



**INCLUSIVE
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION**

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Case Study Visit Report:

Togher Family Centre, Cork, 12–14 October 2016

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full version
ECCE:	Early childhood care and education
ECE:	Early childhood education
EU:	European Union
IECE:	Inclusive Early Childhood Education
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAG:	Project Advisory Group
SEN:	Special educational needs



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Finally, the Agency would like to acknowledge the key role of the PAG members and national experts who took part in the visit and provided additional support.



PREAMBLE: THE IECE PROJECT

This report on the case study visit to Cork and Togher Family Centre, Ireland, is part of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project, conducted by the Agency from 2015 to 2017. The project includes a total of eight such visits in different European countries.

The project's overall goal is to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality inclusive ECE for all children from three years old to the start of primary education.

Thus the project focuses on the structures and processes that can ensure a systemic approach to providing high-quality inclusive ECE that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the children from the school group's local community.

The project started off with a focus on the five thematic areas for improving ECE that were raised by EU and OECD working groups for this field (EU, 2014; OECD, 2014):

- Access to quality ECE for all children. From the perspective of the project, this principle refers to facilitating access for all children in the community, with particular concern for the most vulnerable, such as children with disabilities and SEN, immigrants and newcomers, and other at-risk children and families.
- Workforce quality. This principle calls for the employment of appropriately trained staff with access to continuous training and adequate working conditions, appropriate leadership, support staff inside and outside the school, and adequate resources and positive parent, interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration.
- Quality curriculum/content. This principle underlines the need for a holistic and flexible curriculum and pedagogy that promote child wellbeing and learning in all aspects of development – cognitive, social, language, emotional and physical – and enable children to be meaningfully and actively engaged in a safe but open and stimulating environment.
- Evaluation and monitoring. This not only refers to how children's development and learning is monitored, but also to the ECE provision's level of effectiveness to meet established quality standards that ensure a quality learning environment for all children.
- Governance and funding. This principle considers how public funding and leadership models are used accountably to ensure that a quality ECE service is



available to all children and is managed with a constant focus on enabling each child's holistic growth and learning.

Project activity and project outputs will include:

- A literature and policy review providing the conceptual framework for the project and including a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on ECE.
- Country reports providing information on policy and practice in inclusive ECE for all children at national level.
- European practitioners' perceptions of and practices for inclusive ECE: a qualitative analysis of descriptions of 32 examples of inclusive ECE provisions.
- Detailed reports of the eight selected case study sites, including analysis of the key project themes investigated.
- Recommendations designed to meet policy-makers' needs: the project synthesis report will draw on evidence from all project activities; the key issues/factors facilitating quality inclusion in ECE will be analysed and translated into recommendations.
- A self-assessment/self-reflection tool for the ECE setting.



1. INTRODUCTION: SELECTED CASE STUDY VISIT OF THE IECE PROJECT

This report provides information about the case study visit that the Agency team conducted in Cork, Ireland, in October 2016.

Togher Family Centre was selected, along with seven other sites, from examples of inclusive practice in ECE submitted by national experts and Agency Representative Board members. The eight selected examples were willing to be visited and studied by a project team in order to understand the quality features of inclusive ECE provision.

In order to support the countries in identifying examples of inclusive practice in ECE, the Agency team, in collaboration with the PAG members, established criteria that the example provisions were expected to meet. These criteria, which were also used to select the eight examples, were:

- Relevance of the site
- Clarity of the information provided
- Evidence of the following:
 - respect for diversity;
 - promotion of participation and engagement;
 - holistic curriculum;
 - skilled workforce;
 - collaboration and partnership;
 - smooth transitions;
 - quality assurance;
 - self-evaluation to inform improvement.

The selected examples also needed to reflect diverse geographical locations across Europe.

