

Improvement through Self-Evaluation in Pre-School Education

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Introduction

The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) provides a number of Government Departments with inspection services and information about the quality of education and training across Northern Ireland (NI). Pre-school education is funded by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) within a mix of statutory nursery schools and classes, and voluntary and private playgroups and day nurseries. The staff in these various pre-school centres hold differing qualifications and have a range of experience within pre-school education. The quality of the provision in all types of pre-school centre is evaluated and reported upon by the Inspectorate.

The Inspectorate's main purpose, reflected in the Mission statement of '*Promoting Improvement*' (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2003a), is to promote the highest possible standards of learning and teaching throughout the education, youth and training sectors.

In recent years, the Inspectorate has reconsidered the efficiency and effectiveness of its inspection procedures. While inspection plays its part in helping to raise standards, the Inspectorate recognises that it is the practitioners themselves who have the greatest potential to bring about improvement in the children's achievements. Self-evaluation is a key process in raising standards of teaching and learning. Inspection methods are developing to give a higher priority to encouraging and supporting rigorous self-evaluation, not for its own sake, but to lead to better provision and outcomes. Such self-evaluation involves all the staff and is based on the use of clear evidence of improvement, or lack of progression, to influence what is done and what might be done more effectively in the future.

Improvement through Self-Evaluation: Resources

The Inspectorate has produced a series of materials to help foster a culture of self-evaluation leading to self-improvement. Among these materials is the interactive DVD-ROM, '*Improvement Through Self-Evaluation*' (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2003b). A suite of eight DVDs was produced to support self-evaluation in all phases of education and in the different sectors of training, youth and community work. The DVD designed for the pre-school phase was distributed in September 2003 to all centres providing Government-funded pre-school education. This resource is complemented by the self-evaluation handbook, '*Together Towards Improvement - Pre-school Education*' (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2004) produced by the Inspectorate in April 2004.

Together, these materials provide support for all stages in the process of self-evaluation. They are designed to be accessible to pre-school practitioners whatever their prior experience of self-evaluation. The emphasis is on helping the staff within a pre-school centre to work together as a team and to be open and honest about their work. The materials aim to help the staff to recognise the aspects of their provision that are of a high quality, to identify where there are any shortcomings, and to plan for action that will bring about improvement.

The DVD-ROM presents a range of different approaches to pre-school education, as well as ideas from practitioners, with the aim of stimulating thought and discussion about the elements of effective pre-school provision. It has been developed to help practitioners to reflect on, and improve, the quality of the educational outcomes for young children. It is not intended to provide a 'blueprint' of good practice.

The menu of topics addressed within the DVD-ROM include ethos, relationships with parents, evaluating teaching and learning, assessment and planning, special educational needs, safety and child protection, leadership and teamwork, and centre development. For each topic there is an oral introduction, relevant text, video sequences and interactive questions. The video sequences are filmed in nursery schools and voluntary playgroups. The pre-school centres that participated serve a variety of urban and rural communities, and face different challenges in developing the quality of their provision. The interactive questions prompt viewers to reflect on their own provision and to identify ways of bringing about improvement. Background documents relevant to the topics can be accessed within the DVD-ROM, and text responses to the questions can be recorded and stored.

The Interactive DVD-ROM can only be viewed using a computer with DVD-ROM facilities. Many pre-school centres do not yet have access to this equipment. The Inspectorate has, therefore, produced for the pre-school sector, two versions of '*Improvement Through Self-Evaluation*' in addition to the DVD-ROM, a DVD video version is provided which can be viewed using a domestic DVD player and television. While the DVD video does not have interactive features, it contains the same video sequences and questions as the DVD-ROM. A booklet is provided to accompany the DVD video; this is designed to compensate for some of the information within the DVD-ROM that cannot be included on the video version.

Content and use

The DVD-ROM is designed to be used flexibly, at a pace and in ways which suit the needs of individual pre-school centres. It is not intended to replace other guidance that staff are already using for self-evaluation. It allows viewers to select an aspect of provision, view

clips of relevant video footage, reflect upon the key elements of effective practice, and use the outcomes to monitor and evaluate their own work. The material may be used by individual members of staff; however, most benefit will be gained when the whole staff view the DVD and work together on the interactive tasks. It is not designed to be viewed all at one session but rather to be dipped into as and when staff are evaluating a particular aspect of their work.

