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Disability Inclusion Program Evaluation

Final report

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SPRC
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Disability and Inclusion Program Evaluation

1. Executive summary

1.1. Introduction

The NSW Department of Education (DoE or the Department) commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at UNSW Sydney (University of New South Wales) and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) to undertake an outcome evaluation of the Disability and Inclusion Program (DIP).

The DIP has provided funding and support to enable children with disability and additional needs in community preschools to participate in quality early childhood education on the same basis as their peers since 2018. It is complemented by Start Strong funding for community preschools.

The DIP has four components:

- High Learning Support Needs (HLSN) funding
- Sector Capacity Building (SCB) program
- Minor Capital Works (MCW) funding
- Early Childhood Inclusive Education scholarships.

The HLSN funding and the SCB program are in scope for this evaluation. Information on the MCW and Early Childhood Inclusive Education scholarships is reported in Appendix A.

1.2. Methods and limitations

The evaluation involved two phases. In Phase 1, the research team conducted a desktop review of program documents and a desktop analysis of the program administrative data. These analyses set the foundation for the data collection in Phase 2. Phase 2 involved a survey of NSW community (including mobile) preschools, and interviews with SCB providers, preschool staff members, and parents of children with HLSN attending community preschools receiving HLSN funds.

The desktop analysis of administrative data provided by the Department of Education included a description of the program and, where possible, comparisons across years and by key service and child characteristics to explore trends in program use and outcomes.

The DIP preschool survey was conducted in February and March 2022. All NSW community preschools were invited to participate. The survey included questions about the preschools' experiences of HLSN and SCB, some general questions about the DIP as a whole and inclusion more broadly at their preschool. The achieved sample was 168 eligible services,¹ which represents about 23% of services. The preschools participating in the survey were considered broadly representative of the sector.

The research team conducted 29 interviews between February 2022 and July 2022, which included a total of 33 participants: 5 DoE staff members, 10 preschool staff members, 13 SCB providers, and 5 parents of children with HLSN attending community preschools receiving HLSN funding. The interviews with preschool staff members and SCB providers explored the perceived strengths and challenges of the DIP, the HLSN funding, and SCB program and how successful they are in achieving their objectives. The interviews with parents explored their views on the support their children received through the HLSN funding. All the interviews were conducted either over the phone or via video conferencing and were recorded with the consent of the participants.

All interviews conducted for this evaluation were approved under UNSW HREC assessment (reference: HC210684). The desktop analysis of HLSN and SCB administrative data and the preschool survey were deemed negligible risk by AIFS executive and exempt from ethics committee review.

1.2.1. Evaluation methods limitations

The evaluation identified some data and monitoring issues, for example inconsistencies in the number of records in the SCB documents and limitations on the outcome data available. Individual unique service identifiers were not provided with the administrative data, so duplication could not be eliminated for the evaluation. Lack of individual unique service identifiers and the absence of relevant variables, such as the children's disability type, prevented a more granular analyses of the DIP data.

The number of parents who participated in the study was smaller than originally planned. This was because of difficulties in reaching out to parents through community preschools. In agreement with the Department, the research team changed the recruitment strategy and invited parents through Facebook posts to boost participation rates. It became apparent to the research team that the parents who participated in the interviews were connected to community preschools that were proactive towards inclusion, so their experiences are not necessarily

¹ A small number of childcare services or other out-of-scope services completed the survey and were removed from the sample before analysis.

representative of all parents of children with disability attending community preschools.

1.3. Findings

Overall, the evaluation found that the Disability Inclusion Program provides critical supports for NSW community preschools to meaningfully include children with disability and high learning support needs in early education programs with benefits for all children.

The following two sections summarise the main evaluation findings for the HLSN funding and the SCB program.

1.3.1. High Learning Support Needs funding

This section addresses each of the evaluation questions regarding the HLSN program.

How is HLSN funding spent?

Between 70 and 75% of eligible preschools accessed HLSN funding each year, and supported between 4.5 and 6% of the children who were enrolled in NSW preschools between 2018 and 2020. Just over half of these preschools accessed funding each year, and just under 10% used HLSN funding in only one year.

The majority of children receiving HLSN funding in 2020 attended preschool for more than 600 hours. 40% of funded children received HLSN funding for at least 600 hours. On average, in 2020, HLSN funding supported 78% of a child's enrolled time through one-on-one support or increased ratios of staff to children in the room.

