Tús Maith Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

Barnardos

The Tús Maith Evaluation Report

Executive Summary of the report of the process evaluation of the implementation of Tús Maith in Barnardos during 2009-2010

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Tús Maith

Tús Maith is Barnardos early years care and education programme for children aged between three and five years. The purpose of the programme is to ensure that children are ready for school. The programme aims to achieve outcomes in four areas:

- Emotional awareness
- Social competence
- Language, literacy and communication
- Physical development

Tús Maith integrates the HighScope curriculum with REDI (**Re**search-based **D**evelopmentally **I**nformed), both of which are underpinned by the Barnardos' Quality Framework (BFQ). The HighScope curriculum is based on the premise that children and teachers are partners in determining the learning experience. REDI is a pre-school curriculum that supports children's early social and emotional development and promotes their language development and pre-reading skills. The BQF underpins both of these curricula and ensures that the programme operates within Barnardos' ethos and principles of practice.

Purpose of the evaluation

The main objective was to use the learning from the collective experience of implementing Tús Maith during 2009-2010 to help inform the future implementation of the programme within Barnardos.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was adopted for this evaluation; that is the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in a single study.

The qualitative aspect to the study included semi-structured interviews with Tús Maith staff, their project managers, the Tús Maith coach, regional and national managers, and parents. In sum, a total of 51 respondents were interviewed as part of this Tús Maith programme evaluation.

Pre-and-post-programme quantitative data was collected from the children's parents and project staff implementing Tús Maith. They assessed changes in the four outcome areas: emotional well-being, social competence, language and literacy, and physical development.

Summary of findings

On the whole the experience of implementing Tús Maith during the period 2009-2010 was a positive one for Barnardos staff, parents and children. The programme brought a renewed focus to the development of young children's social and emotional development as well as their language and literacy skills. Together with the focus on healthy physical development including cognitive functions the programme strives to support and prepare children for the transition to school.

Outcomes

Parents and staff believe that the children have developed greater capacities to identify and articulate their feelings, increased awareness of the feelings of others, improved social skills as evidenced by being better able to share and take turns. They have also described improved language and literacy skills as evidenced by a greater interest in books and a wider vocabulary and better physical development. These observations are further supported by an analysis of the pre-and-post-programme parental and staff assessments which show improvements across all the outcome areas. Staff assessments in particular show a statistically significant increase in the number of children obtaining higher scores in each of the outcome areas between pre-programme and post-programme, as the table below illustrates:

Staff Assessment of Children Attending Tús Maith at T_1 and T_2

Outcome variable	N	Mean[1] T1 (SD)[2]	Mean T2 (SD)	t-value[3] (df)	p[4]
Emotional well-being	34	2.05 (0.79)	2.83 (1.01)	-5.1 (33)	.000
Social competence	34	2.58 (0.81)	3.02 (0.84)	-3.7 (33)	.001
Language & literacy	32	2.50 (0.99)	3.09 (1.12)	-5.1 (31)	.000
Physical health	35	3.51 (0.83)	3.91 (0.70)	-2.8 (34)	.007

Without any comparison group of children who did not receive the programme, and any independent assessments of the children receiving the programme, these are indicative of the kinds of outcomes that one might expect from the intervention. The findings are very encouraging.

Leadership and support of programme implementation

The Tús Maith programme has required a high degree of investment by all the stakeholders involved in its implementation from participation in training events, to participation in and openness to individualised observation and feedback, attendance at meetings, review of materials and the introduction of new recording systems.

It was recognised that the development and introduction of Tús Maith was the beginning of a wider change management process for early years services in Barnardos. The early years services are among the most intensive services that Barnardos provides: children attend for four or five days a week for up to 4.5 hours per day and critical aspects of their development such as physical, cognitive

[1] The mean is the arithmetical average of a group of scores (Coolidge, 2000)

[2] The standard deviation is a parameter of variability of data about the mean score (ibid)

[3] A t-test is a statistical procedure that compares two scores to identify if the differences between them are due to chance or are a result of an intervention. In this study staff and parent assessment scores before and after the programme for participating children were compared.

