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Executive Summary

Evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children
Respecting Difference Programme

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Contents

The Programme	3
Methodology	3
Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial	3
In-depth Qualitative Case Studies	3
Findings from the Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial	4
Child Outcomes	4
Parental and Practitioner Outcomes	5
Findings from the In-depth Qualitative Case Studies	5
Practitioners	5
Parents	5
Children	5
Conclusions	6
Recommendations	6
The Programme	6
Curriculum and Resources	6
Practitioners/Teachers	6
Training and Early Years Specialist Support	7
Working with Parents	7
Policy and Research	7
Further Information	8

The Programme

The Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference Programme is a pre-school programme for 3-4 year old children that seeks to increase awareness of diversity and difference issues among young children, early childhood practitioners and parents and to promote more positive attitudes and behaviours towards those who are different.

The programme has been developed by Early Years - the organisation for young children in Northern Ireland in partnership with the US-based Peace Initiatives Institute (Pii). It combines the use of:

- five one minute cartoon media messages shown on national television for three weeks at a time, three times per year;
- an early years curriculum and a set of culturally and contextually appropriate resources for use in the pre-school classroom and in the home environment;
- a comprehensive training programme for pre-school teachers, parents and management committees; and
- ongoing support from Early Years Specialists who act as external mentors and critical friends to practitioners.

The cartoons are set in a play park and feature characters that young children can easily identify with. The messages in the cartoons seek to promote positive attitudes to physical, social, cultural and ethnic differences amongst young children, practitioners and parents. These messages are reinforced in early years settings through the use of resources and curricular activities that prompt young children to talk about their feelings and attitudes to differences.

Methodology

An interdisciplinary research team comprising the Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University Belfast, the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Northern Ireland and Stranmillis University College, was commissioned by Early Years to undertake a rigorous and independent evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference Programme. The evaluation took the form of a cluster randomised controlled trial, led by the Centre for Effective Education, and in-depth qualitative case studies undertaken by NCB and Stranmillis University College. The findings from both elements of the evaluation are presented in two detailed reports that are freely available to download.

Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial

The purpose of the cluster randomised controlled trial was to test whether the programme had a positive and measurable effect on a range of outcomes identified for the children, parents and practitioners participating in the programme. The trial was one of the largest ever trials conducted of its type internationally and involved 74 pre-school settings that were selected randomly

from settings in Northern Ireland (54) and counties Louth and Roscommon in the Republic of Ireland (10 per county). The settings were randomly allocated to either the intervention or control group.

A total of 1,181 children aged 3-4 years participated in the evaluation, together with 868 parents and 232 practitioners. The trial took place during the academic year 2008/09. Pre-testing was undertaken in September/October 2008 and the post-tests were conducted in May/June 2009. At both time points, children were tested individually and asked to complete a series of standardised tasks in which they were shown a variety of pictures and photographs and asked to identify and describe what they saw. Parents and practitioners were asked to complete questionnaires at both pre-test and post-test stages that consisted of a series of questions and statements that respondents were required to indicate their response to on a Likert scale. The outcomes tested and the findings from the trial are reported below.

In interpreting all of the findings below, it is worth noting that over a quarter of all possible settings in Northern Ireland were not eligible to participate in the trial and were thus excluded because they had already actively volunteered to be trained in the delivery of the Media Initiative for Children. As such, this may have resulted in a final sample for this evaluation that had a disproportionate number of settings that were initially less committed to, or enthusiastic about, delivering a programme such as this one.

In-depth Qualitative Case Studies

The purpose of the in-depth qualitative case studies was to go beyond the quantitative findings of the trial in order to analyse the processes involved in delivering the programme and to track the experiences of practitioners, parents, management, Early Years Specialists and children involved in the programme throughout the year.

Four of the settings involved in delivering the programme as part of the randomised controlled trial were selected to act as case studies; three from Northern Ireland and one from the Republic of Ireland. Within this, two were located in predominantly rural areas and two in urban areas and two were located in areas of high deprivation and two in areas of low deprivation.

Data collection took place in three stages: prior to implementation of the programme; mid-way through the year; and when implementation was completed. A wide variety of data collection techniques were used including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and detailed observations of a number of sessions and activities associated with the programme.

Findings from the Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial

The outcomes tested and the effects found in relation to these are listed in Table 1. For the purposes of this evaluation, an outcome is defined as a real and discernible change in attitudes and/or awareness that has occurred as a direct result of taking part in the Media Initiative for Children. There was a need to limit the demands of individual testing on very young children and therefore it was not possible to evaluate all potential outcomes associated with the programme.