Nearly all services (96%) participating in the survey reported that HLSN funding was used to hire additional educators. Other uses of HLSN funding were professional development, extending hours of existing staff and hiring inclusion specialists.

What do services consider when they apply for funding?

Services generally consider that the employment of additional staff with HLSN funding is essential for meaningful inclusion of children with higher support needs. When services consider making an application for HLSN funding, they weigh up the time costs of completing an application to the substantial benefits for children and educators of having additional staff funded through the HLSN.

Preschool directors reported that the application processes are time consuming and the online systems are frustrating. Some preschool directors reported that they are less likely to submit an application for funding if it is based on observation, because these applications are far more time consuming than applications based on

documentary evidence, and also less likely to be successful. In addition, analysis of application data indicates that most applications with observation evidence did not receive the hours of funding that services requested. Some preschool directors seeking small amounts of funding calculated that the additional costs associated with HLSN funding, which are born by the service, plus the time of staff to complete the applications, outweigh the benefits of additional funding.

How is funding for additional staffing spent?

Most preschools use HLSN funding to increase staff numbers, most commonly by providing one-on-one support for the HLSN funded child or by raising staff ratios in rooms with children with high learning support needs.

The additional educators provided 1:1 support for the funded child or contributed to staffing above ratio and working with all children, developing and reviewing Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), and consulting children's specialists. There is little evidence as to how services are managing the funding, or how they manage HLSN being a contribution towards staffing costs. However, interview participants indicated that they tried to employ staff as close to the funded hours as possible, and as close to the funding rate as possible. Refined acquittal data might provide more information on how spending is managed.

How are preschools managing their funding within their individual services?

While the majority of services used funding to increase staffing, other ways funding was spent varied greatly by the size of service. Small services (those with 20 or fewer children) were less likely to report using the time for ILP development or consulting with specialists. Large services (of more than 100 children) were more likely to use HLSN funding for professional development.

Is funding being spent consistent with program guidelines?

HLSN funding rules are understood by most preschools. There was strong agreement among many, however, that the funding rules should be more flexible, particularly with regards to buying equipment to aid in children's inclusion. Preschools made this suggestion despite the fact that under the Disability and Inclusion Program, preschools can apply for Minor Capital Works (MCW) funding to buy equipment to support the inclusion of children who are eligible for HLSN funding². Preschools did not discuss Minor Capital Works when making this suggestion.

² Note that Minor Capital Works funding was out of scope for the evaluation.

Recommendation

- Investigate why preschools would like to use HLSN funding for the purchase of equipment despite the availability of Minor Capital Works funding.
- In the meantime, explore ways to make Minor Capital Works funding more accessible for preschools. For example, for ease of administration for the Department and for community preschools, consider integrating the Minor Capital Works funding applications with HLSN funding, for example by expanding allowable spending under the spending rules.

To what extent is the HLSN program achieving the desired outcomes for children? Which children benefit the most, and least, from HLSN funding and why?

Data on outcomes for children was limited, coming only from reports from preschools in the survey and interviews, and from interviews with parents.

Under the current Disability and Inclusion Program, preschools can apply for HLSN funding for children without a diagnosis by submitting observations by preschool educators as evidence. Because preschools find observation-based applications very time consuming, some reported that they sometimes chose not to make an application for children who do not have a diagnosis and those with behavioural challenges not related to a medical condition. While analysis of unsuccessful HLSN applications was not possible, analysis of successful applications shows that, in 2020, most applications made using observational data did not receive the hours of funding that was requested (by contrast, most applications made with documentary evidence did receive the hours requested). As a result, some children without diagnoses are not benefiting from HLSN funding as much as they might. Another group identified by preschools was children with language or speech delays or auditory issues, who they felt would benefit from funding for a visiting speech pathologist.

Recommendation

- Investigate why applications made with observational evidence are less likely to be funded for the hours requested compared to those made with documentary evidence.
- Consider how to better support community preschools making HLSN applications using observational evidence.

What service characteristics lead to the effective use of HLSN funding, and why?

There is variation in access to HLSN funding, with services connected to large providers accessing funding at a higher rate. This means that children attending standalone services or services attached to small providers, which are over-represented outside urban areas, are less likely to receive HLSN funding.

All services which reported receiving HLSN funding made the most of that funding, largely through the employment of additional staff. Preschools argued persuasively that use of the funding was most effective where preschools could employ staff with experience in supporting children's inclusion, and maintain employment of an HLSN funded staff person over several years – as this facilitated capacity building and teamwork among all staff in a service.

