

Evaluation of National Early Years Access Initiative & Síolta Quality Assurance Programme:

A Study of Child Outcomes in Pre-School

Summary Report
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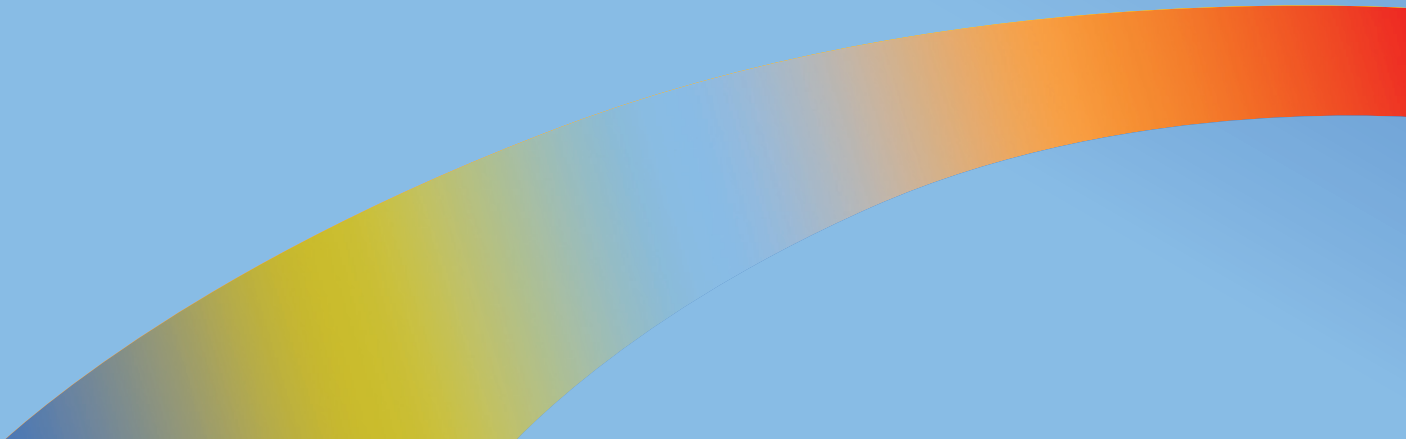
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NEYAI National Early Years Access Initiative

Promoting Better Outcomes for Children & Families

The National Early Years Access Initiative 2010-2014

The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) is a collaboration between a number of funding partners namely, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs(DCYA), the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Mount Street Club Trust, The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Board of Pobal.

síolta

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (2009-2013)

The Síolta QAP was developed to allow Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings to engage formally with the Síolta Quality Framework.

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1. Background

This report is an evaluation of the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI), a three-year programme (2011-2014) to improve quality and outcomes in the early years sector. NEYAI comprises 11 projects mainly located in disadvantaged areas of Dublin, Cork and Limerick and two rural locations in Longford/Westmeath and Donegal. It was officially launched by the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs in June 2011 who referred to NEYAI as being made up of local demonstration projects with ‘a focus on evidence-based practice and ongoing project evaluation for the purpose of advising future policy and the mainstream provision’.

A substantial body of evidence has been created through NEYAI¹ including this Summary Report and the Main Report and Technical Report on which it is based; reports from local evaluations in each NEYAI project; and an evaluation of the NEYAI Learning Community. Details of the 11 NEYAI projects are in Appendix One while contributors to this report, including the funders of NEYAI, are acknowledged in Appendix Two.

NEYAI projects are multi-dimensional in their activities, implementing multiple programmes (such as staff training and mentoring, parenting courses, family support services, interagency collaborations), across multiple sites, with all age-ranges of children from birth to six, and including their parents. This diversity of activity, much of it unique to each project, created challenges for the national evaluation because it was necessary to find a common theme across all projects which would allow a coherent and systematic approach to the evaluation. In response to these challenges, the evaluation focused on one age-group of children, namely those attending the 2012/13 Free Pre-School Year, and compared child outcomes in NEYAI with those in the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (Síolta QAP). Síolta QAP is a 12-step quality improvement process for early years centres; it is supported by mentors with progress and

validation based on a portfolio to demonstrate that Síolta standards are being met in each centre. The rationale for this research design is that NEYAI and Síolta QAP both share the same broad aim of improving quality in the early years sector while Síolta QAP occurred earlier and lasted longer than NEYAI (at least longer than the intervention period of the NEYAI evaluation) thereby providing a validated standard or benchmark of quality.

1.1.1 Free Pre-School Year

The fact that this study is based entirely on children who participated in the 2012/13 Free Pre-School Year provides an opportunity to consider some aspects of this programme even if the study is not based on a representative sample of children in the Free Pre-School Year and was not specifically designed as an evaluation of this programme. Nevertheless the sample provides some of the first evidence available on the Free Pre-School Year particularly on the factors which influenced child outcomes during that year. From the perspective of the wider education system, the sample provides a basis for exploring the extent to which Ireland may have a successful pre-school system which we define as a system to improve outcomes for all pre-school children while simultaneously narrowing the gap in outcomes between children. This definition is informed by internationally-recognised approaches to assessing school systems generally, especially in the OECD, and is also the implied goal for early years education by the Department of Education and Skills (DES): ‘Provide a quality inclusive school and early years education system with improved learning outcomes’ [emphasis added]. It is also the implicit understanding in the vision of the present Government (2011-present) which expresses Irish society’s commitment to every child: ‘that growing up in Ireland means you have the best start in life available anywhere in the world.’

1.1.2 Early Years Sector

A variety of terms are used to refer to the care and education of children under the age of six, such as ‘early years’, ‘pre-school’ and ‘childcare’, and it may

1 Copies of NEYAI reports are available at: www.pobal.ie; www.kieranmckeown.ie; www.trutzhaase.eu

be useful to begin with a clarification. In Ireland, the sector is officially known by the term 'early childhood care and education' (ECCE), a term also used by UNESCO. By contrast, the preferred term in OECD and EU publications is 'early childhood education and care' (ECEC). There is also a preference in Ireland for the term 'pre-school' rather than the OECD term 'pre-primary', although 'infant classes' (itself a uniquely odd term) in primary school are effectively 'pre-primary' but not 'pre-school'. In keeping with these differences in terminology, while also contributing to its complexity, the Free Pre-School Year is also known by its more formal title 'Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme'. Whether or not these different terms denote any difference in philosophical perspective or have any policy and practice implications is a matter of speculation, but some reform and standardisation of the language might be timely. Adopting a pragmatic perspective, we use the term 'early years' rather than 'childcare' but also use the term 'pre-school' depending on the context.

The study comes at a time when the early years sector in Ireland, defined as the care and education of children from birth to six, has experienced significant development in four main areas: (i) publication of *Síolta* in 2006 (National Framework for Early Childhood Education) and *Aistear* in 2009 (National Early Childhood Curriculum Framework); (ii) introduction in 2010 of the Free Pre-School Year for every child between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months; (iii) selective implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear* as well as other initiatives to improve quality in early years through the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) and its successor the Area-Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, plus the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI); (iv) introduction in 2014 of the National Quality Support Service (NQSS) and the National Policy Framework for Children & Young People (2014-2020).

Before summarising the results of the study, we briefly describe the sample of children who participated in the Free Pre-School Year. We then

summarise overall child outcomes in this sample, explaining what influenced those outcomes under the three broad headings: child characteristics, family and social system characteristics, pre-school system characteristics. In the final section we draw conclusions about the implications arising from the study.

2. Sample

In Ireland, there are approximately 4,300 early years centres. This study covers nearly 2% of these: 70 in total, 49 in NEYAI and 21 in *Síolta* QAP. Similarly, the estimated number of staff employed in the early years sector in Ireland is 21,000. This study covers nearly 4% of these staff (759) with about three quarters in the NEYAI sample (553) and one quarter in the *Síolta* QAP sample (206). The number of children in the Free Pre-School Year in Ireland in 2012 was around 66,000. This study covers less than 1% of these (448), just over half in NEYAI (258) and just under half in *Síolta* QAP (190). In order to understand the significance of the sample, we briefly summarise the sample design and some sample characteristics since these set parameters on making wider inferences from the study.

