

EVALUATION AND DOCUMENTATION OF THE PREPARATION FOR PRE-SCHOOL PROGRAMME

Hill Street Family Resource Centre



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DCU Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC), which was invited to undertake the research process on the Preparation for Preschool programme, is an interdisciplinary research centre, led by Professor Mathias Urban, Desmond Chair of Early Childhood Education, which actively promotes close engagement between research, policy, and practice in the field.

Research and Academic activity within the ECRC, involves investigation and analysis of policies, politics, pedagogies, and practices in early childhood, in the context of a shared interest in the transformative potential of collaborative research. The ECRC has a particular focus on work with young children (from birth to 8), families and communities, in the context of critical theory perspectives, including an emphasis on diversity and social justice.

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Hill Street Family Resource Centre (FRC) is funded by the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) to deliver a range of supports and services, to families in the North East Inner City of Dublin. The geographical area comprises four electoral districts, which have a higher than average proportion of residents who consider themselves as having an ethnicity other than Irish. Several small localities within the area are formally classified as ‘disadvantaged’, in the context of comparatively high unemployment rates, low standards of educational attainment, and predominance of households headed by a lone parent.

Hill Street FRC operates as a ‘intercultural centre’, which seeks to offer children and their families, person-centred services, that are easily accessible and inclusive of all, to promote full social participation and enable families to maximise their health, well-being, and potential in life. Hill Street FRC’s work is “rooted in community engagement” and encompasses parenting supports, adult, child and family counselling, parent and child groups, afterschool clubs, community education and celebrations.

The Centre has developed a *Preparation for Preschool programme*, which caters for children aged 1 year and 9 months to 3 years, who attend weekly with their parents or carers. The programme is specifically designed to support children to make a positive transition from home to preschool, by developing and fostering their independence, social emotional skills, imagination, language, and communication skills. Parents are facilitated to make a gradual separation from their young children, attending their own group, which aims to reduce their sense of isolation and encourage them to access information and further family supports, if required or requested. The parents are supported to take collective responsibility for their own learning needs, to develop their communication and language skills, and to become more informed and involved in the work of the FRC and in the wider community of North East Inner City.

In 2019, the voluntary Board of Management sought funding to undertake a process, which would explore the nature and impact of the programme. The research would allow theoretical, conceptual, and contextual underpinnings of the Preparation for pre-school programme to be made explicit, enabling connections to be made between practices, processes and intended outcomes and local, National, and sectoral policy objectives.

Together with identifying and describing core programme components, this would assist Hill Street to document their model, in order to validate effective implementation internally, and enable scaling of the programme across other settings and services.

Introduction to the Report

This Report is based on research, which took place in Hill Street Family Resource Centre from late 2019, up to March 2020, focused on exploring, evaluating, and documenting the Preparation for Pre-school programme (PFP).

Section One describes the design of the research and the methods employed; Section Two summarises and describes themes, theories and concepts which have been identified from literature, within which the engagement processes with children and parents can be framed. This will enhance an understanding of the theoretical framework and research rationale for the model and help to situate it within relevant policy and practice context(s). Section Three offers findings and feedback which emerged from a multi-faceted process of stakeholder engagement and presents some questions and recommendations, to inform future programme implementation.

Section Four provides a detailed description of the Preparation for Preschool programme, to inform a clear understanding of the central elements and optimal conditions which guide successful implementation. A logic model, which was developed in collaboration with the Hill Street FRC programme team, identifies key activities, and outcomes, from which suggested methods and templates to enable monitoring and evaluation, have been developed.

Acknowledgements

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Section One: Design and Approach of the Research

Introduction

Evidence Informed Practice¹ draws on the integration of professional experience and practitioner expertise, with the best available external evidence, from systematic research (Centre for Effective Services, 2011). Research on the Preparation for Pre-school programme in Hill Street FRC, sought to foreground available evidence, lived experience and policy (Humphreys, 2011), in order to situate the model within the 'evidence informed' category.

The research team was anxious to engage in a process, which would be sensitive to and respectful of, this community-based child and family setting, and which would enable meaningful and inclusive analysis of the experiences and perspectives of the key stakeholders. The research aimed to gather detailed information on the PFP programme through observations, discussions, and feedback, in order to understand and identify the integral aspects of the model, which inform effective implementation.

1.2 Research Design

The research was designed to allow researchers to work together with members of the programme community (stakeholders), to jointly produce evaluative knowledge. This approach recognises the importance of context and represents a commitment to collaboration in the design and development of the research, 'on the basis of stakeholder information, needs and interests' (Cousins, Whitmore, Shulha, Al Hudib & Gilbert, 2015).

Stakeholder-oriented engagement in evaluations enables critical reflection that may challenge long-standing biases and allow more culturally responsive, grounded approaches.

Hanberger (2012) contends that there is a vital connection between evaluation and governance, such that evaluation systems are crucial to democratic governance. This would provide valuable opportunities to contribute to an understanding of community development practices, by highlighting not just the impact of the programme, but also the principles, outcomes and goals of the work itself, allowing responses to manifest at *instrumental*, *symbolic* and *conceptual* levels (Rogers, McCoy & Kelly, 2019).

¹ See list of guiding questions in Appendix One, to establish if a programme is *Evidence Informed*

Instrumental use of findings describes how evaluation recommendations may be used in practice (Vo, 2015), whereas findings can also provide legitimacy for decisions symbolically (Kirkhart, 2004). Making use of findings conceptually, allows knowledge gained from evaluations to change opinions, deepen understanding, and influence decision-making, in both conscious and subconscious ways (Weiss, 2004).

1.3 Evaluation of the Programme

Evaluations generally focus on assessing processes, impacts and/or outcomes arising from specific programmes, approaches or interventions, based on the implementation methods that have been found to be effective in specific contexts.

In the case of the *Preparation for Pre-School programme*, some evaluative work had previously been undertaken, (focussing mainly on processes and outcomes), which had examined the satisfaction level of (adult) participants and had begun to explore the impact on children when they attend pre-school, from the perspectives of both parents and practitioners in ECEC settings. This was reviewed for secondary analysis.

In order to provide the basis for documenting the model, the research sought to gather evidence at three levels: descriptive; theoretical and indicative (Veerman and Van Yperen, 2007). This required a mixed-methods approach, collecting data primarily through qualitative methods, as well as drawing on statistical and demographic information.

1.4 Documentation of the Model

The evaluative process helped to identify and analyse the multilevel influences on effective implementation of the PFP programme, allowing for an exploration (and explication) of core programme components (Fixsen et al, 2005), which in turn enabled documentation of the model. Facilitating the development of a Logic Model drawing on 'practitioner wisdom', (Humphreys, 2011) captured the core activities and elements of the PFP programme, to inform delivery, monitoring and evaluation.

1.5 Methodology

Reviews of current policy and practice, and discussions with those involved in programme design and implementation, sought to make visible, any underlying hypotheses or assumptions, which have informed the objectives, selection of methods and target groups for the programme.

Observations, interviews, and focus groups with key stakeholders were intended to elicit a range of perspectives. Combined with secondary analysis of preliminary evidence, which has indicated that the intervention works in practice, these approaches assisted to identify important aspects of participant satisfaction and establish if and how the programme goals are attainable.

The following activities were conducted and facilitated by the research team:

- **Meetings and Discussions** with staff, manager, and board members to understand the vision and ethos of Hill Street FRC and review the history and background of the Preparation for Pre-school programme, review emergent findings, and develop logic model.
- **Desk-top research** to review context for PfP, identify related policy and practice, and determine theoretical and conceptual framework.
- **Focus Groups** with current and past parents, to elicit feedback on their understanding and experiences of the programme and with Pfp Team to discuss aims, objectives, core components and implementation of Pfp.
- **Interviews** with pre-school professionals, from settings where children have attended after participating in the Pfp programme, to capture their feedback on the effectiveness of the programme

1.6 Ethical Considerations

The research underpinning this report adheres to the guidelines provided by DCU Research Ethics Committee (<https://www.dcu.ie/researchsupport/researchethics.shtml>). All participants received information about the project and gave their written consent to participate. The project received ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee.