What elements of the HLSN program are most important for achieving outcomes for children?

Preschools participating in the evaluation reported that the ability to employ additional staff was critical for the successful inclusion of children with disability and higher support needs. The most successful approaches involved preschools or staff with considerable experience and skill in inclusion; and opportunities to facilitate communication between families, preschools and other services working with the child; in addition to employing more staff on the floor.

How is the HLSN program improving inclusion outcomes?

In interviews and in the survey, preschools reported that they strongly believe that the meaningful inclusion of children with disability in preschools is made possible by HLSN funding.

Preschool survey results revealed that the majority of participants agreed that HLSN funding improved children's outcomes in all areas, especially play, learning, safety and security. Comments in the survey and preschool director interviews suggest that in most instances, they consider that outcomes are improved through the availability of additional staff, who either work with children one on one, or raising staff ratios, meaning more staff are available to work with all children in the room.

How could the HLSN program's structure and scope be changed to increase effectiveness and ensure the program is managed within budget?

The value preschools place on HLSN funding is evident in their persistence with completing applications, despite the challenges they report with application processes. The effectiveness of application processes could however be improved.

Preschools reported HLSN applications are time consuming, involving a frustrating online platform, and that funding announcements come too late in the year.

In addition, applications can involve two forms of evidence: a written diagnosis by a relevant specialist or observations by educators at the relevant preschool. Observation-based applications were reported by preschools to be less likely to lead to funding, and funding based on observations is short-term, requiring time-consuming resubmissions throughout the year to maintain funding.

Priority funding based on safety risk warrants more investigation. In 2020 and 2021, nearly a third of all HLSN applications include priority funding. It is possible that high rates of application for priority funding could arise because HLSN funding is not made available to preschools until after the beginning of the preschool year. Not all preschools can afford to employ staff in anticipation of HLSN funding. There might be less need for priority funding if HLSN funding were provided earlier.

Additionally, applications might be better targeted if preschools better understood priority funding guidelines. Although feedback can be made to preschools on request, preschools are either unaware or unwilling to seek feedback.

Recommendation

- The provision of feedback to all unsuccessful applicants would aid in improving understanding of funding guidelines.

How is HLSN funding support similar to or different from the support offered under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Early Childhood Approach (ECA)? Are there any risks regarding duplication or any gaps in support?

The evaluation found that the NDIS ECA and the HLSN programs complement each other, with no evidence of overlaps in provision. HLSN funding can facilitate communication between professionals working with children with disability and higher learning support needs, their families and preschool staff by funding additional time for preschool staff to bring all involved together to share strategies and approaches.

Recommendation

- Consider encouraging preschools to use HLSN funding to facilitate meetings between families and others contributing to the children's care and development to enable a collaborative approach with shared strategies.

How could the HLSN funding program be adapted to improve inclusion outcomes for children?

Overall, the HLSN is a well-regarded program which appears to be highly effective, achieving its objectives to improve the inclusion of children with disability into NSW preschools. A few modifications to the program, outlined below, could lead to greater effectiveness and efficiency in ensuring children with disability can participate meaningfully in preschool education. When asked how the HLSN program could be improved, interview and survey participants pointed to application processes, use of funding to purchase equipment, and the adequacy of funding to attract and retain quality staff. Findings show tension between Departmental expectations that the HLSN rate is a contribution for additional staffing, and preschools who cannot all afford to supplement HLSN funding for staffing. Even those preschools who can afford to supplement HLSN funding, regard the funding rate as a price signal from the Department as the rate at which it is expected HLSN staff should be funded. In addition, some preschool directors reported that it was difficult to attract and retain qualified and experienced staff to positions which were casual and short term.

Moreover, in some cases the employment of highly skilled or specialist staff could potentially benefit inclusion and raise knowledge and expertise of other preschool educators in some instances, for example, where a high proportion of children in a preschool have HLSN funding. Some reported that they needed to train HLSN funded staff if they had no experience with inclusion, which impeded the effectiveness of the program.

Recommendations

- Review the HLSN funding rate to ensure that all preschools can benefit from HLSN funding, regardless of their ability to supplement funding, and to enable preschools to attract and retain experienced and qualified staff.
- Consider enabling an employment specialist and highly skilled staff in some instances, for example, in preschools with very high numbers of HLSN funded children.

