



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Summer Programme 2023: Building Confidence and Connections

Findings from inspections and follow-up visits

Department of Education Inspectorate
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Foreword



I am very pleased to present *Summer Programme 2023: Building Confidence and Connections: Findings from inspections and follow-up visits* on behalf of the Inspectorate of the Department of Education. Inspection is a key component of the quality assurance of education provision in Ireland. Its focus is on promoting improvement in the learning and wellbeing of children and young people and on advancing goals of equity and inclusion. The Inspectorate shares findings from inspection with the education system to support the overarching education, inclusion and equity goals to which educators and policy-makers in Ireland aspire.

This report presents the findings from inspection and follow-up visits to schools that offered the summer programme in 2023. The programme is primarily designed for children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. It aims to provide these children and young people with opportunities to enjoy out-of-school learning and play during the summer months and in a less formal environment than they experience during the school year. The report contains many positive findings; for example, many of the children and young people really enjoyed the programme and had important opportunities to make and develop friendships. The findings from the follow-up visits show that the children and young people who participated in the programme felt that it supported them when they returned to school in September and that many of their parents and teachers agreed. This is a particularly positive finding. The report makes a number of recommendations. These relate to supporting children and young people to become more aware of their own learning and to appreciate the skills they acquire through participation, engagement and play with other young people; increasing the involvement of parents in the summer programme; and ensuring that children's learning and progression on the programme are captured and communicated to parents and to their school.

The Inspectorate's aim with this work is to assist the Irish education system to continue to provide high-quality learning for this and future generations of children and young people. In this regard, it is important that children and young people are enabled to feel a sense of connection and belonging to their school and to be confident, agentic learners. I trust this report on the provision of an educational, social and play-based programme during the summer months will contribute to that goal. I am grateful to the children and young people, teachers, principals, special needs assistants, programme organisers and managers, who shared their views and ideas about the summer programme during these inspections. The Inspectorate values their views and engagement highly and anticipates that those views and ideas will help to further develop the summer programme in the years ahead.

Yvonne Keating
Chief Inspector
February 2024

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1. Introduction

Since 2021, the Department of Education has provided all mainstream primary and post-primary schools and special schools with the opportunity to offer a summer programme. In allocating places on the programme, schools are asked to prioritise children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. The intended outcomes for the children and young people who take part in a summer programme are that they will experience a sense of connection and belonging to their school; develop and maintain positive relationships with their peers and with school staff; and develop skills that will assist them in progressing with their learning in school. These outcomes are reflected in the theme chosen for the 2023 programme - *'Building Confidence and Connections.'*

The programme is funded¹ by Government through the Department of Education's Special Education Section and managed by the individual schools. Full details of the programme, including the guidelines provided to schools, are available [here](#).

Participation in the Summer Programme

In 2023, Special Education Section made a number of modifications to the existing summer programme guidelines. These modifications were made to increase the number of children participating in the programme and to reduce the administrative burden on schools. One of the main changes was enabling schools to appoint a programme organiser as well as a programme manager. The organiser oversaw the preparatory work undertaken in the months prior to the commencement of the summer programme. The manager was responsible for managing and leading the programme.

Changes to the guidelines for special schools included allowing student teachers, early years childcare workers and third-level students, in disciplines such as social care and nursing, to work on the summer programme and providing additional funding² to each special school offering the programme. The changes in relation to mainstream primary and post-primary schools included merging the programme for children and young people in mainstream classes and the programme for those in special classes and allowing children with an entitlement to special needs assistant (SNA) support during the school year to access the same level of SNA support during the summer programme.

Number of schools that offered the summer programme in 2023

One thousand, one hundred and five schools offered the summer programme in 2023. This comprised over forty percent of all special schools, almost thirty percent of all primary schools and just over twenty percent of all post-primary schools.

¹ The total budget for summer programme 2023 was €40 million

² €2,000 per school-based summer programme week

Sector	Total number of each type of school in Ireland	Total number and percentage of schools in each sector that provided a summer programme in 2023	
		N	%
Special	136	59	43.4
Primary	3,095	886	28.6
Post-primary	730	160	21.9
Total	3,961	1,105	27.9

Table 1.1 Number of schools that offered the summer programme in 2023

Number of children and young people that participated in a summer programme 2021 – 2023

The number of children and young people participating in a summer programme has increased by over ten thousand since the programme began in 2021. This is an overall increase of seventy-two percent. The most noticeable increase is in the primary school sector; almost five thousand more children from primary schools availed of the programme in 2023 than in 2022. The increase in the number of children and young people from special schools and post-primary schools is also significant. It is evident that the adjustments made to the programme by the Department of Education to ensure its availability to a greater number of children and young people have been successful.

