communication and consultation with parents regarding their child’s learning and stronger parental involvement and contribution to the service overall have strengthened the group’s performance in relation to working effectively in partnership with parents for the benefit of the child.

10. Improving the Focus on the Individual Child

Each early childhood service was graded on their interactions with the children and opportunities provided for children to interact with one another in a range of groupings. Quality Mentors assessed the planning content and how it related to the needs of the individual child. Learning stories and portfolios were

also assessed for content and how the child’s learning was being extended and developed. Family and cultural background, accessibility of environment, personal space, inclusion of children in discussions and encouraging independence were also features of practice assessed under this particular focus area.

Figure 19: The Individual Child – Full Day Care vs. Sessional Pre-School from Self Assessment Baseline – Impact Assessment 3







**As figure 19 illustrates, overall findings in relation to this area demonstrate that there were significant improvements within all of the participating early childhood services on the PPP from the self assessed baseline to the final impact assessment.**

**What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to improving the focus on the individual child?**

One early childhood service excelled in this focus area, by continually responding to recommendations made by the Quality Mentors and in particular, guidance given with regard to the inclusion of children in the planning process and developing a Key Person System was reflected upon and implemented proficiently. The ethos of this service strongly valued the child as a central player and each child was deemed a partner in every aspect of the development and planning of the service. This focus on each individual child ensured that opportunities and learning experiences made provision for all children, including children with special educational needs.

Positive interactions, unique displays of children's work, freedom of choice and a wide range of activities and experiences planned and documented in relation to individual children's interests and assessment records were characteristic of the highest graded early childhood service and infrequent in the lowest graded service.

The lowest graded early childhood service was very adult directed and did not view the child as a partner in their learning. Although some progression was observed during the final impact visit, attitudes to developing creative play were the main barrier when rating this service. Children were not provided with a wide variety of creative play activities and when creative play was occasionally offered it was adult directed which limited opportunities for choice, imagination and independence.

Three out of the ten early childhood services showed no progression between the first and final impact assessment in terms of improving the focus on the individual child. Assessment for learning procedures had started to develop in these services, however, they were not

comprehensive enough and children's records were not up to date in all rooms. Displays of children's work could have been enhanced within each of the rooms to enable children to develop a sense of pride in their work and offer an opportunity for self reflection. The educators within these services interacted with the children during play activities, however, possibilities to extend the children's learning were missed on numerous occasions during observations.

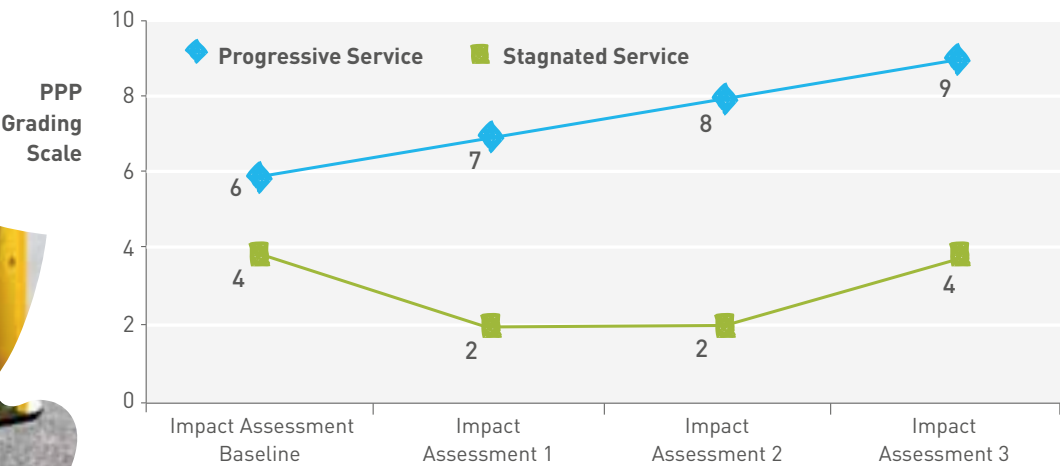
From the evidence collated there are many indications shown as to why this occurred. Educators within each of these early childhood services did not respond to recommendations outlined in previous mentoring and impact reports and, although some changes did occur, these did not fully meet the targets initially outlined.

Educators within these early childhood services indicated that time was a challenge for them to ensure that the planning and learning story approach was being kept up to date. This issue was continually raised by the Quality Mentors to the management of the early childhood services, that educators should be allocated sufficient time for planning, however the allocated time given varied between the three services.

Another indicator that may have impacted the progression of these three early childhood services was staff turnover. This seemed to hinder progression due to the challenges that inducting a new employee brings. Educators brought these challenges to the attention of the Quality Mentors, as an explanation as to why the previous targets had not been met, as trying to manage the induction period along with meeting targets proved too difficult.

As evident from figure 19, there were quite significant gaps in practice between the highest and lowest graded service. Educators attitudes to viewing the child as a significant player in their learning and involving them in the daily routine and planning of activities within the service made a huge impact on how each of the services were graded.

Figure 20: Play and Learning – Progressive Service vs. Stagnant Service



An area that most early childhood services were quite weak at developing within the focus area of the individual child was culture and celebrations. There were elements observed with regard to birthday charts, family photos and celebrating Christmas through planned activities, however, the educators were advised to reflect on how they valued cultural diversity and difference and how this could be improved in the early childhood

service without being tokenistic. Some of the educators felt that they were already being culturally diverse by celebrating festivals during the year and displaying pictures on the wall, however upon reflection on discussions with the Quality Mentors, educators realised how diversity could be improved. No changes however were observed in practice by the final impact assessment.

## 11. Improving Play and Learning

The Quality Mentors graded the early childhood services on the variety of appropriate play experiences available for the children to explore in various groupings both in the indoor and outdoor environment. The range of open ended and age appropriate resources and play areas was also observed and how these were rotated and added to meet the needs and interests of the children. Plans were also assessed to determine how the early childhood services were providing for the children’s interests and how children were involved and consulted regarding their play and learning. The Quality Mentors also rated the educator’s use of pedagogical strategies to support the children and how the types of play and peer support was encouraged.

All early childhood services received six hours training in this focus area as well as attending a cluster on ‘play and the environment’ followed by mentoring and support visits between baseline assessments and the first impact assessment. Two clusters sessions, one on ‘planning’ and a cluster on ‘play and

pedagogical strategies’ were also delivered between impact assessment visits.

**Overall findings indicate that in the area of improving play and learning, nine out of ten early childhood services made progress ranging from significant to good in this focus area with one service remaining unchanged across the duration of the project (figure 20).**

### What were the common features of success and challenge in relation to improving the focus on play and learning?

Three early childhood services achieved the highest grades in this focus area and the table indicates that these services began the project with a good level of knowledge on play and learning. One reason that could be attributed to two of these services is their previous participation on quality programmes, such as the BCCN QDAP and Síolta QAP. Common features among the higher achievers included children being consulted regarding their play environment and being involved in planning

activities. Strong evidence of child-led and child-initiated activities was also evident in these services.

Improvements made by a number of early childhood services in the other focus areas of curriculum development and planning appeared to have a positive impact on the overall play and learning aspect of practice. Other features that enabled

this improvement to be made included the use of pedagogical strategies, the addition of more open-ended materials to the environment and improvements made to the outdoor environment.



