

**REVIEW OF
PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

QUESTION BOOKLET**

Department of Education

June 2004

Name:

Nuala O'Donnell

Address:

INTO Northern Office
23 College Gardens
Belfast
BT9 6BS

Email Address:

(if any)

nualaodonnell@ni into ie

Organisation you are replying on behalf of (if any):

Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Your position within that organisation:

Senior Official

The questions in this booklet relate to the review of pre-school education in Northern Ireland being carried out by the Department of Education between June and October 2004. They should be read in conjunction with either the full review document, *Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland*, or the shorter document summarising the main issues in the review, *Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland - Summary of Main Issues*.

INTRODUCTION

DE values all children equally and believes that they have a right to funded pre-school education if their parents wish it. The Department believes that pre-school education provides a firm foundation for a child's future educational career.

The available research and evidence from the Education and Training Inspectorate show the following.

- Full-time provision is no better than part-time in educational terms and the duration of pre-school experience (i.e., the number of terms attended) is more important than the length of a session.
- The size of the pre-school age group is continuing to decline. As a result, children under 3 years old are entering nursery schools and classes in increasing numbers. Many of these children are not at a stage of development where they can benefit from the experiences provided by statutory nursery schools and classes.
- Pre-school education is especially beneficial for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Reception provision is less beneficial than other types of pre-school education.
- Provision for children with special educational needs provision can be improved.

These findings suggest that we need to:

- have a clearly understood policy on providing full-time places;
- raise the admissions age to nursery schools and units; and
- ensure that those who benefit most from pre-school education continue to have access to it.

Moving towards these objectives will enable us to look at other improvements to current arrangements. Such improvements might include a standard age for the funding of pre-school education across all sectors and the possibility of alternative educational/childcare uses for surplus school accommodation. They, and others, are dealt with in the consultation questions that follow.

Questions 1-6 are about important issues which affect parents and children as well as pre-school settings and early years staff. Questions 7-11 are about organisational and

school education is provided, and in particular about ideas on the further integration of services. Questions 13 and 14 are about equality and rural proofing. Question 15 allows you to raise any issues not covered in the other questions. Finally, there is an opportunity to rank the issues underlying the questions in order of priority.

Full-Time & Part-Time Places

Q1 (a) If, as research evidence shows, there is no educational justification for full-time education in nursery schools and units, can retention of any full-time provision be justified?

Yes go to Q1 (b)

No go to Q1 (c)

Q1 (b) Under what circumstances should it be retained?

Full-time must be retained. Teachers in their professional capacity have identified the benefits for children in having full-time places – including the socialisation and nutritional aspects of having dinner in school.

Part-time provision in Nursery Schools is shorter than in pre-schools, due to the dual days. This system also causes a lot of extra work, stress and paperwork for teachers and Principals.

The EPPNI research is being represented in a one dimensional fashion. The merits of full-time places and international research have been ignored deliberately to fit with the direction the DE wish the review to take. This is totally unacceptable to INTO. For sound educational reasons INTO policy has been and continues to be that full-time places are the best provision for children in their pre-school year.

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Q1 (c) Do you have views on how any change should be handled? Should it, for example, be phased out over a period? Should other forms of provision be made for the children affected (bearing in mind that $\frac{2}{3}$ of all free places are currently part-time)?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Admissions Age

There are 1,900 children under the age of 3 among the 14,000 children in nursery schools and classes. Nurseries are not the most appropriate settings for such young children as they cannot fully benefit from the experiences provided. A change to the

Q2 (a). Do you think the admission age to nursery schools and units should be raised?

Yes go to Q2 (b)

No go to Q2 (c)

INTO agree that children under the age of 3 are not suited to Nursery education as it has traditionally evolved provision for these children should be in pre-school settings or in dedicated smaller nursery schools in severely disadvantaged areas.

Q2 (b) Which of the following suggestions do you think should be adopted as the new admissions age?

i) - to admit only children in their immediate pre-school year (3 years 2 months to 4 years 2 months). This will make the age at which free school places are available the same as that currently in operation in the voluntary and private sector.

