

Evaluating Reception (Year R) Transition Support Models

Summary

The KCC Evaluation and Qualitative Research Team were commissioned to undertake an evaluation of two different models of transition support designed to support children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) transition from an Early Years (EY) setting into Reception (Year R) in a mainstream school.

As part of this project, the team not only focused on identifying if objectives were met, but also gathering and sharing wider learning accumulated as part of the research process with internal and external partners. This included identifying the challenges and concerns that mainstream school staff and parents have around supporting children with SEN in a mainstream setting, as well as identifying areas of best practice or 'what works' from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

The learnings were used to inform evidence-based decisions about the future of transition support for children with SEN moving from an EY settings into Year R and beyond and wider SEN strategy.

The team not produced interim and final evaluation reports, but also presentations for internal and external stakeholders as well as sharing a summary of learning with relevant teams. Parental journey maps/pen portraits were created, in conjunction with parents so that their journeys could be accurately represented and their voices heard.

Methodology

The research and evaluation took a mixed methods approach, involving multiple interviews with mainstream school staff, special school staff as well as parents of children whose children were transitioning into Year R at various points throughout the school year. Surveys were also conducted with staff, as well as developmental progress data collected for the children involved in the projects. Children were also encouraged to participate and offered space to share significant moments with researchers.

Interviews took place either face to face or online and were transcribed and themed at different stages of the project. Thematic frameworks were developed to identify common themes within each group i.e., parents, mainstream and special school staff, but consideration was also given to changes over time. These were used to identify areas that were working well and areas that needed improvement throughout the life of the project. Surveys were distributed online and changes in knowledge and confidence were measured on a 5-point scale. A key part of this work was to put the voice of those involved and impacted at the centre of the work.

The team were also able to gain permission to used additional information collected in these interviews to produce standalone research reports, such as one around the broader inclusion challenges that could be shared more widely and inform strategy and policy.

Wow factor

Strong and clear Communication builds trust

A Common Understanding of goals between stakeholders

Timely access to support

Every child is different – importance of involving families in the school community and transition journey.

Strong Consistent Offer - the right support at the right time in the right place for all children

Synopsis

Supporting children with SEN is a key priority for both KCC and Kent schools, but also an area of national interest. In recent years a number of challenges have presented themselves to LA's and schools around supporting children with SEN in the mainstream school setting and working towards inclusive environments. This research and evaluation project focused on gathering implementation and impact data on models of support for children with SEN, specifically around transitioning into the mainstream classroom setting.

Whilst there were two models, that took different approaches to providing support, the objectives of the project were the same. These were: to support children to develop both emotionally and cognitively, improve parental confidence that their child's needs could be met, support staff in mainstream schools to increase confidence and knowledge around supporting children with SEN.

The teams' role in this project was to understand if these objectives were being met. To do this the three core stakeholder groups, parents (their children), mainstream school staff and special school staff were all involved in the research and data collection. As a team we worked closely alongside staff and parents over a whole school year to capture data and experiences that allowed us to better understand the benefits of and challenges with the models being implemented. Face to face and online interviews were held, both with groups and individuals. We also hosted a workshop with staff. Parents were invited to be a part of a What's App group so both verbal and visual data could be gathered. A wealth of information was collected and used to inform transition approaches, a review of EY support and provide evidence for the inclusion strategy. Due to the vast amount of qualitative information collected and analysed, schools and parental views and experiences were central to the findings. A number of pen portraits that reflect the parents' and children's journeys throughout the school year were also created.

Findings were presented to internal and external stakeholders in both written and verbal formats. The work has also generated interest from wider internal groups, and the team has been invited to present findings at team away days and are making use of creative presentation methods, such as asking parents to record elements of their stories to do this.

By undertaking this research we were able to generate knowledge that could be shared with stakeholders to better inform decision-making moving forward. We were able to identify if objectives had been met, what was working, what the challenges were and how this learning could be used in the future. Key to this was putting the voice and experience of those involved at the centre of the learning and being committed to sharing this.

What should LARIA members learn from your award entry?

It is hard to conduct 'perfect' research and evaluation in the public sector, but with the right commitment and determination from skilled passionate researchers, and by building trusting relationships with participants much useful learning can be gleaned. One of the key takeaways for us as a team is to make sure our findings are shared as widely as possible in an open and transparent way, not just with the clients who commissioned them. Working for local government, we are in the privileged position of recognising the connections of this research within a wider

body of work and to do our best to ensure that key findings are shared widely and taken onboard by as many stakeholders, researchers, professionals and members of the public as possible.