Number of schools that provided a summer programme and number of children and young people that participated in a summer programme						
	2021		2022		2023	
	Schools	Children and young people	Schools	Children and young people	Schools	Children and young people
Special School	39	* ³	39	1,408	59	2,437
Mainstream Primary	743	11,690	874	12,722	886	17,695
Mainstream Post-primary	99	2,228	117	2,787	160	3,801
Total	881	13,918	1,030	16,917	1,105	23,962

Table 1.2 Number of schools that offered the summer programme in the years 2021 - 2023

³ No breakdown of participants between special schools and special classes in 2021 is available

2. Evaluating the summer programme

Inspection visits to summer programmes

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education conducted a programme of inspections of summer programmes. The inspections were unannounced and lasted between a half a day and a full day. During the inspections, inspectors examined the following areas:

- the work of the programme organiser in planning and preparing for the programme
- how children and young people were prioritised for the programme
- learning experiences and the extent to which children and young people and their parents were involved in planning the activities
- plans in place to report on the progress of children and young people to the school
- aspects of the child protection and anti-bullying procedures in place

At the end of each visit, the inspector provided feedback to the programme manager.

Follow-up visits to schools that offered the summer programme

In October and November 2023, inspectors revisited a sample of the primary, post-primary and special schools that were inspected during the summer. During these follow-up visits inspectors held group meetings with:

- children and young people who participated in the summer programme
- parents of children and young people who participated
- teachers of children and young people who participated

The inspectors also met with the programme manager and/or the school principal. The purpose of the meetings was to gather perspectives on how participation in the programme supported the children and young people when they returned to school and how the programme might be improved.

Engaging with children and young people

The approaches employed by inspectors, in engaging with children and young people through focus groups, emphasised the children's agency and were designed to be 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 in this area is informed by the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. The approach also accords with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the principles of the Code of Practice for the Inspectorate (2022).

Schools inspected during summer 2023

	Total number and percentage of schools sampled in each sector		School type		
	Number of schools inspected	Schools inspected as % of schools providing programme	Mainstream with special class	English-medium mainstream with no special class	Irish-medium mainstream with no special class
Special	08	13.6%			
Primary	58	06.5%	32	23	03
Post-primary	28	17.5%	20	07	01
Total	94	08.5%	52	30	04

Table 2.3 Number of schools inspected during the summer

During the summer of 2023, inspectors visited ninety-four schools (8.5%) that provided the summer programme. This comprised eight special schools, fifty-eight primary schools and twenty-eight post-primary schools.

The schools visited varied in size and location and were spread across twenty-three counties. Thirty-two of the fifty-eight primary schools inspected had a special class; twenty-three were mainstream schools that provided education through the medium of English and the remaining three schools were Gaelscoileanna. Twenty of the twenty-eight post-primary schools inspected had a special class; seven were mainstream schools that educated through the medium of English and the remaining school was a Gaelcholáiste.

Follow-up visits to schools during autumn 2023

	Number of schools where follow-up visits were conducted	Schools where follow-up visits were conducted as a percentage of schools providing the programme
Special	03	5.1%
Primary	21	2.4%
Post-primary	08	5.0%
Total	32	2.9%

Table 2.4 Number and percentage of schools where inspectors conducted a follow-up visit

In October and November of 2023, inspectors visited thirty-two of the ninety-four schools inspected during the summer. The schools visited in the autumn comprised three special schools, twenty-one primary schools and eight post-primary schools. The sample also included nineteen schools that had a special class and two of the four Irish-medium schools that were inspected during the summer. During these follow-up visits, inspectors spoke with the children and young people who had participated in the summer programme. Inspectors also engaged with some of the parents and spoke with a number of the teachers.

3. Inspection Findings

Organisation of the Summer Programme 2023

In 2023, there were two administrative positions associated with the programme: the summer programme organiser and the summer programme manager. The main tasks of the programme organiser included recruiting staff, communicating with parents and staff about the summer programme, completing Department of Education forms, arranging for staff training and planning the activities for the summer programme.

During the inspection visits, inspectors considered the extent to which the activities of the summer programme were well-planned and they evaluated the quality of the advance preparation for programme implementation.

Programme organisation

To what extent were the activities well-planned	To a large extent		To some extent		Not well planned	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Special	7	87.5	1	12.5	0	0
Primary	38	65.5	20	34.5	0	0
Post-Primary	25	89.3	2	7.1	1	3.6
Total	70	74.4	23	24.5	1	1.1

Table 3.1 The extent to which the activities of the summer programme were well-planned

The introduction of the role of programme organiser was a positive development, as the activities in almost three-quarters of programmes were considered by inspectors to be well-planned. Activities in only one programme were not well planned. Inspectors noted the following strengths associated with the organisation of the programme:

- Matching the planned programme activities with the skills and subject-expertise of staff: for example, the programme content included *Physical Education*, *Science* and *Home Economics*.
- Gathering relevant information for sharing with programme staff: Many inspectors noted that parents had been contacted in advance to discuss their child's strengths, interests, and areas of need; and participants had been surveyed before the programme commenced.