Yes

ii) - to set the age at 3 years. In this case, the Department will consider funding places from this age in the voluntary and private sector also.

Yes

No

The Voluntary sector should then take children from 2 years of age to 3 years 2 months. This way all children will be catered for and there will be no clashes of provision.

Q2 (c) Do you have any other suggestions or comments on raising the admission age?

Admissions Priorities

There are enough places for children in their pre-school year whose parents wish them. Socially disadvantaged children – for whom pre-school education is particularly beneficial – and older children (those with July and August birthdays) currently have priority in admission to pre-school.

Q3 (a) A child from socially disadvantaged circumstances is defined as "... a child whose parent is in receipt of income support or income-based job-seeker's allowance". Is the definition still suitable?

Yes

~~No~~ go to Q3 (b)

Q3 (b) How might it be changed?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Q3 (c) Should children with July and August birthdays continue to receive priority in admissions?

Yes

~~No~~

Until the legislation in relation to 2 year olds is changed older children should continue to receive priority in admission.

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Under disability legislation being introduced, children with SEN or disabilities will have the same rights of access to pre-school education as other children. The Department recognises that at present this is not always the case.

Q4. What arrangements need to be made to ensure that children with SEN can be fully catered for in statutory and voluntary/private settings?

As stated in the consultation paper, SEN provision across all sectors is insufficient. Provision and support for pupils and teachers must be delivered at the earliest opportunity. Children's specific needs must be identified by fully qualified professionals followed with appropriate provision and support.

interventions to address the problems identified, can only be delivered by properly trained and recognised teachers. These issues require to be at the outset, and by professional teachers.

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Reception Classes and Groups

Reception provision is less beneficial for children than the education offered in nursery classes and voluntary/private settings, but the Department currently has no legal power to prevent a school from offering a reception class or group.

Q5 (a) Should the Department take powers to prevent a school offering reception places? (If it does so, it will ensure that alternative places are available in nurseries or voluntary/private settings in the areas affected.)

~~Yes~~ ~~go to Q5 (b)~~

No

The withdrawal of reception places could lead to dropping numbers and potential closure of the primary school, particularly in rural areas. This is antithetical to the proposals in Part 5 of the consultation document.

Q5 (b) Should reception classes or groups be allowed to continue where they are the only form of pre-school provision in an area?

Yes

No

Staff:Child Ratio

Q6 (a) Is the current staff:child ratio in nurseries (a minimum of 1:13) adequate?

~~Yes~~

No *go to Q6 (b)*

Q6 (b) How could the ratio be changed? You may wish to consider such factors as: is there scope for more parental or voluntary involvement in helping with classes? Does every nursery class in a nursery school have to have a qualified teacher (and would the quality of education provided be affected if it did not?) Could there be a different combination of early years staff?

Every nursery class in a nursery school and primary school should have a qualified teacher. INTO is of the view that the quality of education provided would definitely be affected if not delivered by a teacher. The ratio of teacher to children should be changed to reflect that of the voluntary/private

bureaucracy. The inclusion of Assessment in Nursery schools requires a higher ratio, of teacher/adult to pupil.

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

NOTE

Questions 7-11 are about organisational and support issues and as such are likely to be of more interest to professionals and practitioners than to parents and the public. The background to them is contained in the full review document. Those who do not wish to answer these questions should go to Question 12.

Q7 (a) Currently the Boards' Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS) have no legislative obligation to the pre-school phase, but provide some support on a voluntary basis. What form of additional support for pre-school settings would be most appropriate and effective?

Nursery Schools and pre-school groups are required to follow the pre-school curriculum but are not entitled to CASS. This is unacceptable. Research into education has shown that the early years are crucially important. It is therefore incumbent on the DE to ensure that the teachers and staff are provided with opportunities to develop professionally and keep abreast of current developments in early years education. Teachers in statutory nursery schools and classes should not be disadvantaged.

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Q7 (b) Should CASS' legislative duties be extended to cover:

i) the statutory pre-school sector only? Yes

No

ii) all pre-school sectors?