## In Summary

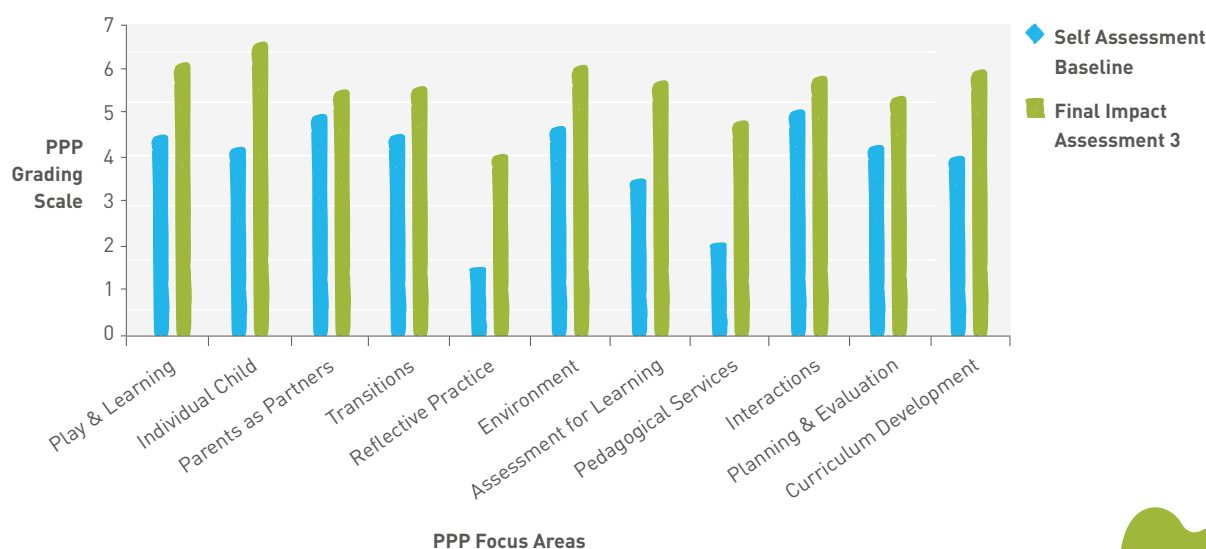
Overall, monitoring and working for the improvement of pedagogical practice across the 11 focus areas proved very positive in terms of impacts across the majority of early childhood services as seen in figure 21. The process was revealing in terms of the depth of the challenge faced by educators in different early childhood services. One area that was hugely underestimated by the Quality Mentors and by the project at large was the level of intensity of supports that was required to enable change in these areas.

The most challenging focus areas highlighted by the Quality Mentors were Planning and Evaluation, Assessment for Learning and Reflective Practice. During on-site visits the educators received extensive support from the Quality Mentors regarding the documentation of their medium and weekly plans and how to link their observations, including the children's learning stories, with their plans. Although the majority of educators used reflective journals, the difficulty was in their effective use and the educators ability to critically reflect on their professional practice to help them progress. However, the focus area of reflective practice made significant progress during the project, mainly because there was no structure in place for reflective practice across the early childhood services to begin with.

Pedagogical Strategies was another focus area that made strong improvements across the majority of early childhood services throughout the term of the project. At the beginning of the project there was little or no awareness of the range of pedagogical strategies that could be used to facilitate and extend the children's learning and development. With the support of the Quality Mentors, the educators were able to implement and see the benefits of using these in their practice. However, the Quality Mentors would be aware of the need to continually reflect on their use to ensure they continue to improve and remain embedded in practice.

The educators' perception of their own practice was often at odds with what the Quality Mentors observed. At times the Quality Mentors were viewed as critics rather than a support. However, those educators displaying positive attitudes to change and reflecting effectively on their practice were able to overcome this and were committed to making improvements to their practice. Although some early childhood services would appear to have taken ownership of change there is a fear going forward without the support of the Quality Mentors that over time practice may slip.

**Figure 21: Self Assessment Baseline vs. Final Impact - Average across 11 Focus Areas**

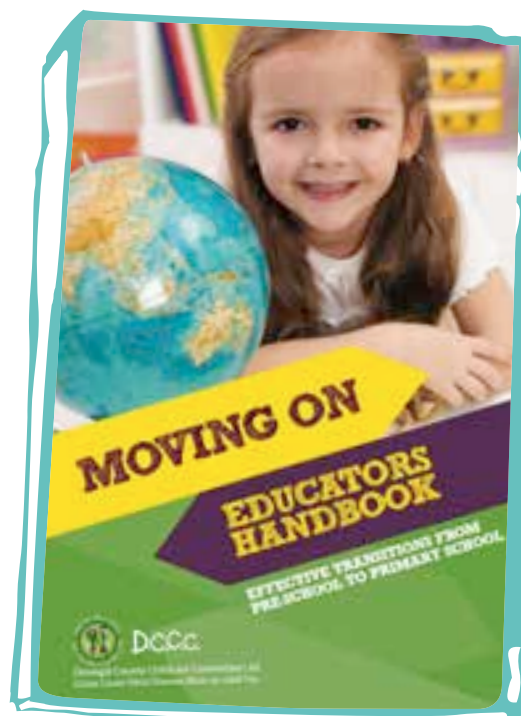




5

A Focus  
on Transitions





Young children experience many transitions in their lives, beginning in early childhood between home and early childhood services, and from there to primary school. Early childhood services have a crucial role to play in supporting these transitions and laying a secure foundation for all future transitions children will make throughout their lives. From the outset, one of the key legacy objectives of the Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP) was to develop a practical resource, in line with the learning themes of Aistear, to support children's transition between pre-school and primary school that had the potential to be shared on firstly a countywide and then a national basis.

## Why focus on Transitions?

Currently there are no transition arrangements in place between the pre-school and primary school sector in Ireland. Therefore valuable information about each child, gathered in early childhood services, which could inform and enhance a smooth transition process, is lost. This is important for all children, however, is particularly important for children with disabilities or special learning needs.

A consistent tool for sharing information between pre-school and primary school is invaluable to help teachers prepare for the positive participation of each child in their new learning environment and provide a seamless continuation of learning for the child.

### What was the Rationale for Developing a Pre-School to Primary School Transition Statement?



The need for this particular component of the PPP came from evidence based knowledge of early childhood education practice observed by Donegal County Childcare in early childhood services across County Donegal.

DCCC's well established *Building Pictures of Learning* Programme is a training programme that supports the implementation of meaningful assessment for learning techniques using the Learning Story approach. The programme also considers how information compiled from meaningful assessment can be used to support the child's transition to primary school.

The learning obtained from the delivery of this programme in Donegal since 2010, was instrumental in providing evidence based information around the gaps in the transition process between pre-school and primary school. This idea was further supported as a result of the baseline practice assessments carried out with PPP participants and from observations made by the Quality Mentors during mentoring and support visits with the 10 early childhood services on the PPP.

Observations highlighted inconsistencies across the groups regarding their transition processes which included:

- no linkages between the early childhood service and their local primary schools
- not having an assessment process in place to inform an end of year summary to support the transition process
- end of year summaries not being completed
- of the services that were completing an end of year summary, this was passed on to parents only
- parents had the responsibility of passing this information on to the primary school if they wished
- one service reported to being involved in developing a transition process with their local schools which proved unsuccessful due to lack of commitment from all parties concerned.