- Building on the success of the previous year's programme: Some organisers used an evaluative review of the programme offered in 2022 to inform the new programme for summer 2023.
- Ensuring staff engaged with training for the summer programme: Participating teachers had accessed the Department of Education's training for providers and the associated National Council for Special Education (NCSE) videos.
- Holding pre-planning meetings between the programme organiser and staff: Some organisers had engaged staff in very effective advance collaborative planning.
- Facilitating clear communication with parents through letters and phone calls: Inspectors commented very favourably where communication was translated to facilitate parents whose home language was not English.

Where inspectors made recommendations for improvement in the quality of programme organisation, these related to the need for greater consultation with parents and with children and young people about the programme activities. In one-fifth of the programmes inspected, planning for more individualised approaches to meeting the needs of young people was recommended, particularly for those for whom English was an additional language (EAL).

Management of the Summer Programme

The Department of Education guidelines enabled schools to appoint a permanent or fixed-term teacher, including the principal, as programme manager. The manager was responsible for managing and leading the programme within the school. While schools could appoint only one organiser, they could share the role of manager between one or more of the teachers within the school. However, only one manager could work in that capacity in the school on any one day.

Summer programme managers according to their main role during the school year					
School principals	47%	Special education co-ordinators	5%	Guidance teachers	1%
Deputy principals	11%	Special class teachers	6%	Mainstream / subject teachers	18%
Assistant principals	6%	Special education teachers	3%	HSCL teachers	3%

Table 3.2 Summer programme managers according to their main role in the school during the school year

Almost half of the summer programme managers were school principals. The remaining programme managers were drawn from three main categories within the school: those in leadership roles, special education support teachers, and mainstream or subject teachers.

Teachers and SNAs

In addition to programme organisers and programme managers, four hundred and forty-nine teachers worked on summer programmes during 2023. There were four hundred and forty-three SNAs working on the programmes.

In 2023, schools could recruit teachers and SNAs, who were not working in the school during the school year, to work on the summer programme. While the majority of teachers and SNAs working on the summer programme were on the staff of the school, almost twenty-five percent of teachers and forty-percent of SNAs who worked on the summer programme were appointed from outside the school.

There were some differences between sectors in employing staff from outside the school. Almost all staff on post-primary programmes were members of the school staff during the school year, while twenty-six percent of staff working on summer programmes in special schools and thirty-one percent of staff working on summer programmes in primary schools were not members of the school staff during the year.

The children and young people

Guidance for the 2023 summer programme advised that mainstream schools should prioritise the involvement of children and young people enrolled in special classes, those who have complex special educational needs in mainstream classes, and those who are most at risk of educational disadvantage. During the inspection visits, inspectors evaluated the extent to which schools adhered to this guidance.

Participation of children / young people with complex special educational needs

To what extent were children and young people with the most complex special educational needs prioritised for the summer programme?	To a large extent		To some extent		No evidence that this group was prioritised	
<i>N=Number of schools</i>	N	%	N	%	N	%
Special	08	100	00	00	0	0
Primary	48	82.8	10	17.2	0	0
Post-Primary	25	89.3	02	07.1	1	3.6
Total	81	86.1	12	12.8	1	1.1

Table 3.3 The extent to which children and young people with complex special educational needs were prioritised for participation in the summer programme

All special schools and most primary and post-primary schools prioritised children and young people with complex special educational needs to a large extent. There was one school that had no process in place to prioritise young people for participation in the programme.

Six of the eight special schools indicated that they offered all or almost all children a place on the summer programme. Children in the two remaining schools were not all offered a place for a variety of reasons. One school could only offer a place to one-third of the children owing to difficulties related to the staffing available. This school prioritised the youngest children for the available places.

In another special school, children with severe and profound needs and children on reduced school days were not invited to participate. This school cited the lack of nursing staff, the high level of medical needs of some of the children and young people and challenges with

bus transport as reasons for this decision. The fact that these children were not able to participate in a summer programme is a cause for concern.

Inspectors found that many programmes used the Department of Education guidance to prioritise children for participation on the programme. In schools with a special class, children attending these classes during the school year were given first priority. In primary schools, children were prioritised through the use of the Continuum of Support⁴ and the School Provision Plan⁵ and through discussions involving class teachers and special education teachers. Post-primary schools used the above methods and many also took advice from their student support teams, year heads and, where available, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator and School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel. Three of the post-primary schools specifically targeted young people in the Level Two Learning Programme⁶.

Participation of children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage

To what extent were children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage prioritised for participation in the summer programme?	To a large extent		To some extent		No evidence that this group was prioritised		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary	30	51.7	16	27.6	09	15.5	03	5.2
Post-Primary	15	53.6	10	35.7	01	3.6	02	7.1
Total	45	52.3	26	30.2	10	11.6	05	5.8

Table 3.4 The extent to which children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage were prioritised for participation in the summer programme in the eighty-six primary and post-primary schools

Children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage were prioritised for participation to a large extent in just over half of the primary and post-primary schools. Five schools indicated that this criterion was not applicable to them. One-fifth of the remaining schools reported they had limited places on the programme for children in this category as those with special educational needs had been given higher priority.