A team of Agency staff, PAG members and country experts visited Cork and Togher Family Centre, from 12 to 14 October 2016. The visit provided opportunities to hear first-hand about developments in the city and the pre-school's ECE provisions, to observe classes and to interview different stakeholder groups: manager, teachers, support teachers, parents and children. Interviews were conducted according to a schedule to provide consistency across the eight project case study visits. In addition, relevant documents on national and regional policy and practice were collected prior to and during the visit. All visiting project participants provided first impressions at a forum on the last day of the visit and then submitted written



feedback about the inclusive features of the ECE provision at Togher Family Centre. All these sources of evidence have been used to draft this report.

An analysis of all the above data led to the identification of three main themes in how Togher Family Centre is enhancing the inclusiveness of its ECE provision:

- 1 Holistic approach
- 2 Family support and involvement
- 3 Shared vision of inclusion.

These are described in detail in Sections 3 to 5 of this report. Section 2 gives an account of the background of inclusive provision within inclusive education in Cork and Togher Family Centre, Ireland.



2. THE CONTEXT

2.1 Inclusive early childhood education and care in Ireland

In recent years, early years policy, provision and practice in Ireland have been reformed.

Since 2010, the Irish Government has funded a universal free pre-school year in an early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme. This gives every child aged between 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months the opportunity to avail of one year of pre-school education in the year before they commence primary school.

Under the ECCE programme, the State pays a capitation fee to participating services. Almost every pre-school service (more than 4,300) in the State is participating. Up to 68,000 children, or 95% of the eligible age cohort, were expected to avail of the programme in 2015.

The normal pattern of free provision for services is three hours a day, five days a week, over 38 weeks. The high take-up level of the ECCE programme has effectively included children with a wide range of additional needs arising from numerous factors including, for example, disability, socio-economic disadvantage or ethnicity (home language different from that of the language of instruction in the early education setting).

Since September 2016, the national government policy has promoted universal access to pre-school.

All children are entitled to a pre-school place from age 3 until school starting age – up to a maximum of 76 weeks (the average is 61 weeks). This has increased from the previous entitlement of 38 weeks. Children must be no older than 5 years and 6 months upon exiting pre-school.

There are three entry points into the universal pre-school scheme (September, January and April). The percentage of 3-year-olds in pre-school will increase, as there is no longer a need to wait for children to turn 4 to take up their place if the parents want them to start school at age 5.

Work is underway to develop a Single Affordable Childcare Scheme to replace the existing schemes. The single scheme will be a simplified subsidy scheme providing affordable quality childcare to working, disadvantaged and low income families. It will offer a sustainable platform for future investment.

The focus is on an Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) for children with additional needs with the following objectives:

- An inclusive culture
- Information for parents and providers

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- Qualified and confident workforce
 - Expert educational advice and support
 - Equipment, appliances and minor alterations capital grant
 - Therapeutic intervention
 - Additional assistance in the pre-school room.

(More information about the inclusive education system in Ireland is available in the country report, in the description of the example and in Ireland's national overview: www.european-agency.org/national-policy-and-provision/Ireland).

2.2 Togher Family Centre

Togher Family Centre is multi-service family centre open to all children in the Togher area of Cork city.

The centre provides a range of universal and targeted services, including early years care and education, to 156 children between the ages of 1 and 5. Of these, 100 children are between three years of age and primary school starting age.

The centre is based in an area of social disadvantage. Many of the families using the early years service are lone parent families.

The centre has a high percentage of children with additional needs attending its early years provision. In 2013/2014, 45% of the children attending the centre had an additional need, including children with speech and language delay, children with a diagnosed developmental delay, children with a physical disability, children receiving or awaiting occupational therapy support and children identified as needing the support of an educational psychologist.

Sixteen percent of the children attending the early years provision in Togher Family Centre do not have English as their first language.

The centre also offers youth and family support services for a number of families and young people.

Staff members have qualifications in a diverse range of topics. These include a Bachelor's degree in Early Years, a Master's degree in Management and a professional diploma in Bereavement and Loss.