**Due to these findings there was strong evidence to support the need for a consistent approach by developing a universal Transition Statement that could be used across and between all services.**

In the case of children with a disability or special learning need, an important function of the Transition Statement is to inform a

**This is essential to act as a bridge between the pre-school and primary school curriculum, ensuring a seamless, positive and supportive continuation of learning for each individual child.**

continuation of professional supports and individual interventions to enable the child to participate fully in a new learning environment.

## Developing the Transition Statement in Partnership with Early Childhood Educators and Primary School Teachers

In developing a format for the Transitions Statement, the PPP team agreed the following as a starting point in advance:

- ☛ the format would have to complement and work in harmony with the social constructivist model of learning depicted by Aistear and Building Pictures of Learning
- ☛ it was imperative that the statement would be open-ended rather than a pre-developed tick-box format
- ☛ content would be framed against the learning and development themes of Aistear
- ☛ adopt a strength-based approach that would highlight each child's individual strengths, interests, and highlight their emerging skills and abilities
- ☛ enable the sharing of information regarding children with special needs
- ☛ enable a partnership approach involving educators, parents and the child.

A draft document was prepared in line with this to act as a working document for the Transitions Working Group, which was made up of a representative from each of the 10 PPP services and primary school teachers.

## Key Learning from the Development Process and Recommendations to Enable Transferability to a National Initiative

- ☛ The process required continuous consultations and drafts circulated to the educators and teachers. In the development of the statement it was necessary to pilot the draft at different stages to ensure its **practical application and usefulness from both the early childhood educators and teachers points of view**. Once the completed drafts were evaluated and teased out teachers and educators were in agreement that this was an ideal statement to use going forward, giving both the educators and teachers a voice in the consultation period was imperative to the process. **This involved compromises being made from both sectors** with regard to the content, depth and layout of the Transition Statement.

Prior to this, collaboration between the pre-school and primary school sector existed in a sporadic and ad hoc manner, if at all, resulting in lack of knowledge regarding deadlines for applying for extra resources, i.e. the deadline in February for SNA's for children with additional needs. **This highlighted the need for regular communication and consultation processes being put in place to enhance and inform the transition process.**

- ✎ As part of the PPP, the educators had **a sound knowledge of the Aistear curriculum** which was vital to completing the statements effectively. Those educators with an established **key person system and strong assessment for learning practices in place** in their service, as a result of taking part in the Building Pictures of Learning programme, were well equipped with authentic information regarding the children's learning and development to record a true and accurate picture of the children in the Transition Statement.
- ✎ Whilst it is important to complete the Transition Statement using positive language, the early childhood educators were also aware of the importance of highlighting information relating to specific learning and development needs or additional needs and required guidance on how to do this. Further support was provided to enhance their reporting skills which involved training provided by the Quality Mentors on **strength based writing** and how to keep the content concise but at the same time not dilute the information. It was important to produce a high quality Transition Statement that reflected excellent literacy skills highlighting the professionalism of the sector. However, despite receiving a range of training and qualifications it was apparent that some educators found writing the statement difficult and lacked confidence in their literacy skills.
- ✎ Teachers liked the family section of the Transition Statement which includes the parents and child's voice and were particularly interested in the question asking the child why they were looking forward to going to school. They were also interested in the section which required the parent to tick a box relating to additional supports the child was receiving from other professionals. **Teachers found the narrative under each Aistear theme informative and gave them a better understanding of each of the learning themes.** The primary school sector are slowly beginning to introduce Aistear into their schools and further training, knowledge of Aistear and implementing a transition policy will enhance the transition process and the teachers understanding of the curriculum.





- 👤 Parents and children are vital contributors to the Transition Statement. As part of the PPP the Quality Mentors supported the educators in the **delivery of parent information sessions regarding the Aistear curriculum** and advised the educators to build strong relationships with parents to support smooth and positive transitions for the children. In addition, educating parents on the importance of the Transition Statement for their child encourages parents to contribute to the statement and to give their permission for the pre-school to pass it on directly to the primary school. In the past some of the educators reported that parents seldom passed information on to the primary school. It was decided that receiving written permission on the statement would overcome this issue along with educating parents on the importance of it. This is proving to be working well.
- 👤 The Aistear curriculum promotes the child as a unique individual with a right to have their say in what happens to them. **The child has an opportunity to contribute their own thoughts and ideas** to the Transition Statement through 'My Voice'. Educators can enable the child to contribute to their Transition Statement by involving the child in the assessment for learning process throughout the year giving them opportunities to contribute to their portfolios and documenting their voice in the learning stories.

## Impressions of the Transition Statement

The *Moving On - Pre-School to Primary School Transition Statement* was piloted with the departing pre-school children in each of the ten PPP services in June 2013. Educators, parents and primary school teachers were provided with questionnaires to evaluate the statement design and content. It was important to capture the

thoughts from all parties involved in completing the statement to ensure that any necessary changes could be made so that the statement was fit for purpose. Feedback received was very positive and sample comments are provided below;

### Feedback from Primary School Teachers

"I found the transition working group helpful in that it has given me a better awareness of the work done in pre-school. It was great to work alongside the educators and we learned a lot from one another. I have received statements from our local pre-school on the PPP, however there are children who have attended other pre-schools and it would have been nice to have a Transition Statement about these children also. It is something all pre-schools should have in place as they are so individual to each child."

"The information was useful as I can pinpoint areas in which the children may need to further develop and identify those areas in which children have been developing well at pre-school. I also liked how the statement focused on the child's social and emotional development rather than academic ability."

### Feedback from Parents

"It gave me a chance to outline what I felt would help my child settle in to school better. The educators have never asked us our opinions before so it was nice that what we had to say mattered and it really made me think more about ways I could help reassure my child and prepare her for school."

"I think it's a great idea to have more of a connection between the pre-school and the schools so that our children can be supported. I would recommend that all parents have the opportunity to complete the Transition Statement as it identifies the needs of our children and provides a valuable insight to the school teacher that our child is an individual"

### Feedback from Early Childhood Educators

"The Transition Statements were beneficial as they promoted and evolved the relationship between the pre-school, primary school and parents. The statement helped us to compile a holistic profile of each individual child demonstrating their stage of learning and development incorporating the four themes of Aistear."

"The statements provide an overview of the child highlighting their strengths. We are delighted that all our hard work of assessing the child's learning and gathering the relevant information is being recognised as useful both by the parents and the primary school teachers."

As evident from the comments shared above, the addition of a Transition Statement to all pre-school services would be very well received and it has been highlighted as a useful tool demonstrating the individual needs and interests of the child to assist with the transition process to primary school. In the short term, DCCC aim to ensure that this becomes a

countywide legacy with all pre-school services gaining access to training. However in the long term, this should be an initiative that could be shared nationally to ensure there is collaboration between the early childhood sector and primary schools with regard to the child's learning and individual needs.



6

Overcoming Challenges  
and Celebrating Successes  
Along the Way



Like any project, the PPP encountered a range of challenges along the way in addition to the successes of the project. These evolved over the period of the project and upon continual reflection many of the challenges were supported in order for the early childhood services and educators to overcome them and at times, turn them into a success. In this section, the challenges and successes from the different perspectives of the three main players will be focused on, the educators, the early childhood services and the Quality Mentors.

