

INTO

**Response to the
DE Consultation
on the Review of
Pre-School Education
in Northern Ireland**

September 2004

Introduction

INTO is the largest Teachers' Union in Ireland, with teachers in all sectors and at all levels of the education system. INTO represents a substantial number of teachers and Principals in Nursery Schools and classes throughout Northern Ireland and is actively involved in all aspects of the pre-school sector development.

INTO policy on pre-school education is that there should be fully funded places for all children, on a full-time basis, in their pre-school year whose parents wish it. These places should be in the statutory sector and delivered by fully qualified, recognised teachers.

INTO supports the position in England, where all education for children in their pre-school year is provided by recognised teachers within the statutory sector. INTO demands that all Northern Ireland children in their pre-school year receive parity with their counterparts in England and are provided with places in statutory schools.

Investment in high quality early years education has been found, and supported by research in many countries across the world, to reap major benefits for the individual children and the community in which they live, in later years.

Pre-School Education Expansion Programme

This was initiated in 1998. PEAGs (Pre-School Education Advisory Groups), were established in each of the 5 ELBs. INTO had a range of concerns about the PEAGs at the time and made these views known to the DE and Employing Authorities. These concerns remain and some are even highlighted in the consultation document.

- lack of consistency across the ELBs with regard to allocation of resources and planning. This leads to inequality of opportunity within Northern Ireland for children and their parents, in relation to the nature, quality and quantity of provision available.
- The vast majority of new places, created under the PEAGs, are part-time, purportedly dictated by the DE in the expansion programme. Full-time places contribute more to the holistic development of the individual child.

- The exclusion of the Teacher Unions from the PEAGs has led to mistrust by teachers and the perpetuation of inequalities. In 1998 INTO sought teacher union representation on the PEAGs and was refused by the DE. This is antithetical to the spirit of partnership espoused by the DE in their strategic plans and associated documentation.
- Admissions arrangements were inoperable from the outset and caused major problems for schools and parents alike. While some of these issues have been addressed, many others remain. The provision, curriculum, support and funding for 2 year olds has not been adequately addressed. This consultation document seeks to remove 2 year olds six years after introducing the legislation, and raising expectations of these children and their parents to pre-school education. Research has shown that education for children under 3 is also important for a child's development. INTO is of the view that pre-school education for under 3 year olds should be provided by the voluntary/private sector, incorporating an integrated approach to childcare, with the involvement of other agencies. 3 year olds should be educated by teachers in the statutory sector as part of the enriched curriculum being developed by CCEA and supported by teachers and INTO.
- The inequality in the ratio of adults to children within the PEAG provision for pre-schools and nurseries must also be addressed. A reduction of the number of pupils in statutory nursery schools and classes is required immediately. A ratio of 1 adult to 8 pupils in these classes, (a maximum of 16 children per class) on a par with the pre-school ratio, and with a fully trained teacher and classroom assistant would go a long way to addressing the many problems faced by schools and society currently.

INTO is opposed to the introduction of EYS (Early Years' Specialists). These are unique to Northern Ireland and are portrayed by the DE as the means of improving educational outcomes for pupils in the private/voluntary sector. "Qualified teachers provide appropriate input in statutory schools and units" according to the consultation document, but "Support from a qualified teacher or EYS is regarded as the most effective way to ensure this emphasis on continuous improvement in voluntary/private sector playgroups." Why does the DE think it is sufficient for support only in the voluntary/private sector when it is clear the statutory sector requires, quite rightly, that every nursery class must have a qualified teacher. Northern Ireland does not need EYS, we

have sufficient fully trained and qualified teachers who are more than capable of providing high quality education to children in their pre-school year. Rather than employ these teachers and pay them appropriately, the DE have constructed another set of qualifications and training and introduced a new tier into the education system on lower pay than teachers. This is further evidence that the DE and the Government are seeking to provide pre-school education on the cheap.

Integration of Early Years Services

INTO supports the integration of early years' services, which can only be of benefit to the children and their parents. Concerns remain as to how this would be managed. Nursery schools and Primary schools with Nursery classes are under funded and overburdened with workload and bureaucracy. INTO seeks an assurance from the DE that the integration of services and agencies working together with schools will not increase any further the workload and bureaucracy for the teachers and principals concerned.

Structural and Organisational Issues

Demographic decline - The difficulties experienced by Nursery schools, particularly in Belfast, North Down and North Antrim, should be addressed by creating full-time places instead of part-time and separating the statutory and voluntary/private provision according to immediate pre-school year and under 3 year olds respectively. In areas of high deprivation there should be flexibility for enhanced provision to address the particular needs of the children in the area.

Pattern of Enrolment - Full-time places are the appropriate provision for children in their pre-school year. This is acknowledged in parts of the consultation documents and refuted in others. INTO members in Nursery school/classes have repeatedly stated that full-time places are required to ensure children are given the opportunity to develop holistically and for teachers to deliver the pre-school curriculum. INTO has grave concerns that the SEELB, NEELB and BELE did not fund full-time places as the WELB and SELB did through the PEAGs.