Child Outcomes

As summarised in Table 1, clear evidence was found that the Media Initiative for Children achieved positive effects regarding children’s attitudes and awareness in relation to their:

- socio-emotional development
- cultural awareness
- inclusive behaviour

Such effects were consistent across the whole sample of children and no differences were found between:

- boys and girls
- Catholic and Protestant children
- children from differing socio-economic backgrounds
- children in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

The programme was also found to achieve similar effects regardless of the rated quality of the setting and, on the whole, the settings that took part in the intervention were found to have delivered the programme with relatively high degrees of fidelity. Within this, no evidence was found that the minor variations in programme delivery across settings that did exist had any significant impact on its effectiveness in improving outcomes among the children.

No evidence was found that the programme had any effect regarding children’s willingness to be inclusive of others in general. In relation to the more specific outcome of children’s willingness to be inclusive of those who are different to themselves, this was only tested in relation to their attitudes towards a Chinese child and a child in a wheelchair where no evidence was found of an effect. However it should be noted that the evaluation did not test the children’s attitudes towards those from other minority ethnic backgrounds and/or with other disabilities that were also featured in the cartoons, the curriculum, the training programme and/or resource materials used in the classroom and those used by parents in the home environment.

Table 1. Summary of the effects of the Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference Programme on Children

OUTCOMES	EFFECTS FOUND
Children: Socio-emotional Development	
Increased ability to recognise emotions in others	+.34***
Increased ability to recognise instances of exclusion	+.61***
Increased ability to recognise how being excluded makes someone feel	+.40***
Children: Cultural Awareness	
Increased ability to recognise the Irish Tricolour flag	+.72***
Increased ability to recognise the British Union flag	+.62***
Increased ability to recognise a St Patrick’s Day Parade	+.39*
Increased ability to recognise an Orange Parade	+.38**
Children: Inclusive Behaviour	
Increased desire to join in a St Patrick’s Day Parade	+.17**
Increased desire to join in an Orange Parade	+.27***
Increased willingness to be inclusive of others in general	No Evidence Found
Increased willingness to be inclusive of a Chinese child	No Evidence Found
Increased willingness to be inclusive of a child in a wheelchair	No Evidence Found

Parental and Practitioner Outcomes

The evaluation found some potentially encouraging signs of positive change among both parents and practitioners in relation to increases in their awareness of the need to undertake diversity work with young children and also their confidence in their own ability to address such issues with their children (effect sizes ranging from $d = +.09$, $p = .266$ to $d = +.23$, $p = .292$).

However, it is important that these changes are not interpreted as reliable evidence in themselves of a positive effect on parental and practitioner outcomes for two reasons. First, as none of these effects were statistically significant then we cannot discount the possibility that these encouraging signs may not have been due to the effects of the programme at all but could have just occurred randomly. Secondly, only 47% of parents and 44% of practitioners who completed the pre-test questionnaires also completed post-test questionnaires. Moreover, this non-response was found to be higher among those in the control settings compared to those in the intervention settings. As such, we cannot discount the possibility that these small positive effects may have been due to the more motivated parents and practitioners who valued the programme deciding to complete the post-test questionnaires.

Findings from the In-depth Qualitative Case Studies

Practitioners

Overall, the practitioners felt that the programme was a success and many reported undertaking a great deal of diversity work with children throughout the year, using both the activities presented in the Service Design Manual and incorporating additional ideas of their own. They felt that the programme had impacted positively on their own skills and confidence in working with children around issues of diversity and also felt that they could see positive impacts on the children as well.

The important ingredients of successful implementation of the programme identified by the practitioners included the quality of the training provided together with what they felt to be the invaluable ongoing support they received from the Early Years Specialists. The variety and quality of the resources provided were also cited as a key element of the success of the programme and especially the emphasis placed on promoting socio-emotional development that was felt to provide the foundations upon which targeted diversity work could be undertaken.

The emphasis within the programme on engaging meaningfully with parents was also felt to be a critical element of the programme, although some recognised the continuing difficulties faced in doing this. One key issue identified in the report that impacted upon the development of relationships with parents

and the local community, and on the successful implementation of the programme more generally, was the presence of effective and committed leadership from the setting management.

Parents

On the whole, the parents welcomed the programme and felt that it presented a good opportunity for their children to learn about difference and respect for others. They also felt that this issue was becoming more important given that local communities were becoming increasingly diverse.

From the parents' perspective, those who attended the initial parent information sessions found them to be extremely useful in helping to address any questions or concerns they may have had about the programme. The additional parent workshops were also found to be extremely beneficial by those who attended them in helping them develop practical skills and confidence in dealing with diversity issues with their children. However, not all of the workshops were well attended and parents tended only to make limited use of the home links materials. Some of the specific reasons for this are outlined in the report.