### 1. Overcoming Challenges and Celebrating Successes as Experienced by Individual Early Childhood Educators

#### Educator Challenges

**Managing expectations:** Feedback from educators on the Professional Pedagogy Project revealed that initially the commitment to a project of this duration, made some educators feel nervous and a number reported feeling pressurised to participate in the PPP by early childhood service management. Some educators were uncertain as to what the project would entail and due to this lack of understanding made them feel anxious about what was expected of them within the two and a half year timeframe. Initially the project was viewed as an extra piece of work that the service had to take on and this again made the educators fearful to commit and progress with the project.

This also had an impact on how the educators viewed the Quality Mentors. At the beginning of the project, the Quality Mentors faced some defensive attitudes, especially in relation to being open to discuss gaps in professional practice and educators felt that the Quality Mentors role was to inspect them, as opposed to support them to make progress. This at times produced negative attitudes from the educators to progressing with targets as they initially viewed the Quality Mentors suggestions and advice as an attack on their current professional practice.

This new relationship was a challenge as the majority of the early childhood services engaged on the PPP had never received external mentoring support and therefore were not accustomed to the structure of progressing practice based on observations made within their service.

**Managing a whole team approach:** A particular challenge for some early childhood services was communication between the whole staff team within the early childhood service. At the beginning there was a lack of opportunity in some of the early childhood services for educators to meet, as either a whole team or as a team within each room, to discuss targets set, planning and making changes. This was frustrating at times for the educators especially when it impacted on documenting the child's assessment records and individual plans.

Educators stated at the beginning of the project that they generally kept to themselves and didn't mix with other staff members. This was due to the fact that generally educators did not have the opportunity to meet frequently with one another in regard to professional practice and also attendance at continuous professional development training was not necessarily encouraged for the whole staff team.



**Communication and relationship difficulties:**

A fear to communicate with managers about various issues was a continual challenge for some educators throughout the project. Speaking out at training proved difficult for some educators who were afraid to voice their thoughts in front of their manager in case what they said was wrong or that it reflected badly on the service. Some educators stated that, prior to the PPP training, they used their manager as a security blanket to answer as a spokesperson for the service. Educators also felt unsupported in their role by managers and at times felt that their opinions and efforts in relation to meeting specific targets of the project were not respected.

Building strong and secure relationships proved difficult at times in those groups that experienced a high turnover of staff. Some educators reported finding it stressful having to continually form new relationships and induct a new member of the team. This had a knock on effect on the quality of their professional practice as they felt they were constantly taking two steps forward and one step back.

**Performance versus reality:** Educators in some early childhood services reported that the manager liked them to 'perform' for impact and mentoring visits and were more concerned with the end rating of the service as opposed to making permanent changes to the practice. This resulted in samples of work being produced that may not necessarily have been embedded in their practice, but merely produced in order to meet targets set prior to a mentoring or impact visit from the Quality Mentor. The educator then felt under pressure to explain this in a way that was meaningful to their practice and, therefore, thought they appeared uncertain during mentoring and support visits. Due to this, educators felt it difficult to remain motivated on the project and stated at times they felt there was no point when the practice was not permanently changing.

## Educator Successes

**Confidence as an educator:** Educators have stated that they are becoming more confident when engaging with parents as they are becoming more confident in relaying the purpose of early childhood education through the Aistear framework. Educators feel a greater understanding about what learning experiences and activities should be provided and not all activities need to have an end product to show parents. Educators have indicated that they are more relaxed in the delivery of curriculum by involving children more, have better communication with other staff and a more positive approach to their work where activities are less structured and more meaningful.

**Reflection and change in mindset:** Educators reported that opening their mind to the value and benefit of reflective practice has been hugely beneficial to their practice and self motivation. Educators have stated that, once they realised that the project was not an additional piece of work but was based on the daily running of their service, they felt more open to change and open to new ideas. This also helped to improve relationships with the Quality Mentors once they began to appreciate the Quality Mentors as a support to them. Over time as relationship strengthened, educators began to confide in the Quality Mentors regarding their struggles, challenges and general advice.

Educators that were able to see the mentoring and support intervention make a difference to their practice became more naturally motivated and excited about the change in their practice and how this influenced the behaviour and enjoyment of children during play. This also led to more job satisfaction and educators have stated that they actually enjoy coming to work now.

**Whole team approach:** Educators feel that there is a better approach to team working now, and they feel more confident to speak to other staff and to their manager. Individual educators reported that they learned to value their role as of equal importance to others and developed more confidence to put their opinion forward.



## 2. Overcoming Challenges and Celebrating Successes as Experienced by Management of Early Childhood Services

### Management Challenges

**Staffing challenges:** Management found that, from engaging on the project, it highlighted to them the capacity of some of the staff in their service in relation to meeting targets and having the ability to understand and make changes to their practice. This, along with trying to keep the team motivated, posed quite a challenge for them during their participation. The issue of staff turnover and sickness also posed a problem during the project, with some early childhood services having to replace quite a number of educators that did not receive the initial training.

**Financial pressures:** One of the early childhood services in particular faced financial difficulty during the project and this, accompanied with lack of support from the management committee, made participation on the project difficult to progress with at times. Other early childhood services, both community and private, found it difficult to manage non contact time for staff and resourcing for indoors and outdoors proved challenging and a slower process than anticipated for them.

**Programme implementation:** Another challenge for some management within the PPP early childhood services was trying to merge their existing curriculum with the ethos

of a child centred approach as promoted by the PPP through the use of the Aistear curriculum framework. This in particular caused quite a frustration within the Montessori early childhood services who at the beginning were more adult directed, and involving the child within the planning of the daily activities needed to become strengthened.

The PPP underlying principle of play based and child led learning conflicted in the approach undertaken by early childhood services who were implementing the Montessori curriculum. This proved quite a challenge and point of discussion between the early childhood services and the Quality Mentors throughout the project.

Management also at times found it difficult to ensure that the educators took ownership of the changes made and it wasn't just for 'the service' that they worked.

**Time:** Time was also a huge issue along the way and was a continual challenge documented on the visit report form from a variety of early childhood services. Finding time in relation to planning, learning stories, changing the learning environment and meeting the various targets outlined, was a constant challenge to early childhood service management.

### Management Successes

**Relationships and motivation:** Management found that there was a change in attitude and motivation within the staff and the educators were now more open to change. The relationship between the managers and Quality Mentors also developed over the period of the programme and enabled many frank and open discussions to occur. This assisted with the positive progress made within the service, as managers and mentors developed a common understanding regarding some areas of practice and were able to work together to achieve the targets set to improve areas of practice.

**Learning environments:** Developing the environment, both indoor and outdoor, was a success for managers on the project. This change took time and they continue to build on the resources offered and the changes have greatly enriched the learning experiences for children. Parents have also been involved in providing natural, open ended materials within the learning environment indoors and outdoors in a cost effective way.

**Time management:** Management have generally been able to develop and strengthen their time management skills in order to provide educators with non-contact time to keep up with record keeping duties. Although the allocation of non-contact time greatly varies between early childhood services, managers have largely embraced the importance of this as a core component of practice. Managers have stated that they are now also able to delegate tasks better to educators to enable a sharing of responsibilities and an ownership of particular tasks across the team.