As indicated, the sample design was built upon an initial decision to focus on one age-range of children, namely those qualifying for the Free Pre-School Year (3 years 2 months to 4 years 7 months), since this was judged to be the most appropriate way of evaluating a multi-faceted programme like NEYAI. Centres in NEYAI and *Síolta* QAP were then selected by each project to participate in the study. The sample of children was randomly selected from a list of all children in each centre in the Free Pre-School Year.

Reflecting the focus of NEYAI, centres in the study are mainly located in more disadvantaged areas compared to early years centres in Ireland; however not all centres in the sample are situated in highly deprived areas. The sample includes a range of children from different social

backgrounds but, on average, they are more disadvantaged by comparison with the national population of children. The majority of NEYAI (75%) and Síolta QAP (87%) centres are community-based providers, unlike the generality of early years centres in Ireland which are private and only a quarter (26%) are community-based.

2.1.1 Characteristics of Early Years Educators

The sample of staff was based on all early years educators in the selected centres and a high proportion of these (76%) participated in the study. The results show that staff in NEYAI and Síolta QAP have somewhat higher levels of education (at Levels 6 and 7) compared to the early years sector as a whole. Employment patterns indicate that less than half (48%) are employed full-time, similar to the early years sector (46%) but radically different from the rest of the Irish economy where more than three quarters of all workers are employed full-time (77%). In terms of their experience of work and the workplace, staff in NEYAI and Síolta QAP have consistently more positive attitudes compared to Irish workers generally. Specifically, they are more satisfied with their job, except for their earnings. They have greater commitment to their organisation although they also report more job pressure and less autonomy compared to the average Irish worker. Workplace consultation is higher in this sample compared to workplaces in Ireland and staff-management relations are better; staff in the sample also have positive perceptions of their manager and feel valued and supported. NEYAI and Síolta QAP staff have a high level of commitment to their work, finding it energising, absorbing and are dedicated to it; this is a higher level of work commitment compared to other occupations in 10 different countries. These aspects of the sample are important because they indicate that NEYAI and Síolta QAP centres are good places for staff to work and the data also provides an opportunity to analyse if the characteristics of staff and their workplace have any impact on child outcomes.

2.1.2 Limitations of Study

In light of this sample design, which required retrofitting an evaluation framework to 11 pre-selected and highly diverse projects, it is important to note that this is not a representative sample of centres, staff or children in NEYAI, Síolta QAP or the Free Pre-School Year. This means that the results cannot be extrapolated directly to the wider population of children participating in these programmes. Other limitations with the research design should also be noted. First, the effective sample of 448 children, with matched data on parents and staff, is relatively small when considering the range of influences on which data was collected, thus limiting the power to identify statistically significant influences on child outcomes. Second, there is no 'control group' of children, staff or centres to evaluate the impact of NEYAI, Síolta QAP or the Free Pre-School Year by comparison with 'doing nothing'. The reason for this is simple: in order to establish a 'control group' a process of random allocation is necessary but this was not possible particularly since 95% of children already attend the Free Pre-School Year. Third, most of the data used in the evaluation is based on self-report by parents and staff as well as staff assessments of children. This is an appropriate and tried-and-tested method of measurement, particularly where it involves instruments whose validity and reliability has been well-established, as in this study. Nevertheless, these instruments cannot provide the type of insight and independent perspective that comes from directly observing quality in an early years setting, such as observing the interactions between staff and children, but this would have required a much larger research budget. Finally, data on parents was collected from mothers only based on the consideration that, since only one parent could be interviewed, for consistency this should be the mother, particularly since one-parent households were more likely to be headed by a mother. This is a well-established convention but the consequence of excluding fathers is recognised in terms of giving visibility to their role in the lives of children and families bearing in mind that a growing body of research shows that fathers and mothers 'influence their children in similar rather than dissimilar ways'.

3. Findings on Child Outcomes

Outcomes are central to the study and these were measured using the Early Development Instrument (EDI), an instrument that is used in many countries, notably Canada and Australia, to assess the development of children around the ages of 4-5. The measurement of outcomes involved assessing how well a child performs over 100 tasks in each domain of the EDI: physical health & well-being; social competence; emotional maturity; language & cognitive development; communication skills & general knowledge. The EDI is a measure of the skill required to perform ordinary tasks of living and learning which are appropriate to a child of this age-group. These skills are increasingly referred to as character skills and cognitive skills and a re-analysis of the long-term outcomes of pre-school and similar programmes has concluded that character skills predict later-life outcomes with 'the same, or greater, strength' as cognitive skills. All assessments were carried out by members of staff who worked directly with the child. Results are reported in terms of the five EDI domains and in more summary form in terms of two broad categories which we refer to as 'social & emotional skills' (with physical health & well-being included as part of this label) and 'language & cognitive skills'.

Children in the sample improved in all domains of the EDI. These improvements combine two processes of child development which cannot be separated, given the absence of a control group: (i) natural growth and (ii) impact of pre-school. In other words, since the study does not have a control group of children who stayed at home, we do not know how much of this development is attributable to the Free Pre-School Year. It is also worth adding that, since the Free Pre-School Year is available to all eligible children and there is an uptake of over 95%, it would be difficult to generate a control group of matched children who are not in the programme. This is a feature of all universal services. It is also important to remember that the impact of pre-school has largely been settled in international research, with the clear conclusion

that high quality, multi-year, pre-school programmes are beneficial, especially for disadvantaged children, and particularly where accompanied by additional support services for vulnerable families.

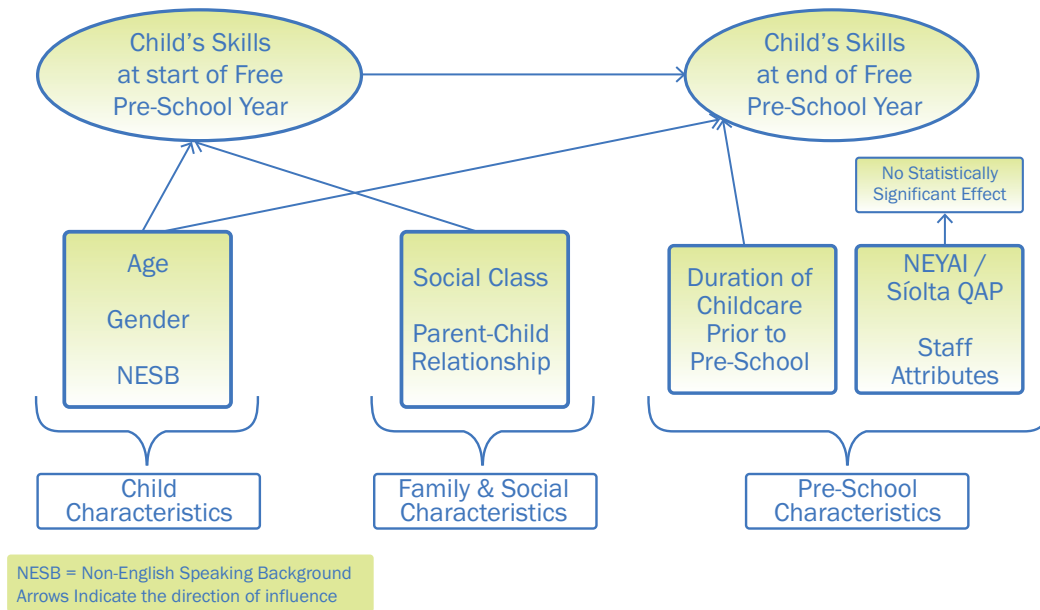
4. Overview of Influences on Child Outcomes

The study is based on the premise that child development is influenced by three sets of determinants: child characteristics; family and social system characteristics; pre-school system characteristics. Our analysis of these influences, graphically summarised in Figure 1, is the centre-piece of the study and the foundation of the main findings, conclusions and implications. Leaving details aside, there are three core findings of the study.