Table One: Schedule of Research Activities

Timeframe	Activities and Outputs
October - November 2019	Meeting with research sub-group Engaging in desk research and review of relevant literature Meeting with manager and key staff
November – December 2019	Consulting with families Engaging with FRC Staff Conducting interviews with staff in ECEC settings
January-March 2020	Reporting on preliminary findings and seeking feedback Documenting the model Drafting recommendations for future implementation Providing briefings to Stakeholders

Section Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Poor theoretical underpinning can make it difficult to explain how and why a programme might succeed or fail, (Nilsen, 2015), whereas having a clear sense of the basis for specific approaches, can offer valuable opportunities to identify factors that provide a robust rationale, predict the likelihood of implementation success and help to develop better strategies for engagement. It also enables a clearer understanding, on the part of both funders and implementers of the ideal staffing and setting for a programme.

For that reason, the Literature Review was intended to explicate the main theories and approaches, which are evident from the PfP programme, as well as discerning the core principles and concepts. This would connect with current policy frameworks and assist to situate the model within the relevant scope of practice(s), under the main pillars of *Family Support* and *Early Childhood Care and Education*.

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

2.1.1 The Bioecological Paradigm (Bronfenbrenner, 1988), suggests that parents and children occupy systems beyond their family system, in which context they need to be understood and through which their health, well-being and development can be supported (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). The ecology of human development involves the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the person lives, as this process is affected by relations between the settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. Ecological and life course theories highlight how children's transition experiences are embedded in wider social systems.

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) conceptualise the ecology of transitions, with a particular focus on the development of relationships over time, emphasising the importance of context for understanding children's experiences. The bioecological approach offers a useful lens through which to understand the necessity to engage with parents, so that they can enable their young children to navigate key transitions, within a broader network of support, within their communities.

2.1.2 Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky,1978) positions children as active agents in their own learning, whose development is intrinsically linked to social and cultural considerations within their own lives. The child internalises social interactions through which they learn and develop. In this way, learning is a collective activity in which tools, language, and social rules will have a direct impact on children as they move between the cultures of different settings.

From this perspective, any transition can be viewed as a process of co-construction, through interactions between all stakeholders such that, in socio-cultural terms, consideration of the cultural differences between home and pre-school and their impact on the transition between the settings is of great importance, in achieving continuity. Socio-cultural theory provides a framework for understanding how belief systems, cultural values, and relationships, shape the ways that the transition to pre-school may be conceptualised and experienced at the individual and macro-system levels, both directly and indirectly.

2.1.3 Competent Systems, (Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011; Urban et al., 2012) require communication and coordination between the individual and institutional levels of an early childhood system, across the dimensions of knowledge(s), practice(s) and values. Shared knowledge and understanding across the entire system are a precondition for the development of shared practices. Systemic and rights-based practices (at all levels of the system) develop from shared values, drawing on democratic dialogue between stakeholders who are working towards rights, equality, and social justice for all children and families.

This perspective seems easily applicable to the PfP programme, which creates and sustains valuable interconnectedness between systems within the community, by striving to share knowledge, practices and values which are integral to Early Childhood Education and Care, with the aims of empowering families to support children's early experiences.

2.2 Professional Engagement with Children and Families

A number of concepts and constructs, which have become increasingly evident in contemporary family support practices, are apparent in the design and delivery of the PFP programme, in Hill Street FRC. The programme is also rooted in established practices within Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC), which emphasise the importance of supporting children's transitions and seeking the meaningful involvement of parents.

2.2.1 Family Support approaches are generally based on the social ecology within which families live, recognising the interdependence between individuals and their wider contexts and the social capital, which is accrued through these interactions; the centrality of the attachments formed between parents and their children; and their resilience in managing adversity (NUI Galway)².

Gilligan (1995; 2000) suggests a three-category Family Support framework for service delivery: The first is that of *developmental Family Support*, which seeks to strengthen the social supports and coping capacities of children and adults in the context of their neighbourhood and community. *Compensatory Family Support* seeks to compensate family members for the negative effects of disadvantage or adversity in their current or previous experiences. *Protective Family Support* seeks to strengthen the coping and resilience of children and adults, in relation to identified risks or threats experienced in families (1995, p.66). Parents in poverty, or facing other challenges are found to cope better when they have one or more close relationships outside the household and these are activated to give practical, emotional, or informational support (Gilligan, 1999). This is particularly important for isolated parents, for whom access to both family centres and professionals can make a great difference (Kirk, 2003; Quinton, 2004).

The ability of NGO's, such as Hill Street FRC, to develop non-stigmatising practices involving families, has long been recognised (Eurochild, 2011). When parents are more involved in services that support them, they are more likely to be confident, less stressed, and more knowledgeable about their children's developmental needs (TUSLA, 2015).

⁵ <http://childandfamilyresearch.ie/cfrc/research-themes/familysupport/>

2.2.2 The focus, scope and direction of policy, which concerns children and families, is currently articulated in a number of key documents, including the *Strategic Framework for Family Support* (Family Support Agency, 2013), *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures – the national policy framework for children and young people 2014 – 2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014), and *First Five*, the recent *Whole-Of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families*, (Government of Ireland, 2018),

The *Strategic Framework for Family Support* (FSA, 2013), highlights the role and potential of Family Resource Centres, such as Hill Street FRC, in providing support for families at an early stage in the life-course. The Framework emphasises the importance of well-being for both parents and children, stressing the influence of proximal relationships and local social networks, as well as wider community and structural factors on the family. These factors are evident in the design and delivery of the Preparation for Pre-school programme, within the broader context of the ethos and approach to supporting families, in Hill Street FRC.

One of the transformational goals set out in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures – the national policy framework for children and young people 2014 – 2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014), is to support parents to feel more confident, informed and able to parent.

In relation to parenting, the Department's *High-Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families* (DCYA, 2015) also recognises parenting and family support, as both a style of work and a set of activities, that reinforce positive informal social networks, through integrated programmes.

One objective of *'First Five'*, the recent *Whole-Of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families*, (Government of Ireland, 2018), is that parents will benefit from high-quality, evidence-based information and services on various aspects of parenting, to support child development and positive family relationships.

Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) is an approach which is increasingly manifest in community-based programmes and projects within the Irish context, which are now being actively supported by the Child and Family Agency, (TUSLA).

PEI is based on the principle that it is necessary to intervene early and as soon as possible, to tackle problems emerging for children, young people, and their families (Eurochild, 2011). To describe the groups who are most likely to benefit from interventions which fall into the PEI category, the terms ‘Universal’ or ‘Targeted’ are normally applied, based on how the needs of participants are perceived and addressed. Universal services include general parenting programmes and early intervention programmes that are available to all families, but they can also target families regarded as being in greater need of such interventions. Targeted provision can take place at several levels, in a variety of settings, including within Family Resource Centres.

2.2.3 Practice paradigms, which are visible within Family Support programmes, include *Strengths based Practice (SBP)*, which fundamentally seeks to challenge the traditional power relationships between individuals, families, and communities, by requiring professionals to critically reflect on and seek to reconfigure the dynamics of power, to support individuals, families or communities to identify their strengths; discover their goals; explore what resources they have, or can access, and consider what other support they might need from professional services (Saleeby, 2013).

‘Empowerment’ is a founding principle of many approaches to working with families in their communities, (Beresford, 2000), to allow a shift from focussing on negatives, to identifying strengths and opportunities and the underlying philosophy of the PFP emphasises the need to empower families to support their children, as well as to develop themselves, through the practice of Community learning and development (CLD). This enables people to identify individual and collective goals, to engage in learning and take action to bring about change, (Standards Council Scotland, 2018).

Social Capital refers to the bank of informal resources that can assist people to succeed in education, employment, and health, through access to trusted persons and local communities, (Baron et al., 2000). *Resilience* is often portrayed as an outcome but can also be seen as a set of qualities or processes that enable a person to make use of internal and external resources (Schofield, 2001; Yates et al., 2003). Resilience perspectives have implications for practice and policy for children, parents, and families.

2.2.4 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), is now generally perceived as beneficial by society and there is a consensus in most developed countries, that positive early childhood experiences should be available to all children. Advances in the area of neuroscience, recognise early childhood as a critical stage for brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) and research on the positive impact of high-quality early childhood programs on outcomes, which offers an economic rationale for investment (Heckman, 2000; Belfield, 2006), has also encouraged provision of greater access to ECEC, at policy level.

Although the tradition of children attending one year of early education, within their community, is a long established one, in Ireland, since the commencement of the *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme* in 2010, the Irish state provides universal (free) access to early childhood care and education, for three hours per day, five days per week, to all children, from when they are 2 years and 8 months of age, until they enter primary school. Well in excess of 100,000 children per annum now attend a pre-school setting through the ECCE Scheme (Pobal, 2019).