Many of the schools that prioritised those at risk of educational disadvantage were in the DEIS⁷ programme. Some of these schools invited all children and young people, who were prioritised for support during the school year, to participate on the summer programme. Other schools used specific criteria to prioritise children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage. The criteria included poor attendance, experiencing challenges remaining in school for an entire day, and membership of the Travelling community. Many

⁴ Special Educational Needs - A Continuum of Support - Available [here](#)

⁵ School provision plan for pupils with special educational needs - Available [here](#)

⁶ A learning programme for young people in the low mild to high moderate range of ability

⁷ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme provides additional resources to identified schools to assist them reduce barriers to children and young people reaching their potential

schools in the DEIS programme used input from the HSCL coordinator and the SCP personnel to prioritise children and young people.

The learning experiences

In this area, inspectors considered:

- the quality of learning experiences
- the involvement of children and young people in planning learning activities
- the involvement of parents in planning learning activities (in primary and special school programmes only)

The quality of learning experiences

The overall quality of learning experiences was good or very good in eighty-eight of the ninety-four programmes visited. A number of themes were common across the learning activities in these programmes: a high level of enjoyment, learning through cross-curricular tasks, social skill development and promotion of wellbeing.

	Very Good		Good		Satisfactory		Fair		Weak	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Special	04	50.0	04	50.0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Primary	26	44.8	28	48.3	4	6.9	0	0	0	0
Post-Primary	19	67.9	07	25.0	2	7.1	0	0	0	0
Total	49	52.1	39	41.5	6	6.4	0	0	0	0

Table 3.5 The quality of learning experiences on the summer programme

Enjoyment of learning

In their engagements with inspectors, many participants told how they enjoyed their learning on the summer programme. The reasons cited for the high levels of enjoyment included the positive interactions between children and staff, opportunities to work in groups on less-formal learning activities, and the relaxed atmosphere of the summer programme. Another factor, which many of the children and young people identified as contributing to their enjoyment, was the variety of learning activities. Inspectors observed children involved in cookery, music, art and craft, sports, drama, gardening, and play-based learning during their visits. All programmes had a variety of excursions and educational visits.

In a small number of schools, there was a need for a greater emphasis on developing more enjoyable and engaging activities with greater opportunities for young people to be active and to work together.

Learning through cross-curricular activities

In many summer programmes, children and young people's literacy and numeracy skills were developed through cross-curricular activities. For example, in a post-primary programme the inspector observed young people very purposefully measuring out cookery ingredients and using mathematical and scientific language. In another programme the

young people were researching online and budgeting for educational tours or visits and, in a third school, the young people made reading spaces for their peers. Many primary programmes dedicated specific time for children to read their choice of material at their own pace. Some programmes in primary schools used bespoke reading programmes to support the identified needs of children. Inspectors also observed well-structured discussions designed to develop oral literacy.

Development of digital literacy skills was included in some, but not all, programmes. For example, on some programmes children and young people had opportunities to use robotics, learn about coding, undertake digital research projects and create podcasts. In a number of programmes, children kept a digital diary to record their learning and, in others, parents received a digital update on their child's progress.

In a small number of programmes, opportunities to develop vocabulary and language skills were not sufficiently capitalised on. In a few schools, inspectors recommended greater use of digital technologies to support learning.

Social skills development

In almost all programmes, inspectors noted that the atmosphere and structure of the programme allowed young people to talk to each other, to mix and to make friends in a more relaxed way than during the school year. A number of summer programmes provided targeted interventions to develop identified social skills. For example, some young people and teachers worked together to develop social stories to support the young people during the programme's external visits and outings. One programme extended the development of social skills by planning a number of parents' mornings in order to forge connections between parents.

Promotion of wellbeing

Overall, the learning activities in the programmes provided good opportunities for the promotion of wellbeing. All programmes provided the children and young people with opportunities to spend time with their friends and to make new friends. Some inspectors noted that the participants had a sense that their opinions on the activities were sought and listened to. Teachers did this by involving the young people in planning the activities, checking in with them regularly during the day and enabling them to reflect on completed activities. Some schools provided children with specific wellbeing programmes, yoga and mindfulness.

In a small number of programmes, there was a need for the young people to have more frequent opportunities to reflect on their learning, to think and talk about how they learn best, and to consider what types of learning activities best suited their own strengths, interests and needs. Such opportunities are important in helping the children and young people to develop reflective skills and capacities when they return to school.

The involvement of children and young people in programme planning

Children and young people were involved to a large extent in planning activities in twenty-six of the ninety-four programmes. They were involved to some extent in fifty-five programmes and were not involved in thirteen of the programmes visited. All special school programmes

involved them to some extent. The main methods of involving children and young people in planning activities on programmes included:

- pre-planning surveys, including surveys jointly completed by parents and children
- focus-group discussions
- co-constructing daily schedules and rules for participation
- compilation of scrapbooks to encourage reflection and conversation about activities
- providing children and young people with choice of activities

In many programmes, it was apparent that the involvement of children and young people in planning activities provided them with a sense of ownership of learning.