**Transitions:** Many managers have also stated that a key success of the PPP was their involvement on the transition working group where they helped to develop a Transition Statement to follow the child from the pre-school to the primary school. Since the participation on this working group, management have stated that partnerships have been strengthened with parents and the local primary schools. This is a necessary step in professionalising the early childhood sector and making the necessary links with the relevant professionals involved in the education of children within this period.

### 3. Overcoming Challenges and Celebrating Successes as Experienced by Quality Mentors

#### Mentor Challenges

**Trust:** The Quality Mentors found it quite a challenge to gain the trust of the educators across the majority of groups and found it difficult to instil in them the idea that they were 'on their side'. This particularly came to light during the mentoring and support visits. The educators appeared to view the Quality Mentors as 'inspectors' coming in to assess their practice. Suggestions made by the Quality Mentors were often viewed as criticism rather than an offer of support to move their practice forward. Constant reassurance and acknowledgement of targets already met helped to alleviate their apprehension regarding the Quality Mentors role. Suggestions that were made to improve practice were also, at times, resisted by the management of the service.

**Process versus scores:** A significant challenge to the work of the Quality Mentors was reassuring the management that the educators were making progress and, although slow at times due to the various challenges that the educators faced, progress was still being made. It was also a challenge to ensure that management understood the importance of the processes and how it was more important for change to occur and become embedded

in practice as opposed to only focusing on the rating that they received during the impact visits.

**Negativity:** In relation to some of the early childhood services, the Quality Mentors experienced a negative and challenging attitude by the managers which seemed to have a knock on effect on the educators in the service and the progress that they were making. At times advice and suggestions were ignored and educators were told to continue with what they were currently doing. This went completely against the ethos of the PPP and the support the Quality Mentors were trying to provide.

This caused a lot of confusion on the educators part as one message was coming from management and the other from the Quality Mentor, resulting in no progress being made and the educators left frustrated during mentoring and support visits in relation to targets. Educators meetings were offered in order to alleviate some of the challenges that the educators in the various early childhood services were facing. However, it was a challenge to empower the educators to resolve the conflicts in their own setting with their management.



### Mentor Successes

#### **Building and supporting relationships:**

In order to overcome the challenges faced in a small number of the participating early childhood services around internal relationships and communication, Quality Mentors provided both individualised support to educators who needed individual time to discuss challenges and also group support to help overcome similar challenges that they were experiencing as a whole setting.

By providing this support the whole service approach was strengthened as educators became more confident in expressing their views in front of their peers in relation to their professional practice whilst also encouraging the educators to work as a team and use the strengths offered by one another to progress. This then created a more open forum for communication and increased understanding between the educators across the rooms, helping to build on continuity of practice within the service.

**Adopting a whole team approach:** The whole team approach proved to have a positive effect on staff relations especially in the larger early childhood services. Before the PPP, educators in each room within the setting appeared to work in isolation of each other and more emphasis appeared to be placed on the pre-school rooms. This new shift in focus enabled educators the opportunity to share

more experiences and ideas with one another which improved relationships and attitudes to work. This motivation and attitude to change was a major success in the project as without this shift the development and progress of professional practice would not have progressed to the levels achieved.

#### **Empowering educators to speak out:**

During the final mentoring and support visits, educators increasingly confided in the Quality Mentors with regard to frustrations and challenges faced by them within their work settings. This in itself highlighted a significant change in the attitude of the educators and in the level of trust they had developed in the Quality Mentors since the beginning of the project.

In order to support this further however, Quality Mentors decided to host a few educator meetings where all educators from the participating early childhood services were invited to a meeting to collaborate and support one another with their challenges. This empowered the educators to discuss problems with their peers and strategies were offered from other early childhood services to overcome the frustrations.

**Embracing reflective practice:** The introduction of reflective practice was, at first, considered as an additional task by educators, however, towards the end of the project, those early childhood services that embraced reflective practice reported huge benefits.

Similarly, those early childhood services who met the target of recording video footage of their interactions with the children gained a lot of learning from this and made changes to how they interacted with children and how they employed a range of pedagogical strategies.







7

# The Legacy of the Professional Pedagogy Project

One of the overarching aims of the Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP) was to ensure that at the end of the 3 year timeframe there would be a body of evidence that would not only inform the future implementation of quality and practice frameworks Síolta and Aistear on a national level, but also that the legacy of the PPP would include a transference of learning to all early childhood services in Donegal to enable a lasting legacy from the project.

### In what way did the PPP leave a learning legacy for ECCE?

At the beginning of the Professional Pedagogy Project, the overall aim of the project was twofold. The first objective was to provide an **evidence based body of information** to inform and shape the type and level of support required to make meaningful and lasting change to early childhood practice.

Secondly, the project had a key focus on the **practical legacy** – in other words, what the project could practically leave behind to ensure that there was some level of transferability to early childhood services beyond the ten services on the programme.

### Leaving an Evidence Based Legacy

An important objective of the Professional Pedagogy Project was to provide a realistic picture of the level and depth of support and resources that are required to enable meaningful improvement to the quality of early childhood practice to improve outcomes for children. The body of rich information gathered by the Quality Mentors during both impact assessments and mentoring and support visits greatly informed this understanding. This learning will be used to inform practice supports offered by the Donegal Childcare Development Team in their work to support early childhood services going forward.

This evidence based learning will also be instrumental in informing and shaping the forthcoming National Early Years Support Service (NEYSS) that plans to deliver state funded supports based on the Síolta and Aistear frameworks, to early childhood

services in a coherent and consistent way, so that those services are of high quality and promote positive outcomes for children. An overview of learning and key considerations for transference to a national programme from the Donegal PPP has already been requested by, and submitted to, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to assist the development of the forthcoming NEYSS. We hope to have the opportunity to continue this engagement as the national initiative progresses.

In particular, evidence of the resources, timeframe, personnel, the type and intensity of support required to enable lasting change to early childhood practice will be very beneficial. In addition, and of equal benefit, will be the sharing of information around potential sensitivities and challenges when providing on-site mentoring supports to different early childhood services.



## Leaving a Practical Legacy

The practical legacy left behind by the PPP stretches across a range of activities in relation to early childhood care and education in Donegal and beyond. **This includes influencing the content of early education training programmes by third level institutions, using mentoring as a support mechanism, influencing Donegal County Childcare's existing quality support activities and making a range of tools and resources available to other stakeholders in the early childhood sector.**

### Influencing Academic Training Programmes in Early Childhood Care and Education

During the lifetime of the PPP, Donegal County Childcare has strengthened local collaboration with Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LyIT) to support the development of professional training pathways for the early childhood sector. Through continual consultations, DCCC were able to negotiate and secure Recognition for Prior Learning for the module Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment for all PPP educators currently involved in either the full time or part time degree programme at LyIT. A further benefit is the exemption of this module fee, which in monetary value is €500 reduction, for the PPP educators currently on the early childhood degree programme.

Overall, the content of the PPP training programme has had a significant influence on the core content of existing early childhood degree programmes with particular interest in the areas of curriculum, pedagogical strategies and assessment for learning. The content of the 12 week PPP training programme has been used to strengthen the exiting curriculum practice modules of two early childhood degree programmes in Letterkenny IT and Dundalk IT.

As a practical resource to support students, the PPP educator's handbook, entitled *Professional Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education*, has been named as a core text for these two early childhood degree programmes.

