

Evaluation of the Learning Community in the National Early Years Access Initiative

Main Report
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The National Early Years Access Initiative 2010-2014

The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) is a collaboration between a number of funding partners namely, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs(DCYA), the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Mount Street Club Trust, The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Board of Pobal.

síolta

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (2009-2013)

The Síolta QAP was developed to allow Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings to engage formally with the Síolta Quality Framework.

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ID	Location	Name of Project	Participants in NEYAI Learning Community	
BC	Ballyfermot / Chapelizod	Early Years Language and Learning Initiative	Carina Fitzgerald Jane Rooney Fiona Hassett	Sharon Kelly Tricia Curtis
CC	Canal Communities	Canal Communities Family Welfare Initiative – Bringing it all Back Home	Marian Connell Barbara Coates Geraldine O’Hara Eadaoin Ni Cleirigh	Suzanne Woods Jordan Butler Laura Dagger Anna Coogan
CK	Cork	Happy Talk	Sheila Dillon Aoife Doyle Mary Lenihan Catherine Sheehan Jennifer Keogh	Paul McGuirk Siobhan Dowling Eleanor Moore Martin Flynn Kate Hogan
CN	Clondalkin	Addressing Gaps Between Training and Practice	Ciara Monaghan Lisa Kavanagh Delia Goodman Jean Courtney	Fiona Dempsey Susan Brocklesby Maressa O’Dwyer Marlene McCormack
DD	Dublin Docklands	Early Learning Initiative	Catriona Flood Josephine Bleach	Aoife O’Gorman Moira Ward
DL	Donegal	The Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP)	Avril McMonagle Orán Sweeney Claire McMonagle	Shauna McGrory Catherine Cullen
FL	Fingal	Fingal Parents Initiative	Grainne McKenna Adrienne Streek Lorna Ní Chéirín	Una Caffrey Gina
LD	Longford	Tús Nua Project	Eimear Carron Laura Smullen Niamh Lynch	Majella McGovern Marie Mc Ardle Nora
LK	Limerick	Start Right Limerick	Maria O’Dwyer John Buttery	Aileen Kelleher
RO	Rialto	Dublin South West Inner City Integration of Services and Continuum of Care Demonstration Model for Children 0-6 years	Sharon Moore Joe Rynn	Barbara Gavagan
TT	Tallaght	Quality Through Professionalisation (An Cosán / Fledglings Early Years)	Dara Hogan Maura McMahon	Mary Harding Ruth Shortall
	Pobal		Bernie McDonnell Emily Cunningham Nuala Kelly Siobhan O’Dowd	Breeda Finnerty Kate Ibbotson Jane Clark

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Finally, in the time-honoured tradition, no one who contributed to this report is responsible for any errors which the report may contain. Kieran McKeown, as author, takes full responsibility for the report and its contents.

Kieran McKeown
May 2012

1 Background

1.1 Introduction

The Learning Community was set up in 2011 as part of the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) to enable the 11 projects in the programme to share learning and influence policy and practice in the early years sector. Like NEYAI, the Learning Community was set up for a three-year period (2011-2014) and met 3 times a year, resulting in a total of 9 meetings. This report is an evaluation of the Learning Community and is one of a number of reports on NEYAI including a national evaluation of the programme and a set of local evaluations on each NEYAI project¹.

This report comprises four chapters covering background to the Learning Community (Chapter One), methodology used in the evaluation (Chapter Two), results of the evaluation (Chapter Three), and a final chapter summarising the results and conclusions (Chapter Four). In addition to this report, the Main Report, there is also a Technical Report containing all the data on the Learning Community which was collected for this evaluation.

This chapter begins with a brief description of NEYAI and its projects (Section 1.2). It is followed by an overview of what is conventionally understood by the term 'learning community' (Section 1.3). The concept of a learning community in NEYAI is then outlined (Section 4). The terms of reference adopted by NEYAI projects for its Learning Community are described (Section 1.5) as well as details about how this Learning Community was implemented through 9 meetings (Section 1.6).

1.2 NEYAI: National Early Years Access Initiative

NEYAI was set up to improve quality and outcomes in the early years sector. It comprises 11 projects which are located mainly in disadvantaged areas of Dublin, Cork and Limerick and two rural locations in Longford/Westmeath and Donegal. It was officially launched by the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs in June 2011 who referred to NEYAI as being made up of local demonstration projects with 'a focus on evidence-based practice and ongoing project evaluation for the purpose of advising future policy and the mainstream provision'².

NEYAI was created through collaboration between Atlantic Philanthropies, Mount Street Club Trust, Department of Children & Youth Affairs, Department of Education & Skills, and Pobal which manages the initiative. A fund of €5.25m was generated through this collaboration with a dual focus reflecting its national and local orientation: 'At national or programmatic level, the Initiative is concerned with establishing a strong evidence-base to contribute to improvements in practice and coordinated service delivery and to influence policy change (wherever relevant and appropriate) with regard to improved learning/educational, wellbeing outcomes for children and their families. At local level, it is concerned with building the delivery capacity of local projects specifically with regard to data collection, monitoring, reflective practice and creating an operating ethos/culture conducive to learning and continuous review. This approach will in turn help to strengthen the quality and impact of the local project while simultaneously contributing to the quality of the learning of the Initiative as a whole. The mechanism for uniting and inter-linking these two dimensions will be the creation of a Learning Community whereby a creative space/opportunity can be made available (and appropriately resourced) as an aid to: stimulate thinking/learning; the cross fertilization of ideas; the sharing of resources; and the exploration of good practice etc. on an ongoing basis'³.

1 Copies of NEYAI reports are available at these websites: www.pobal.ie; www.kieranmckeown.ie; www.trutzhaase.eu;

2 Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2012.

3 Terms of Reference for Evaluation of National Early Years Access Initiative, 2011.

Table 1.1 lists the 11 NEYAI projects and their core activities. Each project is made up of a consortium comprising a lead organisation and at least two other organisations. On average, each NEYAI project received about €300K (range 250K-€400K) over the three years, equivalent to about €100K per annum.

Table 1.1 List of Projects in the National Early Years Access Initiative (2011-2014)

ID	Location	Name	Lead Agency	Core Activities
BC	Ballyfermot/ Chapelizod	Early Years Language and Learning Initiative	The Ballyfermot/ Chapelizod Partnership Company Ltd	Train and mentor early years staff in Hanen Programme to: (i) Improve the child's language development (ii) Support parents to encourage the child's language development
CC	Canal Comm- unities	Canal Communities Family Welfare Initiative – Bringing it all Back Home	Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service	Train and mentor early years staff in Marte Meo Programme and Incredible Years Programme to: (i) Improve the child and parent outcomes (ii) Intensive outreach with children and their parents
CK	Cork	Happy Talk	Cork City Partnership Ltd	Improve the language skills of children aged 0-6 years in The Glen and Mayfield areas of Cork City through parent training programmes and working with teachers and early years providers
CN	Clondalkin	Addressing Gaps Between Training and Practice	South Dublin County Partnership Ltd	Mentor early years staff to improve outcomes for children and their parents
DD	Dublin Docklands	Early Learning Initiative	National College of Ireland	Train and mentor early years staff in numeracy skills to deliver: (i) Improve the child's numeracy skills (ii) Support parents to encourage the child's numeracy development
DL	Donegal	The Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP)	Donegal County Childcare Committee	Train and mentor early years staff to improve outcomes for children
FL	Fingal	Fingal Parents Initiative	The Fingal County Childcare Committee Ltd	Train early years staff to deliver: (i) Parents Together (6-Week Parenting Course) (ii) Parents Plus Early Years (12-Week Parenting Course)
LK	Limerick	Start Right Limerick	PAUL Partnership Ltd	Train and support early years staff to: (i) meet Sólta standards (ii) do intensive outreach with children and their parents
LD	Longford	Tús Nua Project	Longford County Childcare Committee	Train and mentor early years staff to improve outcomes for children

RO	Rialto	Dublin South West Inner City Integration of Services and Continuum of Care Demonstration Model for Children 0-6 years	Barnardos Rialto Family Centre	Train and mentor early years staff in Hanen Programme to: (i) Improve the child's language development (ii) Support parents to encourage the child's language development
TT	Tallaght	Quality Through Professionalisation (An Cosán / Fledglings Early Years.)	The Shanty Educational Project Ltd	Deliver training based on the Fledglings Early Years Manual which integrates the two national early years frameworks – Sólta (Quality) and Aistear (Learning) - through the pedagogical approach and curriculum of HighScope.