The Introduction deals with the nature and purposes of pre-school education; this is a useful starting point for all centres. The section, *'The Purpose of Pre-school'*, prompts viewers to reflect on their beliefs and aims before considering other areas.

Practitioners using the DVD may find it useful to sequence their work as follows:

- Identify the centre's priority for improvement;
- Select the relevant section from the menu and view the video sequences and any written information;
- As a team, discuss their response to the material;
- Consider, and respond to, the interactive questions and/or to any other questions devised by the staff;
- Refer to the other documents within the DVD to inform their response;
- Identify a small number of areas for improvement to take forward;
- Complete an action plan and set a timescale for review of what improvement has been made.

The prime purpose of the DVD is to assist pre-school centres undertaking self-evaluation. It should also be of value following an inspection to help the staff to reflect on areas identified as needing improvement and to plan the appropriate action. The DVD can be of further use when staff are drawing up action plans and development plans, where it is important to have established the centre's priorities and to know what improvements need to be made. In addition, when centres are newly established, or staff appointed, working together to view the DVD can help to develop a shared understanding of appropriate pre-school practice and curricular provision.

Purpose and Aims

The aim of the DVD is to encourage the development of self-evaluation within pre-school centres. The Inspectorate is clear that self-evaluation is primarily about promoting effectiveness by improving the quality of learning and teaching. It is also about recognising the staff's skills and expertise; increasing confidence and motivation; providing opportunities for personal development and leadership; promoting teamwork; and raising awareness among parents. Self-evaluation is not a form of performance review or a tool for staff appraisal.

The Inspectorate believes that, if self-evaluation is to bring about improvement, then it needs commitment from everyone involved in the life and work of the pre-school centre, including all the staff, the parents, and the management group or proprietor. All need to be willing to evaluate openly and honestly the pre-school centre's work and their part in it. The climate in which the self-evaluation is undertaken is therefore very important. There should be a culture that encourages the staff to be reflective, to accept praise and constructive criticism, and to make changes where necessary. It is recognised that not every pre-school centre is ready to undertake self-evaluation. In a newly established group or where there are recently appointed staff, confidence and a sense of team spirit may need to be developed before self-evaluation can be undertaken. Making appropriate use of the DVD may assist centres in establishing the climate necessary for effective self-evaluation.

The recognition of achievements and good practice should be the starting point and foundation for self-evaluation. The procedures used will normally involve collecting evidence to support the evaluation being made. Part of that evidence must include observations of what happens in the playrooms; how the staff work with the children and how the children respond. The video sequences in the DVD encourage the staff to make observations and the interactive questions prompt them to consider evidence as part of their responses.

Self-Evaluation and External Evaluation

The Inspectorate believes that self-evaluation and external inspection should work hand in hand to bring about improvements in the provision made for the children and in the quality of learning. The process of inspection is enhanced greatly when the staff are willing to share and discuss with the inspector the areas they have identified for improvement through their self-evaluation and the action they have taken. Where this process has been recorded clearly, it can help the inspector to understand the progress that the staff have made in tackling any difficulties. Together, ways can be explored to bring about further improvement.

During every inspection, the team of inspectors looks at the quality of the centre's own monitoring and evaluation of its work and at what plans the leader has for future development. This aspect of inspection is becoming increasingly important. As pre-school staff develop their capabilities in self-evaluation, inspectors will consider how effectively centres carry out self-evaluation and the impact that the process is having on the quality of the provision. In some inspections, the focus may be on quality assuring the staff's self-evaluation process; the starting point for these inspections could be the centre's own self-evaluation report. In other inspections, the team will take into account the self-evaluation carried out as part of the leaders' development planning. Good leadership includes having

an understanding of the strengths of the educational and pastoral provision and of any areas that need improvement.

Conclusion

For the Inspectorate, all inspection activity must be fit for purpose and adapt to the particular circumstances and stages of development of individual pre-school centres. It is important that inspection continues to promote self-evaluation leading to self-improvement; that it encourages and develops the highest possible standards in teaching and learning; and that it confirms in practitioners the motivation and capability to provide children with the best possible start to their education.

References

Education and Training Inspectorate (Northern Ireland) (2003a). *Promoting Improvement: A Charter for Inspection*. Northern Ireland: Education and Training Inspectorate.

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