



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Summer Programme 2022

Perspectives of children and young people, their parents and programme managers

Inspectorate
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1. Introduction

In 2022, the Department of Education (DE) provided all mainstream primary and post-primary schools and all special schools with the opportunity to offer a summer programme. The programme was designed to address the needs of those children and young people who were disproportionately impacted by the periods of remote teaching and learning in 2020 and 2021. It specifically aimed to support the ongoing engagement with education, during the summer period, of children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. The Department's Special Education Section funded the programme and the individual participating schools managed it. In total, 16,851 children and young people participated in the programme. Full details of the programme, including the guidelines provided to schools, are available [here](#).

In November 2022, the Inspectorate visited a sample of the primary, post-primary and special schools that provided the programme. The aim of the visit was to gather the perspectives of children and young people, their parents and the programme managers¹ on the impact of the programme on the children and young people who participated in it, when they returned to school. This report presents the findings of these visits. It is intended to inform the ongoing development of policy in relation to summer programme provision.

1.1 How the perspectives were gathered

Thirty-four schools were visited. The Department's Special Education Section provided the Inspectorate with data on all of the schools that offered the summer programme. The schools were then selected to ensure that the sample contained a proportionate number of primary, post-primary and special schools and that the schools were spread throughout the country.

Primary Schools	Post-Primary schools	Special schools
20	10	04

The inspector contacted the school in advance of the visit. The prior notification was designed to provide time for the principal to make practical arrangements for the visit.

¹ The programme leader was referred to as an overseer in the programme guidelines. In most primary and special schools, the leader was the principal. In most post-primary schools, the leader was another member of staff. For summer programme 2023 the role of programme overseer will be replaced two roles: a programme organiser and a programme manager

During the school visit the inspector:

- Met with the manager of the summer programme
- Met with focus groups of children and young people who participated in the programme. In accordance with agreed practice, parental consent and pupil assent forms were completed in advance of these meetings
- Provided a letter to all parents / guardians of children and young people who participated in the summer programme inviting them to complete an online survey.

1.2 Engaging with children and young people

The right of children and young people to participate in decisions on all matters affecting them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and most specifically in Article 12, which relates to the child's right to express their views freely and to have their views given due weight. In all engagements between inspectors and young people, including engagements during these school visits, the Inspectorate acknowledges that children and young people are entitled to have their views sought, listened to and taken into account. A key principle of the [Code of Practice for the Inspectorate](#) (2022) is that inspectors will 'seek and give due consideration to the views and opinions of learners, according to their age and maturity.' This commitment is directly based on article 12.

The consultation with children and young people that took place during these school visits occurred through focus groups. In conducting focus groups, inspectors work to ensure that the involvement of children and young people in focus groups is beneficial for the participants, the schools and the education system as a whole. The approach and methods employed emphasise children's agency and are rights respecting. A rights-respecting approach acknowledges children's fundamental right to be part of every decision that affects them as a matter of principle. It takes their views seriously, bearing in mind their age and maturity, and recognises the unique and invaluable contribution that they can make to the inspection process. Inspectors' work is informed by the [Participation Framework; National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making](#).

2. The perspectives of children and young people

Each focus group contained between eight and twelve young people and focus groups were held in all thirty-four schools. During the focus groups inspectors discussed:

- The range of activities in the programme
- The most enjoyable features of the experience
- The extent to which the children and young people felt they had an input into the design and ongoing review of the programme
- The impact of the programme on their return to school in September
- Any changes they would advise to improve the programme.

2.1 Findings

Overall, the children and young people were very positive about their experiences of the summer programme and reported a number benefits when they returned to school in September.

A main theme from the discussions was how attending the programme helped children and young people with their move into a new school or with becoming more familiar with their existing school. Another strong theme related to the opportunity that the children and young people had to make new friends during the programme and how these friendships lasted when they returned to school in September. Many children and young people said they were particularly pleased about this. A third theme was how the relationship between the children and young people and their teachers had developed or improved as a result of getting to know one another better during the programme. Some also said that the summer programme had helped them with their reading and with their Mathematics.