	To what extent were children and young people involved in programme planning					
	To a large extent		To some extent		Not at all	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Special	00	00.0	08	100	00	00
Primary	15	25.9	34	58.6	09	15.5
Post-Primary	11	39.3	13	46.4	04	14.3
Total	26	27.7	55	58.5	13	13.8

Table 3.6 The extent to which children and young people were involved in programme planning

Activities on the thirteen programmes where there was no consultation with children and young people were prepared by the managers and organisers, with some consultation with teachers and parents. In some of these programmes, feedback was sought occasionally after activities. The recommendations made by inspectors in this area included:

- introducing a variety of approaches to consulting children and young people to reflect their language abilities and their preferred means of communication
- involving children and young people in developing goals and targets for the programme
- encouraging children and young people to reflect on their strengths as learners and how the activities could be matched to these strengths
- encouraging children and young people to reflect on their progress on an ongoing basis

The involvement of parents in programme planning

The summer programme guidelines for primary and special schools view parental engagement as critical to ensuring that the programmes deliver good outcomes for children and young people. The guidelines advise organisers and managers to collaborate with parents in designing the programme.

	To what extent were parents involved in programme planning					
	To a large extent		To some extent		Not at all	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Special	01	12.5	05	62.5	02	25.0
Primary	10	17.2	30	51.7	18	31.1
Total	11	16.6	35	53.1	20	30.3

Table 3.7 The extent to which parents were involved in programme planning in special schools and primary schools

Parents were involved, to varying degrees, in planning in forty-six of the sixty-six programmes in primary and special schools. Parents were not involved in the remaining twenty programmes. Some programmes had very effective means of involving parents, which included:

- issuing questionnaires to parents in advance of the programme and inviting them to submit a profile of their child's interests and abilities
- holding parent meetings and coffee mornings to discuss the summer programme and to explore ideas and suggestions regarding activities and events
- involving parents in some programme activities and outings
- using the school support planning review meetings to consult and to set appropriate goals and targets for participants

In the majority of programmes, consultation with parents was informal; it took place mainly through discussions on the telephone or at regular intervals throughout the programme, often during daily drop-off and collection times. Inspectors advised that programmes in primary and special schools adopt an agreed formal approach to consulting with parents to ensure that their views, perspectives and insights were included in programme planning.

4. Reporting on the progress of children and young people to the school

During the summer programme inspections, inspectors asked programme managers what plans were in place to provide a report to the school, after the programme, on the progress of children and young people. The responses varied considerably. For example, of the eight special schools visited by inspectors, three had formal plans in place, three indicated that there were no formal plans in place, and a further two indicated that there were informal plans in place to report on the progress of children and young people to the school.

In the follow-up visits and engagements with programme personnel, inspectors explored how progress during the programme was reported to the school. Six schools were using the Student Support File, nineteen relied on informal ways of reporting progress, and the remaining seven had no means of reporting progress.

In the six schools that were using the Student Support File, inspectors saw examples of some very effective practice which included comprehensive notes on skill development and very good use of the NCSE templates.

These findings show that there is considerable scope to improve the ways in which children and young people's progress on the summer programme is recorded and used to inform future learning. At a minimum, a concise written report on the progress of each child should be completed at the end of each programme. Where children and young people have a Student Support File, this report should be included on the file. This practice will facilitate teachers in documenting progress over time and assist them in providing an appropriate level of support to children and young people, in line with their level of need.

5. Findings from follow-up visits

During the follow-up visits conducted in October and November 2023, inspectors visited over one-third of the programmes inspected during the summer. They spoke with the children and young people who had participated in the summer programme, some of their parents, and some of their teachers. The focus of the discussions was on how participation in the summer programme supported the children and young people when they returned to school in September. Children and young people, parents and teachers were also asked for specific suggestions as to how the programme could be improved.

The main themes were that the summer programme had supported children and young people through increasing their self-confidence, broadening their friendships and easing transitions for those commencing post-primary school. Participants also indicated that the summer programme was a real support to them in their learning. A number stated that it improved their attitudes to school. Others referred to how the programme improved their attendance at school. Interestingly, many parents, particularly parents of children who attended a special class or a special school, identified how their child's participation in the summer programme was a support to themselves and their families. Teachers also identified a number of ways in which teaching on the summer programme had supported them in their classroom work when they returned to school. All three groups also provided practical suggestions for improvement.

Increased confidence

In almost all of the schools, the children and young people reported that taking part in the summer programme helped them become more confident. Increased confidence was also a strong theme in the parent discussions. Some parents attributed the increased confidence to the culture and environment of the school during the summer; specifically, the way in which the children 'were made to feel special.' Others mentioned how the educational visits and school outings were very good for their children and that they 'had grown in independence and in confidence' after taking part in them.