The two main frameworks, which underpin contemporary ECCE practice in Ireland, are *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006), which was designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood settings, where children aged birth to six years are present and *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, (NCCA, 2009), which is intended to support parents, early childhood educators and teachers, to develop and enrich learning experiences for young children.

Developmental psychology can be seen as informing a discourse, which contributes to the construction of our image of children, guiding our understanding of their needs and their rights (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999). Historically, *Child Development* is a foundational concept of ECEC, through which childhood is framed, as a natural and universal process of progressive transformations (or stages) in children's physical, mental, cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral competencies. These transformations are driven by interactions between maturational processes and children's structuring and restructuring of their own experiences, as they expand their capacities for thinking and reasoning (Vogler, Crivello & Woodhead, 2008).

A modern shift away from a purely developmental perspective, however, allows a more dynamic view of children, as explorers with boundless curiosity, social actors with their own unique goals, interests, and ways to communicate (Doek, Krappmann and Lee, 2006). This emphasises the importance of children developing skills such as problem-solving, social competence and determination (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002) and as such, offers a more relational view of transitions in early childhood, providing a rationale for offering young children opportunities to foster their independence, build self-reliance, develop concentration, communication, and language skills. (O’Kane and Hayes, 2006).

Attachment Theory concerns the ability of human infants to attach to a caregiver figure (Main et al, 2005). Early childhood is an important period for the development of representations of the self and others, which is influenced by the child’s experiences of attachment relationships (Thompson, 2000). However, the quality of the attachment relationships will vary depending on the nature and quality of the attachment (Bowlby, 1982), including the level of maternal sensitivity (Ainsworth et al, 1978). Children will have secure attachment relationships if the primary caregiver is able to differentiate their needs and emotional states and respond to them in a positive and consistent way.

Attachment theory may provide a means to better understand why some children do not adapt to preschool settings (Sroufe, 2005). Teaching strategies, such as facilitating play experiences, modelling play, leaving children to freely choose their play, may assume children’s abilities to initiate activities, trust the educator, move freely in the environment, appear to assume an early history of positive attachment, so that such children will have an easier time meeting the curricular expectations, than children with insecure attachment relationships (Bourdieu, 1973).

Parental Engagement in ECEC, can be broadly considered as partnerships, which are forged between families, settings, schools and communities, not only to raise awareness among parents of the benefits of engaging in their child’s education, but also to ‘provide them with the skills to do so’ (Emerson et al, 2012). In fact, successfully engaging with parents has been described as the only intervention with real potential to narrow the gap in achievement between children from different backgrounds, which has a strong enough evidence base “to warrant further investment and work” (Goodall 2017 p1).

However, “light touch” parent involvement activities, which are sometimes observed in Irish pre-schools, are not associated with positive impact on the proximal processes that matter for children (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010) and do not typically create strong ties or meaningful gains in social capital (Granovetter, 1973; Small, 2017).

The rationale for promoting *parent well-being and skill development* within ECEC settings is supported by research, that finds the interests of young children and parents to be both compatible and synergistic (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Fuligni, 2000), and emerging evidence points to the potential for improvements in both parent and child outcomes, by providing supports for parents within early childhood settings (Ansari, Purtell, & Gershoff, 2016; Grindal et al., 2016; Harding et al., 2017).

2.3 Transitions in Early Childhood

Although not the focus of a wide range of literature, the first important transition experienced by young children is the one from home to the ECCE setting (O’Kane, 2016). Transitions, such as from home to pre-school, can be a time of stress for children and their families, and require effective management for the child to successfully adapt (Graham, 2012). Personal characteristics and dispositions, family and cultural background, and previous experience of early childhood settings or transitions, all impact on children’s adjustment to a new setting.

In current practice, the theme of *Identity and Belonging* in Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) emphasises the importance of children feeling that they belong in a setting, having access to secure relationships and connections, where links with family and community are acknowledged and nurtured. The Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide (2015) describes a transition as the process of moving from one situation to another and well-functioning transitions are seen as supportive of a child’s current and future capacities for learning and development (Síolta, 2006), such that we need to understand that the transition from one environment to another is an important milestone for all children (Government of Ireland, 2018).

Understanding the social and cultural dimensions of early childhood, enables sensitivity to the diverse ways in which child development is constructed and enacted, including in the expectations of the young child and for their early education. Research on young children's experiences, point to the benefits of involving parents particularly where the home culture differs from the prevailing philosophy within educational settings (Sabol, 2018) and also emphasise the need to make more explicit links between children's socio-cultural contexts and their transition experiences (Vogler, Crivello & Woodhead, 2008). Research highlights the need for greater understanding of the various barriers that may impact on caregivers and point to the extent to which parents and communities may benefit from an increased sense of connection with their children's care and educational institutions (Vogler et al, 2008).

In General Comment 7 (2006), the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child encouraged those working with young children, to draw on beliefs and knowledge about early childhood in ways that are appropriate to local circumstances and changing practices, reinforcing the importance of understanding child development goals, and seeking the differential involvement of family members in key transitions to best support children, as they experience change.

Consultation and communication are found to support smooth transitions, by enabling the sharing of information, to ensure a 'welcome' for the child and family in the new setting (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002), by establishing agreed understandings and promoting positive outcomes for all (Margetts & Kienig, 2013),. This will address continuity issues which arise when children change from one educational setting to another (Woodhead and Moss, 2007) by providing links within and between settings, and supporting the close involvement of parents, practitioners and other relevant professionals" (TUSLA, 2013).

While there may limited concrete examples of specific programmes, which focus on the transition to pre-school from home, some evidence appears to validate the approach of the PFP programme, in finding that parents may guide children "with cultural mediation tools, such as play and routines" which enables children to successfully adapt to their new "pupil identity" (Lam and Pollard, 2006: 131–132).

Documentation tends to be a focal point for tools which enable communication and connection between settings. *Portfolios* have been found to be useful in building relationships between children and professionals in a new setting, as they present a multi-dimensional perspective of the child as learner (Peters, et al, 2009). These kind of documents can provide a base for power for the child, who controls and is in charge of interactions in the new setting, involving their own information. Portfolios enable teachers to learn about the child's past learning experiences, and can improve home-school links, while they also serve as a tool to enable the children to learn about each other, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment (Peters et al, 2009, p.8).

In the Irish context, *Mo Scéal: Moving from Preschool to Primary* (NCCA, 2018) comprises templates, which were developed by NCCA, to support the transition between pre-schools and primary schools. *Mo Scéal* means 'my story' and the templates help to tell the story of the child's learning and development. This information is then shared by pre-schools with parents and with their consent, with the primary school.

The Preparation for Pre-school programme, in the context of the Literature

The PfP programme draws heavily on a *bio-ecological perspective* and is grounded on *socio-cultural theory*. The model of engagement which has been developed, addresses the need for communication and coordination between the individual and institutional levels of an early childhood system, to share knowledge, practices and values, to work towards rights, equality and social justice for all children and families³.

The PfP programme can be categorised as a *developmental family support* intervention, which seeks to strengthen the social supports and coping capacities of children and adults, in the context of their neighbourhood and community. Several current policy initiatives, which highlight the need to actively support parents, in their parenting role, provide a robust rationale for the programme. The PfP programme can be regarded as a *Prevention and Early Intervention* initiative; the universal nature of the programme does not exclude the potential to adapt it, in order to focus on one or more specific target groups.

³ Competent Systems: Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011; Urban et al., 2012

Several key elements which have been found to enhance partnerships with parents, are evident in the PfP, which employs strength based practices, based on the principle of empowerment, to share knowledge and promote resilience among families, drawing on accessible, informal resources, as well as practitioner skills.

The PfP programme is framed around a contemporary view of children, which emphasises the need for them to become confident and self-reliant and recognises the importance of their early experiences of attachment relationships, in making positive transitions, to support the multiple dimensions of their development and well-being.

The programme also offers practical examples of how to implement the core pillars of contemporary practice in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland, which are *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework (2006) *and* *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009), as well as supporting principles and practices, which are contained in the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCYA, 2016).

Although it has proved challenging to identify specific interventions, from the Literature, to compare with the PfP programme, this in itself points to the responsive and creative nature of the model, which has been developed in response to the needs of a community. What is encouraging is that the work of a number of authors (Lam and Pollard 2006;; Vogler et al, 2008; Sabol, 2018) validates the need to recognise and address cultural barriers, which may prevent positive connections between families and educational settings within their communities.

Therefore, the PfP programme may offer a useful exemplar, of how parents can be encouraged and empowered, by approaches which recognise the sociocultural dimensions of their family life, to become more actively invested in processes and structures, which support their children's early education.

