

Longford County Childcare Committee | 2017

LONGFORD LEADERS IN QUALITY INITIATIVE

A REPORT 2016

LONGFORD COUNTY
CHILDCARE COMMITTEE



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Introduction

Longford County Childcare Committee Ltd. (LCCC) is a local agency that aims to produce an environment that values all children, by guiding the on-going development of an infrastructure of high quality child-centred care that supports the holistic development of children in a family and community context. As the established local delivery structure for the Early Years, CCCs play a crucial role in supporting the development of the Early Years sector in each county responding to local needs and implementing comprehensive support plans to address these needs.

A core element of the ongoing work of LCCC is to

- Provide direct and indirect support to early years providers including crèches, preschools, childminders, school aged services, parent and toddler groups and parents and to
- Support and promote continued professional development opportunities for the sector

The functions and roles of the CCCs are aligned to support the implementation of national policy at a local level. In addition, we play a key coordinating role and are actively involved in various co-ordinating bodies who support the delivery of supports to children and families. This includes Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) and Local Community Development Committees (LCDC). LCCC participates on local, county wide and national structures as required to meet outcomes under the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 and LCCC's Implementation Plan. Representation at the Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC) ensures local co-ordination of childcare issues and facilitates new initiatives that respond to social inclusion and childcare issues and which maximise resources. LCCC are the Chair of the Early Years Subgroup and are also a member of the Participation subgroup of the CYPSC while feeding into other relevant subgroups through the main committee. LCCC also has an important role as a Childcare Committees Ireland (CCI) rep on the National Early Years Inspectorate Consultative Forum. LCCC values a strong partnership ethos, through collaborative working at local, regional and national level.

Rationale & Overview

Responding to a local need from the early years providers in County Longford for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and training on all aspects of quality early years provision,

but particularly training in the implementation of Aistear: The Early Years Curriculum Framework the Longford Leaders in Quality Initiative was developed and implemented by the team within LCCC.

International research indicates the primary importance of a high quality curriculum in the early years. Of central significance in implementing an early years' curriculum is practitioners' understanding of it and how it is applied in daily practice. Deep understanding of any curriculum arises from robust training and frequent continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities for practitioners. (Farrell, 2016)

Aistear provides a quality framework that, according to Hynes (2009), everybody concerned with best outcomes for children will support. All early years services, including those in County Longford, participating in the ECCE scheme are contractually obliged to implement Aistear (EYEP, 2013; French 2013). Within our remit to support all services in County Longford in the provision of early years services, LCCC sees the support of quality curriculum provision and implementation as our responsibility.

Sofou and Tsafos (2009) indicate that a basic issue in any curriculum implementation is how practitioners make sense of it and what impact their understanding has on their daily practise. Factors, such as available CPD, may impact on how the curriculum is implemented (Farrell, 2016). Hodson and Keating (2007) found that curriculum training is vital for early years' professionals to gain a full insight and understanding of it.

Research suggests that in order to effectively implement an early years' curriculum, commitment is required both at government level and with practitioners enacting it on a daily basis. According to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), ECCE settings need systematic support to implement an effective curriculum programme (DCYA, 2014). A joint study carried out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) – Aistear in Action (AIA) – highlights what is possible in curriculum reform when practitioners have access to support and mentoring. Participants are seen to engage with the frameworks, reflect on practise and develop an emergent curriculum based on the principals of Aistear (NCCA, 2013).

To implement a curriculum in the early years is a complex task and practitioners need to have ownership, both in the interpretation and implementation of it to ensure changes in their teaching behaviours (Alvestad and Duncan, 2006). There are multiple factors that influence a practitioner's engagement with curriculum such as the availability of CPD and time dedicated

to professional learning in the workplace, the lack of which has already been cited, in existing research as a concern for the implementation of Aistear (Hynes, 2009 and French 2013).

This is a cause of particular unease to the team within LCCC as research has highlighted practitioners as essential in implementing the fundamentals of the curriculum. Well-trained practitioners are confident in their knowledge of the sophisticated nuances of a play based curriculum such as Aistear and how to facilitate high-quality play interactions (Hayes, 2007). However, research has shown a discrepancy between practitioners' beliefs about play and how they implement it in practice. The differences between practitioners' understandings of play and its relationship to learning may be associated with differences in their training and exposure to the curriculum, before implementation, highlighting once again the essential role of the well trained and qualified practitioner (McInnes et al, 2011).