4.1.1 Stability of Children's Skills

First, the analysis shows that the distribution of skills within the sample of children is stable over time. This is particularly the case with social & emotional skills, but slightly less so with language & cognitive skills. In other words, children with more or better skills at the beginning of the study period tended to have more or better skills at the end of this period, whilst those with weaker skills at the beginning tended to remain in a weaker position at the end of the study. This indicates that the broad parameters on a child's progress during the Free Pre-School Year have already been set by the child's development during the previous 3-4 years. Similar to other studies in this field, our analysis explained about a quarter of the variation between children at the start of the Free Pre-School Year which implies that most of what shapes a child's development up to that time depends on individual factors (e.g. genetic factors) and other unmeasured characteristics of the child and his or her environment. Acknowledging the uniqueness of each child – because there are more things that make children different than similar – is an inescapable fact of the research and is also foundational to understanding and supporting child development.

Figure 1 Summary of Influences on Child Outcomes During Free Pre-School Year



4.1.2 Child and Family Characteristics Are Largest Influence on Children's Skills

Second, and again consistent with other studies, we found that child characteristics as well as family and social characteristics were the largest measurable influences on development. The pre-school system also influenced child outcomes, but to a considerably lesser extent. On reflection, this finding is not surprising since child and family characteristics are present from the child's birth whereas the Free Pre-School Year, as we have measured it, represents about 3% of the child's entire waking life up to that point. This does not imply early years services are not important, particularly since they have added importance for children whose development may be vulnerable precisely because of family and social circumstances. However it does imply that in order to understand what happens during the Free Pre-School Year, and how it might be improved, requires one to look at all significant influences on child outcomes and not just those in the pre-school system.

4.1.3 Gaps in Children's Skills

Third, the study found significant gaps between the skills of children at the outset, in both social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills. For the most part, these gaps remained unchanged or widened during the following seven months on the programme. Given that a successful pre-school system is one which improves outcomes for all pre-school children, while simultaneously narrowing the gap in outcomes between children, this is an important finding. The economic rationale for investment in the early years rests on improving overall child outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children, but the additional benefits of 'closing the gap' between outcomes can also be substantial. This does not imply that the Free Pre-School Year is not a good investment, or that it does not have a positive impact on disadvantaged children, but it suggests that, as currently organised, the Free Pre-School Year does not contribute strongly to a reduction in the skills gap that separates different groups of children.

The implications of these and related findings are discussed later. We now present more detail on what influenced those outcomes.

5. Influence of Child Characteristics

The child's gender, age and Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB) have a significant influence on skills, affecting both the starting point for children (wave 1) and their progress (wave 2) during the Free Pre-School Year. In this study, a child is defined as NESB where the mother's first language is not English (excluding mothers whose first language is Irish).

5.1 Gender

There is a significant time-lag in the development of boys compared to girls in both social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills. This is not unexpected as it is in line with international evidence. The results indicate that, when other factors are taken into account, gender-related gaps remain unchanged (in the case of social & emotional skills) or widen (in the case of language & cognitive skills). The international literature suggests that gender differences tend to converge by the age of 9-11 years.

5.2 Age

Age is a significant influence on language & cognitive skills (but not on social & emotional skills) and influences the progress recorded between the first and second wave of data collection. Older children have an advantage in terms of language & cognitive skills, which tends to grow during their participation in the Free Pre-School Year.

5.3 NESB: Non-English Speaking Background

NESB children have weaker social & emotional skills and weaker language & cognitive skills, a difference which was also found in the GUI profile of 3-year old children; GUI refers to Growing up in Ireland: National Longitudinal Study of Children. However, the gap in social & emotional skills between these and other children narrowed over time, pointing to an integrative effect of the pre-

school experience, although the gap in language & cognitive skills remained unchanged.

Given that age and gender differences in child development are normal among 3-4 year olds, except where children are diagnosed as having 'special needs', the positive impact of the Free Pre-School Year on the social & emotional skills of NESB children is a noteworthy finding. NESB children, as we shall see, are similar to other children in terms of socio-economic status but somewhat different in terms of their family.

6. Influence of Family & Social System

The 'family and social system', as we use the term in this study, refers to influences on the child which originate within the family but are linked to the family's resources in the widest sense. This system is specified by three latent concepts: social class, mother's well-being and parent-child relationship. The concept of social class denotes the family's resources (material, social and cultural) and comprises mother's education, occupation, and financial problems but also includes two other resources which are relevant to child development, notably the home learning environment and the child's diet. Mother's well-being is based on four observed aspects of the person: optimism, life satisfaction, positive affect and self-esteem. Parent-child relationship is based on how a parent relates to a child along three dimensions: conflict, dependency and stress. All concepts are measured with recognised scales, many of them also used in the GUI.

6.1 Social Class

Within the family and social system, social class is the main determinant of children's social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills. It is one of the biggest sources of differentiation between children in our sample.

In the case of language & cognitive skills, social class creates the largest gap between children. The size of this gap can be expressed statistically in terms of 'standard deviations' by stating that a one unit change in a child's social class is associated with a half unit change in a child's language & cognitive skills. This gap remained unchanged during the Free Pre-School Year.

In the case of social & emotional skills, social class is also associated with a gap between children. The size of this gap can also be expressed by stating that a one standard deviation unit change in a child's social class is associated with a quarter unit change in a child's social & emotional skills. Once again, this gap between children remained unchanged during the year.

The finding that children's skills are differentiated by social class is not new or unexpected, particularly regarding children's language & cognitive skills; it has been replicated in numerous international and Irish studies. Similarly, the finding that the gap in children's language & cognitive skills remained unchanged over time, regardless of participation in the Free Pre-School Year, is also consistent with other studies. This study, despite the relatively short period of seven months between wave 1 and wave 2, is testimony to just how strong this influence is when compared to other influences and, as discussed below, indicates the scale of the challenge required to reduce preventable class-related gaps between children.

6.2 Parent-Child Relationships

Parent-child relationships are a significant influence on children's social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills. The study found that a mother's well-being is the main influence on the parent-child relationship which, in turn, is influenced by her social class, support networks and NESB. From the perspective of a child, this suggests that a child's experience of the world is mediated through the parent-child relationship and the mother's experience of the world as reflected in the mirror of her personal well-being and the various resources

(material, social and cultural) available to her.

The study also found evidence to suggest that different parenting styles have different impacts on children's skills. Specifically, parents who have a more 'relaxed parent-child relationship' (mainly associated with less conflict and stress) tend to facilitate children's social & emotional skills while parents with a more 'demanding parent-child relationship' (mainly associated with more conflict and stress) tend to facilitate children's language & cognitive skills. This implies that parent-child relationships involve a balance between relaxed and demanding styles of parenting since children's skills are affected differently by each style.

These findings on the family and social system underline how social class and parent-child relationships constitute an interdependent set of active ingredients which influence the child's progress during the Free Pre-School Year, simultaneously weaving their influence in both the family and social system and the pre-school system. This perspective underlines why development of children's skills cannot be dissociated from the wider family and social system and, as discussed below, this wider set of cascading influences needs to be taken into account when considering how to improve child outcomes generally and not just during the Free Pre-School Year.

7. Influence of Pre-School System

Within the pre-school system, we found that the amount of time a child spent in an early years centre prior to the Free Pre-School Year – which in this sample averaged 15 months (compared to 7 months spent in the Free Pre-School Year) – had a positive influence on the child's progress during that year. This is an important result and, even allowing for limitations in the research design, is consistent with numerous landmark evaluations of early childhood programmes which have found a

positive relationship between programme duration and child outcomes, but only for children who are aged two years and older. This finding clearly suggests that early years care and education has a positive influence on child outcomes. The analysis also found that duration in an early years centre prior to the Free Pre-School Year was positively correlated with social class which suggests that children from more advantaged social class backgrounds have stronger skills, at least in part, because they start attending an early years centre at an earlier age. Conversely, it suggests that more disadvantaged children may face the 'double disadvantage' associated with lack of resources combined with less as well as later access to early years services. An important determinant of child outcomes during the Free Pre-School Year may therefore be earlier entry and longer duration in an early years centre, at least for children aged two and over. This finding has wider significance since it is consistent with other studies - based on larger samples of Irish children such as the 3-year old cohort of GUI and the 15-year old cohort of Irish children who participated in PISA 2012 - which also showed that usage of early years services has a social gradient.