1.3 What is a Learning Community?

The idea of a 'learning community', like the idea of a 'learning organisation'⁴, suggests that learning can occur through collaborating with others while also suggesting that organisations and 'communities' can be learners, just like individuals. The idea of collaborative learning, and the ideal which underpins it, is not new but the extent to which it occurs in practice – where collaborative learning is adopted as a specific objective - is more difficult to determine. In the field of education, there is compelling evidence that collaboration between teachers to solve routine teaching and other difficulties encountered in the classroom, has a measurable effect on pupil outcomes, over and above individual characteristics of teacher or pupil⁵. This finding underlines the importance of human and

4 The term 'learning organisation' was coined by Peter Senge and popularized through his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). The term denotes a group of people working collectively to enhance their capacities to create results that are important to them. In the book, Senge proposed the following five disciplines which characterise a learning organisation: (i) Personal Mastery: An individual holds great importance in a learning organisation. Personal development holds as much importance as commitment and work for the organisation. Employees need to grow and work on their own goals. (ii) Mental Models: This is the organisation's culture and the diverse theories and mind-sets that serve as a framework for its functioning. Learning organisations look for how these affect organisational development. (iii) Shared Vision: A learning organisation's employees share a common vision. Personal goals must be in synchrony with the goals and vision of the organisation. (iv) Team Learning: This emphasises the importance of dialogue and group discussion. For a team to learn, they must be able to reach agreement. (v) Systems Thinking: Organizations are a system of interrelationships. To become more successful, an organisation needs to analyse these relationships and find the problems in them. This allows the organisation to eliminate obstacles to learning.

5 A study of more than 1,000 pupils in a representative sample of 130 primary schools in New York measured the influence of human capital (teacher qualifications, experience and classroom skills) and social capital (such as asking other teachers for advice and trusting the advice) on improvements in maths scores in fourth and fifth class. The results found that: 'students showed higher gains in math achievement when their teachers reported frequent conversations with their peers that centred on math, and when there was a feeling of trust or closeness among teachers. In other words, teacher social capital was a significant predictor of student achievement gains above and beyond teacher experience or ability in the classroom. And the effects of teacher social capital on student performance were powerful. If a teacher's social capital was just one standard deviation higher than the average, her students' math scores increased by 5.7 percent. What happens when you combine human and social capital? We found that the students of high-ability teachers outperformed those of low-ability teachers, as proponents of human capital approaches to school improvement would predict. More significant were the interactions between human and social capital. Students whose teachers were more able (high human capital) and also had stronger ties with their peers (strong social capital) showed the highest gains in math achievement. Conversely, students of teachers with lower teaching ability (low human capital) and weaker ties with their peers (weak social capital) showed the lowest achievement gains. We also found that even low-ability teachers can perform as well as teachers of

social capital in shaping pupil outcomes but also provides an illustration of the benefits of a 'learning community' in one setting.

In practice, the meaning of the term 'learning community' has been strongly influenced by the education sector – particularly primary and secondary levels of education - where the preferred term is professional learning community (PLC). In the education setting, a widely used definition of PLCs is the following: 'A professional learning community is a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLC's operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.'⁶

The term PLC is now used by the OECD to describe cross-country variations in how schools and teachers organize this aspect of their continuing professional development. In a recent study, based on 2008 data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) which was carried out in 24 countries including Ireland, the OECD defined the central features of PLCs as: '(a) cooperation (b) shared vision (c) a focus on learning (d) reflective inquiry and (e) de-privatisation of practice'⁷. The study showed the first three characteristics were found in PLCs in most schools but 'participation in reflective inquiry and collaboration, where teachers work together on the core of their professional activities, are much less common'⁸. An acknowledged limitation of this study, which is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal in design, is that it contains no data on the outcomes of PLCs⁹.

The widespread use of the term PLC within the education sector has given rise to concerns about using the term loosely to describe 'any community of professionals' or 'virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education'¹⁰. The concern here is that while 'terms travel easily concepts do not' with the result that, if the PLC concept is not applied correctly, it will not generate the improvements in teaching and learner outcomes that are possible with this method. A similar concern has been expressed in Ireland by a group of primary school teachers who implemented PLCs in their schools¹¹. Based on this experience and their knowledge of the concept, these teachers defined PLCs as a school with the following characteristics: (1) Teachers discussed and agreed on their values and vision about learning and teaching; (2) Teachers assumed responsibility, shared the leadership for overall school effectiveness; (3) Teachers formed teams with the specific purpose of learning to be better teachers together, inviting colleagues to see them at work and give

average ability if they have strong social capital. Strong social capital can go a long way toward offsetting any disadvantages students face when their teachers have low human capital.' (Leana, 2011; Pil and Leana, 2009).

6 DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many. 2006a; see also DuFour, DuFour and Burnette, 2006.

7 Vieluf, Kaplan, Klieme, Bayer, 2012:118.

8 OECD, 2012:32.

9 Of note is the finding that: 'Empirical support for the value of de-privatising practice comes from the finding that teachers who report being involved in such activities regularly also have higher self-efficacy. However it remains open in which direction this effect operates.' (Vieluf, Kaplan, Klieme, Bayer, 2012:119).

10 DuFour, DuFour and Burnette, 2006. The authors add: 'Throughout North America schools, districts, professional organisations and occasional gatherings of educators proudly proclaim they are professional learning communities (PLCs), but few have come to implement the underlying concepts of the term. It is difficult to bring these concepts to life in a school or district when there is a common, shared understanding of their meaning. It is impossible when the terms mean very different things to different people in the same organisation. Therefore, school leaders who hope to build the capacity of their organisations to function as PLCs must first engage their staff in building shared knowledge of PLC concepts, and then hold people accountable for acting in accordance with those concepts' (Ibid)

11 'Any group of people coming together to talk about their practice does not automatically constitute a PLC – there is a danger that the term is now being used so ubiquitously that it is losing all meaning. A support group is different from a planning group; each has a distinct purpose which is different again from the purpose of a PLC. Unless participation in a school-based PLC leads to improving classroom practice, making the hidden visible and improving what and how the students learning then it is not functioning as a PLC.' (McDermott, Parsons, and O'Sullivan, 2011:37).

feedback. (4) Everybody in the school was included and assumed a questioning stance, unafraid to ask big questions and finding the data needed to answer those questions: Why are some children leaving our schools unable to read: Who are they? How do we find out? Then what will we do about it? How will we know if our strategy is working or not? (5) Principals and others in leadership and management positions not only engaged in the process but actively supported it by changing how the school was organised or by bringing in outside expertise to help where teachers identified a need.¹²

The term PLC is widely used in the education sector in Ireland¹³, Northern Ireland¹⁴, England¹⁵, Scotland¹⁶ and Wales¹⁷, to cite a small number of examples. However it has been less widely adopted as official public policy within these jurisdictions. In Ireland, for example, the term is not used by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) where the main instruments for improving the quality of education in schools and improving learning outcomes for pupils – apart from the three ‘Is’ of initial training, induction and in-service training – are whole school evaluation¹⁸ and school self-evaluation¹⁹.