Children

From observations of and conversations with the children in the four case study settings, it was clear that the resources provided as part of the programme were both appealing and age appropriate and children readily identified with them. The activities that had been designed for the children were found to provide a supportive and safe space for the children to discuss and explore issues associated with diversity and difference and to increase their awareness and understanding.

The report outlines a number of detailed case studies of practitioners using a range of programme resources with the children including puppets, feelings cubes, lotto games and jigsaws depicting a wide range of cultural events and symbols. The report identifies specific ways in which these materials were used to good effect to promote the key outcomes associated with the programme. Common characteristics underpinning these were:

- practitioners who were fully trained in using the resources appropriately and skilfully
- practitioners providing children with the space to raise and talk about issues they felt to be important
- the integration of the materials across all elements of the settings' activities
- the continuing support of the Early Years Specialist (EYS) who helped practitioners to critically reflect upon their work and identify areas for further development

Conclusions

Overall, the randomised controlled trial found strong and robust evidence that the Media Initiative for Children is effective in improving outcomes in young children in relation to their socio-emotional development and awareness of and attitudes towards cultural differences. Moreover, these effects represent the 'added value' to pre-school settings that the programme provides in enhancing socio-emotional learning and promoting understanding of and respect for differences compared to their usual methods and resources.

The qualitative case studies found that the programme was enthusiastically received by practitioners, parents and children and provided a range of examples of how the programme can be effectively and appropriately delivered in a range of differing contexts. Moreover, the case studies identified a number of core elements to the programme that acted as important drivers of successful implementation:

- a practical and relevant curriculum supported by a wide range of high quality and culturally appropriate resources;
- the provision of high quality training for practitioners, parents and management to achieve a common vision for the programme and the development of practical skills required to ensure its effective delivery;
- ongoing support of the Early Years Specialists to ensure that the programme is delivered by skilled and confident practitioners in an effective and appropriate way; and
- strong and clear commitment to the programme and leadership from setting management to ensure the programme is delivered with fidelity.

Recommendations

The Programme

1. Given the strong evidence base that now exists for the programme, further investment would be warranted to ensure that the full programme is available for use by all pre-school settings across the island of Ireland and that settings are encouraged to use it as an effective means of improving young children's socio-emotional development and awareness of and respect for diversity and difference.
2. Given its proven effectiveness among 3-4 year old children, consideration should be given to developing and extending the programme so that there are developmentally appropriate versions for use in:
 - Sure Start Programmes and Day Nurseries to help lay the foundations for the programme, especially in relation to early socio-emotional development, among younger children aged 2-3 years; and
 - Key Stage One/Infant classrooms in primary schools to help consolidate and build upon the effects achieved at pre-schools among children aged 5-8.

Curriculum and Resources

3. With regard to encouraging children to be more inclusive of others in general, it would be worth considering how the existing activities and resources developed for the programme could be used to demonstrate and explicitly model out inclusive behaviours for children in a range of naturally occurring situations as well as providing more guidance for practitioners, as agents of change, on how they can model out such behaviours as well in their practice.
4. The current trial did not test all of the potential effects that the programme may have had on children's willingness to include those from differing minority ethnic backgrounds and/or those with differing types of disability. Of the two differences that were focused on, namely in relation to a Chinese child and a child in a wheelchair, no evidence was found of the programme having an effect on the children's attitudes. It is therefore critical that when practitioners are working on issues related to disability and race/ethnicity, they draw upon all of the available curricular resources and guidance contained in the Programme Service Design Manual which support practitioners to address all aspects of difference.
5. With regard to increasing further the effectiveness of the Media Initiative for Children in relation to children's awareness of and positive attitudes towards cultural differences, it would be worth identifying a number of key cultural events and symbols and developing more focused activities and materials that seek explicitly to increase the children's awareness and knowledge of these. The choice of events and symbols should reflect a variety of cultures and should also appeal to both boys and girls.

Practitioners/Teachers

6. Practitioners should ensure that they are making extensive use of the guidance and resources provided to support the programme delivery and that they are devoting a sufficient amount of time to working on each of the five core messages to ensure the programme is delivered effectively.
7. It is essential that practitioners and setting managers attend the full four days of introductory training. Where this proves difficult because of staff shortages in settings, efforts should be made to ensure that all content is covered through arranging additional sessions.