More information is available on the Togher Family Centre website: www.togherfamilycentre.ie/index.php/home



3. THE SETTING'S HIGHLIGHT (THEME 1): HOLISTIC APPROACH

In the conversations with the staff, they indicated that they take a holistic approach. This promotes all aspects of children's development and learning, including physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development.

The centre uses the HighScope model of working with children, while also incorporating various aspects of other models of working with children and elevating the child's voice. The curriculum is closely aligned with Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. It aims to deliver high-quality experience in line with Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education.

It considers that Aistear, together with Síolta, can provide practical support and guidance to practitioners working with younger and older children in the early childhood period.

Aistear is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children from birth to six years old in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences, so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others. Aistear describes the types of learning (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that are important for children in their early years. It offers ideas and suggestions as to how this learning might be nurtured. Aistear also provides guidelines on supporting children's learning through partnerships with parents, interactions, play and assessment.

Aistear is based on 12 principles of early learning and development. These are presented in three groups. The first group concerns children and their lives in early childhood: the child's uniqueness; equality and diversity; children as citizens. The second group concerns children's connections with others: relationships; parents, family and community; the adult's role. The third group concerns how children learn and develop: holistic learning and development; active learning; play and hands-on experiences; relevant and meaningful experiences; communication and language; the learning environment.

The key principles of Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, include: the value of early childhood; children first; parents; relationships; equality; diversity; environments; welfare; the role of adults; teamwork; pedagogy and play.

More information about Aistear and Síolta is available at:

siolta.ie/access_manuals.php and at:

www.ncca.biz/Aistear/pdfs/PrinciplesThemes_ENG/PrinciplesThemes_ENG.pdf



4. THEME 2: FAMILY SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT

The centre is a family centre and, as such, places the family at the heart of the children's learning experience.

This is implemented through regular formal and informal contact with parents throughout the year. This includes a schedule of parental activities designed to bring parents into the learning space using art, music, drama and literacy activities.

The centre has the capacity to provide additional support to parents who are vulnerable, including those who come to the centre through the referral process, those parents who have children with additional needs, and parents who require advocacy support.

The centre provides a wide range of activities and support to families. For example, it offers family support services to 10 families per week, child contact services to 10 families per week, parent and toddler services to 12 families per week, youth services to 80 children per week and adult education services to 50 adults per week. The family support activities take place in a very nice bungalow that was recently renovated to look like a cosy home. This makes children and family members feel comfortable in the sessions.

Every Thursday morning, parents meet at the centre for two hours for tea or coffee, biscuits and informal discussion. All parents are informed about this meeting. It is a good opportunity to get to know other parents. The staff target parents through social workers and welfare nurses and by placing notices around the community.

The staff also try to involve parents in the centre's activities. In the discussions, the staff indicated that the majority of parents want to know where their children are and they understand the importance of being involved in their children's learning. The staff arrange regular meeting with parents and speak about their observations and the children's progress.

From the conversations with parents, they seem to be very satisfied with the centre. They believe that their children receive very good care in the centre and they can always talk to the teachers and get advice and support, if needed.

One mother said that her child used to be very shy when he first started at the centre, with limited language communication in English. The teachers greatly supported him to improve his English, increase his self-esteem and develop interaction with other children. He made good friends during this period. Both the parents and the child are still in contact with those families. He meets and plays with those friends, even though he is attending primary school now.



Family members feel very supported by the centre. One parent pointed out: 'It is the best pre-school service in town and I feel very lucky that my child was here for three years'.



5. THEME 3: SHARED VISION OF INCLUSION

5.1 Strong leadership

The visit participants were impressed by the manager's passion, commitment, inclusive policy and values and by the highly motivated and engaged staff. They all share the same vision of inclusion and, as the manager said, 'all children are equal but not the same' and 'inclusion should be done naturally'.

In the conversation, she explained that, in order to implement inclusion, she needs to be 100% confident about this approach. It is a hard job and she has to employ people who are adaptable and share this vision and who are open to parents.