The analysis also indicates that whether the child attended a centre in NEYAI or Síolta QAP made no difference to outcomes, which implies that neither quality improvement programme had a marked advantage over the other when other influences were taken into account. The analysis also revealed that none of the self-reported attributes of staff or their workplace - which included personal characteristics, professional qualifications, work experience, work commitment, quality of workplace, interactions with children and parents - had any statistically significant effect on these children's progress during the Free Pre-School Year. These findings may, once again, be related to the relatively small sample size used in the study and the short duration of the intervention; but they may also be due to our reliance on staff self-report measures of quality rather than direct observation of early years settings. However, it also needs to be seen in the wider context of educational research which shows

that pre-school systems, like school systems generally as measured through international studies such as PIRLS & TIMSS and PISA, tend to have less influence on child outcomes compared to child and family characteristics. It follows logically that if the pre-school system has a relatively small effect on outcomes then individual aspects of the pre-school system will have correspondingly smaller effects which are more difficult to detect in small samples such as this. The possibility that this finding may therefore be a 'false negative'² cannot be discounted, but a much larger sample combined with observational measures of quality would be needed to prove that.

8. Implications

It is clear from the study that the determinants of child outcomes are to be found predominantly outside, and to a lesser extent inside, the pre-school system. That is why the implications of the findings extend well beyond the confines of the early years sector to include all influences on child outcomes. Our conclusions stop short of making recommendations since this requires a wider consultative process, particularly involving those with responsibility for formulating and implementing recommendations. We nevertheless set out six implications which invite reflection: considering a second Free Pre-School Year; improving quality and outcomes in the pre-school system; measuring quality and outcomes in the pre-school system; addressing the pervasive influence of social class; supporting parents; integrating new communities.

8.1 Considering a Second Free Pre-School Year

The introduction of a universal Free Pre-School Year in 2010 is widely regarded as a success since the vast majority of parents (around 95%) have been enrolling their eligible children. One of the consequences of that decision is that it is no longer possible to assess the impact of the Free Pre-School Year by comparison with doing nothing or doing something different, since it would be extremely difficult to generate a matched sample of

² In research, it is conventional to refer to risks which can arise when making inferences about the impact of a variable. One risk is a 'false negative' which can arise from claiming that a variable has no impact when it has. Another risk is a 'false positive' which can arise from claiming a variable has an impact when it has not.

children who do not attend the Free Pre-School Year. The present study therefore cannot directly contribute to such assessment.

It is true that the decision to introduce a Free Pre-School Year is well-supported by evidence, much of it cited in the Main Report, which shows that pre-school education produces beneficial and lasting effects on children, but only if it is high quality, multi-year and preferably accompanied by additional support services for vulnerable families. This evidence alone, however, is not sufficient to prove that the existing Free Pre-School Year is effective, bearing in mind that it is not a multi-year programme, it does not meet the same standards of quality found in landmark studies of effective pre-school programmes, and additional support services for vulnerable families are not a routine part of the programme.

Consideration of a second Free Pre-School Year is prompted by the fact that this is a 'commitment' in the National Policy Framework for Children & Young People (2014-2020). Given that the Free Pre-School Year is regarded as an 'early' intervention – at least early in the *life* of a child if not necessarily early in the *development* of a child - the question of a second such year might usefully be framed in terms of whether it is 'early enough'. Some findings in this study are relevant to a wider discussion of this issue because they identify sources of 'naturally occurring variation' in the skills of children as well as socially-generated gaps between children which are difficult to change. It may be useful, therefore, to assemble and assess the evidence which could inform the decision about a second Free Pre-School Year, acknowledging that other factors which are not considered here, notably the availability of resources, will also inform this decision.

8.1.1 Evidence to Inform Decision on Second Free Pre-School Year

The study shows that children in NEYAI and Síolta QAP improved in all domains of the EDI during the Free Pre-School Year but the absence of a control group of children means that we do not know

whether this would have happened anyway even if the children stayed at home. Nevertheless, it is consistent with a wider body of international evidence on pre-school programmes and suggests that it is at least likely that the overall objective of the Free Pre-School Year - 'to benefit children in the key developmental period ... before they start primary school' – is being achieved to some degree.

A robust finding of the study is that socially-generated disparities between children observed at the beginning of the year tend to be maintained over the course of that year. In fact, what happens to a child before the Free Pre-School Year has a much greater influence on the distribution of skills at the end of that year compared to what happens during that year. This has radical implications. First, the Free Pre-School Year begins after substantial development has already taken place in the child's life. These developments are measurable in terms of the child's social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills, which already display substantial gaps between children and because they are socially-generated, are at least partially preventable. In that sense, the Free Pre-School Year may be 'early' in the life of a child but it is not 'early' from the perspective of child development. Second, the pre-school system is intimately connected to the child's family and social system to the extent that a child's experiences at home are more significant drivers of outcomes than what happens during pre-school. This draws attention to the importance of even earlier intervention but also highlights that interventions need to take place in the family and social system and not just in the pre-school system. By implication, it also highlights the need, as recommended by the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy, for 'strong coordination mechanisms across Government departments' as well as bringing together 'in a single Government department all policy responsibility for early care and education services, including their funding, quality assurance, curriculum development, training and workforce development.'

The case for earlier intervention – whether through the early years system, the family system, or both –

rests not just on the general principle that earlier is better and more effective than later but also on the evidence of this study that class-related disparities in the skills of children are already well-established before the Free Pre-School Year begins and remain comparatively stable throughout this period. International research cited in the Main Report shows that socially-related gaps between children in vocabulary and language processing skills are measurable at 18 months (and detectable even earlier) and persist for many years. It is clear from this study that the Free Pre-School Year, in its current form, does not have the capacity to significantly reduce or close these developmental gaps and that considerable staff skills will be required to do so, as well as additional complementary initiatives for children whose circumstances cause them to miss vital developmental opportunities. This is because child development is incremental, which implies that early advantages (and disadvantages) will tend to be reproduced, if not reinforced, by universal interventions alone. That is why some of the most effective early years interventions combine centre-based programmes for children with family support services for more vulnerable parents.

It is well-known that the economic benefits of investment in the early years rests on improving overall child outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children, but additional benefits from closing the gap between outcomes can also be substantial. The strength of the economic argument rests on the return on investment that comes from the large benefits accruing to disadvantaged children, in terms of lifetime benefits to individuals and society; in other words, the opportunity cost (or ‘opportunity lost’) of poor outcomes is greater than the cost of reducing it. Given that the economic case for early years services is typically built on landmark studies which show a return on investment from high-quality multi-year programmes, the results of this study suggest that the Free Pre-School Year will deliver the economic returns found elsewhere if, but only if, the investment is sufficient to deliver similar programmes.

8.1.2 Effectiveness of Early Years Services

The study shows that the amount of time spent by a child in an early years centre prior to the Free Pre-School Year had a positive influence on progress during that year which, even allowing for limitations in the research design, suggests that both earlier entry and longer duration in an early years centre has a beneficial effect. This is consistent with numerous landmark evaluations which have found a positive relationship between duration in an early years centre and child outcomes, though only for children aged two years and older. In addition, the finding that the amount of time spent by a child in an early years centre is also positively correlated with social class is significant and in line with findings of much larger samples of Irish children. As already indicated, it suggests that more disadvantaged children may face the ‘double disadvantage’ associated with lack of resources combined with less and later access to early years care and education. Extending pre-school provision to earlier years would address this inequity and could be especially beneficial for children from less advantaged backgrounds, although it is impossible to provide estimates of the potential benefit on the basis of the present study.