How could the HLSN program's structure and scope be changed to increase effectiveness and ensure the program is managed within budget?

The evaluation identified the application process as the primary element which could change to increase effectiveness and reduce cost for the Department.

Recommendations

- Provide funding to community preschools prior to the start of the preschool year. Ideally, funding would be made available so that HLSN funded staff are

employed with time to be involved in the planning before the children start attending, and to be available in the first weeks to help children with disability settle into preschool.

- Refine the HLSN application process and platform to ensure greater reliability and efficiency for community preschools.
- Review HLSN application requirements where observations are the source of evidence. Currently, there is a lack of understanding from community preschools regarding what needs to be provided, and observations are found to be overly time-consuming.
- Consult with community preschools to develop new, structured, observation templates that meet HLSN funding requirements and community preschool needs.
- Provide feedback to community preschools on all unsuccessful HLSN and priority funding applications, with the opportunity to request more detailed feedback. This will have equity benefits, as it should result in higher rates of successful applications to support children with disability by standalone preschools, those operated by small providers, and those in regional areas. Feedback should increase efficiency for the Department and community preschools by facilitating better-written applications.
- Remove requirements to provide evidence of disability for children who have NDIS plans or are participating in the Early Childhood Approach. Services seeking HLSN funding for these children should only provide an indication of their preschool learning support needs. This will improve efficiency in the HLSN application process both for the Department and preschools.

In addition, the evaluation found that, although directors of community preschools value systemic adjustments and capacity building in the sector, they believe that funding to support inclusion will continue to be needed into the future. They regard the employment of additional staff to be essential to support inclusion and to make early education available to all children in the room. Evidence on rates of disability in the community suggest that they are likely to continue to increase. In addition, parents of children with higher learning needs are likely to send their children to preschool over other early childhood services if they regard preschools as inclusive early education centres.

How could the HLSN program be adapted to be an effective basis for the evaluation of inclusion outcomes for children?

The Department of Education collects considerable data regarding the HLSN program, which could be more effectively used to evaluate program outcomes. Refinement of HLSN acquittal data, for example, would allow for a closer monitoring

of how funding is spent and managed within preschools, and whether spending complies with funding rules. Information provided to the evaluation indicates that little analysis is currently conducted of this data. If routine data analysis were undertaken of HLSN acquittal data (together with SCB preschool profiles), the program could provide ongoing assessment of program effectiveness. Data linkage with other government datasets would provide opportunities to assess school readiness and other outcomes for children.

Recommendations

- Review Departmental data collections, including routine reporting such as the HLSN acquittal data and the SCB preschool profiles, to ensure the data can be used for monitoring the DIP.
- Regularly analyse the reasons why HLSN applications are unsuccessful. This will provide valuable information on where preschools need additional guidance and clarification about HLSN eligibility and application processes.
- Better link SCB reporting and other preschool data to enable understanding how the DIP as a whole is working and how the elements of the program are interacting.
- Adequately resource the analysis of this data to allow internal monitoring of the program on an ongoing basis.
- Consider linking data from the DIP program to school and other datasets (perhaps through the Human Services Dataset) to examine the impact of the DIP program on school readiness, attainment, and possibly other outcomes for children in receipt of HLSN funding.

1.3.2. Sector Capacity Building program

In 2020-2021, there were 31 SCB providers delivering services in 50 discrete regions across NSW, including 18 metropolitan and 32 regional areas. The 50 regions were included in the SCB program as regional hubs that were most likely to contain community support networks for preschools who enrolled children with disability and additional needs.

SCB providers offer SCB support to all community and mobile preschools in their allocated region. Some SCB regions contained more services than others, with those in regional areas covering fewer services than those in metropolitan areas.

SCB providers deliver on three DIP objectives, which since 2020 are to assist preschools to:

- increase their capacity to include children with disability and additional needs on the same basis as their peers

- enable equitable education outcomes for children with disability and additional needs consistent with the five outcome areas of the Early Years Learning Framework (Identity, Connectedness, Wellbeing, Confident and Involved Learners, and Communication)
- understand the NDIS as it relates to the delivery of supports for children through the Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) approach (now known as the Early Childhood Approach) within an educational setting (NSW DoE, 2021).

