

Early Learning and Care Experience of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Findings from early years education inspection



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The temporary closures of early learning and care (ELC) settings in 2020–21 had significant negative effects on the lives and education of children in Ireland. Early years inspectors at the Department of Education interviewed owners and managers of ELC settings to discuss the challenges and successes. This article describes the findings, which include a strong capacity for resilience, creativity, and professionalism.

Introduction

The suspension of early learning and care (ELC) settings and schools in March 2020, as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic, has had significant negative impacts on the lives of children and young people. Ironically, public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus enhanced the spread of a range of stressors among children and families. These caused anxiety, disengagement, and disruption in the learning experiences of children and young people at all stages of education.

This article shares the findings from contacts with ELC settings by the Department of Education Inspectorate (DEI) from September 2020 to June 2021. It highlights the undisputed challenges for both provision and practice created by the global pandemic, and it highlights the dividends due to the creative and innovative responses of the ELC practice community.

DEI early years inspectors maintained contact with ELC settings during the early stages of resumed operation from September to December 2020. As part of this support, structured interviews were carried out by telephone with owners and managers to discuss the challenges and successes they were experiencing in re-establishing the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) preschool programme.

Education inspections in ELC settings resumed in April 2021. Initially these were follow-through inspections in settings where a previous early years education inspection (EYEI) had taken place. This approach made sense, given inspectors' familiarity with these settings and the fact that follow-through inspections' more focused nature required less time on site. A programme of full EYEIs was recommenced in June 2021.

Data generated from this research and evaluation work has identified distinct phases in the response of the ELC sector to the pandemic:

- **Adaptation:** focused first response to the public health guidance
- **Innovation:** creative approaches to the challenges of providing for continuity in learning experiences for children and staff
- **Consolidation:** integration of positive changes to provision and practice into the regular plans for the programme of learning.

Adaptation

Many of the traditional practices associated with providing ELC experiences for young children proved challenging in the context of the public health advice aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19. These include the natural inclination of very young children in the ELC setting to seek physical contact with staff and their peers, the normal welcome for parents to enter and engage with practitioners in the learning environment, and the provision of various play experiences, including messy play, dressing-up play, and role play.

Practitioners in ELC settings reported stress and anxiety about managing the reopening of settings and, in particular, being responsible for the implementation of health and safety guidance. The following comments are typical of exchanges with DEI early years inspectors at this time:

The implications of having to recruit new staff to help with the timing of breaks and down time for staff should be considered. There have been financial implications, and this is an extra cost that was not there prior to Covid-19.

The amount of extra paperwork and cleaning took away from the time spent with the children.

We are a very open service, and not having parents coming into the building has been strange. We have had to limit the people that parents come in contact with to just the key worker, so informal communication has been greatly reduced.

It is also important to note, however, that even as these stresses were expressed, providers were also able to identify positive opportunities:

Seeing how resilient the children are and how well they have adapted to the new routines and changes.

We have revamped the garden, and we spend a lot of time every day outside. It's really beneficial for the children and the staff. We are realising how much learning can happen outside.

“ We spend a lot of time every day outside... really beneficial... We are realising how much learning can happen outside.”

Innovation

The positive attitudes illustrated in the previous section become more evident as time progressed, but the emphasis in settings remained focused on the safety and welfare of children and staff. Some lovely examples of creative and innovative approaches were shared with inspectors. These combined public health guidance with pedagogy, and engaged children in positive learning experiences:

As parents were not allowed enter the building when new children started and current children returned, we decided to do an introduction session outside.

We introduced a new computer programme as a means of sharing information with parents. While we have short informal conversations at handover times, all formal information, such as daily routines and children's daily activities, are shared through the app.

We found that the Covid signage could be intimidating for some children, and so we involved them in redesigning the signs – we were amazed at how knowledgeable and engaged the children were on all aspects of the safety routines.

Among the significant positive advantages arising from the pandemic were the many opportunities for outdoor learning to be developed and enhanced. Many settings showed great energy and enthusiasm for innovation in their outdoor environments, with many permanent fixtures being installed with the support of additional funding.

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Consolidation

The extent of the consolidation phase is becoming more evident since the Department of Education inspection programme resumed in September 2021. The continued use of the outdoor learning environment is noteworthy, as is the creative use of information and communication technology to engage with parents and the wider community.

It was very positive to see that primary schools had engaged with ELC providers to support children's transition to school in September 2021, by using videos of the school environments and teachers and staff. Although it is still early days, many providers have reported that they intend to retain these new practices into the future.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and the necessary public health responses have had the potential to be a very negative and damaging influence on the learning, wellbeing, and development of young children across the world. In Ireland, the closure of settings and the stress and anxiety associated with their reopening and the resumption of the ECCE programme of preschool were significant. These undoubtedly impacted on children's learning by constraining a wide range of pedagogical activities that are normally high-quality early learning experiences.

Despite the challenges, however, engagement with providers and practitioners in ELC settings by DE inspectors during the pandemic has identified a strong capacity for resilience, creativity, and professionalism that can rightly be described as a positive outcome of the Covid-19 pandemic.

If time is now allowed for professional reflection on the experiences of the past year, and if opportunities are created to share the learning, there is much to be optimistic about in the quality of children's early learning experiences. The DE Inspectorate looks forward to engaging with, validating, and supporting this work as we continue to support the ELC sector through our programme of early years education inspection.

NEW COURSE: Diploma in School Age Childcare

GMIT is offering a brand new course in its suite of Early Childhood Education and Care programmes - the new Diploma in School Age Childcare (Level 7).

The innovative academic programme was designed in consultation with stakeholders in the School Age Childcare and Early Learning and Care sectors. One hundred and five participants took part in the consultation process.

School Age Childcare became a regulated service in February 2019, requiring providers of school age childcare services to register with Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency.

The programme will support the upskilling of professionals working in this area, meeting employers' requirements outlined during the stakeholder consultation process with GMIT.

The new programme will be delivered using a blended approach (online and one Saturday a month) at GMIT's Mayo campus over one academic year and is designed to be accessible to individuals already working full-time in this sector. Modules include Leadership, Psychology, Digital Technologies, Relationships, Nature Pedagogy and Play.

Louise Kilbane, Programme Chair of the GMIT Diploma in School Age Childcare, said

"I am very excited to be the programme chair of our new innovative course in School Age Childcare...

For many years now, in Ireland, the sector has called upon higher-level institutions to develop a training programme for those working with children in School Age Childcare (SAC). We are delighted to support the sector in answering this call and we know the graduates will bring high quality to the SAC services across the country."



Children exploring in the GMIT woodland trail.