Mentoring

While there is a paucity of research on how Aistear is understood and implemented in Ireland, there does appear to be consensus that mentoring and leadership is vital in order to understand and implement it (Farrell, 2016).

Mentoring, when implemented effectively, can help to bring about educational change in the practices of early years' educators. (Howe & Jacobs, 2013) discusses how educational change is best achieved when there is a commitment to change, there are organisational supports for change and there is an openness to reflecting on beliefs and values. The most meaningful change happens when educators are "*actively involved in determining the program content*" (Howe & Jacobs, 2013, p.593).

A good quality early years mentoring programme can assist educators in developing their reflective practice skills and can strengthen their overall professional practice. Research shows that educators who engage in critical reflection of their practice are more likely to be responsive to children's needs, to value the child's thinking and to be more capable in "*bridging the gap between theory and practice*" (Howe & Jacobs, 2013, p. 606). Wong, & Waniganiyake, (2013). discuss how having a strong reflective practice is important in the early years as it empowers educators to make the necessary changes to ensure they are offering a high-quality programme to children and their families (Murphy & Thornton, 2015). High quality early years programmes have been shown to improve outcomes for young children and the benefits of attending a high quality early years setting have far reaching effects into adulthood.

The support and expertise of a mentor can help to embed in everyday practice, information and training from continuous professional development sessions (Brown & Inglis, 2013) and to create a community of learners within an early years setting where educators can improve professional practice by creating a “*collaborative community*” (Howe & Jacobs, 2013, p. 607).

Longford Leaders in Quality -

The Longford Leaders in Quality Initiative aimed to provide innovative and interactive training and information sharing opportunities on various aspects of High Quality Early Years Provision. All workshops provided were underpinned by *Síolta: The National Quality Framework* (2006), *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (2016).

Research tells us that it is critical for preschool practitioners to have ongoing and regular opportunities to engage in continuous professional development. Ongoing professional development keeps practitioners up-to-date on new research on how children learn, emerging technology tools for the classroom, new curriculum resources, and more. The best professional development is ongoing, experiential, collaborative, and connected to and derived from working with children.

The Longford Leaders in Quality Initiative took eight months to complete. It began in January 2016 and culminated in June 2016. Workshops ran from February to May with initial support visits, based on Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) commencing in January and follow up support visit occurring in June 2016.

Completion of the programme required attendance at all eight workshops, participation in group discussions, reflections on practise underpinned by the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* and evidence of improving quality within the setting.

This programme was open to all services but spaces were limited to ensure that participating services got sufficient support from the team within LCCC.

Workshops focused on quality provision in the early years. These workshops provided an opportunity to reflect on service provision, where quality exists and areas in need of development. The workshops were an opportunity for peer supported learning and engagement. The workshops included:

1. Applying Aistear in Practice
2. The Place of Play in Curriculum Design
3. The Importance of the Learning Environment
4. Quality Interactions
5. Transitions
6. Observations & Learning Stories
7. Partnership with Parents
8. Equality & Diversity

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) –

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is an early years assessment tool designed to measure the quality of group programs for young children aged 3 – 5 years by collecting data through on site observations and a staff interview. Extensive research has documented both the ability of the scales to be used reliably and the validity of the scales in terms of their relation to other terms of quality. (Harmes et al, 2015)

According to ECERS, process quality consists of the various interactions that go on in an early years settings between staff and children, staff, parents, and other adults, among the children themselves, and the interactions children have with the many materials and activities in the environment, as well as those features, such as space, schedule and materials that support these interactions.

The Scale consists of 35 items organized into 6 subscales:

- Space and Furnishings
- Personal Care Routines
- Language and Literacy
- Learning Activities
- Interaction
- Program Structure

Services were observed in each area of the subscales and a formative feedback meeting was held with management and staff at the end of the observation and a detailed written report followed. Both method of feedback offered services the opportunity to recognise current quality practice as well as identifying areas for development. All feedback was linked to Aistear and Síolta for participants who in turn were guided towards the resources within the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide to continue to reflect and self-assess.