[4] Results where the p-value is at or less than 0.05 are deemed to be statistically significant

and emotional development are targeted through the intervention. The development of the early years programme therefore represented a potentially significant change to practice and required a significant change management process. The introduction of Tús Maith provided the organisation with an opportunity to build on existing practice as well as introduce new practice and ways of engaging with children. This process of change, development and implementation was led by the director of children's services, supported by an assistant director with responsibility for Tús Maith and the head of the SDDT, in the first instance. Their participation demonstrated the importance of Tús Maith and the early years services more generally to Barnardos and the commitment to supporting its development and implementation from the very beginning. Furthermore the participation of the director of children's services and assistant director played an important role in encouraging staff engagement with the new programme and facilitating discussion of the benefits and challenges of introducing such a programme.

The provision of a dedicated and full-time coaching support has been central to the successful implementation of the programme. The role has been successful for a number of reasons not least of which include the early years expertise that the coach brings, the on-site support for and observation of practice, the individualised response to team needs, and a clear understanding of the Barnardos context and the needs of children attending our services. This level of practice support and the facilitation of debate among staff and managers implementing Tús Maith are unprecedented; no other service design has been so well-supported in terms of the availability of full-time and dedicated support.

Programme implementation

The teams experienced a number of practical implications in implementing the programme. The planning and preparation associated with Tús Maith was reported to be significant but worth while. Planning and preparation has become a formal part of programme delivery and has resulted in teams not only being better prepared for the lessons but there being better communication between team members and better team work.

A number of successful aspects of the Tús Maith curriculum have been identified. Key among these is the attention paid to feelings in both the PATHS lessons and the dialogic reading materials. Although a minority of staff worried that as the curriculum developed some of the children struggled to grasp some of the more complex feelings dealt with in the lessons. Project staff also described the 'turtle' technique as successful. The puppets have also been very successful, with the children universally responding to them. As a tool for learning and sharing lesson messages the puppets have been very effective.

The success of the dialogic reading has been more mixed. Some of the books were described as unappealing and the book themes didn't always fit with the PATHS lesson. Despite this it appears that the specific attention paid to reading in a structured way is paying dividends as the children are showing a greater interest in books. The alphabet centre and sound games are perhaps the least successful aspect of the programme. Staff have struggled to incorporate these aspects. Having

sufficient time appears to be an issue, although the materials for these activities have been reported to be not as engaging as some of the other programme materials.

There are a number of areas of practice where the introduction of Tús Maith has led to challenges and changes to early years practice. Areas that have been challenged and altered include the direct instruction involved in the PATHS lessons, compliment giving, the identification of kid of the day, the introduction of specific rules, and the use of praise and conflict resolution strategies. These practice differences were not experienced equally or in totality across all staff or all projects.

The delivery of the adult-led PATHS and the dialogic reading lessons were viewed as being at odds with the child-initiated approach promoted by HighScope. However, this view was not widespread, as most practitioners accepted that within the HighScope curriculum adults did lead on some activities e.g. deciding on the task or activity for large and small group time. Furthermore, staff also acknowledged that the children have responded positively to both aspects of the Tús Maith curriculum.

The use of compliments and kid of the day were also initially described as being counter to previous practice. The 'singling' out of individual children through both of these programme features was initially concerning for some staff. Some members of staff who expressed concerns have had them dispelled as the children have reacted so positively to both the compliments and kid of the day. Others maintain their reservations but use the strategies nonetheless.

The use of praise and encouragement is also an area where practice differences have been identified. With support from the coach and project manager most staff have been able reconcile these differences. For staff who have made the shift in thinking this may be attributed to considering the praise issue in terms of authentic encouragement.

In reviewing and analysing the practice differences that did emerge it is perhaps unsurprising to note that teams that spoke about the greatest practice differences had many years experience of implementing HighScope. Teams newer to HighScope did not identify so many practice differences and had fewer concerns about the new curriculum.