SCB providers complete an annual report on how their support to community preschools meet the above objectives and the following key performance indicators (KPIs): understand the DIP guidelines; support development of self-reflective practices; support the use of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) outcomes and implement ILPs and adjustments to teaching strategies; identify and document barriers to participation; support the use of research-based assessment tools; deliver research based educational supports; understand the ECEI approach; embed research-based practices from the National Guidelines for Best Practice in ECEI; use the Working Together Agreement to promote a coordinated approach; embed research-based therapy supports into the preschool program; develop procedures and policies for collaborative practice; provide professional development; plan accessibility improvements; access resources and community services.

To what extent is the SCB program achieving the desired outcomes for children, educators and community preschools?

All community preschools in NSW are encouraged to participate in the SCB program, but they are not required to do so. The evaluation found that most preschools had engaged with the SCB program at some stage in 2021 or 2022.

The evaluation investigated how the SCB providers achieved the three above mentioned program objectives and the program's KPIs.

With regard to the first SCB program objective – i.e. to increase the preschools' capacity to include children with disability and additional needs on the same basis as their peers – the evaluation found that, for most community preschools, the SCB program is effective in helping to identify barriers to inclusion at their service, and to find strategies for inclusion other than funding to support children with disability. Most preschools (73%) that participated in the DIP Preschool Survey agreed or strongly agreed that identifying barriers helped to address their concerns regarding the inclusion of children with disability or additional needs. SCB providers reported that the program helped to build educators' confidence and skills in providing inclusive education.

However, the DIP Preschool Survey found less agreement about whether the SCB improves the services' ability to receive children with additional needs (36% of the

participant community preschools agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 30% who disagreed or strongly disagreed; 34% neither agreed nor disagreed). Furthermore, the evaluation found that some preschools were of the view that their service did not need support from the SCB program and that money would be better spent providing extra support in the classroom. This suggests that there was variation in the ability of the SCB providers to help preschools identify barriers to inclusion that required applying for HLSN or Minor Capital Works funds, and barriers to inclusion that could be addressed by engaging in professional development, training and coaching.

With regard to the second SCB program objective – i.e. enabling equitable education outcomes for children with disability and additional needs consistent with the five outcome areas of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) – the evaluation found that, in the three-year-period from 2018-19 to 2020-21, there was an improvement in the rating by the SCB providers of the community preschools' confidence in supporting the educational development of children with disability and additional needs against the five EYLF outcome areas. In 2020-21, SCB providers rated all but a few community preschools at a minimum "confident" on each of the EYLF outcomes. Most services were rated as "very confident", with close to 3 in 10 services rated as "extremely confident". Although these findings show a positive trend, they are based on the SCB providers' evaluations of the community preschools and it is not possible to establish a direct link between them and the impact of the SCB program.

With regard to the third SCB program objective – i.e. understanding the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as it relates to the delivery of supports for children through the Early Childhood Approach (ECA) within an educational setting – the evaluation found that Most preschools who had engaged with the SCB program reported that their SCB provider was a good resource for accessing training and professional development, and that their advice or support helped the preschool to be more inclusive, to understand or access HLSN funds and the NDIS ECA.

Recommendations

- Promote consistency in the quality and core offering of the services provided by the SCB providers. The evaluation identified variation in the way SCB providers support community preschools, with some SCB providers having more experienced staff members and offering online resources via their websites.
- Develop a quality assurance system for the SCB providers to promote consistency in the quality of the services offered by SCB providers.
- Collect feedback from community preschools regarding the services they receive from their SCB providers at regular intervals.

- Provide feedback to the SCB providers on how community preschools perceive their services.
- Establish an outcomes framework to measure the outcomes of the SCB program on preschools and on children with high learning needs.

What elements of the SCB program are most important for achieving these outcomes?

Several factors were identified that helped SCB providers to meet the program's objectives. SCB providers were more successful when they: 1) developed trust with the services; 2) were able to conduct in-person visits to preschools (which were disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic); 3) could access support from professionals (e.g. speech pathologists, occupational therapists) both to inform the support they provided and deliver specific training sessions; 4) were able to accommodate preschool needs in a flexible way.

Preschools that reported positive outcomes from participating in the SCB program had leadership teams and educators that were open to engage in critical reflection on their practice, regardless of their level of experience, and were open and transparent when completing the preschool profile with the SCB provider. Preschool profiles are completed once a year and report on the preschool's activities and progress, including barriers to inclusion, agreed actions and ratings of service confidence in ability to include children. Most SCB providers agreed that the preschool profiles needed to be complemented with in-person visits at the preschools. SCB providers also stressed that preschool profiles need to be regularly updated to make the tool as helpful as possible, such as having greater ability to identify barriers to inclusion.