[The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide](#)

The purpose of the Practice Guide is to support practitioners in using Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) and Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) together to develop the quality of their curriculum and in doing so, to better support children's learning and development. The Practice Guide includes a range of resources to help practitioners to critically reflect on their curriculum and to identify what works well. Additionally, the resources can help practitioners to identify priorities for development and to plan actions for positive change. In this way, the Practice Guide can be used for on-going review, development and improvement by individual practitioners, practitioners working together and by practitioners supported by a mentor.

[Expected outcomes for stakeholders](#)

The stakeholders in this pilot mentoring programme are as follows:

- Longford County Childcare Committee
- Management and staff of 8 early years settings located in the LCCC area
- Children and families attending these settings

The expected outcome for LCCC is the development of a successful CPD programme which can be rolled out across the county for all interested early years settings. It is hoped that this will lead to the expansion of the programme and the building of a network of early years practitioners to support each other in the implementation of the programme, thus increasing the quality of the early years settings and improving child outcomes for children and families in the LCCC area.

[Early Years Settings](#)

Early years settings who take part in this CPD programme will benefit in a number of ways. The objective of the programme is to provide educators within the settings with the necessary

skills and knowledge to develop and implement an emergent play based curriculum using Aistear and the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide, thus improving the quality of the early years practice. In doing so, it is hoped that educators will develop their professional practice, skills and knowledge and leadership capabilities (Wong & Waniganiyake, 2013 p.173). Management and educators will benefit from using the Aistear Síolta practice guide to inform their practice to implement a more child centred and child led curriculum

Early years educators and managers will be provided with CPD training, initially on Aistear and documenting the curriculum, planning and assessing and reflective practice and following this, on training identified by staff teams in conjunction with the LCCC mentor. It is envisaged that improved professional practice and increased skills and knowledge will lead to greater job satisfaction and career development for early years educators within the settings taking part in the programme

LCCC, plan to develop a community of practice for practitioners of each early years setting taking part. The peer support network will afford practitioners a structured space to reflect on their practice, to learn from the practices of other settings and to discuss any issues that may be arising from practice. Learning communities give educators the opportunity to come together to reflect on and discuss how to go about implementing new ideas (Chu, 2014).

Children & Families

Children utilising participating early years settings will benefit from the improved quality of the setting and the improved professional practice, skills and knowledge of the early years educators. By implementing and following an emergent curriculum and increasing the quality of the practice, interactions between adults and children and children and children should be much improved. This will be measured by using ECERS before the mentoring programme begins and at the end of the programme. High quality early years practice is shown to improve outcomes for children and this is the main aim of this programme.

In line with Aistear Guidelines for Good Practice, settings will be encouraged to develop and utilise a strong partnership with parents throughout the CPD process with a view to parents becoming more involved in their children's learning.

Methodology

The primary aim of this project is to ascertain the effectiveness of the Longford Leaders in Quality Programme in challenging the current practice of early years practitioners and any

quality improvements that have been made as a result.

The methodology was designed as action research and reflective practice. This approach facilitates building the capacity of early years practitioners to self-evaluate (Leitch & Day, 2000).

ECERS-3 Observation Reports

The Environment Rating Scales have a long history of use in research projects. They have been used in research studies and program improvement efforts in many countries including Canada, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Russia, Iceland, Portugal, England, Spain, Austria, Singapore, Korea, Hungary and Greece. The Environment Rating Scales, in translation or with minor adaptations, have been shown to produce reliable and valid ratings in each country and region. In England, Greece, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Austria, higher scores on the Environment Rating Scales have been shown to be related to more positive child development outcomes (Melhuish & Petrogiannis, 1996). The global quality of the child care environments assessed by the Environment Rating Scales can be measured meaningfully and with confidence across cultures (Clifford, 2005; Peisner-Feinberg, et al., 2001; Zill & Resnick, 1998). Extensive training, as well as follow-up reliability checks are important for obtaining reliable scores across multiple raters and time points and to address this LCCC has invested significant time and resources to ensure that all scoring is both reliable and valid. The scales themselves have good interrater reliability and validity, thus making them suitable for research and program evaluation, as well as program improvement efforts.

Face to Face Interviews

Interviews are the most versatile form of primary research, and are appropriate when targeting detailed perceptions, opinions, and attitudes. They can be used to gain deeper insight to specific objectives by probing for quality responses. This offers an advantage over self-completion methods, such as surveys, because the respondent is more likely to give their full attention and the interviewer can deduce the quality of each response. All participants were invited to partake, of whom four agreed. Interviews took place in a venue of the participant's choice, primarily their own service.