12 McDermott, Parsons, and O’Sullivan, 2011:37. The authors add: ‘These characteristics are fundamental to the concept of a PLC. They are interdependent and the absence of even one changes the concept.’ (Ibid).

13 See, for example, The Teaching Council (www.teachingcouncil.ie), Irish National Teachers Organisation (www.into.ie). See also McDermott, Parsons, and O’Sullivan, 2011; Malone and Smith, 2010.

14 See, for example, the Regional Training Unit at www.rwtuni.org.

15 See, for example, Ofsted whose survey of schools (including nursery schools) where continuing professional development was good or outstanding, found that ‘The most successful schools prided themselves on being ‘learning communities’. The head teachers had successfully created a culture where staff were strongly committed to discussing and improving teaching and learning.’ (Ofsted, 2010:17). Ofsted is the acronym for Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects all services for children and young people including in education and skills training. See also Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008:8 and 48; Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, and Wallace, 2005.

16 See, for example, www.educationscotland.gov.uk A report on teacher education prepared for the Scottish Government cited evidence on PLCs to suggest that: ‘Much of the recent research suggests that CPD [continuous professional development] is most effective when it is ‘site-based’, fits with an existing school culture and ethos, addresses the needs of different groups of teachers, is peer-led, collaborative and sustained.’ Donaldson, 2011:64). In a similar vein, it pointed out that ‘In terms of courses and conferences, there is increasingly strong evidence that set-piece one-off events, however good, have limited lasting impact. The most powerful professional development is often undertaken locally, in teams, and is designed to lead to a tangible outcome in a school or cluster of schools. Self-evaluation, reflection and inquiry are in themselves potentially powerful tools for professional development. Similarly, individual teachers comparing and learning from each other’s practice through approaches such as peer observation are likely to have immediate impact. An external stimulus is often needed to challenge assumptions, stimulate ideas and illustrate new teaching approaches. Such a stimulus needs to be high quality and relevant.’ (Donaldson, 2011:96).

17 See, for example, Welsh Assembly Government, 2008; Harris, 2011.

18 ‘Whole School Evaluations (WSEs) are carried out in primary and post-primary schools. During these inspections, we evaluate the quality of the school management and leadership, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and the school’s own planning and self-review. The way in which we inspect the school during WSE varies somewhat. For example, we use slightly different processes in primary and post-primary schools; sometimes the inspection has a subject or curriculum focus and at other times, we concentrate on a range of different lessons across a wide range of subjects. We provide oral feedback to the school community at the end of these inspections and we provide a printed report which is published on our website.’ (Department of Education and Skills website - www.education.ie).

19 ‘School self-evaluation (SSE) is a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review. The process requires schools to gather evidence about teaching and learning practices, to analyse the evidence and to reflect on the findings in order to reach conclusions and to make judgements about their strengths and weaknesses. The school self-evaluation process and the school improvement plan must be informed by assessment information, including information about literacy and numeracy, and other forms of evidence, such as the views of pupils and their engagement in learning and in school life. The school will record its own judgement about its performance and the quality of its work, in the form of a concise school self-evaluation report. A summary of this report should be made available to the whole-school community. As a result of the school self-evaluation process each school should produce a short school improvement plan. The plan should contain specific and measurable targets to improve outcomes for learners. It should act as a guide for

While PLCs are not mentioned by name, the model of school self-evaluation implies that every school becomes, *de facto*, a PLC.

Wales is relatively unique in the examples mentioned above which has adopted PLCs as an explicit element of its national education policy, entitled School Effectiveness Framework. It states: 'To promote and share innovative practice across schools, local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government, networks of professional practice must be built. Sharing effective practice is essential if children and young people across Wales are to benefit from the excellent work being undertaken in individual classrooms. The basis must be strong professional learning communities within each school. Many of our most effective schools have already established professional learning communities, although they may not actually be called this. Professional learning communities within and between schools should include support staff as well as teachers.'²⁰

In practice, despite widespread usage of the term, learning communities are still relatively rare in Ireland's primary or secondary schools. This was revealed in a survey of primary teachers which was undertaken as part of a 34-country study in 2011, referred to as PIRLS and TIMMS²¹. It showed that 'Ireland is unusual, in international terms, for the very low level of collaboration and sharing of professional expertise among teachers of Fourth class pupils. For example, about one-quarter of Irish pupils are taught by teachers who never or almost never discussed teaching with their colleagues, or worked with their teaching colleagues in preparing instructional materials.'²² A review of professional practice in Ireland's post-primary schools also suggests that learning communities may be relatively rare since 'the professional practice of Irish post-primary teachers is characterised by didactic teaching, coaching for examinations and individualism and by apathy towards Education Studies, associated research and reflective practice.'²³ In other words, despite the evidence that learning communities are an effective way of improving quality and outcomes in education²⁴, it would appear that the practice in Ireland falls short of the ideal.

This brief review of the concept of learning community highlights its potential as a method of enhancing the professional practice of teachers while also showing that, in Ireland's primary and secondary schools, it is rarely used in practice. The decision to create a learning community as part of

improving teaching and learning activities in the school. Schools should make a summary of the school improvement plan available to the whole-school community.' (Department of Education and Skills, 2012).

20 Welsh Assembly Government, 2008:16-17. An evaluation involving 106 schools in the pilot phase of PLCs in Wales revealed 'seven clear features or tests of effective professional learning communities: clarity of focus, directly related to improving learner outcomes; consistent use of data to identify the focus and to monitor progress; collaboration of professionals with purpose; capacity building through the engagement and involvement of others; coherent action and change in pedagogical practice; communication of outcomes to other professionals; and change in learner outcomes.' (Harris, 2011:631).

21 In 2011, Ireland along with 34 other countries took part in an assessment of fourth class pupils (9-11 years) in reading, mathematics and science based on PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and TIMSS (Trends in International Maths and Science Study). In Ireland, the stratified random sample comprised 151 schools, 221 classes, and 4,825 pupils who were assessed in March / April 2011. As part of this study, the teacher of every pupil completed a questionnaire and the results relevant to the concept of a learning community showed that 'Ireland is unusual, in international terms, for the very low level of collaboration and sharing of professional expertise among teachers of Fourth class pupils. For example, about one-quarter of Irish pupils are taught by teachers who never or almost never discussed teaching with their colleagues, or worked with their teaching colleagues in preparing instructional materials.' (Clerkin, 2013:100-101).

22 The report adds: 'Unlike some other European countries (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2013), participation in CPD is optional for Irish teachers rather than being a contractual requirement or a necessity for promotion.' (Clerkin, 2013:101).