Some parents of children attending special classes and special schools reported how they had previously tried local summer camps but, they had either not secured a place, or their child was not able to participate fully in them. These parents noted that, after their child had taken part in the school-based summer programme, they could talk about their 'summer camp' when the child had returned to school, just like their peers. This, parents said, boosted their child's confidence. Some teachers also referred to growth in the children's confidence as a result of participation in the summer programme.

Making new friends

In their engagements with inspectors, many children and young people spoke of how the summer programme had helped them make new friends and, importantly, how these friendships lasted on their return to school. For example, one fifth-class child told how they had 'always found it hard to make friends. Now I have friends from other classes and I can play on the yard with them'. Teachers also noticed this and reported that many friendships made during the summer programme had continued on the return to school. The children reported that the friendships they had made through the programme meant that they now had opportunities to visit their friends after school and at weekends. They were especially pleased about this. For parents, the fact that these friendships extended beyond school time to weekends and evenings was also noted as a particular strength and support.

Supporting transitions

The children in sixth class who did a summer programme in their new post-primary school spoke of the benefits of knowing their way around the school. They reported that knowing practical things, like where the lockers and the specialist rooms were, reduced the worry they felt about post-primary school. Parents of children in primary school spoke of how their children sometimes experienced challenges adjusting to summer holidays in July and readjusting to school in September. Many of these parents described how the summer programme had assisted in 'bridging the gap' between the school routine and the summer routine.

Many teachers felt that the summer programme strengthened children's relationships with each other and helped to build resilience; this is a positive finding in the context of the challenges children and young people can experience at transitions points. One teacher told an inspector how, in her opinion, the programme effectively supported the transition of a child with autism into the junior infant class.

Supporting learning

Many children and young people spoke about how the summer programme had supported them in their learning when they returned to school. A number of children spoke of how they were able to self-regulate, or manage themselves better, in the classroom. Some children said that they were reading more after the summer programme and others spoke of how they enjoyed subjects, such as Science, much more now. Other examples related to informal learning; for example, playing chess and doing Sudoku and how this now helped them with problem-solving.

Many parents provided examples of new interests that their children developed following the programme, such as basketball and gymnastics. Some parents of children in special classes and special schools reported that their child's fine-motor skills and social skills had developed. Other parents provided examples of how the skills learned during the programme had transferred to everyday life; for example, one parent described how their child was supported to engage in shopping, an activity they had previously found very challenging.

Some teachers described how the young people had learned to manage their behaviour more effectively during the summer programme. Teachers said that this had a positive effect, not only on these young people, but also on their peers. Importantly also, some teachers noted that children had become less reliant on direct support from SNAs and demonstrated greater independence when they returned to school following the programme. A strong theme in the discussions with teachers related to improvements in young people's communication skills. Teachers of children and young people learning EAL reported improvement in both language skills and in confidence in speaking English. Teachers also mentioned how improvements in other skills, such as presentation skills, the ability to role-play and digital skills, supported the children and young people on their return to school.

Attitude towards school

Many children and young people reported that taking part in the summer programme allowed them to see the school in a 'more positive light'. Children in one focus group spoke of how they particularly enjoyed having the school to themselves, visiting rooms they wouldn't normally be in. They said that this made them feel 'really comfortable' in the school.

Many parents mentioned that their children's attitude towards school was more positive. For example, one parent told how encouraging their child to attend school had been challenging in the previous school year '...but now this has improved one hundred percent'. Some teachers observed that children and young people returned to school with more positive dispositions because of their individual successes and achievements on the summer programme.

Attendance

Many parents and teachers who participated in group discussions mentioned improved attendance as a concrete way in which the summer programme supported the children and young people. For example, one parent referred to their child's erratic attendance during the previous school year noting that the child 'found it difficult to adjust to a new school and new routines.' Following the programme, the parent reported they had seen a great improvement in school attendance as the child 'was much happier in school.' Teachers also noticed improved attendance, particularly for young people who had previously found completing a full school day challenging. One teacher commented that the young people now saw 'the connection between being at school and learning', and how, particularly 'if you are not in school, you miss activities that could be interesting'.

Support for parents

A significant number of parents of children with complex special educational needs told inspectors how much the summer programme supported them and their wider families. They emphasised in particular the support they received from knowing their child could now participate in an activity outside of the home, which, for some, hadn't happened before. As one parent said 'without the summer programme he would remain indoors for most of the summer.' The fact that the programme was in a familiar place, meant that parents could bring their children each day without having to prepare them with social stories, photographs and trial walk-through, as they have to do for activities in unfamiliar settings.

Parents also spoke about how the summer programme enabled them to spend some additional quality time with their other children who did not have not complex needs; this was important for many parents. Additionally, parents explained that knowing their child was engaged in a summer programme that they were enjoying was a significant support to the parents and to their families; one parent told the inspector 'this programme has changed my house for the better.'