The need to improve quality in the Irish pre-school system is well-recognised and this study strengthens the case for doing so by highlighting, among other things, the substantial skills that are required of staff to reduce preventable socially-generated gaps between children, particularly in the area of language & cognitive skills. There is also an argument in favour of improving quality in the pre-school system as a pre-condition to further expanding pre-school provision. But it could also be argued that extending pre-school provision, even if equivalent in quality to current provision, would be beneficial in overall terms, given the finding that the amount of time spent by a child in an early years centre has a beneficial effect on outcomes. This finding does not imply that quality is adequate in all early years settings – and some centres may even be sub-standard and potentially harmful to children and need to be removed from the system – but the positive influence of earlier and longer intervention

highlights that the existing pre-school system has beneficial effects. This suggests that improving pre-school quality and extending pre-school provision are both beneficial options whether considered separately or together. It might therefore be useful to consider the option of a second Free Pre-School Year and the option of improving quality in the pre-school system as separately beneficial rather than making one option conditional on the other. Whether both options combined would be sufficient to reduce the aforementioned gaps, without also strengthening family supports for vulnerable parents, remains unlikely.

8.1.3 Balancing Universal and Targeted Early Years Services

The question of how to balance universal and targeted measures within the early years system is a matter of debate. For example, a second Free Pre-School Year could be provided universally, like the first, or targeted at more vulnerable children, or involve a combination of both universal and targeted provision with additional resources directed at children in more disadvantaged circumstances. Targeting is complementary to universal provision and an important component of the developmental welfare state, variously referred to as 'tailored universalism', 'progressive universalism' and 'proportionate universalism'. One of the strengths of the Free Pre-School Year is universal provision and, on balance, this is worth maintaining since universal provision is known to improve uptake by more disadvantaged families; it may also facilitate more interaction between children from different backgrounds; and there is the consideration that a substantial proportion of Irish families could not afford pre-school unless it was free. However, extending universal pre-school provision without targeting additional resources at those who are more disadvantaged is unlikely to disrupt the socially-generated disparities between children's skills that are documented by this study. This means that targeting additional resources will be required in some parts of the early years system, either in addition to universal provision as recommended by the Expert Advisory Group on the

Early Years Strategy, or instead of it if universal provision is not affordable. This model of combining universal and targeted provision is already well-established in the education system through the DEIS programme in primary and secondary schools; and a second Free Pre-School Year would fit well with the wider objectives of the national literacy and numeracy strategy which clearly recognises the foundational role of early childhood experiences for the success of this strategy. It is also worth emphasising that implementing targeted programmes in a way that is fair requires the inclusion of all disadvantaged children and not just those living in disadvantaged areas since there is a substantial body of evidence to show that the majority of 'poor people' do not live in 'poor areas'. At the same time, given the extensive network of early years centres throughout the country, targeting disadvantaged children using small area deprivation scores could be an effective way of doing this. The newly-formed Child and Family Agency, as its name suggests, has an important and potentially expanded role in supporting children during the early years, especially targeting services at vulnerable families where normal healthy child development may be at risk.

The infrastructure of the pre-school system in Ireland is built on a network of approximately 4,300 early years centres. Putting this in the wider context of education, the number of early years centres is greater than all first-level schools (3,300) and second-level schools (723) combined. There is evidence of surplus physical capacity within this system during 2011 and 2012, at least in terms of available places, but questions about staff capacity and overall quality remain, as already indicated.

8.2 Improving Quality and Outcomes in Early Years System

It is Government policy to 'improve the quality of the pre-school year'. Consistent with this, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs introduced the 'Pre-School Quality Agenda' in October 2013 comprising a new National Quality Support Service (NQSS, costing €2.5m in 2014), training support for staff

(costing €1.5m in 2014) and improvements in the Pre-School Inspectorate (costing €1.1m in 2014). It has already been acknowledged that this study is limited from the perspective of measuring quality – due to the absence of direct observation of settings and the interactions between staff and children within those settings – with the result that just two findings are relevant to improving quality in the early years system.

8.2.1 NEYAI and Síolta QAP Have Similar Effects on Child Outcomes

The first finding is that there is no significant difference in outcomes between centres in NEYAI and Síolta QAP when all other sources of variation are taken into account. This result is somewhat unexpected at least to the extent that Síolta QAP is a more substantial and sustained intervention to improve quality in early years settings by comparison with NEYAI. It involved a 12-step Quality Assurance Programme (2010-2013) delivered by Síolta Mentors with progress and validation based on a portfolio to demonstrate that Síolta standards were being met within the centre; moreover the programme occurred earlier and lasted longer than NEYAI (at least longer than the intervention period of the NEYAI evaluation). By contrast, NEYAI is essentially a funding programme for quality improvement in 11 different ‘demonstration projects’ and the evaluation covered less than a year of this quality improvement process. In addition, not all NEYAI projects focused exclusively on quality improvement or indeed on early years settings. As explained, the research design was based on the assumption Síolta QAP provided a validated standard or benchmark of quality.

It is beyond the scope of the study to undertake a thorough examination of the reasons why Síolta QAP, including its process of validation, is not associated with better child outcomes than NEYAI. We have already highlighted how the methodological limitations of the study may have influenced this result, and it is also possible that NEYAI was a particularly effective intervention, producing results which are comparable to those

obtained by Síolta QAP. Keeping those limitations in mind, it is nevertheless useful to reflect on the possibility that Síolta QAP may not be having the impact on quality and outcomes that was intended and explore possible reasons for this. One possibility is that, since Síolta QAP is a mentoring programme, the focus of mentoring may not have addressed sufficiently the skills and practices of staff in their day-to-day interactions with children or parents, or indeed other active ingredients associated with child outcomes. Another possible reason is that the central role of reflective practice in this model of quality improvement – which requires staff to ‘have appropriate levels of skill and knowledge to help you assess the quality of both your practice and the environment’ – may have presumed that staff already had capacities which the programme was designed to promote. As a recent review of quality in Irish education observed, the value of reflective practice depends on having objective data on performance as a basis for reflection. Whatever the reasons, it is possible that Síolta QAP, and its validation process, may not have impacted sufficiently on the knowledge, skills and competencies of staff to make a significant difference to child outcomes. This suggests that a challenge may need to be faced in terms of how best to implement Síolta, and possibly Aistear as well. The frameworks and standards embodied in Síolta and Aistear are likely to remain the bedrock of quality but the current model for implementing Síolta may need to be re-examined since we have not been able to establish a demonstrable link between superior quality and outcomes in Síolta QAP, at least when compared with NEYAI.

8.2.2 Illustration of How to Improve the Skills of Educators in Early Years Settings

The second finding that is relevant to improving quality in early years services is based on an in-depth case study which showed how a well-designed and executed training intervention can measurably improve the capacity of staff to develop children’s speech, language and communication. This is an important case study for a number of reasons: language & cognitive skills are strong

predictors of later academic achievement; these skills are highlighted in Síolta and Aistear; specific staff training is required to acquire the skills – variously referred to as ‘sustained shared thinking’ and ‘extended purposive conversations’ – in order to facilitate children’s language & cognitive development; this is a known area of weaknesses in the Irish pre-school system and related services.