23 Gleeson, 2012:1.

24 PLCs have been cited as a key ingredient in whole system reform in education (Fullan, 2010). In a study of 20 education systems around the world which achieved significant, sustained and widespread gains in student outcomes as measured by international tests (eg PISA), learning communities were found to be characteristic of education systems which were on an improvement journey from 'great to excellent' (Mourshed, Chinezi and Barber, 2010:42-44).

NEYAI is therefore significant and offers an opportunity to learn how this works in the early years sector. It is true that learning communities are, to some extent, part of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (Síolta QAP)²⁵ but these are different to idea of a learning community in NEYAI, as described in subsequent sections.

1.4 Design of NEYAI Learning Community

The design of the NEYAI Learning Community was the outcome of deliberations by the Evaluation & Learning Expert Advisory Group based on four possible models or iterations. These iterations, based on a paper prepared by Pobal in 2011, are summarised in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Four Possible Models for NEYAI Learning Community

Model (Iteration) 1
The initial thinking had at its centre, a simple vision of networking the recommended projects by bringing them, together on a periodic basis for the purposes of receiving supports to assist with the implementation of their local projects. It also envisaged providing opportunities for them to share practice, experience and knowledge with each other in a structured and supportive environment. The objective being to enhance local implementation in the realisation of project level outcomes, and therefore to indirectly improve Initiative-wide outcomes.
Model (Iteration) 2
Over time the initial thinking expanded to incorporate the notion of also including non-recommended projects (all of those that applied under the Expression of Interest (EOI) stage), in addition to relevant national organisations involved in the sector. The assumption was that this version of a LC would essentially operate on the same basis as above, but the audience would be wider. This diverse audience would create an ongoing multiplier effect for the learning - from practitioner to practitioner engaged in different types of activities and working within and outside of the Initiative. It would broaden the exchange and cross-fertilisation of knowledge, experience, evidence-based practice etc.
Model (Iteration) 3
This iteration builds on the previous two by expanding the membership to include those with a policy-making, policy influencing role in the relevant sectors of early childhood care and education. This changes the complexion of iterations 1 & 2 and broadens the sphere of influence in a way that potentially addresses the dual challenge of influencing both practice and policy.
Model (Iteration) 4
The last iteration is the most expansive and embraces the local communities in which the projects are located. It is about grass roots capacity-building and empowerment, inclusive engagement of all stakeholders, (parents, children, service providers, etc) in a way that makes them active and equal participants in the projects, that promotes community ownership, and that creates a culture whereby local people feel part of decision-making processes in respect of early childhood service delivery. Under this model, the project is the catalyst for local change and development. It should be

25 The Síolta quality assurance process begins with a baseline assessment using the Síolta Self-Assessment Tool and involves the staff team going through the following steps: '(a) reflect on your current level of practice, (b) describe quality and quality-practice within your setting and (c) provide evidence of the quality described under each individual component. However, your setting (in conjunction with your Síolta Coordinator) will also describe how you can develop quality and quality-practice under that Component in order to progress from where you currently stand to a higher level. This development work will include setting goals, naming actions, as well as listing resources required, to reach the specified goals.' (Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education:13).

noted that this iteration relates more to a way of working at local level. This process or outcome may happen irrespective of participation in the LC as it may reflect a community-development ethos and preferred way of working by local consortia. However, the LC may have a role in supporting the thinking for such an ambitious approach at local level.

The Evaluation & Learning Expert Advisory Group recommended that: ‘the LC should initially be based on ‘iteration 1’ with in-built potential for embracing some of the elements of iterations 2, 3, and 4 in an evolutionary type of approach, coinciding with the implementation life-cycle of the Initiative.’ This recommendation was adopted by the Steering Group in September 2011. This meant that the Learning Community would be confined to the 11 projects with two places allocated to each project: one for the project coordinator and one for a nominee of the project consortium, resulting in a core membership of 22 persons. Attendance would be obligatory.

The expected outcomes of the Learning Community, as proposed by the Evaluation & Learning Expert Advisory Group and adopted by the Steering Group, are summarised in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Expected Outcomes of NEYAI Learning Community

Outcomes
<p>In tandem with the expected outcomes as per the NEYAI Logic Model framework the following specific LC outcomes are envisaged at appropriate stages over the implementation cycle of the NEYAI:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ A vibrant Learning Community is taking shape as part of a rich learning and evaluation framework; ✓ Evidence of the multiplier effect re: local implementation of best practice in early years care and education; ✓ Shared learning in and between sites and with government stakeholders in influencing mainstream practice and policy.

1.5 Terms of Reference Adopted by Projects for NEYAI Learning Community

The terms of reference for the Learning Community were developed by the 11 projects at their first meeting in September 2011 and adopted with minor amendments at the second meeting in November 2011. These terms of reference are reproduced in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4 Terms of Reference Adopted by NEYAI Projects for Learning Community

Purpose of the NEYAI Learning Community
<p>To learn from and with each other through engagement by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Reporting and reflecting on project progress ✓ Sharing information and different perspectives ✓ Sharing & solving problems ✓ Informal dialogue & peer support ✓ Access to expert input & research ✓ Disseminating collective learning ✓ Influencing national policy
Guiding principles for the Learning Community
<p>We will strive to create and maintain a learning community which is safe, confidential, supportive and flexible. Projects will make a commitment to attend and participate in the learning community. Participants will be honest and open to giving and receiving constructive challenge. There will be</p>

respect for the expression of minority opinions. We will be mindful not to put extra pressure on the stretched resources of projects. We will set and review defined learning outcomes for each day.

Structure & Organisation of the NEYAI Learning Community

- ✓ The learning community will be led by the participant projects with the support of Pobal.
- ✓ The learning community will be facilitated by an independent facilitator for the first three meetings, after which the need for independent facilitation will be reviewed.
- ✓ Meetings will be structured around an agenda with a thematic focus and there will be a balance of both informal and formal learning opportunities, including expert inputs and presentations.
- ✓ There will be two-way communication with the national steering committee and other relevant groups/organisations.
- ✓ The learning community will use various methods of engagement between LC meetings, e.g. telephone, email, the portal, meeting in small groups around common issues. At a later stage the LC will consider establishing a website.
- ✓ The learning community will develop over the three years and its work and focus will change over that time. At first the focus will be on set up and implementation. Later there will more emphasis on looking at how to disseminate the learning and how to influence national policy.
- ✓ The learning community will explore how to communicate with and involve key stakeholders in this group. There will be different levels of engagement and different events aimed at different groups, e.g. service managers/coordinators & members of the consortia, service providers, parents. The LC will also consider how the control group and CCC coordinators could participate in and/or benefit from the learning community.
- ✓ At a later stage the learning community will explore different avenues of communication through newsletters, seminars and conferences.
- ✓ There is an interest in exploring possibilities for forming cluster groups around agreed areas of common interest.
- ✓ The learning community will engage in active learning, e.g. by identifying at the end of each day what we will do differently as a result of what we are learning.

Membership

Two people from each project will attend the LC days, i.e. the project manager/coordinator and a member of the consortia. Bernie McDonnell, Siobhan O'Dowd and Emily Cunningham from Pobal will attend both as participants and resources to the LC. Kieran McKeown will attend the LC, both as an observer and as a resource. It will be beneficial to the LC to have consistent membership, as far as possible.

Meetings

The learning community will meet for a full day, three times a year. The day will be from 10.15 to 4.30 with two short coffee breaks and 45 minutes for lunch. The next meeting will be held in the Aisling Hotel to facilitate those travelling by train from outside Dublin.