In a broad sense all the projects appear to be implementing the programme with fidelity. The programme has been subject to some minor adaptation or 'tweaking' in a bid to reconcile some of the differences in approach. Continued attention, however will need to be paid to the issue of 'tweaking' or making small adaptations to the programme in order that fidelity to the original proven model is maintained.

More generally, the programme has led to greater planning and preparation, improved team communication and greater sharing of activities and group leadership. All of which have had a positive impact on practice.

Despite initial concerns that Tús Maith would represent a significant and potentially difficult shift in early years practice the implementation of the programme has for the most part been welcomed. This success lies in the openness of the staff teams to the programme, the support of the coach and project manager to the teams, time being given to enable staff to process, reflect and implement the changes that Tús Maith has brought and the programme itself. Staff have felt the benefits to their own practice and team working and have also witnessed the positive benefits for the children participating in the programme. The programme, for the most part, is now viewed as Tús Maith rather than HighScope plus.

Recommendations

The future

It is the recommendation of this evaluation that Tús Maith should continue to be implemented. The qualitative feedback from staff and parents is that the programme is having a positive effect on the children attending. While this evaluation was not intended to and indeed cannot establish any causal relationship between the programme and the achievement of outcomes, the findings from the parental and staff questionnaires are broadly supportive of the qualitative findings. It is recommended that:

- The monitoring of outcomes should continue over and above any further formal evaluation plans

The completion rate for these assessments was however low, particularly, at T_1 and so the form and content of the assessment may need to be revisited. Since it is unlikely, given the range of needs experienced by families using Barnardos services, that a pre-and-post-programme measure that is fully suitable for self-completion by parents, can be designed, it is further recommended that:

- The ways in which parents, in particular, can be best supported to complete the pre-and-post-programme measures be considered and agreed

The children

The children attending Tús Maith are within the appropriate age range and the programme appears to be meeting their needs.

Training and practice development

It's clear from the staff interviews that staff teams experienced in delivering Tús Maith require opportunities for practice development rather than training per se. That is the opportunity to focus on the processes of the programme, to tailor the approaches and strategies used to meet the needs of individual children and be able to monitor and respond to group dynamics. Teams implementing Tús Maith for the first time during 2010-2011 will require training in order to master the script, become familiar with the activities, content and approach of Tús Maith and be able to deal with the general practicalities of delivering the programme. The challenge therefore is to be able to meet the needs of different staff at different stages of development and programme familiarity. It is suggested therefore that:

- Training is offered to the projects new to Tús Maith in 2010-2011, in this way the coach can focus on and tailor the material to their individual needs and attend to the issues noted above

- Practice development is offered to more experienced staff teams. The focus of these sessions can address the more advanced themes identified above through the processes of collaboration, team work, sharing of experiences, peer support and facilitator experience

- At least one national event that brings together 'old' and 'new' teams is held later in the year e.g. spring 2011. This will facilitate discussion between a greater mix teams and bring 'old' and 'new' teams together

Over and above ongoing practice development needs for existing staff, 'normal' staff turnover and any establishment of new projects will necessitate training for new staff in HighScope, REDI and Tús Maith. Further consideration will therefore have to be given to how this range of training can best be done and by whom. In anticipation of Tús Maith all early years staff, not already in receipt of HighScope training, have received it. This was followed up (in some cases it was in parallel) with REDI and then Tús Maith training from the coach. The sequential nature of this training was very effective; as staff were incrementally introduced to the core components of Tús Maith, and staff were largely starting in the same place with respect to REDI and Tús Maith. However, new members of staff recruited as a result of normal attrition will not have these benefits. Instead the organisation will need to consider how best to pace the training provided to new members of early years' teams while ensuring that programme implementation can continue.

Finally, with respect to training, the issue of the ongoing integration of HighScope into Tús Maith training should be considered. The organisation has worked closely with an independent external HighScope certified trainer to ensure that the HighScope curriculum is represented in our Tús Maith training. This collaboration has also ensured that Barnardos rationale for choosing Tús Maith, the inclusion of the REDI curriculum, and the differences in style or practice are well-understood. HighScope remains our core early years' curriculum and staff are trained and evaluated by certified HighScope trainers, it will therefore be important to develop our links with HighScope Ireland to ensure that the rationale for the Tús Maith is clearly articulated to and understood within the training context.