Section Three: Feedback and Findings from Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement was a vital element of the research process, through which to capture a range of perspectives and opinions on the *Preparation for Pre-school programme*. This Section sets out the feedback and findings which emerged from the various elements of consultation and engagement with key stakeholders.

Parents and practitioners contributed as follows:

- 29 current and past parents participated in Focus Groups
- 5 Hill Street FRC staff members engaged in Consultations
- 14 Early Childhood Professionals (from 5 settings) provided responses to Interview questions.

3.1 Context

The overall philosophy and ethos, which is evident in Hill Street FRC, supports a vision of enabling multidimensional, meaningful engagement with families through which to empower and enable children and adults, to participate on a meaningful basis both within the FRC and the wider community.

A core theme which emerged from the consultation process with stakeholders, is the importance of the underpinning values, and practices, as a context for the successful implementation of the Preparation for Pre-school programme. Daily activities reflect and promote values, which emphasise equality and inclusion, actively promoting respect for diversity, making culture visible and valued.

The critical components, which have been categorised by the Research team, under the headings of *Values which facilitate engagement; Culturally sensitive, inclusive practices and Processes* which are *enabled through Pfp*, are set out in Figure One, (in Section Four). These elements were found in the initial and ongoing engagement with the Manager, staff, and Board members, and compellingly demonstrated in feedback on the programme, which came from current and past parents.

3.2 Parents' Experiences

Four Focus Groups took place with current and past parents, in which they enthusiastically shared their experiences of the Preparation for Preschool programme in Hill Street FRC. Participants in the Focus Groups comprised 26 parents, one grandparent and two au pairs, who bring children to the group, on behalf of parents who are at work.

3.2.1 Access to PFP

When asked how they had heard about the Preparation for Pre-school programme, Focus Group participants described the following information and referral mechanisms:

- Within Hill Street FRC
- At the Playground
- Public Health Nurse
- Older child's school
- Friends/family/neighbours
- G.P.'s Secretary
- Key worker in homeless service
- TUSLA family support worker

The range of points of access to information about PFP demonstrates the extent to which the broader Community is aware of the programme and prepared to recommend it, as well as the high level of engagement by families in other groups in Hill Street FRC. Parents who were involved in the Focus Groups also spoke about often recommending the PFP programme to other parents.

One grandparent commented that he had been taking the bus to bring his grandchild to a parent and toddler group in another area, which he had found by searching on the internet. When one of his neighbours told him about the PFP group in Hill Street FRC, he described how happy and relieved he was to be able to walk to the centre and find that he could meet parents and carers from the area in which he had been living for several years, without mixing with anyone else, His grand-daughter could now make friends with children who live in her locality. Other parents also described trying to access play and activities for their young children in venues, where they had just not felt the same sense of connection or confidence.

One parent described how she had lived in the community for over ten years, but never knew about Hill Street FRC, even though she had often passed by the centre, until another parent mentioned the PfP and she was delighted to sign up.

3.2.2 Benefits of PfP for Children and Parents

Participants identified a wide range of benefits to their children and for themselves, from their involvement in the Preparation for Pre-school programme. These have been grouped in two tables, according to the themes which emerged, which are presented alongside related comments, representing the authentic voices and views of parents and carers.

Table Two: Parents/Carers perceptions of how PfP benefits children

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Comments</i>
<i>Friendships</i>	They are still friends now My child has no siblings, so it was really good for them to meet other kids They still recognise children (from PfP) when they see them
<i>Independence</i>	My child likes packing their own bag
<i>Confidence</i>	They show us at home what they are learning and what songs and music they like
<i>Positive Separation from Parent</i>	The gradual process of separation (from 10 mins to 1.5 hours) really helped both of us (adult and child)
<i>Structure and Routine</i>	Tidying up after play and washing their hands, gives them good habits
<i>Language and Social Skills</i>	The child is talking more, getting assertive, using their words, finding their voice My child really learned how to share
<i>Play Activities</i>	My child learned so many new things It gave me the opportunity to see my child's potential I never provided messy play activities at home
<i>Participation in Snack Time</i>	My child wouldn't eat well at home, so it was really helpful It was my child's favourite time My child tried different snack foods and learned good eating habits from others My children would never sit and eat at the table at home
<i>Sense of Belonging</i>	My child never wants to go home from here; he wants to stay My child calls it "my Hill Street" If it was an option, he would come every day They love the 'Hello' song
<i>Making a Successful Transition</i>	My child loved starting pre-school I saw other children being really upset but he wasn't I really think it helped her to make the adjustment

Table Three: Parents/carers perceptions of how PFP benefits Parents

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Comments</i>
<i>Empowerment</i>	<p>Very informative- good sharing of information</p> <p>It is very helpful for parents</p> <p>You can access parenting courses and activities</p> <p>I never would have reached out to be part of the school my child is in now, if I hadn't been in Preparation for Pre-school</p>
<i>Making Friendships</i>	<p>I can socialise with other parents</p> <p>It is a chance to make connections on a deeper level</p>
<i>Opportunities for Peer support</i>	<p>Hearing other parents talk about their experiences gives me the feeling I am not alone as a parent</p> <p>I really feel comfortable telling people stuff</p> <p>You can discuss challenges and get advice on things like potty training</p>
<i>Positive Separation from Child</i>	<p>I am relieved of separation anxiety; not anxious any more</p> <p>Some parents have never left their child with anyone before</p> <p>I had my first "child-free moments"</p> <p>Good to be in the same building as my child is being cared for</p> <p>Other parents provide reassurance if you are feeling anxious</p> <p>Some parents don't have any relatives here, so they are all the child knows</p>
<i>Support, Advice and Feedback from Staff</i>	<p>Really good to hear about how your child is doing</p> <p>They Really know their stuff</p> <p>Staff Modelling strategies for engaging with children</p> <p>Learned about how to name children's feelings from staff</p> <p>I learned how to tell a story from watching staff do it</p> <p>Interaction with staff feels individualised</p> <p>You don't feel judged</p>
<i>Increased Cultural Awareness</i>	<p>There is no way I would have learned as much about other cultures and got to know different people, like Chinese or Roma parents</p> <p>People who are new to the country can ask questions they might be afraid to ask elsewhere</p>

3.2.3 Additional Feedback

The focus group discussions with past and current parents, clearly demonstrated the strong sense of connection that parents feel with Hill Street FRC, through participating in the Preparation for Pre-school programme, along with their deep appreciation for the 'welcome' that families receive and a palpable sense of pride:

“I am proud to bring my parents to Hill Street, when they visit from China

Feedback from past parents and carers also indicated the frequency and extent to which many children happily return to Hill Street FRC, to access summer camps and after-school care, with many parents also remaining involved in groups, through which long term relationships are maintained.

3.2.4 Suggestions for Improvement

By far the strongest suggestion for improvement, which was made within each of the Parent Focus Groups was to have the PFP programme running on more than one day per week. The length of the session is regarded as appropriate, but while some parents would like the session to run every day, most parents feel that three days per week would be ideal.

Other ideas put forward include:

- Having more cultural days from other countries
- Having access to a more advanced English class while children are in their session
- Having a bigger premises, with a garden to use
- Organising outings for siblings
- Receiving feedback from the local preschools and from the staff of Hill Street FRC, on how children progress.
- Having access to an activity space for parents to meet informally with children, when it is raining or very cold
- Disseminating the Research, so that PFP can be set up in other locations in the area

3.3 Professional Perspectives

To capture the perspectives of the professionals involved in the Pfp programme and those potentially impacted by it, it was decided to consult with staff within Hill Street FRC, (through detailed focus group discussion, and some individual meetings) and to interview ECEC staff and Managers, in settings where Pfp children attend.

3.3.1 Pfp Child Development Team

The current team includes a Child and Family Team Leader who comes from a tradition of community development, who sees the importance of intervening early in work with families, to engage them in holistic supports. There are also two Child and Family Workers with a background in ECE. One is fluent in Romanian and Spanish and is therefore able to speak to some of the children and parents in their native languages, a practice which all staff regard as “a real bonus”. Another joined the team more recently and having worked elsewhere, she highlighted the contrast between the nature of engagement with parents through Pfp and the prevailing attitude to settling children into in ECEC settings, describing the programme as a “lovely support for parents”.

A student who was on work-experience in the group at the time, articulated her observations of how children develop and flourish, through their participation in creative play.