Participating children and young people said that the most enjoyable features of the programme were:

- Being able to contribute to planning and giving their views about the programme
- Having a say in the activities during the programme
- Having opportunities to go on trips away from the school with their teachers; several children and young people said that this helped them to get to know teachers outside of school

- Working together in what they described as ‘fun activities’ such as rocket making and sandcastle competitions
- Experiencing new activities such as kayaking
- Being in school when it was quieter and less busy
- Opportunities to work with children from other classes / year groups
- Engaging with virtual-reality technology and learning to code.

When asked how the programme could be improved, some children and young people said they would have preferred a later start time in the mornings and that they would prefer shorter days over a longer period of time. Others expressed a wish for a greater use of technology including social media and more music-related activities.

3. The perspectives of parents

The survey of parents contained both rating-scale responses² and open-text responses. It enquired into parents' perception of the extent to which:

- Their child enjoyed the summer programme
- The summer programme helped their child to remain connected with the school, the teachers and his/her friends
- The school provided information to them about the summer programme
- The summer programme helped their child to make up for any learning gaps caused by the school closures of 2020 and 2021
- The summer programme promoted a sense of safety, calm and hope for their child
- The summer programme helped their child to settle back to school in September
- They received information about the progress their child made during the summer programme.

The survey also asked parents to indicate if they were satisfied with the progress their child had made during the summer programme and to indicate what, in their opinion, the summer programme did best for their child and how it could be improved.

330 responses were received as follows:

Primary Schools	Post-Primary schools	Special schools
172	83	75

3.1 Findings

Almost all parents indicated that their children enjoyed the programme and that it helped their child to remain connected with the school, their teachers and their friends. The most positive comments focused on the value of the programme in maintaining routine and structure for children and young people. Parents also stated that the opportunities their children got to work with other children in fun-based learning activities were very good for their children's social skills.

A significant number of parents reported that the summer programme helped their children with transitions³. Parents of children and young people who were moving from primary to

² Strongly agree, agree, don't know, disagree, strongly disagree,

³ Moving into a new school or a new class at the beginning of a school year

post-primary in September 2022 noted this in particular. Some parents of children and young people in primary school also mentioned how the programme helped their child move into a new class in September. Many parents commented on how the opportunities their children had to develop new friendships and closer relationships with staff had a positive impact on their child's confidence and their attitudes to school. This resulted in their child being enthusiastic about returning to school after the holiday period. Some parents said that this enthusiasm was not common before the summer programme.

A small number of parents indicated that the summer programme was the only outlet for their children during the summer, given the complexity of their needs. These parents, in particular, reported that the summer programme had a very positive impact on their child.

In relation to learning, the majority of parents described how their child enjoyed the fact that some of the reading and mathematics activities had an element of fun. They described that their children were improving in aspects of learning, and that this helped their confidence and motivation when they returned to school. Many parents welcomed the fact that learning activities were less formal and more varied. They said that their children really enjoyed the less formal activities and that these activities helped develop their children's social skills and their learning. Some parents also commented that the high levels of support that their children received meant that they often experienced success during the programme.

While the majority of parents in primary and special schools reported that learning programmes were discussed in advance with them, only half of these parents indicated that they received a progress report at the end of the programme⁴. A few parents were disappointed at the lack of educational input in the programmes and thought that their child should have received more support in literacy and numeracy. A small number indicated that the programme was effective as a recreational camp, but they would have preferred more learning targets and more assessment of their child's progress.

In summary:

- Almost all parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child enjoyed the summer programme and that the programme helped their child to remain connected with the school, the teachers and their friends
- Most agreed that the summer programme helped their child to transition into the new school year
- Most parents of primary school children indicated that the school discussed their child's learning plan for the programme with them
- The majority of parents of primary school children indicated that they were provided with a progress report at the end of the programme

⁴ Post primary schools were not advised to discuss the learning programme in advance with parents or to provide a progress report at the end of the programme to them

- The majority of parents said that the programme helped their child to make up for some of the learning loss caused by school closures.