Coach role

To a greater degree the plan for training will be determined by the future of the coaching role within Barnardos. There is little doubt that the coaching role has been critical to the successful implementation of Tús Maith. However, it would be advisable for the organisation to begin to devolve the knowledge and programme expertise to the project managers. This has a number of benefits. First, programme knowledge/expertise is invested in more than just one person. Second, project managers develop the knowledge to support their staff thereby supporting programme embedding and sustainability over the longer term. Thirdly, the costs of providing programme-specific support are absorbed into the existing cost base. This transfer of knowledge and expertise cannot be done overnight and so it is suggested that:

- The coach continues to offer intensive coaching support to the new teams while incrementally withdrawing intensive support to the more experienced teams during 2010-2011

- Some of the coach's resources are re-directed to providing development and support to the project managers of the five 'experienced' sites during 2010-2011 through both one-to-one and group-based support

- The implementation group be used as a forum through which training and development for project managers is provided

- To explore what tools and mechanisms might be developed and/or used by the coach to develop the capacity of the project managers to support practice and programme implementation e.g. use of DVDs, use of the manual and peer support etc

The current organisational commitment to the coaching role is to October 2011. Barnardos requested a deferral of one Atlantic Philanthropies grant payment which means funding will continue into mid-2012. It is suggested that:

- The coach role is extended to match this funding period

- This should be used to support and facilitate the up-skilling and development, during 2011-2012, of the three project managers implementing the programme for the first time during 2010-2011 while incrementally withdrawing intensive coaching support to their staff teams

This would mean that by mid-2012 all eight projects will have implemented and been supported by the coach for at least two academic years. Project teams will always be subject to staff and managerial changes but providing an indefinite full-time and dedicated coaching role is not financially feasible for the organisation in the longer term. The organisation may, however, wish to consider resourcing a part-time coach post-2012. The role could include facilitating quarterly practice development events and/or facilitating Tús Maith training for newly qualified HighScope practitioners. The role, in this event, should be re-oriented to provide technical assistance rather than intensive coaching.

Finally, the future of the coaching role is also likely to be influenced by the ultimate organisational goal for Tús Maith. Does the organisation wish to set the mainstreaming of Tús Maith as an objective or outcome of the service development? In the event that it does, maintaining or indeed re-establishing the role at some date in the future may be desirable. In this event, it is likely that the coach role would assume a more external focus, promoting the programme and providing training and technical assistance to external agencies adopting the model. In this way the role may help to pay for itself, however, it is likely that there would be limited time and/or opportunities to provide intensive coaching support to Barnardos teams. It is suggested however, that any objective to mainstream or promote the wider use of Tús Maith is a long-term goal and would not be achievable in the absence of a more rigorous and stronger evidence-base for the effectiveness of the programme in an Irish context.

Fidelity

Implementing the programme with fidelity is critical to the achievement of outcomes. Avoiding programme drift will be an essential part of any future support and supervision for staff. To date this important role has been taken on by the coach. Given that this role is time limited and it is the recommendation of this report that the project managers be empowered to take on some of these functions, the ways in which fidelity can be monitored and teams supported to implement the programme with fidelity need to be explored. Clearly the development and training of the project managers by the coach as already suggested will go some way towards this as will the availability of the Tús Maith manual. Other mechanisms might include greater use of DVD recordings in supervision or team meetings, use of the implementation group to provide peer and management support and so on.

Conclusion

The programme, while not without its challenges has been successfully implemented by all the teams involved in its delivery. The development and implementation of the programme has been led by the senior managers, which demonstrates an organisational commitment not jut to Tús Maith but to early years care and education provision more generally in the organisation. Resources have been made available to support the teams implementing the programme and to give the programme the best chance of success and the children the best chance to achieve the outcomes that they need in order to be ready for primary school.