Online Survey and evaluations

In addition to face to face interviews, an online survey was devised and emailed to all participants. Participants were invited to share their thoughts and opinions on the LLiQ

Initiative. The results are synthesised and discussed below. At the end of each workshop an evaluation was provided and participants were asked to reflect on the outcomes and processes of the LLiQ Initiative. Evaluations were anonymous to facilitate honest constructive feedback.

Limitations of the Study

As with any research study, it is important to note the limitations. The scope of this study must be considered. Due to localised role of LCCC participating services were all based in County Longford. Furthermore participants were selected to engage with the initiative based on completing and submitting an expression of interest form. It should therefore be noted that these services likely had an interest in CPD and a willingness to embrace change may be assumed. It is important to note however, that these limitations will not have a negative impact on the findings, recommendations or conclusions

Overview of Participants

Once the initiative was developed initial information was circulated to all Longford services as an exciting new opportunity for early years providers to upskill and promote excellence in early years provision. A public launch and information session was held to brief interested parties on the initiative and to outline the application process. This process included a written submission as to why the service wanted to engage in the initiative and a commitment of support by service management and room leaders to attend all workshops.

Successful services varied in service provision and county location. 5 participating services were full day care providers in both private and community operations, 3 were sessional private providers and 1 was a community part time service. 5 services were rural based with 4 in services located in an urban catchment area of Longford town.

Findings –

This section presents findings from twelve ECERS visits, baseline and follow up, along with mentor observations and feedback from participants. A number of themes emerged such as

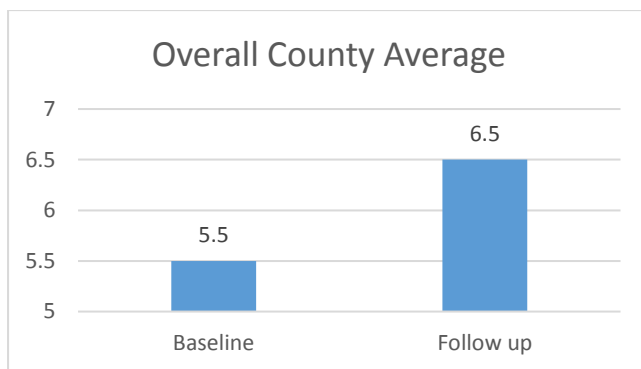
- Space and Furnishings
- Personal Care Routines
- Language and Literacy
- Learning Activities
- Interaction

- Program Structure
- Workshops

This section will address each of these themes in turn and to support clarity and meaning, selected quotes will be included to illustrate participants’ views and experiences.

Baseline and Follow up assessment:

From the eight participating services ECERS baseline and follow up scores were recorded in 12 rooms. These 12 rooms achieved baseline scores varying from a score of 3.5 to 7 with an overall county average score of 5.5 - Good. Follow up scores highlight quality improvement in all 12 rooms with scores now varying from 4.41 to 7 and an overall county average score of 6.5 – between Good and Excellent as outlined in Graph 1.

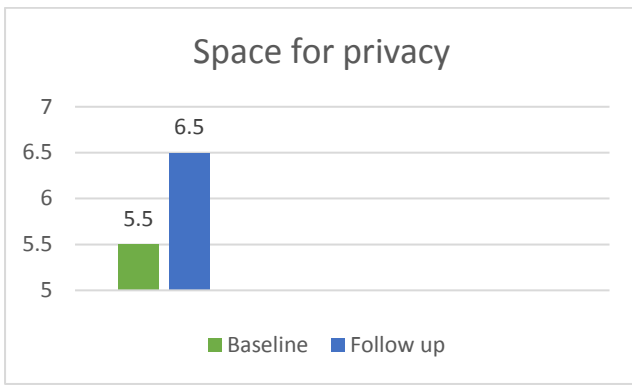


(Graph 1)

Some examples of existing good practice and significant changes which have occurred in each subscale are:

Space and Furnishings

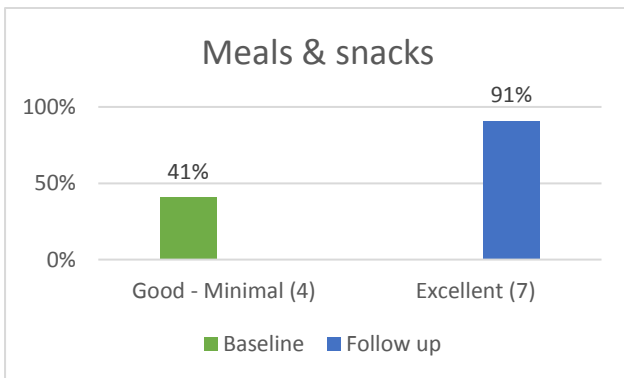
In the Space and Furnishings subscale had 91% of rooms scored excellent (7) in item *space for gross motor play* on baseline assessment. In addition, baseline assessment identified that *space for privacy* item scored minimal (3 or <) in 25% of the rooms, however, on follow up assessment this subscale scored excellent (7) in 91% of rooms (graph 2).



(Graph 2)

Personal Care Routines

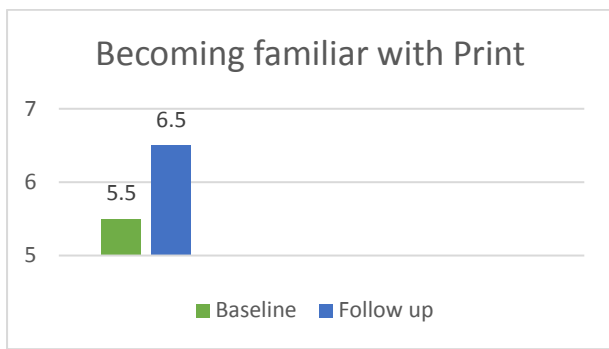
In the Personal Care Routines subscale had 83% of rooms scored excellent (7) and the remaining 17% of rooms scored between excellent and good (6) in item *safety practices* on baseline assessment. Furthermore, graph 3 illustrates on baseline assessment *meals and snacks* item scored between good and minimal (4 or <) in 41% of the rooms, however, on follow up assessment this subscale scored excellent (7) in 83% of rooms.



(Graph 3)

Language and Literacy

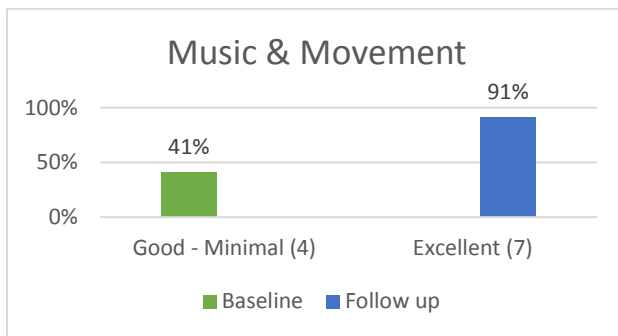
In the Language and Literacy subscale over half of the rooms at 58% scored excellent (7) in items *help children expand vocabulary* and *encourage children to use language* on baseline assessment. Furthermore, graph 4 illustrates on baseline assessment *becoming familiar with print* item scored minimal (3 or <) in 33% of the rooms, however, on follow up assessment this subscale scored excellent (7) in 83% of rooms.



(Graph 4)

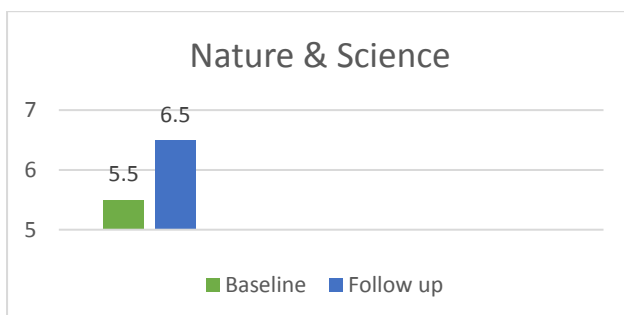
Learning Activities

In the Learning Activities subscale 75% of rooms scored between good (5) and excellent (7) in items on baseline assessment. Moreover, on baseline assessment *music and movement* item scored between good and minimal (4 or <) in 41% of the rooms, however, on follow up assessment this subscale scored excellent (7) in 91% of rooms (graph 5).