When asked how the programme could be improved:

- The majority of parents said that more advance notice of the dates of the summer programme was required
- A small number of parents, whose children only had the option of a two-week programme, would have preferred a longer programme
- A few parents indicated that the timing of the programme at the beginning of the school holidays was too early and children and young people should have had a break before the programme began
- A small number of parents said that a summer programme during the week before school opened in September would ease the transition into the new school year
- A small number of parents wanted greater home-school contact before, during and after the programme
- A few parents said that they would prefer more planned educational input into the programme
- Some parents wanted greater involvement of therapeutic service and multi-disciplinary teams.

4. The perspectives of programme managers

Inspectors held a meeting with the programme manager in each of the schools visited. The meeting discussed the following areas:

- The criteria used to select children and young people for the summer programme
- The role of the manager
- The perspective of the manager on the summer programme.

4.1. Programme criteria for selecting children and young people

The guidelines for summer programme 2022 asked schools to prioritise children and young people in special classes and children and young people with complex special educational needs who do not attend special classes for participation the summer programme.

Once the school allocated places to these children and young people, they were expected to offer places to children and young people who were at risk of educational disadvantage. While schools were free to choose the children and young people in this category, the Department's Special Education Section provided the following guide to help in prioritising participants during the selection process:

- Children and young people already identified by the school as being most at risk of educational disadvantage and at risk of early school leaving
- Children and young people accessing special education teaching or special needs assistant school supports during the school year
- Children and young people who have missed significant periods of school or who have been identified as having poor attendance
- Children and young people from Traveller and Roma communities
- Children of migrant families who were learning English as an additional language.

Inspectors found that the vast majority of schools prioritised children and young people correctly for the programme. Inspectors also found that in a minority of programmes some children and young people who met the criteria were not offered a place. For example, fifty-six children who attended special classes in mainstream schools were not offered places on summer programmes and over ninety young people in mainstream classes who were at risk of educational disadvantage were not offered a place on summer programmes.

Managers reported good levels of collaboration at school level in the selection process. The staff involved typically included the principal, the programme manager, the special education

teachers, class teachers and those involved in student support. The active involvement of parents in the selection process was reported in a few of the schools visited.

Inspectors identified very good practice in relation to selection and prioritisation of children and young people in some schools. An example of such very good practice includes a matrix that the teachers developed and populated with relevant data. Teachers then considered children and young people in order of need.

Attendance records from the programmes indicate that in almost all programmes daily attendance levels were good or very good.

4.2 The role of the programme manager

The principal undertook the role of manager in the majority of primary and special schools. In post-primary schools, staff other than the principal generally assumed this role.

Inspectors did not report any particular benefits or disadvantage to either approach. Principals, in some instances, identified the opportunity to build capacity amongst staff as being a key advantage to delegating the role to staff members.

4.3 The perspective of the programme manager

Almost all managers identified the development of children and young people's friendships as the most positive impact of the programme. The opportunity the summer programme provided for children and young people who were moving into post-primary schools to familiarise themselves with the school and with school personnel was another significant benefit highlighted by managers. Managers also spoke positively about the leadership opportunities the programme provided to children and young people and the opportunities to develop relationships with the teachers in more informal settings, such as school outings.

Other benefits reported by managers included:

- Improved attendance at school since the beginning of the school year
- Increased participation by children and young people in school activities
- Children and young people engaging more confidently with peers and teachers.

Specific examples of improvements noted after the summer programme included a preverbal child engaging in communication with a broader range of children and young people and staff. Another manager explained how a child moved from getting support from a special education teacher outside of the classroom to being supported in the class as a result of improvements in the child's social and emotional regulation. Examples of more positive parental attitudes to school and improved home-school communications were also reported by the managers.

In the majority of schools, communication from the manager to the teachers in September was informal. However, inspectors noted a small number of examples of more formal approaches. These included:

- Formal meetings between the principal and summer programme staff to ensure a structured hand over at the end of the programme
- The use of a template to provide teachers with notes and records of children and young people's learning during the summer programme
- Notes and observations from the summer programme uploaded to the relevant teachers' section of the school portal
- The inclusion of the summer programme activities on the school support file with a review and progress report included at the end of the programme
- Photographic displays of children and young people's participation in summer programme activities displayed in the school.