Portal

Pobal will set up and administer a portal for the learning community. The portal will include a discussion board, resources, calendar of events. Participants will add reports, information about events, meetings etc. to the portal.

Planning

Pobal will consult with projects three weeks in advance of each LC day to identify priorities for the agenda. Two representatives of the projects will meet with Pobal staff and the facilitator a fortnight in advance of each learning community meeting to plan the next day. An agenda for the day will be sent out to all participants after the planning meeting.

Communication with the National Steering Group

The two project representatives will also meet the chair of the national steering group with a Pobal representative to communicate relevant issues/views identified at the LC meetings. The project representatives will communicate responses from the national steering committee to the LC participants by email.

Project progress and learning

LC days will begin with time for each project to share their experience since the last LC day, i.e. where are we at, what is going well and what is difficult.

Review

The LC will keep all these arrangements under review and adapt as necessary.

1.6 Format of Meetings of NEYAI Learning Community

The Learning Community was implemented through nine meetings between 2011 and 2014. The first set of five LC meetings were facilitated by Jane Clarke, an independent facilitator. The second set of four LC meetings were facilitated by Bernie McDonald, Manager of NEYAI.

At the end of the fifth meeting in September 2012, a Learning Community Planning Group was established to work with Pobal to prepare for each meeting. This group also met regularly with the Chair of the NEYAI Steering Group (Noel Kelly) to give an update on progress in the Learning Community. In September 2013, after seventh meeting, a Dissemination Working Group was formed to plan for the national conference in May 2014; this working group was subsequently merged with the Learning Community Planning Group.

Meetings of the Learning Community tended to follow a relatively standardised format comprising the following elements:

- (1) brief updates from each project usually in the form of 'two positives and one challenge'.
- (2) presentation by each project, about 20 minutes per presentation, with 2-3 presentations per meeting; this ceased after the first five meetings since all projects had presented by then.
- (3) small group discussion with feedback to the plenary session for wider consideration. These discussions tended to focus on three broad themes: training, mentoring & continuous professional development; language, literacy & numeracy; coordination of services for children & families including the role of consortiums.
- (4) presentation by invited speakers which included: Catherine Hynes and Maresa Duignan, Department of Education & Skills, who presented on *Síolta QAP and its evaluation*²⁶; Aisling Gillen, currently Child & Family Support Agency and formerly Health Services Executive, who presented on

²⁶ The evaluation of *Síolta QAP* was based on a report by Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2011.

the structure and implications of the new Child & Family Support Agency²⁷; Winnie Donohue and Marian Quinn, Prevention & Early Intervention Network (PEIN)²⁸, who presented on the work of PEIN. (5) inputs from the evaluation team, comprising presentations on the overall evaluation framework, updates on data collection, interim and final results; additional presentations were made on the themes of inter-agency working²⁹ and the implications of the new Child and Family Agency³⁰. (6) discussion on the dissemination of NEYAI learning which assumed more importance from the sixth meeting onwards, particularly the legacy emerging from the local and national evaluations.

Two meetings of the Learning Community were attended by the Chair of the NEYAI Steering Group (Noel Kelly) and the Chair of the NEYAI Evaluation & Learning Expert Advisory Group (Tony Crooks) when interim and final results of the national evaluation were being presented.

27 The Child and Family Agency was established in January 2014 for the purpose of providing a more integrated approach to all services and supports for children and families. The agency includes many services which have a role to play in supporting the healthy development of children: child welfare and protection, family support, pre-school inspection services, educational welfare, detention schools, domestic and sexual violence. But it also excludes, at least at this stage in the agency's life, many services which are central to supporting the healthy development of children most notably public health nursing which is the only universal service in Ireland in contact with all families around the birth of a child. Similarly the new agency does not include speech and language services although this is an area where early intervention is known to be more effective even though the average waiting time for Speech and Language Therapy for children in some early years services is 15-18 months (Hayes, Siraj-Blatchford, Keegan, and Goulding, 2013). All of these services were recommended for inclusion in the new agency by the Task Force on Child and Family Support Agency (2012:25).

28 'The Prevention & Early Intervention Network is a network of evidence-based practice, advocacy and research organisations across the Republic of Ireland that share a commitment to improving outcomes for children, young people, and their communities. The network, which is funded through the Atlantic Philanthropies Disadvantaged Children and Youth Programme, first met in October 2010. Membership is open to programmes in receipt of funding from Atlantic Philanthropies.' (www.preventioninpractice.ie)

29 Presentation was based on published article: 'Inter-Agency Cooperation in Services for Children and Families: Does it improve outcomes' (McKeown, 2012; 2011).

30 Presentation was based on published article: 'Using Evidence to Develop Services for Children and Families: Some Considerations and Challenges for the Child & Family Support Agency' (McKeown, 2013).

2 Methodology

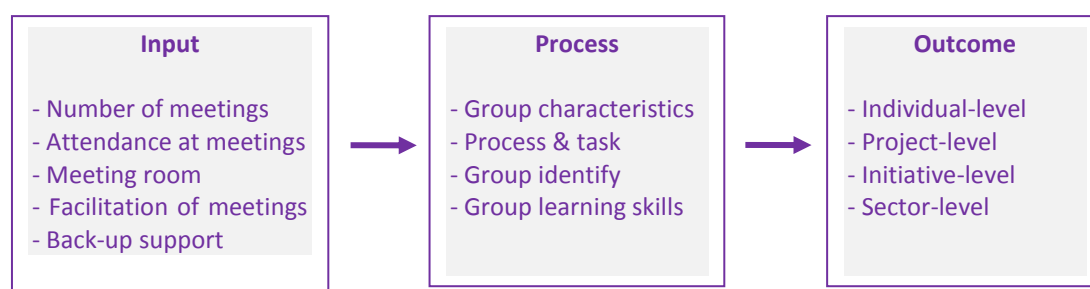
2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology used to carry out the evaluation. It begins by describing a logic model for the Learning Community which depicts a logical sequence between inputs, processes and outcomes (section 2.2). Building on this understanding, two instruments were created to collect the data – a Monitoring Instrument and an Evaluation Questionnaire – and these form the dataset for the evaluation, supplemented by the minutes of each meeting (Section 2.3). Finally, limitations of the study are noted (section 2.4).

2.2 Logic Model for Evaluation of NEYAI Learning Community

In order to design a framework for the evaluation, it was necessary to develop a logic model for the Learning Community. A logic model is normally defined as a graphical representation of a programme depicting the logical sequence between inputs, processes and outcomes³¹. Figure 2.1 summarises a simple logic model for the Learning Community. It is informed by the stated aims and objectives of the Learning Community as well as an understanding of the wider literature on the dynamics of groups and organisations³².

Figure 1 Logic Model of Learning Community



The main sources of data on inputs, processes and outcomes in the Learning Community are: the Monitoring Instrument completed on-line after each meeting of Learning Community; and the Evaluation Questionnaire completed at the mid-point and end-point of the Learning Community. These were supplemented by minutes of all meetings of Learning Community. In addition, the evaluation team attended all meetings of the Learning Community.