(Graph 5)

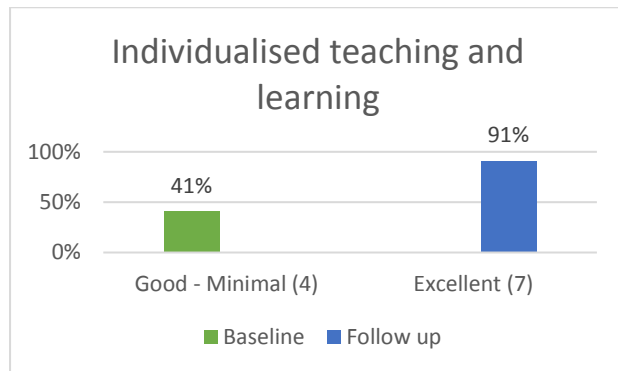
While, graph 6 below illustrates on baseline assessment *nature and science* item scored between minimal and inadequate (3 or <) in 58% of the rooms, however, on follow up assessment this subscale scored excellent (7) in 91% of rooms.



(Graph 6)

Interactions

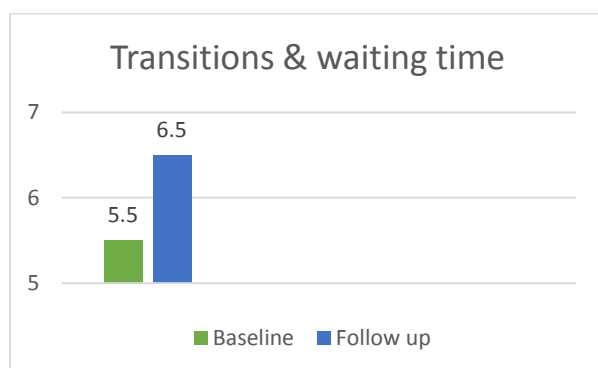
In the Interaction subscale 100% of rooms scored excellent (7) in item *staff child interaction* on baseline assessment. In addition, baseline assessment showed that *individualised teaching and learning* item scored between good and minimal (4 or <) in 17% of the rooms, however, on follow up assessment this subscale scored excellent (7) in 100% of rooms (graph 7).



(Graph 7)

Program Structure

In the Program Structure subscale 91% of rooms scored excellent (7) in item *whole-group activities for play and learning* on baseline assessment. In addition, baseline assessment highlighted that *transitions and waiting time* subscale scored minimal (3 or <) in 25% of the rooms, however, on follow up assessment this subscale scored excellent (7) in 91% of rooms (graph 8).



(Graph 8)

Workshops

Workshops were delivered on the 8 thematic topics and were evaluated after each session. They were scored 1 = low and 5 = high.

The evaluations reviewed

Content – were the topics relevant to your work

Usability – will you be able to use today's learning in your work everyday

Delivery – was the workshop delivered in an understandable and clear manner

Comments from participants:

Applying Aistear in practice – ‘I found it interesting it makes you rethink your ideas in some areas’, ‘I really enjoyed the workshop and feel that I will put things we look at into practice’.

Play – ‘extremely good tips on new ideas encouraging feedback and challenging people’.

Learning environment – ‘got more ideas from others (participants)’, ‘yes had a lightbulb moment tonight’

Quality interactions – ‘very interesting and some great ideas’, ‘great handouts and resources’

Observations and Learning Stories – ‘very useful, good ideas on how to update method of observing children’, ‘I got wonderful ideas that I can use in my everyday’, ‘very informative and educational’. In this workshop both content and usability scored 5 by all participants.

Partnership with Parents – ‘valuable and enjoyable workshop. Gave time to reflect on our service and what changes we can make’, ‘very interesting’.

Transitions – ‘tutor was friendly, approachable and non-judgemental’, ‘really enjoyed this class made me aware of things we do without thinking (about transitions)’. In this workshop content scored 5 by all participants.

Equality and Diversity – ‘thinking about it (inclusive practice) from the child’s perspective was extremely eye opening’, ‘lots of interesting activities discussed’

All of the workshop ranged between a rating of 3-5 in each element (content, usability and delivery).

This section has identified the issues experienced by early years providers in their efforts to implement quality early years experiences for young children. These matters have been summarised into themes as presented by both the participants and the literature review in the first section. These findings will now be discussed and their implications analysed.

Discussion

This section will discuss the findings presented in the previous section and analyse in potential repercussions and impact of these discoveries in relation to the implementation of a quality early years curriculum within ECCE settings in County Longford. Recommendations will be proposed as a result of detailed discussion with a view to addressing issues arising from the findings section previously.