Understandings among staff, of the rationale for the Preparation for Pre-school programme, focused on the core themes of separation, independence, language development and diversity (both culturally and in other ways, which may lead to social exclusion and isolation). Social interaction for both children and parents is regarded by staff as a key element of the programme, as is the daily routine, which includes regular language-based activities, such as songs and stories, and opportunities to learn to take part in group activity and snack-times.

Themes are seen as an important way to enable home learning opportunities, allowing parents to provide continuity in activities and approaches. Parents getting to have a separate space with each other (in a group led by the Community worker) is regarded as extremely valuable, as it allows them to focus on themselves as individuals and to make a positive break from their children.

The importance of supporting the transition to pre-school was described mainly in the context of helping children to become more confident and independent, but also supporting parents to learn to allow children to experience things on their own, which they can often struggle with. Children are regarded by the team as more likely to follow rules, routines, and structured activities, and engage in turn-taking and sharing in ECCE settings, having had those opportunities in advance of attending a pre-school.

The Team was invited to review the aims and objectives of the PfP programme and asked to prioritise the most important ones, which relate to children.

Staff selected priority areas, as:

1. Supporting a successful separation and fostering healthy attachment
2. Encouraging routine and structure
3. Facilitating language development opportunities, especially for children with ESL
4. Fostering socio-emotional development, independence, self-care skills, cooperation with others and conflict resolution
5. Offering activities and learning experiences, based on children's needs and interests

In the context of a discussion about how to conceptualise the PfP, although the Child Development team in Hill Street FRC, initially highlighted the fact that the PfP could not, in itself be regarded as ECEC *provision*, (in the traditional sense of offering a daily session to children over three years of age), they responded positively to a suggestion by the research team, that the programme could in fact be conceptualised as a model, which reflects the knowledge, values and practices, which are integral to the ECEC system, grounded in contemporary practice frameworks and designed to enable partnerships with parents, which actively support their children's development and well-being.

Curriculum practices in the PfP session for children, are visibly rooted in the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), with staff emphasising that they also engage parents in the language of Aistear, to ensure that they have an understanding of the framework, when they later hear about it in their child's pre-school or primary school.

There is also an explicit commitment to understanding and reflecting the culture and ethnicity of the families who attend the PFP programme. This is reflected in images and symbols, which are clearly evident in the environment and examples which were provided by staff, of the diverse range of celebrations, traditions, parental expectations and parenting styles, which have emerged within the group.

Additional feedback from staff reflected an implicit, shared commitment, to providing a nurturing atmosphere for the young children who attend the PFP programme and highlighted the importance and value of the broader context of Hill Street FRC, in being able to offer additional benefits to families, such as parenting programmes and access to both a Child Therapist and Public Health Nurse. Staff also provide information to families on specific supports, if required, such as the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), which is available in ECEC settings, to support children 'with a disability'.

Issues which the team identified as impacting on the delivery of the PFP programme, include the challenges of dealing with children, whose needs may be difficult to address within the group and whose parents often require a lot of support and information, to enable them to access (and sometimes accept), a diagnosis. Homelessness has increasingly emerged within the PFP group in recent times, as a factor which may create additional pressures on families, and the team indicated that they occasionally observe what they describe as "chaotic parenting".

More practical challenges can arise when parents have a younger child or infant who they need to bring along with them (which happens quite frequently); when parents require a significant amount of support from staff to access important information or services, and from the frequency of the group, which in recent years has had to be reduced to one session a week, in order to cater for a greater demand from families, for places. There is a concern that this could actually be reducing levels of attendance, as staff feel that parents are more likely to attend when the group is held over several days per week, rather than just one.

Areas which could be improved include the connections between staff and local pre-schools, which are currently somewhat ad hoc and informal. Staff would welcome having more time to support families and to plan and review the programme, together.

3.3.2 Professionals in ECEC Settings

Although 12 settings were identified as having children who had previously attended the PfP programme in Hill Street FRC, from contact with these settings, some reported not having any children from PfP currently on their books and of those that do, five indicated their openness to being interviewed. One of these is a private setting, one is a pre-school within a Primary School and three are Community Early Childhood Education and Care services.

In all, five Managers and nine Educators from these settings, spoke to the Researcher, the majority of whom have been working within settings in the North Inner City for many years. Some of the settings have an existing relationship with Hill Street FRC and staff in several settings are already involved in linking in with local Primary schools, to focus on the transition to school, from pre-school. Most of the settings mentioned the Aistear Framework (NCCA, 2009) in describing their own curriculum.

In the context of their familiarity with the Preparation for Pre-school programme, most of the ECEC professionals indicated they had known about the programme, for approximately three years, as they had some children attending, who had participated in the PfP and one staff member having attended as a parent, with their own child.

One Manager heard about the programme from a parent who told her that several other children in the group had also attended PfP. Some have a perception that the programme seems to have changed somewhat over the years and view the current group as play-based, offering opportunities for children and parents to meet each other, with the main objective of preparing children to leave their parents, for the first time.

Apart from two professionals who are directly involved in Hill Street FRC, in a voluntary capacity, and some informal visits from local teachers, no current staff has any direct experience of the PfP or of receiving any visits from the PfP team. Some of the settings do make referrals to PfP, if children are too young to start in their pre-schools and/or awaiting a place. Several settings maintain links with Hill Street FRC, to share information on events, or direct families to access the range of supports available.

ECEC Professionals clearly and frequently identified and described benefits which they had directly observed and experienced, from children in their settings who have taken part in the PfP.

Their comments are set out below:

Children are easier to settle in

Settling in was instant

They “take direction better”

They seem a bit more independent and more confident

Better separation was definitely more evident

They seemed to trust more easily

Separation is much easier, and they get used to routine much quicker

Language development was very rapid, which indicated that she had previously been engaged in activities (through PfP)

Children know each other when they have been in PfP together

Although the children might still be shy, they seem more ready

*Children are familiar with activities (like sand) and ready to get stuck in
We had one child who was suffering from separation anxiety and cried every day for three weeks. The child was referred to PfP and his place was deferred until the following year, when he made a very successful transition.*

I definitely see the PfP children as more secure, knowing their parent will be back, whereas other children find the separation far more daunting.

Benefits for Parents, which were articulated by ECCE Professionals, include:

- Peace of mind, especially when parents have language barriers
- Confidence in leaving before the other parents, because she knew her child would be happy and secure
- Closer relationships with other PFP parents
- PFP parents will “hang around” more after the session, which is good
- Parents who have been involved have encouraged other parents in the setting to participate in community events in Hill Street FRC
- Parents seem to be more open to engaging with staff

One manager made a specific comment on the value of involving parents in the PFP:

“The fact that parents are involved is so important: Until parents get what they need, they can’t give children what they need”.

3.2 Communication and engagement between the PFP team and Local Pre-schools

This emerged as a central theme in the discussions with ECEC Professionals. In some cases, staff did not know that families had been involved in PFP at all, or until the parent mentioned it to them in passing. Suggestions and ideas from ECEC managers and staff about how links between the PFP team and pre-schools how could work more effectively, mainly focused on the benefits to ECEC settings from having information in advance about children and families and on the interest from ECEC staff in the programme itself.

Documentation which could be shared to support the child’s transition was mentioned frequently in a positive way and some pre-schools indicated that they would be happy to host visits from PFP children. Mechanisms which could allow pre-schools to provide feedback on the PFP children would be positively received by pre-schools, who themselves are open to completing a ‘one-page’ assessment of the children’s progress in settling in, to Hill Street FRC.

3.2.1 Information which would be welcome by ECEC settings, was described on two levels:

(i) Child and Family

- ❖ *I would like specific information about the child's personality, likes and dislikes*
- ❖ *It would be good to have a document which could come with the child, maybe based on Aistear, similar to Mo Scéal?*
- ❖ *We have children with younger siblings, which our staff could refer*
- ❖ *Something like Mo Scéal would be really positive, particularly in affirming the child's participation in pre-school*
- ❖ *Sharing information about children's interests and activities they enjoy*
- ❖ *Mechanism for Feedback on PFP Children – previously used Santa Barbara. Staff would be open to completing*
- ❖ *It would be nice to know what works well for a child, their interests*
- ❖ *We would love some more child-level information (like Mo Scéal) as well as on how we can best support the family*

(ii) Preparation for Pre-School programme

- ❖ *Knowing about the PFP approach and curriculum practices, as well as making tangible links about individual children and families would really help*
- ❖ *I would love to have known more about PFP to recommend it to parents*
- ❖ *Knowing about aspects of the daily routine, such as a welcome song, which maybe we could use too?*
- ❖ *Communication about the programme so our staff could be more informed would be welcome*
- ❖ *I would be happy to incorporate some of the practices, as well as the techniques for comforting and reassuring children*

3.3 Key Recommendations from the Consultation Process

1. Frequency of the Group

It might be more constructive to invite the same group of parents and children to attend the session twice per week, to allow for greater continuity and attendance, which could potentially improve the quality of engagement with families and enhance the impact of the programme.