It is clear from the consultation document that the DE is not anxious to spend money on full-time places, despite all professional evidence to the contrary... "The research does indicate however, that the benefits

increase in line with the length of time in pre-school education". This research relates to the continuous time spent by children in pre-school education. INTO supports this view that children should have a full year in nursery education, and the full day's education is much more beneficial than the part-time sessions determined by the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. The dual day system in nursery schools and classes does not provide children with the best opportunity for learning. The morning session is 2_ hours long, insufficient time for the children to fully engage and learn and for the teacher to deliver the curriculum. The part-time sessions in the playgroups are an hour longer, but because the schools/classes have to take an afternoon session, dictated by PEAG and the funders, their morning session is of necessity shorter.

The afternoon session is not suitable for young children. They are at their most receptive to learning in the morning. Children starting school /class in the late morning/ afternoon are tired and find it more difficult to focus. This point is not addressed in the consultation documentation but has been highlighted by teachers and INTO over many years.

Unfortunately, economics and budgets continue to win out over the provision of quality nursery provision for children. International research on the benefits (financial and otherwise) of investing in early years' education is being ignored. The Education Minister and the DE need to take a long-term view of education in deciding how money should be spent. Short-term solutions, which cost less initially, inevitably cost more long term with less positive results.

Inclusive Environments - INTO welcomes the initiative in the WELB in establishing a number of community nursery schools. This is the way forward for nursery schools where primary schools or sectors cannot sustain the school/class on their own.

Special Educational Needs (SEN) - INTO supports the DE's "policy priority in relation to children with Special Education Needs in ensuring that their needs are identified and supported at the earliest possible stage". This requires additional provision, funding, training, educational psychologists and classroom assistants. SEN can only be provided for on an adequately resourced basis. INTO welcomes the additional funding for ELBs but as the amount is unspecified, it is unclear how far this will go to address the backlog of issues already in the system. SEN is also best addressed through smaller ratios 1:8 and full-time places.

Reception Provision - INTO opposes the suggestion that legislation should be introduced to prevent schools from using LMS to continue with their reception. LMS - Local Management of Schools, means exactly that - the school manages the budget locally. Reception classes/children are protecting the enrolment numbers in some primary schools (mainly rural). Such schools constitute a large proportion of the primary schools in Northern Ireland. The removal of this protection could lead to a loss of jobs and even school closures, which adversely affect the children and the community in which they live.

Reception provision in schools gives parents a choice between education with a fully qualified teacher, or pre-school education in a non-statutory sector. As this choice is only provided where there are no nursery education places available, it should remain available to parents until nursery places become available to them. Reception provision should not be viewed in a negative sense. The positive benefits of Reception include familiarisation with the school environment, the personnel, routines and other pupils, as well as developing the children educationally, without the formalities associated with statutory education.

Support and Training - this should be available to all teachers according to their contracts of employment, regardless of the sector in which they teach. The document states "The Department acknowledges that many voluntary /private settings, particularly small ones, find it difficult to meet their requirements under the programme" The DE must also then acknowledge that pre-school education should be delivered by teachers in the statutory sector and make plans to provide it.

Irish Medium Education- The staff - child ratio in the Irish Medium sector should be reduced to 1:8 to ensure appropriate provision can be delivered.

PEAGs - There should be consistency of approach across the ELBs to ensure equality of opportunity for all, particularly rural areas. INTO is of the view that there is no further role now for PEAGs. Responsibility for Pre-school Education should pass to the Education and Library Boards in association with the Health Boards for all provision for the under 3 year olds. The provision for pre-school education for 3 year olds should remain with the Department of Education through the normal structures and procedures.

Revised NI Curriculum - The introduction of the revised NI Curriculum requires pre-school education to be delivered by teachers to ensure the proper basis is provided for the enriched curriculum.

Conclusion

The Consultation Document refers on numerous occasions to the EPPNI research, paraphrasing its findings. At no stage does the document quote what the actual research actually states. INTO is concerned that in the actual research quoted, the statements have been paraphrased in such a way as to create a misunderstanding and as such directing the readers in a predetermined direction.

The research highlights the key fact that the higher the qualifications of the pre-school leader, the higher the outcome of the children, but this has not been quoted in this document. This EPPNI research which provides the evidence that supports the INTO view, that qualified teachers in pre-school settings will provide for children attaining a higher standard, has been omitted from this document.

In fact it is not only the EPPNI research usage that is unhelpful. There are many subjective statements throughout the document which lead the reader in a pre-determined direction, i.e. to remove pre-school education from the remit of qualified, professional teachers.

This would be a bad outcome not only for INTO but for the children of Northern Ireland. Consultation must be meaningful. Cognisance must be taken of the views of the teachers and researchers in the field. INTO seeks an assurance from the DE that this consultation really is an "opportunity to influence the future development of pre-school education" in Northern Ireland.