In addition to this, the guidance tool developed and used by the Quality Mentors to break down the observable components of the 11 pedagogical focus areas has been shared with course coordinators of these two training colleges to provide a framework for student placement evidence of practice whilst participating on the early childhood degree.

**The influence that the PPP has had on existing training at degree level is significant even at the end of this relatively short project. Considering the gap in skills and knowledge around core areas of professional pedagogy practice, there is huge potential to replicate these very positive developments further with other training organisations, both regionally and nationally.**

### Testimonials from Training Organisations and Students:



"The theoretical underpinning of the Professional Pedagogy Project (DCCC 2012) is highly relevant to current early childhood care and education policy development in Ireland as it strongly adheres to the practical application of the principles and philosophy of *Síolta*: (The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) and *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009).

The Professional Pedagogy Project (DCCC 2012) is highly significant to the professional development of future early childhood care and education graduates as it validates the importance of high quality early childhood pedagogical practice. The project strongly advocates a socio-cultural perspective of child centred learning, thus stressing the core role of a high quality play environment in bringing a wealth of





benefits in all areas of the child's well-being, learning and development. The project supports the importance and influence of the early childhood care and education workforce on the quality of early childhood education and provides clear and practical direction for how professionals who engage with children can support their learning and interaction with their environment through play and build positive relationships which can affect their social and emotional development, cognitive development and personal sense of achievement and well-being.

The quality of children's experiences are at the core of this project and an important part of this is educating early years professionals who need to be able to continually develop their knowledge, skills and understanding. Excellent pedagogical leadership is vital in improving the quality of early childhood care and education provision, and the Professional Pedagogy Project (DCCC 2012) strongly advocates that all early years professionals can aspire to be pedagogical leaders."

**Rosemary McGill B.Ed.; D.A.S.E; M.Ed.; PhD - final year - Lecturer in Early Childhood, LyIT**



"I have used the Professional Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education (DCCC 2012) text with both my level 7 and level 8 ECS students at Dundalk Institute of Technology. This text offers a step by step guide for students as they come to terms with implementing the Aistear curriculum framework. I found that sections 3 and 4 in particular provided very practical resources for students who were going out on their work placements. From a lecturer's perspective it filled a gap in the current literature available for ECS students as they grapple with learning a socio-cultural approach to early childhood care and education. I found this text to be more accessible for level 7 and first year level eight students than the Aistear research papers. The core strength of this text is that it clearly explains complex concepts and offers practical examples of professional pedagogical practice that are easily grasped by students as they begin their journey into early childhood studies."

**Dr Aine Mc Kenna Assistant Lecturer on Early Childhood Studies DkIT**



"The Professional Pedagogy Project was an excellent forum for bringing early years practitioners together. There were many valuable learning opportunities for staff who were able to integrate the practical with professional understanding of the development phases of a child and the need for effective communications processes. The potential that this project has to inform the modular content of early childhood care and education programmes in a variety of training organisations is significant and the learning resources produced will serve as a valuable legacy to the initial project.

**Dr. Martin Gormley, Education Officer, Donegal ETB.**





“I’ve found the PPP Educators Handbook an invaluable asset during my studies and fieldwork practical assignments. The clear language and specific examples have helped me to translate the theory into practice, in a meaningful way, and has helped me to understand what I do, and why.”

**Deirdre Murphy, 4th Year Student, Early Childhood Studies, DkIT**

“I just wanted to let you know how fantastic the PPP Educators Handbook is – I came across it by accident on the DCCC website and downloaded a copy. I have now requested a hard copy from your office and have recommended it highly to my fellow degree students. Rarely do you come across a manual that is both academic and practical in its format – it’s so clear and easy to understand - thank you”

**3rd year student, Sligo IT.**

## Mentoring as a Quality Support Mechanism

One of the most significant pieces of learning from our experience in delivering the Professional Pedagogy Project was around mentoring. Overall, mentoring and support clearly was the most effective support mechanism to enable lasting change. However, it was also the most resource intensive and challenging component of the initiative as well.

The importance of recruiting an appropriate mentor – not just in terms of qualifications and experience, but also in terms of their personal resilience, creativity and responsiveness. The mentors ability to form and maintain relationships in what can be a defensive atmosphere is crucial.

When planning a mentoring programme in terms of the time it is initially believed it will take to effect change, it would be safe to double it. Truly embedding change and making lasting change takes time. Changing the practice is easy; it’s changing educators’ long held attitudes, enabling them to see the benefit of change and most importantly embedding that change that takes considerable time, patience and perseverance.

## The Difference Between ‘Collecting’ Evidence of Change and ‘Observing’ Evidence of Change

One of the key objectives of the PPP was to enable permanent, embedded change to early childhood practice after the project was complete. As already discussed, there was evidence to suggest that some of the participants that had taken part in previous quality raising initiatives had not succeeded in retaining the level of change achieved in their everyday practice. Educators pointed towards the emphasis on collecting evidence to build up a portfolio in isolation of practical change as being responsible for this.

Therefore, the overall aim of the PPP was to address these gaps through a bespoke programme that not only incorporated training, but supported the transference of theory to practice through onsite mentoring and peer networking through themed cluster sessions. The aim was to scaffold and observe changes to practice, enable educators to take ownership of that change and to use self and team reflection to map progress. It was decided that portfolio building was not a productive or meaningful way of measuring or monitoring change.

### Influence on Donegal CCC Continuing Professional Development Programmes

The model adopted by the PPP in delivering a training programme with wrap around supports will be continued through the quality support components of Donegal County Childcares' work. The existing Childcare Development Officers (CDO's) will use the range of tools developed by the Quality Mentors to support and strengthen their existing training programmes and to offer follow on mentoring and supports to ensure positive changes remain embedded in practice.

The PPP Educators Handbook **Professional Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education** is again proving to be a valuable additional support for the DCCC Team and one that dovetails well with existing DCCC training resources. CDO's commented that sections 1-3 provide a good foundation for educators taking part in DCCC's Aistear workshops. As the educators continue their training and access DCCC's more advanced workshops, for example, DCCC's Building Pictures of Learning: Meaningful Assessment in Early Childhood programme, sections 4-6 helps to reinforce programme content.

The PPP **Moving On: Pre-School to Primary School Transitions Statement** and the accompanying **Moving On: Educator's Handbook** also complements DCCC's existing training resources in strengthening the transition element of a number of programmes.

**We Do Aistear**, the information brochure for parents will also be reprinted and made available to early childhood services for new parents each year. The brochure has already been uploaded to the resources section of the DCCC website where it has been shared on the websites of a number of other County Childcare Committees.

Limited funding in recent years has curtailed the DCCC Team providing on the ground supports to early childhood services across the county. Training sessions were therefore the main source of contact that the CDO's had with the educators. However, evidence from the PPP has reinforced that training in isolation is ineffective. With this in mind, and with growing awareness of the importance to be compliant with Regulation 5, of the Child Care Regulations 2006, the DCCC Team are now adopting a more targeted approach to early childhood services using the PPP model to ensure lasting changes are made and remain.





The Baseline Assessment Tool and Impact Assessment Tool developed as part of the PPP are proving useful in assessing and monitoring the progress of the early childhood services and in highlighting areas of professional practice that need strengthening. This will ensure that DCCC can target quality improvement support more effectively and efficiently.