Training and Early Years Specialist Support

8. Further support and encouragement should be provided to practitioners through the training and ongoing support of the Early Years Specialists to implement all of the media messages, particularly those messages dealing with ethnicity and sectarianism.
9. The introductory training could be further developed to include more use of multi-media techniques and real-life examples, for example, video footage of programme activities being implemented in settings that follow a range of curricula, together with interviews with practitioners from these settings could be developed. In addition, video footage of practitioners demonstrating good practice delivering and discussing the ethnicity and cultural diversity messages with children could be developed.
10. While the Service Design Manual recommends that practitioners take the lead from children in deciding when to introduce the various messages, the less confident practitioners would benefit from following a sample timetable that could be included in the Service Design Manual.
11. The current Early Years Specialist model is a vital aspect of the programme in terms of quality and quantity of support offered to practitioners and should be maintained. The ability to identify individual settings' needs and tailor support accordingly should remain an important aspect of this model as practitioner confidence and ability levels will vary.
12. In relation to initial teacher education, there is a need to ensure that knowledge and understanding of diversity issues inform all aspects of the curriculum. In addition, specific components of training are required that seek to provide teachers and practitioners with the knowledge and skills required to deal skilfully and effectively with issues of diversity in their own classrooms and settings.

Working with Parents

13. While the parent workshops and information sessions are delivered by the Early Years Specialists, practitioners are the agents through which these are organised and communicated to parents. It would therefore be beneficial if the Early Years Specialists could have more direct contact with parents regarding these important elements of the programme, rather than relying on practitioners as the link. Whilst efforts to organise workshops should be maintained, particularly where parental demand is high, achieving a total of three may not always be feasible. In such cases, the Early Years Specialists need to use their professional judgement in the number of workshops organised and balance demand with delivery whilst actively seeking to engage parents using the most appropriate method.
14. Practitioners should be encouraged and reminded of the importance of communicating with parents in terms of what their children are doing in the setting regarding the programme as well as what could be done at home to support programme delivery. Doing this will help ensure that children are not receiving conflicting messages at home.

15. Although some resources are currently provided for parents, namely the home links material, a more comprehensive and tailored parent/family support package would be useful. For example, parents could also be given a DVD containing the media messages and their own manual to explain the messages and to give them some simple activities to follow at home. The DVD could also provide some background information on the development of the programme, such as that used in the EYS information sessions. This may help to convince parents of the importance of doing diversity work with young children and may in turn encourage greater parental participation.

Policy and Research

16. It is notable that in relation to Northern Ireland, the need to address issues of diversity and to promote respect for difference in early childhood is not mentioned either in relation to the government's current consultation on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (OFMDFM, 2010) or the Early Years (0-6) Strategy (Department of Education, 2010). In contrast, recent policy developments in the Republic of Ireland have stressed the need for a focus on diversity and interculturalism. These include: *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006); *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (2006); *Aistear*, *The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009); and the *Intercultural Education Strategy* (2010). Given the cumulative weight of evidence that now exists locally regarding how attitudes form at an early age, and in light of the strong evidence provided through this present trial of the role that early childhood initiatives can have in bringing about real and measurable positive change, it is imperative that issues of diversity and difference form a key component of any early childhood strategy and that such a strategy, in turn, represents a key element of any wider programme to promote community cohesion.
17. This present trial is one of only a few studies – either in relation to early childhood programmes or in relation to community relations programmes more generally – that has attempted to undertake a rigorous evaluation of the actual measurable effects of a diversity programme on the attitudes and awareness of children, parents and practitioners. There is a need for government not only to develop appropriate programmes to promote community cohesion but also to ensure that such programmes are based on the best available evidence and also subject to rigorous evaluation.
18. Finally, it should be recognised that this has been an innovative trial, not just in relation to its size and scope but also the nature of the outcomes focused on. As such, it has required a number of bespoke measures to be developed and used for the first time. In ensuring that the appropriate tools are available to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes such as this one, further developmental research is required in relation to working on and refining existing measures as well as developing further measures that are capable of being used to measure the impact of other aspects of the programme not covered in this evaluation.

Further Information

The full findings from both the cluster randomised controlled trial and the in-depth qualitative studies are contained in the following two reports that are freely available to download.

- Connolly, P; Miller, S; and Eakin, A; (2010) A Cluster Randomised Trial Evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children: Respecting Difference Programme, Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast. Available at: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cee/>
- Molyneaux, F; Geraghty, T; McConnell, B; McStravick, C; Walsh, G; McDowell, J and Gamble, C; (2010) A Case Study Report: The Media Initiative For Children Respecting Difference Programme, NCB NI and Stranmillis University College. Available at: <http://www.ncb.org.uk/resources>



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