2. Emphasis on Cultural Diversity

While not currently an explicit component of PfP, the benefits of having a staff member who is competent in the home language(s) of families appears to be an important one, which could be articulated in the objectives and operation of the programme.

3. Connections with Pre-Schools

Relationships should be strengthened with local ECEC settings, to forge meaningful links and build partnerships between professionals to more effectively support the important transition of young children from home to pre-school. It may be timely to explore how the documentation which has been developed by NCCA to support the transition to school from pre-school (Mo Scéal), could be adapted to provide a similar resource, which could be utilised by the PfP to share information with ECEC settings.

4. Links to Local Service Design

Research should be disseminated and shared with key local agencies (YPAR; CYPSC) to offer the PfP as a model to address the needs of under 3's, in the North Inner City, instead of, or as well as providing 'childcare', to improve services for this age group.

5. Target Group(s)

Further consideration needs to be made of the potential target group(s) for the PfP programme, in the context of assessing if vulnerable families can or will access the programme, as well as exploring whether it is possible (or necessary) to specifically adapt the model, to include families of children with specific needs, or other issues.

Section Four: Documentation of the PfP Programme to Guide Implementation

Introduction

The PfP programme can be described as an emergent, innovative initiative. The level of evidence available, suggests that it would qualify as an *evidence-informed programme*, with the inclusion of a strong logic model and written guidelines.

The developers of the programme are anxious to share their expertise and experience in delivering the PfP, to enable replication of the model within other settings. To address this objective of the Research, this section sets out a detailed description of the core components of the Preparation for Pre-school programme and provides tools and templates which are intended to assist with monitoring and evaluation. However, it is vital that the values and ethos which underpin the PfP programme are also made explicit, as these have been found to be fundamental to creating the conditions for implementing the model successfully.

4.1 Background to PfP

The Preparation for Pre-school (PfP) programme was devised by staff in Hill Street Family Resource Centre, in response to a need perceived by the team, for children from their area, to be supported to make a positive transition to pre-school. Originally engaging with children while parents/carers left the premises, the programme evolved, to include parents in a more substantial way, and although the group originally engaged the same families twice weekly, its increasing popularity within the community, has resulted in two different groups of children now attending once per week, from September to June.

4.2 Values and Ethos

It is essential to note that the specific ethos of Hill Street FRC and the core principles which guide broader engagement with parents and children, have been found to be fundamental factors in creating the conditions for successful and effective implementation of PfP. Therefore, any scaling of this innovation to other sites, will first require a thorough analysis of these integral, enabling influences, (which are set out in Figure One).

Figure One:

Core values and practices, which are integral to the effective implementation of the Preparation for Pre-school programme, to generate positive outcomes, for children and families



4.3 Programme Overview

Engagement with parents and carers, through the PFP, is framed to enhance their understanding of child development and learning and equip them to support their children to separate from them, by providing:

- A secure space in which to facilitate activities, which encourage children's language development, social and emotional skills, independence, and self-care.
- Continuity in the relationship with staff, for both parents and children, supported by a key worker system with a ratio of six children to each member of the Child Development team
- Modelling of strategies, which parents can directly observe, when staff are engaging in activities, dealing with challenging behaviour, or helping children to resolve conflicts.

Parents initially attend the children's group with their children, before gradually withdrawing from the session, for increasingly longer periods, to attend a separate parents' group, facilitated by a Community Development Worker. This group aims to support parents to identify their own needs and draw on peer support, which assists in breaking down barriers, building friendships and forming social networks.

Through facilitated group work sessions, parents become more confident, develop their own voice, and become more involved collectively in the work and the activities of the setting and in the wider community.

4.4 Aims

- To provide a specific, child centred programme, to prepare parents to support their children between the ages of 1 year 9 months to 3 years, to develop their skills, confidence and competency, to make a successful transition from home to preschool and to separate with ease from their parents, whilst maintaining a healthy attachment.
- To address cultural barriers and create opportunities for meaningful relationship-building between parents, in a participatory and creative way, by providing parents with their own space, fostering their community spirit and sense of belonging.

4.5 Objectives

- To enable parents/carers to participate and become more confidently involved in their role in their child's educational and social development
- To support a healthy attachment between parents/carers, and children
- To develop the skills and confidence of the parents/carers to extend their knowledge of child development and play into the home learning environment
- To provide an age and stage appropriate stimulating play environment to enrich the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development of the child
- To encourage and foster children's creativity, imagination, independence, and individualism
- To promote and support language and numeracy skills, through the medium of play, books, art, songs, and stories
- To provide information to families on accessing local preschools and other services within the community and advocate on their behalf, when requested
- To utilise the Aistear and Síolta frameworks and integrate them into the PfP programme
- To develop strong links with local preschool settings, to ensure a smooth transition for children
- To provide opportunities for families to celebrate cultural diversity, to socialise together and to foster a sense of belonging and identity, within their community
- To provide and develop programmes based on parents needs and interests
- To enhance the capacity of parents to take on leadership roles and become actively involved in Hill Street FRC and in the wider community
- To provide one-to-one support to families, when requested
- To monitor and evaluate the PfP programme, with parents, children, and local preschool providers

4.6 Partnerships with Parents/Carers

4.6.1 Recruitment of Families

Registration for children aged between 21 months and 3 years of age takes place at the end of August in the year prior to children starting Preschool. During registration, families are informed about the aims and objectives of the PfP programme and are provided with a Getting to Know Me (the child) questionnaire (Appendix Two) to complete before beginning the programme in early September.

4.6.2 Phases of Engagement

Phase 1: During the month of September, both the parents/carers and children participate in the PfP programme, familiarising themselves with the staff and the session structure. Relationships are formed between staff, children, and carers, ensuring carers are confident in the staff's role in caring for their children and the children also gain confidence and form relationships with the staff. During these initial sessions, carers are encouraged to play and engage with their children, whilst staff consistently model positive interactions, using descriptive language and conflict resolution strategies with the children. This practice aims to support children to regulate their emotions while also providing carers with the skills to support their children's independence.

Children become familiar with the set routine that is followed at each session, they know what to expect and what is expected of them, they get used to adapting to different requirements at different times.

Phase 2: During the month of October carers and children begin a process of separation, initially for 5 minutes then gradually building to full separation by the end of December. Staff learn key phrases in the child's mother tongue in order to reassure the child of their carers return and to provide a sense of familiarity.

Throughout the separation process, staff continuously update carers on their child's progress and provide support to parents on their role as carers, and in particular on how they can support their child with the separation. Carers stay in the same building and are available to return to the room to settle a child if required. During this process, carers attend a group, which is facilitated by a Community Development worker, to provide a relaxed, participatory learning environment.

Throughout the programme, carers are provided with information on local services and supports as and when required, as well as information on local pre-schools. Referrals to preschools are made when deemed necessary. Parents are linked in with public health nurses, if there is any concern around a child's development.

Individual support is available to parents/carers, either during sessions, or on a one to one basis. Advice and support which is available to parents/carers often relate to aspects of child development, or specific issues such as toilet training, behaviour management, healthy eating, and sleep routines. During conversations with carers, staff promote the importance and value of play for children's health, well-being, and overall development.

4.7 Delivery of the PFP Sessions

Each PFP group has a sign-in board with photos of the carers along with their names. This enables both carers and staff to familiarise themselves with the names of those attending the groups. The sessions follow monthly themes. Toys, books, sensory equipment, songs, and stories reflect the theme. This allows for extending the child's areas of interest, providing variety, and expanding learning and vocabulary.

Specific areas of child development can be incorporated into the programme throughout the year, to provide opportunities for carers to be more involved during the programme and to extend learning opportunities, to their home environment. It also helps parents to understand the importance of play in building the child's early understanding of concepts, such as literacy and numeracy.

Diversity and inclusion are embedded within the programme, represented through the use of photographic images, translated materials, books, diversity dolls, gender equality messages and symbols. Intercultural community celebrations and events are promoted and conversations are facilitated, on topics related to diversity.