Workshops

As was noted in the findings section eight workshops were delivered based on thematic topics as were indicated from the findings of the initial ECERS visits. These workshops were researched, devised, developed and implemented using Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, Aistear: The Early Years Curriculum Framework, The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations and the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide as a basis.

Interactive, reflective and mentor facilitated workshops were utilised to ensure formal engagement of participants on a regular basis and to develop, promote and challenge the knowledge base of participants on their current ideology of quality practice in the early years.

Space and Furnishings

Space and furnishings available to children are of interest as they influence both the type of activities that children can engage in and how often they engage in these activities. A lack of insufficient space can lead to frustration and conflict with children due to overcrowding. It can also cause issues with curriculum implementation if materials get disorganised or cramped. (Cryer et al, 2003). While the findings indicated a good level of alignment with ECERS requirements, there was significant issues around 'space for privacy'.

Space for privacy is considered important as the constant pressure to share toys and play space can be stressful for children. The ability to move away from a busy environment into a quieter, protected area helps children to retain their sense of equilibrium and therefore function better in their learning environment.

A workshop was provided on the learning environment with particular focus on the space for privacy. Participants were given the opportunity to discuss and critique what they currently offer, access images of spaces for privacy and self-assess their practice using the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide – Creating and Using the Learning Environment.

Personal Care Routines

This section examines practices and provisions to meet health and safety, nap, and toileting needs of all children in the learning environment. Here the observer hopes to witness:

- Meals/snacks that are well-balanced
- Nap provisions and time are appropriate
- Most children use appropriate hand-washing procedures
- Children taught to manage health practices independently
- Greeting routines that address children and parents positively

IN ECCE programmes we have the opportunity to help children develop healthy habits that will have a knock on effect on their health and well being practices throughout life. Thus children need a variety of healthy food to ensure they gain access to a range of healthy choices required for growth and development. Within this indicator meals and snacks showed the lowest scoring. Following workshops, self-assessment and mentoring however this score increased significantly.

Language and Literacy

Helping children to develop a positive and enthusiastic attitude towards books is a very important first step in early literacy development. Early childhood practitioners have a vital role to play in preparing children for life long literacy. Within this item, the observer is primarily concerned with materials and practices that support language development. The selection of books that are displayed for children to see and use is assessed and whether children

are encouraged to speak throughout all parts of the day or not. Finally the observer considers whether children are asked to think about and reflect on their own thinking. A particular item needing work in this indicator was highlighted as ‘becoming familiar with print’. Research tells us that children with print awareness can begin to understand that written language is related to oral language. They see that, like spoken language, printed language carries messages and is a source of both enjoyment and information. Children who lack print awareness are unlikely to become successful readers. Indeed, children's performance on print awareness tasks is a very reliable predictor of their future reading achievement. Again, following workshops, self-assessment, self-assessment and mentoring however this score increased significantly.

Learning Activities

This indicator evaluates the kinds of materials available and accessible to children and amount of time that children have to engage freely with them. Particularly, the observer is assessing how varied materials are (e.g., art, music, blocks sand/water, dramatic play) and whether they are organised in defined learning centres. It is important that children can use these materials for at least 1/3 of their day. It is also a requirement that children can choose their own activities and play mates. Finally access to Information Technology (IT) is observed to ensure it is developmentally appropriate and in line with the individual service policy.

Two items scored consistently low across all services:

- 1) Music and Movement
- 2) Nature and Science

Music and Movement: this includes both listening to and making music and dancing, marching or exercising to music or rhymes. Music is a natural and important part of young children’s growth and development. Early interaction with music is said to positively affect the quality of all children’s lives. Successful experiences in music help all children bond emotionally and intellectually with others through creative expression in song, rhythmic movement, and listening experiences. Music in early childhood creates a foundation upon which future music learning is built.

Nature and Science: Science is a part of our daily life. Everything we do and deal with in life is science from cooking, playing ball games, growing a garden and understanding how technologies work to watching a rain storm. Understanding nature and science helps children appreciate and relate to the world around them. Nature and Science education teaches children

more than just the basics of geology, biology, physics and chemistry, it teaches children to make observations, collect information and to use logical thinking to draw a conclusion. These skills are important for every part of our lives. Participating services increased their score significantly in these following the workshops, self-assessment and mentoring from LCCC. Furthermore, following mentor reflection on these areas and discussions with participants, we have decided to develop this area further with a symposium on these topics later in the year.