Likewise, the Mentoring and Support Visit Report template ensures the on-site visits now carried out by the DCCC Team remain focused, enabling the educators to discuss their strengths and challenges and to set realistic

targets going forward to embed the knowledge and skills into their services.

The PPP highlighted the importance of reflective practice in advancing the knowledge and skills of the early childhood educators and also of accepting the need for change. Cluster sessions and practice bytes developed by the Quality Mentors to support the educators to reflect individually and as a team, will be used by DCCC and offered as an additional workshop to be included in DCCC's Continuous Professional Development Calendar going forward.

## Additional components of the PPP will be merged into DCCC's resources and supports as follows:

**Educators Discussion Forum:** The Discussion Forum will be utilised by DCCC's Childcare Development Officers as they engage with educators across the county. This will also offer great networking opportunities for educators to strengthen peer networking and collaboration.

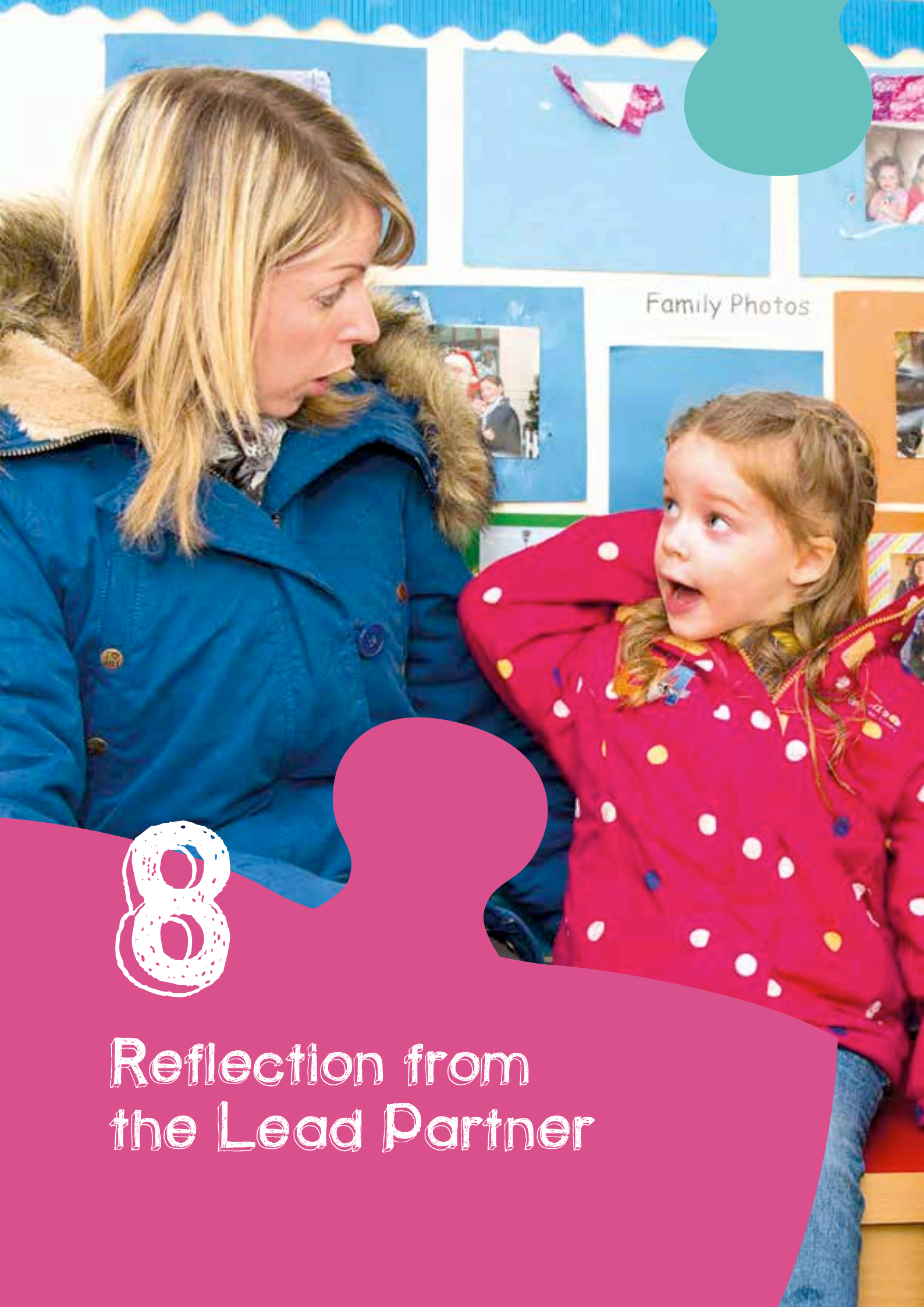
**PPP Resource Library:** The resource library will be merged with the existing Donegal County Childcare library and will continue to be accessible to educators, students and parents across the county.

**Impact Recording Database:** The Impact Recording Database will be adapted for use

by the DCC Childcare Development Officers to record their communication with the early childhood services in the county. The Impact Recording Database will be used to monitor progress made within individual early childhood services.

**Probably the most significant legacy component of the PPP is the development of the Pre-School to Primary School Transitions Statement. This legacy component is reported on separately in section 5.**





8

Reflection from  
the Lead Partner



## Responsibilities, Successes and Challenges

On reflection, the role of the lead partner, Donegal County Childcare Committee was a significant and sizeable responsibility to undertake. The PPP initiative was successful in an overall sense and the early childhood sector in Donegal has, and will continue to gain from, DCCC's success in delivering such an initiative. As well as the considerable gains to the participating early childhood services already outlined, the work of DCCC has been greatly enriched by the level of knowledge the organisation has gained around what exactly it will take to enable realistic change to the quality of practice in our early childhood services across the county. We will be able to reflect upon and utilise this unique and valuable insight in our future work.

One of the key objectives of the PPP was to enable permanent, embedded change to early childhood practice after the project was complete. As already discussed, there was evidence to suggest that some of the participants that had taken part in previous quality raising initiatives had not succeeded in retaining the level of change achieved in their everyday practice. Educators pointed towards the emphasis on collecting evidence to build up a portfolio in isolation of practical change as being responsible for this.

Therefore, the overall aim of the PPP was to address these gaps through a bespoke programme that not only incorporated training, but supported the transference of theory to practice through onsite mentoring and peer networking through themed cluster sessions. The aim was to scaffold and observe changes to practice, enable educators to take ownership of that change and to use self and team reflection to map progress. It was decided that portfolio building was not a productive or meaningful way of measuring or monitoring change.

## Maintaining a Flexible Approach

As the Professional Pedagogy Project was designed in such a way that it aimed to address needs led responses from the participating early childhood services over the duration of the project, it was at times difficult to match this approach to the advanced planning details required for the administration of the project at national level.

Although the objectives of the project in relation to gaps in pedagogical practice identified at the beginning of the project were accurate, the level of resources, time, type and intensity of support required to effect change was vastly underestimated. It was therefore essential to the success of the project that timeframes remained fluid and flexible. In achieving this, it has to be said that the NEYAI staff team at Pobal were very understanding in relation to this and practical, supportive compromises were always made when necessary.