The managers identified a number of areas that could be improved in future programmes:

- Participation by a greater number of school staff on the programme
- Establishing a formal communication mechanism between teachers and summer programme staff before and after the programme
- Collaborating with other schools to plan activities such as trips and games
- Inviting parents into the programme to observe and possibly participate in some of the activities
- Incorporating short courses, such as first aid, into the programme schedule
- Giving children and young people, opportunities to organise activities for example booking transport for trips and outings
- Earlier notification of the programme
- Establishing an online training forum for managers to access additional support and guidance and to share ideas and experiences between schools
- Greater flexibility regarding timetabling provision to include the option of introducing shorter days over an extended time period
- Promoting the programme and recruiting staff across a broad range of higher education institutions including schools of nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology and colleges providing post primary masters and diploma programmes for teachers of curriculum subjects such as physical education, technology and home economics
- Reviewing the administrative burden associated with special class transport.

5. Conclusions

Summer Programme 2022 aimed to support the ongoing engagement with education of children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. This report provides the perspectives of children and young people who participated in the programme, their parents and the programme managers.

5.1 Programme content and approach

A consistent theme arising from children and young people, their parents and the programme managers related to the opportunities children and young people had received to engage in informal learning activities. Examples of these activities included the creation of film scripts; the production of short dramas; designing and making activities in Art, PE and cooking and fashion design and showcasing using recyclable materials. The children and young people said that they really enjoyed these activities and which gave them a chance to work with each other and with their teachers in different ways. Parents reported that their children described many of the activities as ‘fun’ and that these activities helped their child’s confidence. Managers saw benefits to the children and young people working with teachers in less formal ways.

The summer programme also provided an opportunity for children and young people to engage with literacy, numeracy and other school subjects. Importantly, these activities were presented in engaging ways, which included children and young people managing the programme budget, booking buses and exploring best value and literacy and numeracy activities integrated with innovative use of digital technologies. An important finding from this report is that many of the children and young people perceived that they had experienced success from these learning activities and they may not always have experienced similar success during the school year. Parents, managers and the children themselves all commented, in different ways, on how this helped the children’s motivation and enthusiasm.

5.2 Friendships and transitions

Children and young people, their parents and managers all commented on the positive impact of the summer programme on children’s friendships. All groups noted that the programme provided the children with opportunities to make new friends and that these friendships had lasted when the children returned to school.

There is a large degree of consensus that while transitions within and between schools are challenging for all children and young people, they can be particularly difficult for children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. The children and young people who participated in a summer programme in the school to which they were moving in September spoke of how the programme had helped them settle into their new school. Their parents agreed with this. Interestingly also,

some parents of primary school children reported how the programme helped their child move to a new class in September.

The feedback provided by children and young people, their parents and programme managers suggests that the summer programme was successful in fostering the ongoing engagement of children and young people with education during the summer period. It also indicates that it had important benefits in key areas such as the wellbeing of children and young people and their successful transition within and between schools.

5.3 Prioritising of children and young people

The summer programme guidelines asked schools to prioritise children and young people with complex special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage for participation in the summer programme. The [Terms and Conditions Document](#) provided advice to schools about how they could identify these children and young people. Findings from the parents' survey showed the importance of the programme for those children with the most complex of needs, as it provided the only out-of-home experience for some of these children during the summer.

This report found that most, but not all, schools prioritised children and young people correctly for participation in the summer programme. It also found that some schools developed very effective means of using school-based data to prioritise children for the summer programme, whereas other had not.

5.4 The participation of children and young people and their parents

The guidance that issued to all schools advised that that each programme should include the perspective of the child or young person in planning the content and delivery of the programme. Almost all programmes in post-primary schools had such procedures in place while just over three-quarters of programmes in primary and special schools had such procedures in place.