4.7.1 The Learning Environment

- The learning environment is set up as an ECCE room, with different spaces, including a home corner, table-top area, dress-up stand, sand play table; a water play area; shelving with creative materials and construction toys; a cosy corner.
- Activities and materials which support multiculturalism, include toys and pictures with fruit and vegetables from around the world, diversity dolls, kitchen tools and images that are aimed at challenging gender stereotypes.
- Words and signs are displayed in English and in other languages (to reflect the languages spoken by families attending).
- Images of children and adults who use the centre are displayed on walls. There are also adult sized seats for parents and carers.





4.7.2 The Daily Routine

The session is designed to, offer both parents and children, valuable opportunities for interaction and socialising. The usual practice, after hanging up coats, is to start with Free Play, during which children choose activities, which they may pursue alone or with other children, with support from educators (and parents). Guided by the Aistear curriculum, children are encouraged to explore different areas of the room and to develop their own preferences and areas of interests. Staff are at all times interacting with the children, encouraging the children to expand on their own play. When carers are in the room, staff discuss with them the value of child led play and the benefits of each area of play in the room.

Sample Session Plan

9.15 Children arrive in the playroom with their carers. They are encouraged to remove and hang up their own coats, followed by good hand hygiene. This promotes their independence from day one, while also teaching routine.

10.35 Children are given 5 minutes notice before Tidy Up time, to allow them time to finish their play. This also supports them to transition smoothly to their next activity.

10.40 Playing the Tidy Up song, all children, staff, and parents (if in the room) participate in putting away all the toys and equipment. This helps with transitioning, and teaching children to care and take responsibility for their environment. It also encourages collective participation.

10.45 Once the playroom is tidy, children are encouraged to carry their own chairs and to sit in a large circle. Depending on the monthly theme, the songs and stories vary. The welcome song supports children sense of identity and belonging. The process of coming together supports the children to develop the ability to sit, listen, concentrate, and participate, which in turn prepares them for preschool.

10.55 When Large group is over, children are encouraged to return their chairs to the tables and to wash their hands. This emphasises routine and fosters their independence.

11.00 Once sitting down, children are provided with a healthy snack and a drink of water. They are encouraged to sit at the table together; to eat independently using a spoon, and to sample a variety of fruit and vegetables. Once snack time is over children are encouraged to tidy up after themselves and wash their hands. Sitting and eating together fosters children's social and independence skills, while also raising carers awareness of their child's ability to be independent and confident.

11.15 Children put on their own coats and say goodbye

4.8 Monitoring and Evaluation

- Observations of children are recorded within the sessions and learning stories are used to share experiences.
- Parents are given regular feedback from the child development team on their children's progress along with relevant information and support to understand and be able to support the process of a positive transition to pre-school, for their young child.
- Parents perspectives are sought throughout the year, including on three occasions, using evaluation methods.
- Engagement between PfP staff and local pre-school professionals to share information should take place in advance of children making a formal transition. This can include providing information on the Preparation for pre-school programme as well as individual children and families (with parental consent).
- Staff follow up with settings, to enquire about the progress of children, after they begin to attend their pre-schools,

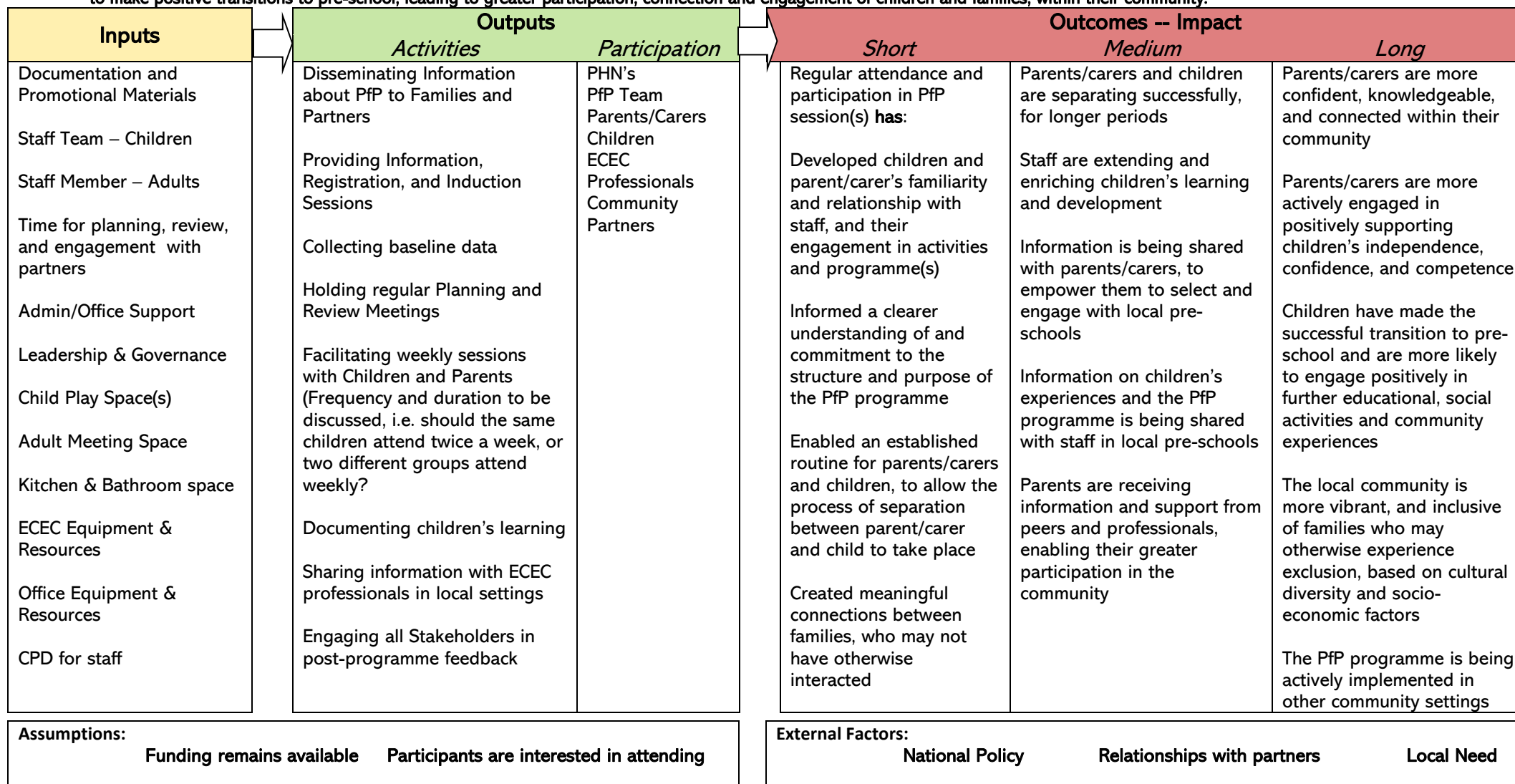
4.8.1 Logic Model

A Logic Model is a systematic and visual way to present an understanding of the relationships between the resources to operate a programme, activities and changes/results you hope to achieve (Kellogg Foundation, 2004). Logic models are actionable plans, with clear outcomes and explicit steps for solving problems, based on series of 'if-then' relationships. Underlying each of these are a number of assumptions about the way the programme is intended to work and the principles that are guiding it in the context of the environment in which it is designed to operate. Logic models can assist to clarify underlying beliefs; challenge assumptions and strengthen logic; communicate the core purpose of the programme to the larger audience and make a case for financial investment.

The logic model for the programme was developed by the Hill Street FRC team. Any team implementing the PfP should engage in a process of discussing, defining, and agreeing, the various elements of their own model. The logic model can then be used as a mechanism through which to monitor and assess their work and as a tool for planning, reviewing, and adapting implementation of PfP.

Figure Two: Logic Model for *Preparation for Pre-school programme*

Goal: To improve the knowledge and skills of parents and carers, who face challenges arising from social exclusion, so that they can actively support their young children to make positive transitions to pre-school, leading to greater participation, connection and engagement of children and families, within their community.



4.8.2. Documenting Progress

A crucial aspect of evidence-informed practice is using data from a range of sources to inform decisions, to ensure that the progress and effectiveness of the programme can be captured. Indicators relating to activities set out in the Logic Model, will provide information on the degree to which identified outcomes are being achieved, by collecting information on specific aspects of programme implementation, which will assist to chart and monitor progress; enhance knowledge and add to evidence; improving planning and influencing more accurate and action-focused evaluation (See Template One).

4.8.3. Capturing Outcomes

An approach drawing on *Results-Based Accountability* (Friedman, 2005) will assist to capture outcomes across two key dimensions:

Quantity (How much did we do?), and Quality (How well did we do it?), combined with measuring Effort (How hard did we try?) and Effect (Is anyone better off?).