Similar training interventions have been undertaken in other NEYAI and Síolta QAP projects but the availability of a robust local evaluation for this intervention – called the Language Enrichment Programme – makes it a ready-made illustration of how quality can be improved within the Free Pre-School Year, and within the early years sector generally. As with the national evaluation, this local evaluation is limited by the absence of a control group and longitudinal follow-up after the intervention. Nevertheless, the local evaluation showed that the Language Enrichment Programme improved staff skills, based on direct observation of those skills before and after the training. Specifically, there were significant improvements in the three centres participating in this training and its evaluation, notably improvements in staff-child interactions with the greatest improvement in the interaction strategy called, ‘OWL: Observe Wait Listen’, which is the hallmark of this programme: observe the children, wait for the children to make the first move, listen to what the children have to say. Further analysis from the perspective of the national evaluation revealed that this project is virtually indistinguishable from other NEYAI and Síolta QAP projects in terms of the characteristics of staff, children or parents. This suggests that no special staff attributes are required for this programme to have a similar impact in other centres. However it is also worth noting that child outcomes in this project were not significantly different from those observed in other centres when all other factors were taken into account; this is likely due to the small sample of children in this project (20) which is probably too small to detect a statistically significant difference when all other variables are taken into account. Nevertheless the case study is an illustration of one way to improve

quality and is consistent with ‘the best approaches’ to professional development of early years educators (and teachers) because it combines knowledge of effective adult-child interaction strategies, use of video-recording for self-analysis, and expert individualised feedback on how staff interact with children. As such, it may offer a possible model of continuous professional development that could be used by the National Quality Support Service (NQSS).

8.3 Measuring Quality and Outcomes in Early Years Services

One way of verifying the quality of Ireland’s early years services is by measuring child outcomes. This is necessary in order to show the link between implementing quality frameworks and standards on the one hand and better outcomes for children on the other. Making this link, rather than assuming it, is a significant challenge however since the measurement of outcomes, even for the narrower age-range of children in Free Pre-School Year, is not without difficulty. This does not imply that pre-school children should be continuously tested – a separate issue – but periodic assessment of quality and outcomes is an important aspect of checking the overall performance of the early years system.

8.3.1 Measuring Child Outcomes Using the Early Development Instrument (EDI)

The study addressed the challenge of measuring outcomes in the Free Pre-School Year by using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) which is widely used internationally, particularly in Canada and Australia. The EDI is normally used with children attending primary school – mainly 4-5 year olds and not with children aged less than 3 years 8 months – and is completed by teachers rather than early years workers. This is the first study to use EDI in a pre-school setting where it was completed by early years educators. The decision to use EDI, including permission to use the instrument which is protected by copyright, was made after consulting with its authors.

The results of the study show that EDI scores were internally consistent, mirroring the child's gender and chronological development but with greater sensitivity to changes in language & cognitive skills than to changes in social & emotional skills; the scores also showed considerable stability between waves 1 and 2 and were also broadly consistent with the pattern of scores from international studies. The significance of this finding, in conjunction with robust statistical analysis, shows that the EDI provides a realistic and reliable option for assessing outcomes associated with the Free Pre-School Year.

The EDI Handbook emphasises that this instrument is a 'population measure' which means that while measurements are collected at the level of each individual child, the EDI is not suitable for child-level assessments. This is relevant to the national literacy and numeracy strategy which recognises that early years practitioners require 'continuing professional development to enhance their ability to use a range of assessment for learning (AfL) and assessment of learning (AoL) approaches'. It is also recognised that assessment for learning is an area in need of development so that early childhood curriculum and assessment frameworks are aligned and support each other.

8.3.2 Expanding Knowledge About Improving Quality and Outcomes in Early Years Services

Using the EDI to assess national outcomes of the Free Pre-School Year provides one way of assessing quality in early years services. As already stated, existing frameworks and standards embodied in Síolta and Aistear remain the bedrock of quality, but the measurement of outcomes is the only way of verifying that their implementation is creating experiences for children that result in better outcomes such as improved social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills. Taking a wider perspective on the knowledge-base that is required to support the Pre-School Quality Agenda, it is clear that continuous national assessment of the Free Pre-School Year is essential. This will require a much larger sample than this study, one

which is representative of the entire population in question, and a longitudinal design over a much longer period. In addition to collecting new data, there is also need to do further analysis of existing datasets like GUI. Specifically, a full statistical analysis of the GUI infant cohort – based on a merged dataset of over 8,000 children at age 9 months (wave 1), 3 years (wave 2) and 5 years (wave 3) – would generate evidence and insight on all influences on child outcomes, including the role of early years services; this could be done with greater robustness and precision than has been possible with the small sample in this study.

8.4 Addressing the Pervasive Influence of Social Class

Social class, as conventionally defined in research, denotes the resources available to a child, adult or family. A conceptual innovation in this study involved extending the conventional concept of social class – which includes mother's education, occupation and financial resources since these are known to have a pronounced social gradient on child outcomes – to include other resources which are also relevant to child development, notably the home learning environment and the child's diet, and which are highly correlated with social class. These additional aspects are also part of the family's resources, operating as risk and protective factors on child development in much the same way as more conventional aspects of social class. As indicated, social class is the main determinant of children's social & emotional skills and especially their language & cognitive skills; by implication, social class is the main socially-generated source of gaps in the skills of children at the start of the Free Pre-School Year. The significance of this finding is far-reaching because it identifies an active ingredient in early child development. For children who are most disadvantaged, these class-related differentials, if unaddressed, have consequences though childhood and into adult life because they shape the capacity to learn skills, both character and cognitive skills, while also influencing each person's self-concept and related capacity to live well and be well.

8.4.1 Child's Home Learning Environment

Many studies treat the home learning environment as a separate influence on child development and have found that it is 'one of the most powerful influences' on child development. Consistent with this, research shows that reading to a child has a positive influence on the cognitive development of 3-year olds; reading stories also improves a child's skills at entry to primary school; the quantity and quality of child-directed speech in the home predicts a child's vocabulary and language processing skills; the number of books in the home has been shown to influence academic performance of fourth class pupils (9-11 year olds). Building on these findings, our study shows that the home learning environment is strongly influenced by structured differences in material, social and cultural resources, and is thus a statistically reliable indicator of the broader concept of social class that we have used in this study.

8.4.2 Child's Diet

The child's diet - measured by frequency of 'healthy foods' and 'unhealthy foods' in the previous 24 hours - is also treated as an indicator of social class, and is closely aligned with the mother's education. Other studies have examined the separate influence of diet on child development. For example, findings from the infant cohort of the GUI show that about a quarter of 3-year old Irish children are overweight (19%) or obese (6%). In many respects, diet and home learning environment seem to operate through similar processes because parents shape their children's eating behaviour not only through the foods that are available in the home, but also through parental example and parenting practices. This underlines how parents create the child's environment, with food being one aspect of it, creating experiences which give rise to differences in child outcomes that are observable in this study. One of the innovations in the study is to treat diet as an aspect of social class thereby illustrating how it is also part of a wider set of inter-linked experiences for children and their parents. This underlines the importance

of a holistic approach to child development which focuses on all the major factors influencing development, in addition to the specific behaviours or characteristics that express their effects.

8.4.3 Intergenerational Effects of Social Class

A strength of the concept of social class presented here - and an indicator of its pervasive influence - is its intergenerational character. The child's environment is simultaneously the parent's environment. That is why mother's education, occupation and financial resources are integral parts of a shared family environment. This underlines how social class has an inter-generational aspect and why children with weaker skills are more likely to have parents who also have weaker skills. This means that improving outcomes has a longer-term intergenerational aspect which requires improving levels of education, employability and incomes amongst vulnerable parents. Viewed from this perspective, there is a clear linkage between the five benchmark targets for education and training in the Europe 2020 Strategy which Ireland has adopted:

1. at least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education;
2. the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%;
3. the share of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%;
4. the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%;
5. an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning.

8.4.4 Promoting a Wider Understanding of How Poverty Affects Child Development

The understanding of social class presented here represents an extension of conventional measures of poverty and disadvantage to reflect more adequately the multifaceted nature of social class

and how child poverty affects child development. Child poverty means lacking any of the resources necessary for child development which are social and cultural as well as material. It is obvious that the family's financial resources are important (including the education and employment of parents) but so too is the child's diet and home learning environment as well as the quality of interactions within the family. Poverty in this wider understanding gives rise to disparities in social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills that were evident when children entered the study. Understanding how poverty in this wider perspective influences child outcomes is an essential step towards improving those outcomes. It is also an essential step in developing services for children – including the coordination of early years services with other services for children and families – and needs to take full account of the impact which the lack of all resources (material, social and cultural) has on child development.