Where these procedures were in place, the children and young people identified their involvement in planning the content and delivery of the programme as a benefit of the programme. This also emerged from the programme managers, who saw the opportunities to give leadership roles to children and young people as a significant advantage of the programme.

The guidance on involving parents in programme planning differed between primary and post-primary schools. Post-primary schools were asked to provide good information to

parents about the programme and its benefits, to reassure parents about any concerns they may have had about the programme, and to provide any assistance that parents may need to access online material. Inspectors reported that almost all programmes fulfilled these requirements.

Primary schools were asked to involve parents in planning programme material and to provide a progress report to parents at the end of the programme. While most parents indicated they had an opportunity to contribute to the initial planning of the programme, just over half of the parents received a report on their child's progress at the end of the programme. A small minority of parents thought that schools could improve the educational aspects of the programme so that the programme would align more closely with their child's needs and ability levels.

5.5 Reporting on the progress of children and young people

The summer programme guidance advised schools to use the progress of children and young people during the summer programme to inform planning for the child's education in the 2022/23 school year. Inspectors found that most schools had informal procedures in place for this planning. Inspectors noted a few examples of very good practice in this area, such as the use of the school's digital platform to record progress and inform planning.

5.6 Organisational matters

The engagement with children and young people, their parents and programme managers highlighted a number of organisational issues regarding the summer programme. One of these was the timely announcement of the programme, which the Department's Special Education Section has addressed for 2023. Others issues include the timing and duration of the programme and the possibility of greater flexibility in relation to starting and finishing times.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Building on good practice

There was evidence of good and very good practice in the content and approach to many of the summer programmes.

In order to ensure that future programmes build on the examples of effective practice observed, illustrations of good and very good practice should be compiled and published.

These examples of good practice should include specific examples of:

- **Fun-based learning activities** including designing and making activities in subjects such as Art, PE and cooking
- **Active-learning methodologies** including play-based learning, active tasks, and outdoor activity
- **Cross-curricular learning** including project work incorporating literacy, history, geography and digital technologies
- **Educational trips** including trips to areas of local historical and geographical significance and murder-mystery tours
- **The purposeful involvement of children and young people** in planning learning activities including involvement in organising trips, setting and managing budgets and organising daily routines
- **Use of school-based data** to prioritise children and young people for participation in the programme
- **Transfer of information about children and young people's progress to teachers following the summer programme**, including the use of the student support file, the school's digital platform and photographic evidence of progress.

6.2 Promoting wellbeing

One of the strategic actions of the Department is to support the wellbeing of all children and young people⁵. This report found that many elements of the summer programme 2022 are conducive to supporting and promoting wellbeing. These include, for example, the opportunities the children and young people receive to develop friendships and to get to

⁵ Department of Education, Statement of Strategy 2021 - 2023

know their teachers better, the opportunities for children and young people to experience success in learning, the involvement of children and young people in planning learning activities and the relaxed, less formal atmosphere of the summer programme.

When the current *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* are reviewed consideration should be given to including the summer programme to promote the wellbeing of children and young people.

6.3 Supporting transitions

Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools (2022) and *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* (2022) identify 'procedures and practices to facilitate and promote the sensitive management of transitions within, between and across learning settings' as a feature of highly effective practice in schools. Children and young people, their parents and programme managers all indicated how the summer programme helped the children and young people with transitions.

In promoting the summer programme, its potential to promote successful transitions within, between and across learning settings should be highlighted to school managers and to parents.

6.4 Prioritising children and young people for the summer programme

This report found that not all schools prioritised children and young people correctly for participation in the summer programme 2022.

All schools should correctly prioritise children and young people for participation in the summer programme 2023.

6.5 Organisational matters

This report also identified a number of organisational matters regarding the summer programme that children and young people, their parents or the programme managers raised.

The Department's Special Education Section should consider the possibilities for addressing the organisational matters highlighted in this report for summer programme 2023.

These organisational matters include exploring the possibilities of recruiting staff for the summer programme from colleges of further and higher education and exploring flexibilities around the timing and duration of the programme.