Most SCB providers reported that the updates that the Department of Education introduced in the program (e.g. more flexibility in the allocation of hours of support to preschools and updates to the preschool profile form) were positive. SCB providers would also welcome the opportunity to have regular workshops with the Department to provide feedback on the implementation of the program and to network with other SCB providers to share examples of best practice.

Recommendations

- Develop a system to obtain regular feedback from the SCB providers about the implementation of the program to keep improving its key elements (e.g. the preschool profiles) and the communication between the Department and SCB providers.
- Build better links between the SCB program and the HLSN funding, for example by providing feedback to the SCB providers regarding patterns that the Department identifies in the community preschools' applications.

- Allow SCB funds to be used to access specialists to inform the support they provide and deliver specific training sessions.

How is the SCB program improving inclusion outcomes?

The evaluation found qualitative evidence that the SCB program improved inclusion outcomes by raising educators' confidence in working with children with disability, upskilling educators through professional development and training, and providing support around HLSN applications and the NDIS ECEI.

In the DIP Preschool Survey, 70% of the participant community preschools reported that the SCB provider delivered resources and training, 69% that the SCB provider delivered professional development, 59% that the SCB provider gave support through the completion of the preschool profile, 18% that the SCB provider provided support through communities of practice, and 12% said that they were supported in other ways.

However, the evaluation did not have data to measure directly the impact that the support provided by SCB providers to preschools had on the children's access to the education program.

SCB providers stressed the importance of establishing good relationships with the community preschools in order to achieve the program outcomes. Factors that hindered the establishment of positive relationships between SCB providers and preschools, and therefore the achievement of inclusion outcomes, included: 1) the preschools' time availability; 2) whether the preschool already received support from their organisation and did not feel they needed support through the SCB program; 3) preschools' leadership teams not engaging with the program; 4) preschools experiencing significant architectural barriers or operating in limited spaces that could not be successfully addressed by the Minor Capital Works fund or other interventions; 5) external factors that affected the efficacy of the support and suggestions offered by the SCB providers in relation to the NDIS ECEI and the Minor Capital Works fund. For example, SCB providers in regional and rural areas provided training about the NDIS ECEI to community preschools; however, in some instances, families in these areas experienced long waiting lists to get in contact with the NDIS provider or to see a paediatrician (up to 18 to 24 months) or other health professionals, which limited the support they could receive through these services. Similarly, some SCB providers reported suggesting interventions funded under the Minor Capital Works fund. However, there were significant delays in receiving equipment or finalising the planned interventions that prevented the achievement of the outcomes for children with disability

Recommendations

- Investigate ways to support preschools with workforce shortages to be able to fully utilise the program.

- Investigate ways to clarify to preschools the role of the SCB program compared to alternative forms of support.

In circumstances where community preschools have children with disability or additional needs enrolled, how and to what extent has the SCB program led to changes to the educational program at the service level, and individual adjustments to the program for children with disability and additional needs?

The SCB program contributed to changes at the service level by providing professional development, mentoring and coaching consultancy, and by being critical partners (i.e. supporting educators to question what they do while they are doing it). The DIP Preschool Survey found that 51% of the participant community preschools agreed or strongly agreed that SCB had resulted in changes to the educational program at a service level.

Individual adjustments for children with disability and additional needs were tailored to the children's specific needs. The DIP Preschool Survey found that 53% of the participant community preschools agreed or strongly agreed that SCB had contributed to better individual adjustments for children with additional needs. Similarly, 53% agreed or strongly agreed that SCB had led to equitable educational outcomes for children with disabilities and additional needs.

One example of individual adjustment was preschools introducing sign language or including visual props to support children with autism or a language impairment during mealtimes or group times. Another example was SCB providers supporting preschools to identify ways to coordinate the communication between the specialist services involved in the support of children with particularly high support needs.

What modes of delivery are most effective to produce change in services' education for children with disability and additional needs?

The SCB providers reported that in person support was the most effective way to deliver the program. This kind of support typically includes delivery of training, participation in staff meetings, participation in meetings with services as well as families and professionals, and on the floor coaching and support. In person support was greatly disrupted by COVID-19.