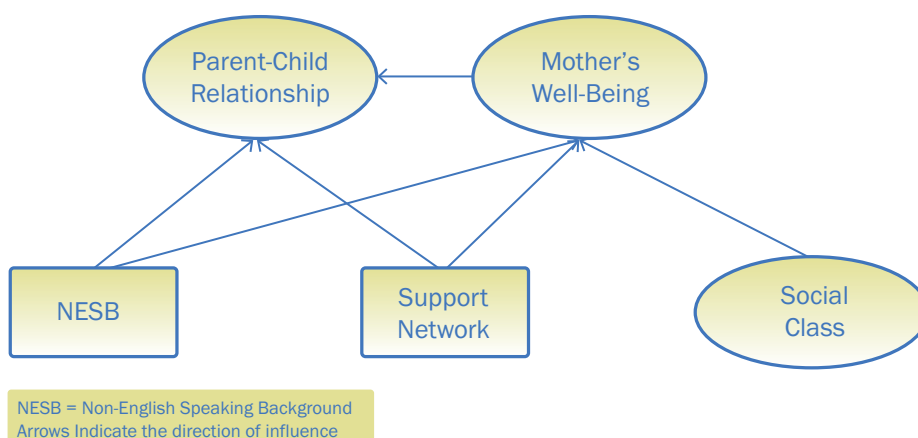
8.5 Supporting Parents

Supporting parents is one of the 'transformational goals' in the National Policy Framework for Children & Young People (2014-2020). Parent-child relationships are a significant influence on children's social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills. The study found that this relationship is part of a wider social context that

needs to be taken into account, especially when considering how to support vulnerable parents. Specifically, the analysis revealed that the main influence on parent-child relationships is the mother's well-being; this in turn reflects her resources as indicated by social class, support networks and NESB. In other words, a significant part of a child's experience of the world, and what the world offers, is mediated through the mother's experience of the world as reflected in the mirror of her personal well-being and her relationship with the child. This web of influences on the parent-child relationship is illustrated in Figure 2.

The study also found evidence to suggest that different 'styles' of the parent-child relationship have different impacts on children's skills. Specifically, parents who have a more 'relaxed parent-child relationship' (mainly associated with less conflict and stress) tend to facilitate children's social & emotional skills while parents with a more 'demanding parent-child relationship' (mainly associated with more conflict and stress) tend to facilitate children's language & cognitive skills. The interpretation of this finding recognises that a common root of all parenting styles is the attachment between parent and child since this bond is known to be foundational for every child; through this attachment bond, the child develops a sense of self and an internalised working model of interactions which normally lasts throughout adult

Figure 2 Summary of Influences on the Parent-Child Relationship



life. In addition, parental responsiveness to the child, both emotional and cognitive, is also shaped by this attachment bond. Against this background, our findings suggest that a balance of relaxed and demand styles of parenting is conducive to the development of children's skills.

8.5.1 A Wider Perspective on the Parent-Child Relationship

The findings of the study have implications for how to support parents and, through that, improve child outcomes. It is true that how parents interact with their children remains central to child development – combining both 'relaxed' and 'demanding' styles as expressions of parental attachment and responsiveness to the child – but improving the parent-child relationship may also require improving the mother's well-being. The study indicates that this can be done by ameliorating the negative impacts of disadvantage and lack of support since these also affect the parent-child relationship and, through that relationship, the child's development. This perspective involves seeing the parent-child relationship in the context of a wider set of influences on the child which include the mother's self-esteem, optimism, life satisfaction and positive affect (expressions of her well-being); her education, occupation, financial resources, home learning environment and diet (expressions of her social class); as well as her sources of support when help is needed. In light of this, it is clear that supporting parents so that children achieve better outcomes involves improving the quality of their interactions but it also involves a wider set of supports for more vulnerable parents. This is consistent with the approach adopted in those landmark early years programmes which have shown the largest and most enduring impacts on disadvantaged children because they are accompanied by family support services for parents. These insights could inform future developments of the Free Pre-School Year – and early years services generally – while also being considered in the policy statement on 'Parenting and Family Support' which is one of the commitments in the National Policy Framework for Children & Young People (2014-2020).

8.6 Integrating New Communities

Ireland is an increasingly multi-cultural society. In 2010 there were 75,000 children born in Ireland, over 20% of them to mothers not themselves born in Ireland. Reflecting this trend, a substantial minority of children in the study (15%) are described as NESB (Non-English Speaking Background) because the mother's first language is not English (excluding mothers whose first language is Irish). An important finding of the study is that the Free Pre-School Year had a positive impact on children with NESB. Nevertheless, the gap in language & cognitive skills remained unchanged, indicating that further support is required including initiatives which develop the skills of staff to address the needs of these children. However, this study suggests that the Free Pre-School Year has the potential to have a positive effect on promoting the integration of children from new communities, probably because of the benefits of interacting with staff and other children in a new environment.

NESB is an attribute of the mother as well as the child and the analysis revealed that NESB mothers, though similar to other mothers in terms socio-economic status, have consistently weaker well-being. This means that they tend to have lower self-esteem, optimism, life satisfaction and positive affect. The reasons for this are not apparent since no data was collected on the country of origin of NESB mothers, their reasons for coming to Ireland, how long they have been living here, or the circumstances in which they are living here. Nevertheless their weaker well-being is a cause of concern in its own right but also because this has a negative impact on the parent-child relationship and on their children's development.

9. Concluding Comment

This study is part of a larger body of evidence generated by NEYAI on different aspects of early years services in Ireland. The study focused on child outcomes in pre-school and, while this represents just one strand of work in NEYAI, it has particular national relevance in the context of the Free Pre-School Year because it provides some of the first evidence available on the determinants of child outcomes during that year. The evidence presented showed that this sample of children improved their social & emotional skills and especially their language & cognitive skills during the Free Pre-School Year but, without a matched control group of children not in the programme, it is impossible to know how much of this improvement is attributable to natural child development and how much to the impact of pre-school.

The study is on firmer ground in explaining why children varied in their progress during the Free Pre-School Year and the three main findings merit repeating since they have radical implications for the future direction of the Free Pre-School Year and early years services generally. First, child development is characterised by change and stability which, in the context of the Free Pre-School Year, means that the parameters of a child's progress are set by the child's starting point: children who start with more skills make more progress while those who start with less skills make less progress. Second, the main influence on a child's starting point, and therefore on progress during the Free Pre-School Year, is the child's family particularly the relationships and resources within the family which are essential for child development. Third, the gaps in skills between children which were evident at the start of the Free Pre-School Year tended to remain unchanged or even widened and, without remediation, these gaps are likely to persist throughout primary and secondary school and possibly into adulthood.

These findings, which are consistent with a much larger body of international and Irish evidence on pre-school and school systems, have radical implications because they frame the Free Pre-School Year in the wider context of a child's life. It is easily forgotten that the Free Pre-School Year represents just 3% of a child's entire life up to that time and, although it comes relatively early in the life of a child, it is not early in terms of child development. This supports the case for earlier intervention, particularly where a child's family circumstances are not conducive to normal healthy development. It also underlines why improving child outcomes and reducing socially-generated gaps in child outcomes cannot be the sole responsibility of Ireland's early years system, even if it has a substantial and potentially more important role to play.

The findings of this study also underline why the economic case for early years services is typically built on the long-term outcomes of programmes which are high quality, multi-year and include family support and related services for vulnerable parents. These landmark programmes address all key influences on child outcomes which are identified in this study. It is clear that the Free Pre-School Year does not meet the standard of these landmark programmes and, for that reason, will only deliver the expected economic return on investment if, but only if, that investment is sufficient to produce a programme of equivalent standard. In other words, all the evidence indicates that further progress is required to create a more successful early years system, including a more successful Free Pre-School Year, in order to improve outcomes for all children while simultaneously narrowing the gap in outcomes between children.