Supports for teachers

Teachers explained that their participation in the summer programme had supported their own professional practice as educators. The summer programme provided teachers with the opportunity to get to know the children in different contexts, and consequently, they reported that they now had a better understanding of the strengths, interests, and needs of each child or young person and were better able to support them. One teacher captured this as follows: 'following the summer programme, the prioritised children are understood so much better.....it helps to de-escalate situations when you know the child's context and background.'

How the summer programme can be improved

A common theme from children and young people was that they would like a greater degree of choice over the activities in the summer programme. A small number of children and young people sought further opportunities to make friends with children in other classes. A few said they would like the chance to choose specific areas of the curriculum that they would like assistance with.

A significant number of parents whose children participated in the two-week programme expressed a wish for the programme to be extended to four weeks. Other suggestions included greater advance notification of the programme and greater advance notice of whether or not their child had received a place on it. Some parents also requested that some of the activities of the programme be continued during the school year.

Teachers and school principals highlighted the issue of recruitment of staff as a main challenge in running the programme. In addressing this, some principals of special schools saw potential for greater flexibility in the pupil-teacher ratio and in the respective roles and responsibilities of teachers and SNAs the during summer programme. In this regard, they noted that, as the activities of the summer programme involved less-formal instruction than school activities do, they might not require the same pupil-teacher ratio as they have during the school year. The second main area for improvement noted by teachers and programme managers was school transport, and, in the context of special schools, the challenges of hiring bus escorts for children.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The Department of Education summer programme aims to promote the inclusion, participation and engagement in learning of children with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage through strengthening their connection to their school community, promoting their enjoyment in learning, and developing their resilience and wellbeing. This report presents the findings of inspection visits to ninety-four summer programmes in 2023 and thirty-two follow-up visits conducted in October and November 2023.

This Inspectorate report is the third in a series of three reports that focus on inclusion, participation and engagement of children and young people in their education. The first report, *'The Quality of Education for Children and Young People from Ukraine,'* (published February 2024) describes the quality of education provision for children and young people from Ukraine in Irish primary and post-primary schools. The second report, *'Meeting Additional Language Needs – Whole-school and Classroom Approaches for Inclusive Language Learning'* (published February 2024) describes the quality of provision for children and young people learning English as an additional language (EAL). Both reports are available [here](#).

This third report describes the quality of provision for children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage participating in the Department of Education summer programme. It also evaluates the learning experiences provided on the programme and the extent to which these experiences supported the children and young people on their return to school in September. Inspectors reported on the very significant growth in the summer programme since its inception and they make a number of key recommendations designed to further improve the inclusion, participation and engagement of children and young people in their education.

Increasing access and participation

In 2023, in order to increase the number of children and young people participating in the summer programme, the Department of Education allowed schools greater flexibility in recruiting staff for the programme. The Department also provided enhanced administrative support to assist with coordination and administration, reduced the restrictions on the number of children and young people who could participate, and increased the funding for the programme. These developments have been very positive in increasing access to and participation in the summer programme. Since 2021, the number of children and young people who participated in a summer programme has increased by over ten thousand and the number of schools that offer the programme has increased significantly.

Taking account of these significant improvements, this Inspectorate report notes that in 2023 just over half of the special schools in Ireland did not offer a programme. Furthermore, these inspections indicate that difficulties sourcing suitably qualified staff meant that a small number of children with severe and profound needs could not participate in the summer programme offered by their school.

A number of children and young people attending a special school, and who were on a reduced school day, were not able to participate in a summer programme. The Department of Education is currently engaging with relevant stakeholders, including representatives of the special school sector, to address these issues and to further increase the number of special schools offering the programme. The Inspectorate and the Department of Education will continue to work with all stakeholders to realise this important objective.

Enhanced planning and preparation

The position of programme organiser was introduced in 2023 to facilitate advance planning and to reduce the administrative workload of the programme. The findings of this report indicate that this was a very beneficial development, as inspectors recorded many examples of effective pre-planning by programme managers. These examples included the identification of the strengths, interests, and needs of children and young people in advance of the programme; matching programme activities to the skills of staff; and issuing clear and helpful communications to parents about the programme. Most importantly, almost all programmes incorporated a broad range of learning activities, many of which required advance planning and careful coordination.

Leadership opportunities for staff

Other changes to the terms and conditions of the summer programme included separating the position of programme organiser from the position of programme manager and allowing schools to employ external staff to work on the programme when they could not recruit teachers from the school staff. These were also positive changes. The programme manager was a teacher other than the principal or deputy principal in almost forty percent of programmes. The opportunities afforded to these teachers to lead a programme that prioritises children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage for participation, is a very welcome development. The facility to employ external staff has ensured that more programmes were offered in 2023 than in previous years.

Promoting enjoyment in learning

The quality of learning experiences was good or very good in almost all programmes visited. A number of factors contributed to this including the cross-curricular approach to activities and the emphasis on wellbeing and on social skill development. Inspectors found that the children and young people enjoyed their learning on the summer programmes. The high level of enjoyment in learning is particularly welcome, especially for children and young people who may not always experience enjoyment in learning in more formal settings.