This approach will enable the Preparation for Pre-school programme to be monitored, assessed, and reported on.

Figure Three: *Results Based Accountability*

	Quantity	Quality
Effort	How much did we do?	How well did we do it?
Effect	How much change did we produce?	What quality of change did we produce

Template One: Planning and Mapping Implementation of the Preparation for Pre-school programme

Key Activity	Designated Team Member(s) (Who is responsible for getting this done?)	Performance Indicators (What will we measure to know if/how/when it is achieved?)	Timeframe (By when, will this have been achieved?)
Disseminating Information about Pfp to Families and Community Partners		Quantity of Literature/Number of Visits Numbers of Requests from Partners Numbers of Enquiries from Families	
Providing Information, Registration, and Induction Sessions		Number of Families Enrolling Number of Families attending/registering	
Collecting baseline data		Forms completed by Participants Input into CRM System	
Holding regular Planning and Review Meetings		Schedule is agreed in advance Number of Meetings Held Agenda, Notes and Minutes maintained Actions agreed and implemented	
Facilitating weekly sessions with Children and Parents		Number of Sessions Number of Attendees Level of Attendance/Absences	
Documenting children's learning		Number of Portfolios being maintained and shared Level of engagement with Learning Stories	
Sharing information with ECEC professionals in local settings		Number of settings contacted and visited Extent to which Information is shared Number of Pfp children followed up	
Engaging all Stakeholders in post-programme feedback		Number of sessions held Number of participants engaged Stakeholders represented	

4.8.4 Measuring Impact

A common approach to measuring the effectiveness of a programme for children and families, is to use a standardised assessment tool, which has been tested for reliability and validity, such as the *Santa Barbara School Readiness Scale* (Pavelski Pyle, undated), the *Home Learning Environment Measure* (Melhuish et al, 2001) or the *Strengths and difficulties questionnaire* (Goodman, 2005)⁴. It is of course open to Hill Street FRC, to explore and employ the use of such a standardised assessment tool, if desired.

However, given that such instruments suggest causal relationships between practices and outcomes, this research finds that it may not be suitable (or even possible) to administer these types of instruments with child participants in the Preparation for Pre-school programme, to establish direct cause and effect, between the programme components and children's experiences in making the transition to Pre-school (allowing for the inevitable wide range of variables), nor will it allow a robust comparison, between children who avail of the s, with a similar cohort who do not.

While it may be tempting to be able to demonstrate impact or effectiveness using standardised instruments, a further concern in applying these to the Preparation for Pre-school programme, is that they may have been framed around different assumptions in relation to work with children and families and developed to measure progress, in somewhat specific contexts. In this regard, their use could represent a significant departure from the ethos, approach, and innate responsiveness of the work in Hill Street FRC, challenging the underpinning values on which it is grounded.

However, some evaluative tools have already been generated through the PFP programme, which are intended to elicit the observations and experiences of key stakeholders. These tools have been revised and adapted, through the research process, to provide templates through which to identify if and to what extent objectives are being met and to document any unintended outcomes. This approach is considered more realistic and suitable to providing evidence, which can demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of the PFP programme.

⁴ SBRS, HLEM and SDQ described in detail at https://whatworks.gov.ie/app/uploads/2019/08/Training_Child_Learn_Dev_Jul19.pdf

Template Two offers a questionnaire, (which may be revised and adapted in the future), which can be administered to invite parents to assist in providing a snapshot of an individual child, across the five goal areas for the PfP programme, before and after participation in PfP.

Template Three, offers a set of questions, which may be used to survey staff in pre-school settings, where children attend after participating in the Preparation for Pre-school in Hill Street FRC, in order to identify and explore potential gains from the programme.

Template Two
Pre/post-Programme Questionnaire for Parents - Page 1

Childs name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

Completed by: _____ Date: _____

Please indicate where your child is on a scale of 1-5

Separation/Attachment

My Child is happy to be without me for a short period of time	1	2	3	4	5
My child feels comfortable in the company of non-family members	1	2	3	4	5
My child is able to express their needs	1	2	3	4	5

Language

My child understands spoken English	1	2	3	4	5
My child speaks English	1	2	3	4	5
My child speaks clearly and can be understood by strangers	1	2	3	4	5
My child is able to express their needs, e.g. ask to go to the toilet	1	2	3	4	5

Independence

My child can put on and off his or her coat, shoes etc.	1	2	3	4	5
My child can feed themselves	1	2	3	4	5
My child can go to the toilet and wash their hands	1	2	3	4	5

Social and Emotional Skills

My child plays independently and makes choices	1	2	3	4	5
My child can wait to take their turn for a few minutes	1	2	3	4	5
Can my child manage conflict with another child	1	2	3	4	5

Routines and Transitions

My child can sit and listen to a story	1	2	3	4	5
My child can join in with songs and nursery rhymes	1	2	3	4	5
My child can follow a basic instruction/activity	1	2	3	4	5

Pre/post-Programme Questionnaire for Parents – Page 2

Please describe any specific issues which you feel your child needs support with/or challenges which you think may face:

If your child has participated in the Preparation for Pre-school programme, please describe if and/or how they benefitted:

Template Three
Questions for ECEC Professionals in Settings where PFP Children Attend

1. Number of Children in the setting/group who have participated in PFP Programme:

2. Did you observe any difference(s) in the children who took part in the PFP programme, in separating from parent/carer?

Yes/No

Please Describe

3. Did you observe any differences in the parents who took part in the PFP programme in supporting their child's transition to preschool?

Yes/No

Please Describe

4. Have you observed these skills/abilities in children in your group who have participated in PFP:

- a. Putting on/taking off coat/shoes, etc.
- b. Feeding her/himself
- c. Going to the toilet independently
- d. Washing hands
- e. Other, please describe:

5. Can you comment on any differences you have observed in the children who have participated in the PfP programme in their:

- a. Independence
- b. Understanding of language and/or expressive language?
- c. Interactions with peers?
- d. Self-confidence?
- e. Conflict Resolution skills?

6. Have you observed any other behaviours or dispositions, which you feel distinguish the PfP children from other children?

Appendix One

Key Questions to determine if a Programme/Practice is Evidence Informed⁵

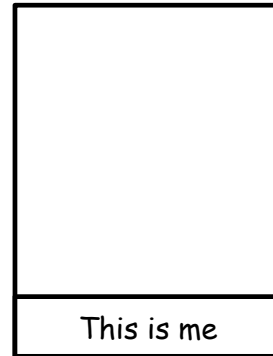
1. Is the program or practice guided by child-development theory? Yes No
 - 1a. If yes, continue to question 2.
 - 1b. If no, the program or practice is not evidence-informed.
2. Does the program or practice have a strong logic model? Yes No
 - 2a. If yes, continue to question 3.
 - 2b. If no, the program or practice is not evidence-informed.
3. Have qualitative studies or basic research of the program or practice found positive effects? Yes No
 - 3a. If yes, continue to question 4
 - 3b. If no, the program or practice is not evidence-informed.
4. Is practitioner wisdom available about when, how, and why to use the program or practice? Yes No
 - 4a. If yes, continue to question 5
 - 4b. If no, the program or practice is not evidence-informed.
5. Does the program or practice have implementation guidelines? Yes No
 - 5a. If yes, continue to question 6
 - 5b. If no, the program or practice is not evidence-informed.
6. Does the program or practice have a history of demonstrated positive results? Yes No
 - 6a. If yes, AND the answer at each of the previous steps is yes, the program or practice is evidence-informed.
 - 6b. If no, the program or practice is not evidence-informed.

⁵ Taken from the Smart Start Resource Guide of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices: A Summary of Research Evidence (Howes et al, 2013)

Appendix Two:
Getting to Know Me Form



Getting to know me



My full name is: _____

Everybody calls me: _____

My date of birth is: _____

My mommy's name is: _____; she comes from _____

My daddy's name is: _____; he comes from _____

Sister(s) _____ Brother(s) _____

Other important people in my life: _____

Language(s) spoken at home: _____

Key words in my language: _____

In my family we celebrate: _____

We have a family pet called: _____ and it is a _____

My favourite toys/activities are: _____

I don't really like : _____

I am really good at: _____

I need help with: _____

Allergies or dietary requirements: _____

Additional needs: _____

I don't like: noises: _____ sounds: _____ smells: _____

tastes: _____ textures: _____ others: _____

When I am upset or tired, these make me feel better: _____

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