10. Appendix One: Projects in National Early Years Access Initiative

ID	Location	Name	Lead Agency	Intervention for Evaluation
BC	Ballyfermot/ Chapelizod	Early Years Language and Learning Initiative	The Ballyfermot/ Chapelizod Partnership Company Ltd	Train and mentor early years staff in Hanen Programme to: (i) Improve the child's language development (ii) Support parents to encourage the child's language development
CC	Canal Communities	Canal Communities Family Welfare Initiative – Bringing it all Back Home	Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service	Train and mentor early years staff in Marte Meo Programme and Incredible Years Programme to: (i) Improve the child and parent outcomes (ii) Intensive outreach with children and their parents
CK	Cork	Happy Talk	Cork City Partnership Ltd	Improve the language skills of children aged 0-6 years in The Glen and Mayfield areas of Cork City through parent training programmes and working with teachers and early years providers
CN	Clondalkin	Addressing Gaps Between Training and Practice	South Dublin County Partnership Ltd	Mentor early years staff to improve outcomes for children and their parents
DD	Dublin Docklands	Early Learning Initiative	National College of Ireland	Train and mentor early years staff in numeracy skills to: (i) Improve the child's numeracy skills (ii) Support parents to encourage the child's numeracy development
DL	Donegal	The Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP)	Donegal County Childcare Committee	Train and mentor early years staff to improve outcomes for children
FL	Fingal	Fingal Parents Initiative	The Fingal County Childcare Committee Ltd	Train early years staff to deliver: (i) Parents Together (6-Week Parenting Course) (ii) Parents Plus Early Years (12-Week Parenting Course)
LK	Limerick	Start Right Limerick	PAUL Partnership Ltd	Train and support early years staff to: (i) meet Síolta standards (ii) do intensive outreach with children and their parents
LD	Longford	Tús Nua Project	Longford County Childcare Committee	(i) Facilitate transitions from home to early years services (ii) Train and mentor early years staff to improve outcomes for children

ID	Location	Name	Lead Agency	Intervention for Evaluation
RO	Rialto	Dublin South West Inner City Integration of Services and Continuum of Care Demonstration Model for Children 0-6 years	Barnardos Rialto Family Centre	Train and mentor early years staff in Hanen Programme to: (i) Improve the child's language development (ii) Support parents to encourage the child's language development
TT	Tallaght	Quality Through Professionalisation (An Cosán / Fledglings Early Years.)	The Shanty Educational Project Ltd	Deliver training based on the Fledglings Early Years Manual which integrates the two national early years frameworks – Síolta (Quality) and Aistear (Learning) - through the pedagogical approach and curriculum of HighScope.

11. Appendix Two

Kieran McKeown, Trutz Haase and Jonathan Pratschke, as authors of this report, wish to acknowledge the many people who, through dedication to doing the best for children, contributed to this report. We thank the staff in the 70 early years centres throughout the country, and the children and their parents who use them, for giving us information about their lives and experiences. This information is treated in confidence and with respect, and represents one of the largest datasets ever assembled on the early years sector in Ireland. It is the heart of this report and has a quality and depth which gives the report its richness but also its usefulness. For reasons of space and confidentiality, we cannot name these staff, children or parents, but their contribution to the study, and the greater public good, is acknowledged and appreciated.

The collection of data was made possible through coordinators and managers in NEYAI (National Early Years Access Initiative) and Síolta QAP (Síolta Quality Assurance Programme), the two programmes that are evaluated in this study. We thank them for the qualities displayed in contributing to this part of the study, particularly their patience and persistence, and for their valuable comments on an earlier presentation of results. Their names are:

NAME	NEYAI ORGANISATION
Carina Fitzgerald	Early Years Language and Learning Initiative
Marian O'Connell	Canal Communities Family Welfare Initiative – Bringing it all Back Home
Sheila Dillon	Happy Talk
Ciara Monaghan Susan Brocklesby	Addressing Gaps Between Training and Practice
Catriona Flood Josephine Bleach Aoife O'Gorman	Early Learning Initiative
Avril McMonagle Orán Sweeney	The Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP)
Adrienne Streek Gráinne McKenna	Fingal Parents Initiative
Eimear Carron	Start Right Limerick
Maria O'Dwyer John Buttery	Tús Nua Project
Sharon Moore	Dublin South West Inner City Integration of Services and Continuum of Care
Jenny Hayes Nicola Keeler	Demonstration Model for Children 0-6 years
Maura McMahan Dara Hogan	Quality Through Professionalisation (An Cosán / Fledglings Early Years)
NAME	SÍOLTA QAP ORGANISATION
Máire Corbett Fiona Kelleher Carol Duffy	Early Childhood Ireland
Jean Currid Imelda Graham	Barnardos
Noel Kelly Joanne Waters Kathleen Tuite	Prevention and Early Intervention Programme
Michelle Hart Sharon McGuire	Border Counties Childhood Network
Ulrike Farnleitner	Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association

The study was guided, supported and approved by an Evaluation & Learning Expert Advisory Group. This group is the type that researchers dream of: competent, challenging, good-humoured, and committed to clarity of thought and purpose, mindful that research is a service for the common good. We express our appreciation to each member of this group:


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

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

NAME	NEYAI ORGANISATION
Noel Kelly (Chair)	Preparing for Life, Northside Partnership
Noelle Spring (Vice-Chair)	Katharine Howard Foundation
Marion Martin (replacing Albert O'Donoghue and prior Liz Canavan)	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Catherine Hynes	Early Years Education Policy Unit, Department of Education & Skills
Ruth Cullen (replacing Mary Cunningham, National Youth Council of Ireland)	Cork City Childcare Committee and Pobal Board
Charles Delap (replacing Brian Nolan)	Mount Street Club Trust
Jane Forman (replacing Tom Costello)	Atlantic Philanthropies
Tony Crooks	Adjunct Prof of Applied Social Studies, NUI Maynooth
Gretta Murphy	Kilkenny County Childcare Committee
Stella Owens (replacing Heino Schonfeld)	Centre for Effective Services
Aisling Gillen	National Policy Development Manager Family Support, Child & Family Agency
Denis Leamy	CEO, Pobal
Bernie McDonnell	Programme Manager, NEYAI

Throughout the study, we have been in regular contact with the staff team in Pobal who are responsible for NEYAI and its evaluation. This is a team of exemplary, dedicated and hard-working public servants and they have done everything to facilitate our work. A special word of thanks is due to Bernie McDonald, Programme Manager for NEYAI, for her skilfulness in managing the programme and its evaluation. It has been a pleasure to work with Bernie and her team, and we are grateful for their support right to the end:

NAME	ROLE
Bernie McDonnell	Programme Manager, NEYAI
Nuala Kelly (replacing Siobhán O'Dowd)	Co-ordinator, NEYAI
Emily Cunningham replacing Kate Ibbotson	Administrator, NEYAI



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

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

Over the course of the study, it has been a pleasure to have prolonged conversations with one of Ireland's leading specialists in early childhood education, Geraldine French, whose clear and passionate thinking helped dissolve some confusion in earlier stages of the study. We are particularly grateful to her for providing a fine evaluation of the Language Enrichment Programme on which we draw heavily in Chapter Six of this report.

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

Finally, we recognise that this study is a small part of a larger work, inspired by the Government's vision for children that: 'growing up in Ireland means that you have the best start in life available anywhere in the world'. Everyone, named and unnamed, in these acknowledgements is a co-author of that larger work. It is our service, as individuals and a society, to do all we can so that children 'stand in the glow of ripeness', to borrow a phrase about giving service from Polish poet and Nobel laureate, Czeslaw Milosz³:

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

Kieran McKeown, Trutz Haase & Jonathan Pratschke
May 2014

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



The National Early Years Access Initiative 2010-2014

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