Yes

No

Q8. How can we ensure that playgroups receive sufficient Early Years Specialist support?

Play groups should be limited to children under 3. All children in their pre-school year should be under the guidance and direction of a qualified teacher on a full-time basis. As pre-school education is very important, it should be provided by those qualified-teachers. Pre-school education on the cheap will not deliver the government objectives and will cost more in the long term, educationally and in the broader societal and economic context.

Introduction of New Statutory and Voluntary/Private Sector Providers

At present, there is an adequate number of places for children in their immediate pre-school year in existing statutory nursery schools and classes and funded voluntary/private settings.

Q9 (a) The Department will always consider replacing a nursery unit if its parent school is replaced. Should arrangements be made to allow for additional statutory nursery schools or units apart from replacements to be established?

Yes go to Q9 (b)

~~—————~~ No

Q9. (b) How could this be achieved without resulting in over-provision of places?

As stated earlier, education for children in their pre-school year should be provided in statutory nursery schools and classes, with playschools providing for the under 3 year olds, therefore ensuring sufficient places for all children in settings appropriate to their age and stage of development.

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Q10 (a) Pre-school Education Advisory Groups will continue to replace voluntary/private settings which drop out of the Pre-school Expansion Programme. Should new playgroups be admitted to the Programme other than as replacements?

~~Yes go to Q10.(b)~~

No

Q10. (b) How could this be achieved without resulting in over-provision of places?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Viability of Voluntary/Private Playgroups

Q11 (a) Funding is provided to the voluntary and private sector on a 'per child' basis. Some playgroups with smaller numbers of funded places may find that it is difficult to remain financially viable. Should the current funding arrangements for the voluntary/private sector be changed?

Yes go to Q11 (b)

Playgroups should be funded to deliver provision for 2-3 year olds only.

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

The Wider Context

Q12. Bearing in mind developments outside Northern Ireland, what changes (if any) would you wish to see made to the overall arrangements for pre-school provision in Northern Ireland? (You should accept that changes may not be implemented in the short-term if they involve childcare as well as education. Such changes will be considered in the context of the review of the *Children First* childcare strategy.)

INTO supports the principle of integrated provision in the pre-school sector and will comment fully in the consultation on the Children First childcare strategy. In England and Wales, education for children in their pre-school year is delivered by teachers. INTO is of the view that children in Northern Ireland should receive the same level of provision.

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Equality

Section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between certain individuals and groups, namely:

- between persons of different religious belief;
- between persons of different political opinion;
- between persons of different racial group;
- between persons of different age;
- between persons of different marital status;
- between persons of different sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally;
- between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- between persons with dependents and persons without.

Q13 (a) Do, or might, any of the proposals contained in the review have any adverse implications for any of the section 75 categories?

~~Yes~~ ~~go to Q13 (b)~~

No

Q13 (b) What are they?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Rural proofing

Rural proofing is a process which ensures that all policies are examined carefully and objectively to determine whether or not they have a different impact in rural areas from that elsewhere, because of the particular characteristics of rural areas.

Q14 (a) Do, or might, any of the proposals contained in the review have adverse implications for rural dwellers?

Yes *go to Q14 (b)*

~~No~~

Q14 (b) What are they?

Changes to current provision of reception in schools could have adverse effects in some rural areas. Elimination of reception provision may cause a drop in primary school intakes and eventually force a closure, which would be detrimental to the rural community.

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Other Issues

Q15. Are there any other issues you would like to comment on? If so, please use the box below.

{INSERT BOX}

There are financial and staffing implications in many of the above questions. You are therefore asked to number, in order of priority, the areas in which you would wish to see changes made (or not made), either for their own sake or to allow for the developments you wish to see in pre-school provision. You may list as many or as few as you wish.

Full-Time and Part-Time Places	1
Admissions Age	4
Reception Classes and Groups	6
Admissions Priorities	
Children With Special Educational Needs	5
Staff: Child ratios	3
Support and Training Arrangements	
Introduction of New statutory and Voluntary Sector Providers	
Funding of Playgroups	
Providers	2