31 The following is a standard explanation of how logic models work in practice: 'Many who use logic models talk about them as a series of "if-then" sequences. If you have certain resources, then you will be able to provide activities, produce services or products for targeted individuals or groups. If you reach those individuals or groups, then they will benefit in certain specific ways in the short term. If the short-term benefits are achieved to the extent expected, then the medium-term benefits can be accomplished. If the medium-term benefits for participants/organizations/decision-makers are achieved to the extent expected, then you would expect the longer-term improvements and final impact in terms of social, economic, environmental, or civic changes to occur. This is the foundation of logic models and the theory of causal association. Such "if-then" relationships may seem too simple and linear for the complex programs and environments in which we work. However, in working out these sequences, we uncover gaps in logic, clarify assumptions, and more clearly understand how investments are likely to lead to results' (Taylor-Powell & Henert, 2008).

32 Examples of the wider literature on groups and organisations that was reviewed include: Benson, 1987; Senge, 1990; Zaffron and Logan, 2009; Bate, Mendel and Robert, 2008; Friedrickson, 2002; Carr, 2004.

2.2.1 Inputs

The main input to the Learning Community was the nine meetings and the people who attended them. Data on attendance was recorded in the minutes of every meeting. In addition, an Evaluation Questionnaire recorded participants' assessments of meetings at the mid-point (December 2012) and end-point (April 2014) of the evaluation. The following aspects of meetings were assessed in the Evaluation Questionnaire:

- ✓ Number and duration of meetings
- ✓ Attendance at meetings including consistency of attendance by the same people
- ✓ Physical environment of meeting room (size and suitability in terms of layout, comfort, refreshments, etc.)
- ✓ Facilitation of meeting
- ✓ Back-up support including setting agenda, circulating minutes and documents, follow-up.

2.2.2 Processes

Process refers to the way meetings were held and includes the 'success factors' normally associated with group outcomes. Data was collected through the Evaluation Questionnaire on the following processes within the Learning Community:

- ✓ Group cohesion. This influences the extent of goodwill in the group and, when present, it fosters positive and enjoyable interactions while also making it more likely that the group is creative and problem-solving³³. These characteristics could be described as 'traits and states' of the group and include positive and negative affect as well as safe, supportive and constructive interactions.
- ✓ Group identity. This refers to the bonds holding the group together, seeing its work as necessary and urgent, and having a collective desire to succeed³⁴.
- ✓ Process and task. Successful groups pay attention to the 'task' of the group (what is to be done) as well as the 'process' of the group (how it is done) and maintain a balance between the two³⁵.
- ✓ Group learning skills. These are generic to all learning and apply to adults as well as children:
 - attentive listening so there is a true appreciation of different perspectives and the possibility of learning from the other;³⁶

33 This understanding is informed by the insights of cognitive psychology and the emerging science of positive psychology which shows a connection between positive emotions and problem-solving ability, and has given rise to the 'broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions' (Fredrickson, 2002). A key insight from this research is that people with more positive thoughts and emotions are more likely to see the world in terms of expansionary 'win-win' options rather than contractionary 'win-lose' options. This is because positive thoughts and emotions encourage qualities which are needed to solve problems - such as persistence, flexibility and resourcefulness - and because they broaden the range of options which people perceive to be available (See also Carr, 2004; additional information is available at www.positivepsychology.org).

34 The learning community is a group and, like all groups, its success depends on having a group identity in order to achieve its goals. The dynamics of a group can be seen as governed by the 'love principle' (characterised by the desire for attachment and cooperation and which can find expression in a group through emphasising reassurance, protection, sympathy, etc.) and the 'will principle' (characterised by the desire for separation and power and which can find expression in a group through emphasising boundary, consistency, order, achievement, etc.) (Benson, 1987). The formation of a group typically goes through a number of stages comprising: (i) forming (ii) storming (iii) norming and (iv) performing – although the process is rarely linear or sequential. In another formulation, these stages may be expressed as: (i) the inclusion stage (which is analogous to the infancy stage where the facilitator acts as the 'group mother') (ii) the control stage (which is analogous to the adolescent stage where the facilitator acts as the 'group father') (iii) the affection stage (which is analogous to the adult stage where the facilitator acts as the 'group guide') and (iv) the ending / separation stage (which is analogous to the death stage where the facilitator is expected to act as group mother, father and guide all at the same time).

35 The balance between process and task is important since too much focus on processes and the group could become a 'talking shop'; too much focus on outcomes and the group could lose the good-will of those who take longer to adapt, change or learn. These two dimensions are core to understanding how a group works, and how effective it is – or can be - at achieving its goals (Benson, 1987).

- quality of interaction, including the group's capacity for 'sustained shared thinking'³⁷ and 'extended purposive conversations'³⁸;
- quality of group dialogue based on the frequency of statements on a spectrum from 'open-and-exploratory statements' to 'closed-and-declaratory statements'³⁹;
- relative importance given 'objective learning' (which emphasises facts, evidence, and interventions that work) and 'subjective learning' (which emphasises how learning is framed by the subject, the limitations of scientific understanding as a basis for action, and the relationship between learning and unlearning)?⁴⁰

2.2.3 Outcomes

Outcomes are the changes or impacts which would not have happened without the learning community. These were measured through the Monitoring Instrument and the Evaluation Questionnaire.

The Monitoring Instrument assessed how much each meeting of the Learning Community may have influenced the thinking and actions of participants to improve outcomes for children, parents, staff, or early years sector. It also asked participants to identify the sources of influence within each meeting (projects, invited speakers, Pobal, facilitator, evaluation team) as well as the influence of other events unrelated to the Learning Community (such as conferences, seminars or training workshops).

36 'Simply put, there is nothing, nothing in the world that can take the place of one person intentionally listening or speaking to another. The act of conscious attending to another person ... can become the center of gravity of the work of love' (Needleman, 1996:44).

37 'Sustained shared thinking' is a concept used by early childhood educators and emerged from research on The Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project (EPPE). This showed that learning outcomes were better in settings which encourage 'sustained share thinking', a concept that is defined as 'any episode in which two or more individuals 'worked together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative, etc. ...'. The research found that this did not happen very frequently. ...'. Our investigations of adult-child interaction suggest that periods of 'sustained share thinking' are a necessary prerequisite for excellence in the early years practice, and it is especially powerful when it is also encouraged in the home by parents. ...'. (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010a:157-158).

38 'Extended purposive conversations' is also a concept used by early childhood educators and is conceptually the same as sustained shared thinking. Geraldine French has suggested that 'extended purposive conversations' may be a more appropriate term because 'it puts the focus on extending the conversation 'by listening to and engaging children with conscious purpose and intent, encouraging them to articulate their discoveries and their learning. ...'. The emphasis on 'conversation' is perhaps more concrete, grounded in practice, and easier than 'thinking' for educators to conceptualise as a goal for working with young children' (French, 2011:74).

39 This is also a framework used by early years educators and draws attention to the key role of open-ended questions and statements in the learning process. Again, the observation of Iram Siraj-Blatchford, based on research from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project (EPPE), is noteworthy: 'Open-ended questions were found to make up only 5.1 per cent of the questioning in the case study settings. ... the open ended questioning encouraged children to speculate and to learn by trial and error, and it also provided an initial stimulus for sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010:157). It seems likely that the proportion of open-ended questions in the learning community might also be a useful indicator of its openness to learning.

40 This aspect is informed by the understanding that learning has a rational and logical dimension as well as an intuitive and imaginative dimension. It is also informed by the idea that unlearning is an aspect of learning and involves letting go of assumptions and beliefs that are not supported, and may even be contested, by evidence. The importance of learning as a key ingredient in the improvement of health and social services is well recognised (Bate, Mendel and Robert, 2008). However the process of unlearning is less frequently acknowledged, though no less important. Its philosophical roots can be traced to Socrates and his insight that 'the only real wisdom is knowing you know nothing' (Plato, 2003: 43-6). In a number of fields, including child protection, the importance of 'unknowing' (Morrison, 2010) and 'respectful uncertainty' (Lord Laming, 2003) are increasingly recognised as qualities which organisations need in order to manage risk and respond to complex demands (See also Zaffron and Logan, 2009:203-4).