Telephone and email support is another way that SCB providers work with services, including being available for discussions or help on specific issues. The DIP Preschool Survey found that services are most likely to have regular contact via email with their SCB provider. More than 4 in 10 reported having email communications more frequently than once a month. Phone contact and site visits occurred for many at least every 2-3 months (61% and 53% respectively). For site visits, 47% had them less than every 2-3 months or never.

Online support has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes web-based meetings (e.g. Zoom, Skype), online training (e.g. webinars, on demand training modules), facilitation of communities of practice, web resources (such as libraries of resources). The DIP Preschool Survey found that group sessions and video calls appear to be used less often as a form of contact between services and SCB providers with a higher proportion never using these as a form of contact. However, video calls and group sessions were often used to deliver training and professional development.

How and to what extent has the SCB program impacted general inclusion capacity and support where community preschools have no children with disability or additional needs enrolled?

Even in community preschools that did not have children with disability enrolled at the time of the evaluation, the SCB program made an impact by providing professional development opportunities. This might enable community preschools to establish sufficient confidence to enrol students in the future. However, the evaluation did not have data to establish the actual extent of the impact on the inclusion practices of those preschools.

Recommendation

- Further work is needed to explore how the SCB program can be best utilised to support services with no children with disability or additional needs currently enrolled.

How could the SCB program be adapted to improve inclusion and educational outcomes for children?

The evaluation found that the program could be adapted to improve inclusion and educational outcomes for children by:

- promoting consistency in the quality of the services offered by the SCB providers
- improving the communication of the Department to the community preschools around the goals of the SCB program
- encouraging preschools to engage with their SCB provider to increase awareness of the level of support they are entitled to
- supporting SCB providers to engage relevant health professionals when needed to address the specific challenges that preschools face with some children.

Finally, the evaluation identified some data and monitoring issues, for example inconsistencies in the number of records in the SCB documents, and limitations on

the outcome data available to evaluate the impact of the SCB on preschools and children with disability and additional needs.

Recommendations

- Ensure community preschools are counted consistently and accurately in the SCB documents.

How could the SCB program be adapted to be an effective basis for the evaluation of inclusion and educational outcomes for children?

Evaluation needs to be built into the implementation and delivery of the program.

Possible indicators for evaluating how successful the implementation of the SCB and, more generally, the DIP program could be:

- what changes preschools have seen in the children they have supported
- educators' confidence in learning about and understanding of inclusion
- how much HLSN funding for individual support preschools have applied for.

1.4. Conclusions

The HLSN program is regarded by community preschools as essential to their capacity to ensure that children with high learning support needs participate in preschool.

The SCB program was found to successfully provide professional development, training and coaching to the community preschools that engaged with the program. The resources provided through the SCB program help preschools identify barriers to inclusion, apply for HLSN and Minor Capital Works funds and, where relevant, find strategies for inclusion other than funding. However, some preschools reported negative experiences with their SCB provider and others believed that they did not need the program. Ultimately, the evaluation found variations in the quality of the services provided by the different SCB providers.

We propose the following recommendations to address the areas of improvement and tension identified in the evaluation findings regarding the DIP data collection:

1.4.1. DIP data collections

Routine reporting data could be collected and analysed with more emphasis on monitoring inclusion and spending. Better linkage between SCB data, HLSN spending information and other preschool data would improve the capacity of the Department to monitor outcomes of the whole DIP program. Information provided to the evaluation suggested that little analysis of DIP data is undertaken. Adequately

resourcing the analysis of this data would allow monitoring of the program on an ongoing basis. It may also build up good will with services and SCB providers if they can see that the data they are required to collect and provide is used.

Recommendations

- Review Departmental data collections, including routine reporting such as the HLSN acquittal data and the SCB preschool profiles, to ensure these collections can be used for monitoring the DIP.
- Regularly analyse (for example yearly) the reasons why HLSN applications are unsuccessful. This will provide valuable information on where preschools need additional guidance and clarification about HLSN eligibility and application processes.
- Better link SCB reporting and other preschool data to enable understanding of how the DIP as a whole is working and how the elements of the program are interacting.
- Adequately resource the analysis of this data to allow internal monitoring of the program on an ongoing basis.
- Link data from the DIP to school and other datasets (perhaps through the Human Services Dataset) to examine the impact of the DIP on school transitions, children's access to the education program, and possibly other outcomes for children who are being supported by HLSN funding.