NEYAI Steering Group site visits carried out in Donegal proved to be a very positive experience for our project. They provided a valuable opportunity to discuss our project, its difference, complexities and hopes in a supportive and engaging manner. We sincerely appreciate the time individual NEYAI steering group members and our colleagues at Pobal took to visit our county for this purpose.

Being mindful that the overall view is that embarking on the initiative was a worthwhile activity, it was one that was not without its challenges to the organisation and in particular to the DCCC Manager who undertook the project management of the initiative. The management and coordination challenges of a project of this magnitude should not be overlooked and should be taken on board for any future initiatives the DCCC is likely to embark upon.

### Consortium Working

One of the first challenges faced in the early phase of the project was the emphasis on consortium working. The range of consortium partners in Donegal for a project of this nature is extremely limited. Since 2008, DCCC has experienced a significant decline in the number of agencies represented on the DCCC management committee. As budgets and resources were reduced and agencies lost personnel, partner agencies appeared to become entrenched and a number of agency representatives were withdrawn from the DCCC board. This is a huge problem for organisations like DCCC who rely on a partnership approach to facilitate its management structure.

Most of the consortium partners that pledged their support to the initiative were already part of the DCCC Management Committee. This seemed to result in the partners coming to see the Professional Pedagogy Project as part of DCCC's work and little recognition or allowance was given to the project as a significant addition to the work of the organisation in the HR, financial, planning and development and overall coordination of the project over the three year timeframe.

In hindsight, DCCC would still embark on the project for the benefit of the early childhood sector in Donegal, but the difficulty lies in an inaccurate perception of the strategic management of the project overall. The model put forward as a result of the criteria at application stage is that of a project that is strategically managed, co-ordinated and supported in a collaborative way by a number of stakeholders. This is not always achievable in different regions and in the case of the Donegal

PPP, the project was both strategically and practically managed by DCCC.

The initial application was made on the basis of a financial contribution being made from key organisations to support the project, however after year one, these failed to materialise. Once staff were recruited and the three year plan had been submitted with corresponding budget lines, it became an ongoing challenge to meet the objectives of the project within budget.

Over time, a number of scheduled consortium update meetings were not attended by the original partners and it became an inefficient use of time and resources to hold meetings. Instead, following five consecutive meetings that failed to take place, a full PPP update was provided as part of the Manager bi-monthly report to the DCCC Management Committee for information purposes.

In an attempt to inject new life into a partnership approach, the project manager developed a small PPP Strategic Planning Group of interested partners outside the DCCC Management Committee. This proved very successful in providing support to arranging the Investing in Every Child's Right to Education mid way seminar in 2012. Although over time attendees fell away from this group as well, the project did manage to recruit two of its most active members to the DCCC Management Committee where they remain strong supporters and positive advocates for the PPP currently.

Although it is accepted that some of the challenges in relation to the consortium aspect of the project were unique to Donegal, this was

nonetheless a difficult component of the project to manage. The initial criteria for involvement from the perspective of the local Children's Services Committee (CSC) did not lend itself to the project at all. Despite expressing an interest at the consortium development stage and attending the launch event, no further participation or engagement was experienced from Donegal CSC.

At times the weight on the lead partner was tremendous and it was a huge undertaking for

DCCC as an organisation with considerable responsibilities in addition to the day to day running of the organisation. Despite this, the tenacity and dedication of the collective personnel involved in the project, the dedicated PPP Team, with the support of our colleagues at Pobal; the NEYAI Donegal Professional Pedagogy Project was delivered successfully, on target, within budget and with positive outcomes for participating educators, early childhood services, parents and children.

## Better Outcomes for Children

The overall success of the NEYAI Professional Pedagogy Project has been realised primarily through supporting educators to work towards providing better outcomes for children through the implementation of visible, measurable and hopefully lasting changes to their everyday practice. Across the ten early childhood services on this initiative, to a greater or lesser extent, this includes evidence of:

1. The ability to see opportunities for children's learning and development due to becoming more reflective, open minded and motivated educators
2. Increased levels of understanding regarding Ireland's national practice frameworks Aistear and Síolta, how to use each framework and the added value that the frameworks give to providing positive play and learning experiences for young children.
3. The rights of the child for equality of learning opportunity including differentiation of provision for children with special educational needs
4. Increased visibility of the child through consultation, child-led planning and recognition of the child's individual interests and strengths
5. Educator's recognition of themselves as professional educators who are able to articulate the magnitude and importance of their role for young children's future outcomes.
6. The provision of appropriate, challenging and meaningful early childhood curriculum programmes for children 0-6 years through the medium of play.



## Section 8 Reflection from the Lead Partner

7. Improved skills and interaction strategies for meaningfully engaging with children and parents.
8. Strengthened learning partnerships between the home and the childcare service and between the childcare service and primary schools through effective transition procedures.
9. Increased understanding on behalf of parents regarding the importance of play/learning experiences in the home and the role of the quality childcare service in supporting the continuation of learning.
10. Improved well being and positive dispositions to learning on behalf of children
11. The transference of information relevant to the child's individual learning and development including support for special education needs through the Pre-School to Primary School Transition Statement
12. The cultivation of educators with a purpose.







9

ppp Media Gallery







## County Childcare to take lead in new Demonstration Project

Donegal County Childcare Committee is one of only 11 demonstration projects nationally to be funded under a newly designed programme specifically devised for the advancement of early childhood care and education in County Donegal. DCCC is the lead partner in a consortium project made up of representatives from a variety of local agencies with an interest in early childhood care and education. DCCC has successfully secured 100,000 for an innovative 3-year professional development project under the National Development Programme for Early Childhood (NDPEC). Early Years Manager of DCCC is delighted with the success of DCCC's bid and said that at a time of budget cuts and an uncertain future for funded programmes, this is a wonderful testament to the work and expertise of DCCC as a lead organisation.

"This presents the Donegal early childhood sector as a whole with a wonderful opportunity to develop and implement an innovative project that has the potential to influence policy and be mainstreamed in a national level," she said. The Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP) is a framework of professional development and practical supports and a variety of resources aimed at enabling early childhood service providers to make steady, measurable changes and improvements to their practice. The PPP will provide an in-depth focus on the areas of Early Childhood Play and Curriculum, Planning and Reflective Practice, Assessment for Learning and Transitions. Dr. Martin Gurney, Chairperson of DCCC, commented, "The success of this project will be demonstrated by the projected improvements to the standard and quality of pedagogical practice in participating early childhood services and through the improvement of parents' skills and support. Overall, parents will be enabled through to enabling better outcomes for children." The increased funding that the PPP offers will enable DCCC to provide a complete package of resources tailored to suit local need and delivered at local level by a specially trained dedicated team. This full-time and one-part-time post will be created as a result of the Professional Pedagogy Project. The addition of staff with a dedicated remit of delivering quality support solutions will provide a strategic, consistent approach that will bring about real change. For more information on the activities of Donegal County Childcare see www.donagatchildcare.com



## Early childhood initiative launched



# A final word from the PPP Team



*"Celebrate what you have achieved as an Educator,  
preserve and share your learning with others, and  
most importantly, strive to make life a little better  
for young children in whatever way you can"*

**AVRIL, ORÁN, CLAIRE AND CATHERINE – MAY 2014**



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**D.C.C.C.**

**NEYAI** National Early Years  
Access Initiative  
Promoting Better Outcomes for Children & Families



 **pobal**  
government supporting communities