The Evaluation Questionnaire assessed how the Learning Community may have influenced the following outcomes:

- ✓ Individual-level outcomes such as any changes in personal understanding or attitudes to NEYAI or the wider early years sector; it may also involve changes in the understanding of self and others.
- ✓ Project-level outcomes such as a new or improved way of implementing actions or targeting them at particular groups.
- ✓ NEYAI-level outcomes such as networking, joint actions, statements or publications on behalf of NEYAI.
- ✓ Sector-level outcomes such as any changes which affect the entire early years sector.

2.3 Dataset

The dataset for this evaluation comprises the following:

- ✓ responses to the Monitoring Instrument over the nine meetings (n=100);
- ✓ responses to the Evaluation Questionnaire at the mid-point (n=19) and end-point (n=21) of the Learning Community;
- ✓ minutes of meetings (n=9).

2.3.1 Response Rate to Monitoring Instrument

Following each meeting, those who attended were invited to complete the on-line Monitoring Instrument; this invitation was usually followed up with two email-reminders in order to improve the response rate. The response rate to the Monitoring Instrument is estimated as the number of responses relative to the number of persons who attended each meeting. This is summarised in Table 2.1 and shows that the overall response rate was 50%. Responses tended to be higher among those who attended regularly which implies that the views in this report tends to reflect those who are more familiar with the Learning Community and, in that sense, may be regarded as a reasonably accurate reflection of how the group worked in practice.

Table 2.1 Response Rate to Monitoring Instrument on Learning Community, 2011-2014

	Date of Meeting										
	9-11 (i)	11-11	2-12	6-12	10-12	2-13	6-13	10-13	2-14	4-14 (ii)	
Persons at Meeting (n=61) (iii)		22	19	24	22	19	20	15	15	19.9	22
Monitoring Responses		13	12	15	10	14	12	11	6	11.6	13
Response Rate (%)		50	52	56	39	64	52	61	33	50	50

(i) The Monitoring Instrument was not available for the first meeting of the Learning Community.

(ii) This was a specially convened meeting for a presentation of final results from the national evaluation. It was not a 'normal' meeting of the Learning Community but a number of respondents completed the Monitoring Instrument after this meeting.

(iii) This is the number of persons from NEYAI projects who attended any meeting of the Learning Community.

2.3.2 Response Rate to Evaluation Questionnaire

The Evaluation Questionnaires were completed in April 2014 after the final meeting of the Learning Community; these were supplemented by data from the interim evaluation, based on the same questionnaire which was completed in December 2012 after the first five meetings of the Learning Community. The response rate to the Evaluation Questionnaire in April 2014 is estimated as the number of responses relative to the number of persons who attended each meeting and the frequency of their attendance. This is summarised in Table 2.2 and shows that the overall response

rate was 30%; however the response rate was 73% among those who attended 6-9 meetings. Given that the response rate was higher among those who attended more frequently, similar to the Monitoring Instrument, this further confirms that the report reflects the views of those who are more familiar with the Learning Community.

Table 2.2 Response Rate to Evaluation Questionnaire on Learning Community, 2011-2014

Responses	1-3 Meetings	4-5 Meetings	6-9 Meetings	Total
Persons at Meeting (N)	46	7	15	68
Responses to Evaluation Questionnaire (N)	8	2	11	21
Response Rate (%)	17	29	73	30

2.4 Limitations

This report assesses the Learning Community based the self-report of participants. In that sense, the results are akin to a barometer-reading of how participants perceived the Learning Community rather than an 'objective' or independent assessment. While this may be a limitation, the perceptions of participants provide valuable indicators of the Learning Community's effectiveness in terms of inputs, processes and outcomes. Given that those who attended most meetings also provided most responses, the results are likely to reflect accurately how the Learning Community was experienced.

The main focus of the evaluation is on the nine meetings of the Learning Community. This is appropriate since almost all its activities involved these meetings, apart mainly from the national conference in May 2014 which occurred after the final meeting of the Learning Community. However, since outcomes inevitably come at the end of a process, and since many of the outcomes of NEYAI will only become apparent following publication of the national and local evaluations, it is possible that this report may under-estimate of the impact of the Learning Community.

3 Results

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents results on how participants experienced the Learning Community based on the three concepts: inputs (section 3.2), processes (section 3.3) and outcomes (section 3.4). The chapter also includes with a summary of the main findings (section 3.5). The full dataset on which this chapter is based is in a Technical Report; to facilitate cross-checking of results, the Technical Report follows the same structure as this chapter.

3.2 Inputs to Learning Community

The concept of 'input', as used in this study, refers to attendance at the nine the meetings of the Learning Community as well as participants' assessment of the adequacy of those meetings in terms of number, duration, attendance, physical environment, facilitation and back-up support. We begin therefore with an overview of attendance at meetings.

3.2.1 Attendance at Meetings

The number of persons from each NEYAI project who attended each meeting is summarised in Table 3.1. This shows that an average of 20 people from the projects attended each meeting, plus three from Pobal (which includes the independent Facilitator who attended for the first five meetings). This level of attendance has been consistent over most of the meetings, except the last two when attendance from the projects declined to an average of 15 per meeting.

Table 3.1 Number of Persons Attending Each Meeting of Learning Community, 2011-2014

ID	Date of Meeting									Mean Per Meeting
	9-11	11-11	2-12	6-12	10-12	2-13	6-13	10-13	2 - 14	
BC	2	2	2	3	2	1	1	1	1	1.7
CC	3	2	0	2	2	2	1	2	0	1.6
CK	1	2	2	1	2	3	2	2	2	1.9
CN	3	3	3	3	2	2	4	2	2	2.7
DD	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1.9
FL	4	3	1	2	2	2	2	1	0	1.9
DL	1	1	4	3	3	2	0	2	2	2
LK	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	0	1.4
LD	2	3	2	2	3	1	2	1	2	2
RO	1	1	0	2	1	1	2	1	2	1.2
TT	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	1	2	1.7
Sub-Total	23	22	19	24	22	19	20	15	15	19.9
Pobal*	4	4	4	3	4	3	3	3	3	3.3
Total	27	26	23	27	26	22	23	18	18	23.3

**For the first five meetings this includes the independent Facilitator.*

Note: The Evaluation Team is not a member of the Learning Community but is 'in attendance'.

A different perspective on attendance is presented in Table 3.2 which details the number of meetings attended by each person. This is based on attendance at each meeting as recorded in the minutes. It shows that, over the nine meetings, the total number of persons who attended any meeting was 68, comprising 61 from projects and 7 from Pobal (again including the independent Facilitator for the first five meetings).

The vast majority of participants from the projects (43, 72%) attended only three meetings; less than a tenth (5, 8%) attended between four and five meetings, and a fifth (12, 20%) attended between six and nine meetings. Only one person attended all nine meetings. This implies that core attendance at meetings involved the same 12 people, mainly but not exclusively the coordinator of each project. This provided continuity and consistency of attendance but, on average, involved only one person per project.