Interactions

Aistear and Síolta highlight the importance of interactions in children's learning and development in early childhood. Practitioners play an important role in building these relationships through consistent quality interactions. Babies, toddlers and young children need a secure attachment to at least one of the adults in their setting. This relationship provides comfort, reassurance and security. Interactions that are respectful and consistent increase the child's confidence and competence to respect, explore, develop and learn. According to ECERS-3 individualised teaching involves responding to variation in the abilities, needs and interests of children in the group, working with individual children in a systematic way that involves determining the child's ability to do a task or learning a concept providing support and encouragement. While staff child interactions scored as excellent in 100% of cases, the more nuanced individualised teaching and learning was highlighted as needing attention. This resulted in LCCC mentors focusing on the interactions pillar of the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide with practitioners and encouraging self-reflection and self-assessment using the self-evaluation tools provided. This was encouraged after the baseline assessment and following the subsequent visit six months later. The result was an 83% increase in the quality of these individualised interactions.

Program Structure

Programme structure refers to what children actually experience each day in their early learning environment and is based primarily on how the children spend the time in the environment as opposed to what appears on a written schedule or daily routine. Within this section transitions, free play and group activities are observed. This section highlighted the need to focus on the importance of transitions with the practitioners. An entire workshop was dedicated to this topic and was based on Síolta Standard 13 and the pillar Transitions within the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide.

Workshops utilised the self-evaluation tools available, examples for ideas and practice, resources for sharing, action planning tools and the gallery section to provoke thought, reflection and discussion on the place of transitions.

Value for Money

Continuous research shows that investment in early childhood care and education would improve the health, education and well-being of all children in the long term. During this Initiative quality provision within ECCE settings improved significantly as evidenced above. When reviewing the LLiQ Initiative the cost benefit regarding this quality impact was assessed.

LLiQ Initiative in year 1 is top heavy with programme development costs, therefore, subsequent years will be at a reduced level of investment. In this formative year the initiative cost 3.8% of Longford County Childcare Committee's overall annual budget. With an average cost of €1005 per participating service and an average cost of €41.65 per child. Therefore, the LLiQ Initiative is a cost effective investment to have targeted quality improvements within eight services and directly impact the learning experience of 193 children.

Recommendations

The rich data collected over the course of this initiative has given an in depth assessment of early years' practitioners' perspectives on quality implementation. Analysis and discussion of these findings, in the previous section, has provided the basis for LCCC to make a number of recommendations to ensure that quality provision is implemented seamlessly and effectively into daily early years' practice.

- It is recommended that all County Childcare Committees utilise the Longford Leaders in Quality Initiative Model to implement quality improvement measures within their county at local level. This ideally, will provide systematic support and assist services to build confidence and knowledge to participate in effective self-evaluation and reflection and to assist services in building resources and tools specific to quality implementation within their individual service.
- Funding and support is recommended to ensure all practitioners' are aware of the availability and the benefits of engagement with the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. Significant time and resources have been invested in the development of this resource. It aims to support early years' practitioners practice and aid understanding of how to implement the curriculum framework.

Conclusion

This initiative aimed to provide an opportunity for practitioners to gain a baseline understanding of their current practice in relation to quality early years experiences for young children, for LCCC to assess the strengths and weaknesses of practice within County Longford, to provide support and resources to understand quality improvement practices.

The findings indicate that there is an appetite for supporting quality development by practitioners within the county and commitment to quality improvement was highlighted by follow up ECERS visits. This findings suggest that early years' practitioners require assistance, in the form of training and mentoring, to gain new knowledge in the area of quality early years practice in order to enable them to effectively and critically examine their own practices and implementation techniques. It is through practitioners' experiences and discourses that make quality yearly years experiences for young children and their families a reality, so it is essential to support practitioners in their role of early years' educators if the realisation and implementation of quality to be successful in early years' settings.

This study highlights the positive appetite there is for quality improvement among practitioners but also the frustration at the lack of support and resources available to assist them to do this. The Longford Leaders in Quality Initiative has been found by participating practitioners to address this national lack of support at a local level.

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