She believes in a teamwork approach. As a manager, she must respond to the staff's needs and the staff must respond to all the children's needs. She indicated that they must start with what the child needs and build on that. Staff also undertake continuous training to be able to respond to the different needs of all the children. Each year, the staff may encounter children whose needs they are not familiar with, which is why continuous training is so important. The manager also informed the visit participants about the systematic and daily documentation of the educational processes. Moreover, the centre has developed its own evaluation tools and educational materials.

5.2 Continuing professional development

Staff are supported to engage in training at all levels up to doctoral degree within the centre. They are encouraged to use the centre as a site for on-going research and development.

The workforce is diverse, with a range of qualifications from basic entry level childcare qualifications, to master's degree level. The manager is currently undertaking doctoral studies. The centre actively supports staff to engage in training at all levels.

Staff are encouraged to attend training courses as part of their work time and are facilitated to undertake training. Sometimes training takes place during the evening or at weekends. The centre financially supports professionals who want to pursue higher education (master's or doctoral degrees).

5.3 Collaboration with local services

In the discussions with the staff and parents, the visit participants were informed that Togher Family Centre works closely with government agencies (the Health Service Executive and Tusla – the Child and Family Agency) through the social work departments, public health nurses, community mental health nurses and other health professionals. This ensures that the most vulnerable families and children in



the community are supported and educated in an environment where their needs are fully understood.

5.4 Transition

The centre addresses the issues of transition from home to the centre, and from the centre to primary school. It provides a range of actions to support children through transition.

This support begins with the provision of open night orientation for parents before their children start attending the centre. It includes support for parents through the transition to early years education.

It offers extended settling-in periods for children who may have additional needs. It also includes ensuring there is a high staff-child ratio to ensure comfort and support for the children.

At the other end of the children's educational experience, the centre engages in a 'school readiness' week. This supports children and parents to know what to expect when going to school, including information and support around healthy lunches, how to communicate with your child about school, etc.

The centre also runs a youth resilience project for children between the ages of 4 and 12. Many children from early years education continue to come to the centre and receive support throughout their educational life.



6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Togher Family Centre's inclusive ECE model, presented in this report, was observed and appreciated by the participants during the visit and the relevant discussions. It is a holistic early years education approach for all children, irrespective of ability, educational need, culture and gender.

Participants highlighted it as a 3-R early childhood inclusive education model:

- Respectful – to children, parents and community needs
- Responsible – for each child's wellbeing
- Responsive – to each child's needs.

There seems to be a clear focus on family support and involvement and the emphasis is on a holistic approach to learning and development. The manager and the staff appear to be highly trained, committed and creative.

The discussions with staff and parents confirmed the focus on recruiting highly qualified staff, enabling continuing professional development and promoting a teamwork approach, based on trusting each other and collaborative teaching.

The visit participants stated that the strengths of Togher Family Centre are: a clear inclusive approach to support diversity; family-centred and community-based interventions; highly qualified staff; highly motivated and engaged manager and staff; a holistic curriculum that supports all children; parents' involvement and support; positive atmosphere; shared vision; team-building strategies.

6.1 Areas for further discussion

Togher Family Centre strives to continue improving its services. The visit participants made some proposals for further reflection on key areas related to inclusion:

- Limitations of three hours per day: Participants consider that the three hours' free provision per day restricts the possibilities of completing all necessary activities in relation to childhood education and care, in a socially disadvantaged area such as Togher. This is particularly true for children with additional needs.

In most countries, the settings are open for the whole day and the staff have enough time to conduct all the appropriate activities in relation to education and care. Participants have indicated that a time extension could be beneficial for the children.

- Service co-ordination: Despite the centre's networking activities and close collaboration with other services, participants have indicated that some additional co-ordination of services could be useful. For example, they



propose preparing an individualised family service plan together with the other local service providers and the families in order to co-ordinate service delivery for families with multiple and complex needs (disability, poverty, social exclusion, mental health issues, etc.).