The sense of enjoyment that children and young people experienced during the programme reflects very positively on the programmes offered and on the important opportunities that were provided to further develop their range of learning competencies. These competencies include the ability to reflect on their achievements and on the further supports they may need to make progress in learning. They also include the ability of children and young people to see themselves as learners and to become motivated to learn. These competencies are critically important in increasing the inclusion, participation and engagement of children and young people who have special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. In planning learning activities in future summer programmes, organisers, managers and staff should include activities designed to develop children and young people's ability to reflect on their learning, their motivation to learn, and their sense of progress and achievement in learning.

Involving children and young people in planning their learning

Inspectors saw a variety of appropriate means of involving children and young people in programme planning in eighty-one of the ninety-four programmes. Importantly also, the inspections indicate that children and young people experienced a greater sense of ownership of their own learning when they were involved in planning and decision-making in relation to their learning activities. It is recommended that all programmes should take careful account of the views of children and young people, and allow for the appropriate involvement of children and young people in programme planning and in the review of programme successes. This could be very beneficial in identifying gaps and opportunities for development and in highlighting aspects for further improvement in the design and delivery of the summer programmes.

Promoting parental involvement

There is extensive evidence that parental involvement and engagement with their children's learning and strong partnerships between home and school have immediate and long-term effects on aspects such as children's behaviour, their social and emotional development and their enjoyment of school⁸. However, the level of parental involvement in the summer programmes varied considerably. In most programmes, parental involvement was informal, with only a small number of programmes having effective, formal means of involving parents. This is at variance with the guidelines provided by the Department of Education on summer programmes for primary and special schools. That guidance sets out a number of approaches to involving parents in programme planning.

Based on these findings, all programmes should consider appropriate and practical means of promoting effective parental engagement with the summer programme. These could include, for example, opportunities for parents to provide information to staff about their child's strengths, interests and needs. They could also provide opportunities for some parents to assist with activities in which they have particular expertise, and opportunities for parents to receive information on their child's progress during the summer programme.

Reporting on the progress of children and young people

The inspection visits indicate that only a small number of schools had a formal means of reporting to the school on the progress of children and young people during the summer programme. The lack of recording and reporting of progress means that important opportunities for school-based learning to build on the progress that children make during the summer programme may be lost. It also means that insights into the strengths, interests, and needs of children and young people gained during the summer programme, are not available to inform learning activities in school. In order to capitalise on the progress children and young people make during the summer programme, all programme organisers and managers should put a system in place to ensure that a concise, written report on the progress of each child is completed at the end of each programme. This report should be shared with parents and included in the Student Support File of children who are on the school's provision plan.

Supporting children and young people on their return to school

The outcomes of the follow-up visits demonstrated that taking part in the programme supported children and young people in a number of ways when they returned to school. Children and young people, parents and teachers mentioned increasing self-confidence, broader friendships and smoother transitions as particularly relevant supports. Participants also indicated that the summer programme supported them in their learning and in their

⁸ Goodall, J. (2017). *Narrowing The Achievement Gap: Parental Engagement With Children's Learning*. London, Routledge.

Kiely, J., O'Toole, L., Haals-Brosnan, M., O'Brien, E.Z., O'Keeffe, C., and Dunne, C.M. (2021) Parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their children's education during the primary school years. Available at: https://www.npc.ie/images/uploads/downloads/Parental_Involvement_Research_Doc.pdf.

attitudes to school and, for some, it improved their attendance. These are very positive findings.

The following recommendations are made in order to further support the inclusion, participation and engagement in education of children and young people who participate in the summer programme.

Recommendations

1. All summer programmes should include a range of activities designed to develop the higher-order learning competencies of the children and young people who participate in the programme. These competencies include the ability to reflect on learning, having a sense of ownership of learning and motivation to learn.
 - As a first step in achieving this, programme organisers, managers and teachers should plan for and facilitate discussions about learning both before and after activities. This could involve, for example, discussing what the children and young people would like to learn before they go on an excursion or undertake an activity; talking about the skills the children and young people developed at the end of a day and considering what further skills they would like to develop.
2. All programmes should include appropriate and practical means of promoting effective parental engagement with the summer programme.
 - In this regard, all programmes should provide an opportunity for parents to share information with staff about their child's strengths, interests and needs in advance of the summer programme.
 - Programme organisers could also consider conducting a brief audit of parents' interests and skills in areas that are relevant to the activities of the summer programme and consider how best to utilise the available talents to positive effect during the programme.
3. Programme organisers and managers should put a system in place to ensure that a concise, written report on the progress of each child and young person is completed at the end of each programme. This report should be provided to parents and included in the Student Support File of each child or young person on the school's provision plan following their participation on the summer programme.
 - In order to progress this objective, the stakeholders currently involved in planning for summer programme 2024 should work together to devise a brief, accessible template that summer programme organisers and managers can adapt for their own context.
 - The summer programme template should take account of the wide range of co-curricular, social, collaborative and reflective learning experiences that children and young people engage in during a summer programme.