Table 3.2 Number of Meetings Attended by Each Person in Learning Community, 2011-2014

No of Meetings Attended	Persons from Projects		Persons from Pobal*	
	N	%	N	%
One	25	41	2	29
Two	11	18	0	0
Three	7	11	1	14
Four	1	0	0	0
Five	5	8	1	14
Six	6	10	1	14
Seven	3	5	1	14
Eight	2	3	1	14
Nine	1	2	0	0
Total Persons	61	100	7	100
Average No of Meetings Per Person	2.9		4.4	

**Pobal includes the independent Facilitator for the first five meetings. Evaluation Team is not a member of the Learning Community but is 'in attendance'.*

3.2.2 Assessment of Meetings

The following aspects of meetings were assessed by the 21 participants who completed the end-point Evaluation Questionnaire in April 2014: number, duration and attendance at meetings; the physical environment of meeting room (size and suitability in terms of layout, comfort, and refreshments); facilitation of meeting; and back-up support (such as setting agenda, circulating minutes and documents, follow-up). These aspects were assessed using a 5-point scale (1=negative rating; 3=average rating; 5=positive rating) and supplemented by written comments. The assessments are summarised in Table 3.3 with comparison data from the mid-point assessments in December 2012.

The overall assessment of meetings is positive and particularly positive regarding the facilitation of (4.1) and back-up support for (4.2) meetings. The written comments are replete with complements to the staff team in Pobal for their role in this. The meeting room also received a positive overall rating (3.6). Of note is the fact that attendance at meetings was assessed positively (3.8) which suggests that, in practice, the Learning Community was seen as comprising a core group of around 12 people who attended regularly (6-9 meetings) even if these constituted just a fifth (20%) of all attendances. It is also noteworthy that the assessment of meetings improved between the mid-point in December 2012 and the end-point in April 2014 which, as we shall see, is similar to the improvement in group processes over this period.

Table 3.3 Participants' Assessment of Meetings of Learning Community?

Assessment of Meetings	Mid-Point Assessment			End-Point Assessment		
	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
1.1 number of meetings	1	4	2.7	2	3	3.0
1.2 length of meetings	2	5	2.9	1	4	2.6
1.3 attendance at meetings	2	5	3.5	3	5	3.8
1.4 consistency of attendance	1	4	2.7	3	4	3.4
1.5 meeting room	1	4	3.1	2	5	3.6
1.6 facilitation of meetings	2	5	4.1	3	5	4.1
1.7 back-up support for meetings	3	5	3.9	3	5	4.2

Notes: Mid-Point Assessment (n=19) is based on the first five LC meetings. End-Point Assessment (n=21) is based on all nine LC meetings.

Rating Scale: 1=too little; 3=about right; 5=too much.

3.3 Processes of Learning Community

The concept of 'process', in the context of this study, refers to factors normally associated with effective groups and includes: group cohesion (such as whether interactions are safe, supportive and enjoyable); group identity (such as the bond holding the group together and its desire to succeed as a group); balance between group process and task; and group learning skills (such as attentive listening, using open-and-exploratory statements, capacity for extended purposive conversations). These dimensions were rated on a 5-point scale (1=negative rating; 3=average rating; 5=positive rating) and, in conjunction with the written comments, provide an insight into the group processes of the Learning Community.

3.3.1 Group Cohesion

The assessment of group cohesion, as summarised in Table 3.4, is above average in terms of general feeling within the group (3.8), feeling safe (4.1), feeling supported (3.8), enjoying meetings (3.9). On every aspect of group cohesion, there was an improvement in mean scores between the mid-point and the end-point, suggesting that the group matured during this period. Many of the written comments noted how meetings became more positive and constructive with each additional meeting. At the same time, the range of scores indicates diversity and shows that a minority did not experience the Learning Community as a cohesive group. Two comments seems to capture the reality of group cohesion as experienced by many and as reflected in these scores: *'Most of the time quite positive but it was also a space where colleagues needed to air their frustrations but generally as time went on everyone grew closer and openly shared the good, bad and ugly which I felt was a very important aspect of the meetings'; 'Truthfully, it was up and down but I think that we tried our best to stay upbeat. At times we became laden down in the same issues but ultimately, and in particularly towards the end, there was a tangible positivity.'*

Table 3.4 Participants' Assessment of Group Cohesion of Learning Community?

Group Cohesion	Mid-Point Assessment			End-Point Assessment		
	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
2.1 overall feeling within the group	2	5	3.4	2	5	3.8
2.2 feel it is safe to say what you think or feel	1	5	3.5	2	5	4.1
2.3 experience the group as a supportive environment	1	5	3.6	2	5	3.8
2.4 enjoy meetings of the learning community	2	5	3.6	1	5	3.9

Notes: Mid-Point Assessment (n=19) is based on the first five LC meetings. End-Point Assessment (n=21) is based on all nine LC meetings.

Rating Scale: 1=negative rating; 3=average rating; 5=positive rating.

One influence on group cohesion, and on the Learning Community generally, was the national evaluation of NEYAI. This was a source of some negativity, particularly during the early meetings, and remained so for a minority of participants. This is understandable in the sense that different perceptions of the national evaluation are to be expected; however it may have been exacerbated by lack of clarity within the Learning Community about NEYAI structures for managing the national evaluation. These structures meant that every aspect of the national evaluation - beginning with selection of tenders, adoption of the research protocol and every aspect of the research design including sampling strategy, measurement instruments, comparison group, baseline and final report - was approved by the Evaluation & Learning Expert Advisory Group (ELEAG) and, on its recommendation, adopted by the Steering Group. As a consequence, the structures of NEYAI did not give the Learning Community a remit in the national evaluation, apart from implementing the research protocol. Nevertheless, facilitation of discussion within the Learning Community on various aspects of the national evaluation, particularly around the difficult task of retro-fitting an evaluation framework to 11 pre-selected multi-dimensional projects, may have created false expectations and, for a minority at least, an unnecessary source of negativity during the foundational stages of the Learning Community. As one participant observed: *'this reality had the potential to destabilise the LC but thankfully it didn't'*.

3.3.2 Group Identity

The concept of group identity was measured using three criteria, each rated on a 5-point scale (1=negative rating; 3=average rating; 5=positive rating). The results, summarised in Table 3.5, reveal that group identity was not strong in terms of the bonds holding it together (2.9), seeing its work as necessary and urgent (2.6), or its desire to succeed (3.0). There was a slight strengthening of group identity since the mid-point assessment in December 2012.

Table 3.5 Participants' Assessment of Group Identity of Learning Community?

Group Identity	Mid-Point Assessment			End-Point Assessment		
	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
4.1 How strong was the bond holding the learning community together?	1	4	2.5	1	5	2.9
4.2 Do you think the learning community saw itself and its work as 'necessary and urgent' or 'optional and not urgent'?	1	5	2.4	1	5	2.6
4.3 Would you say there was a strong desire within the group to succeed as a learning community?	1	5	3.3	1	4	3

Notes: Mid-Point Assessment (n=19) is based on the first five LC meetings. End-Point Assessment (n=21) is based on all nine LC meetings.

Rating Scale: 1=negative rating; 3=average rating; 5=positive rating.

Written comments by respondents suggest a number of reasons why the Learning Community did not have a strong group identity: projects were busy and preoccupied with their own work; project participation was obligatory rather than voluntary; changing membership reduced the sense of continuity. As a result, many felt that the work of the Learning Community was necessary but not urgent and this remained relatively constant over its nine meetings.

3.3.3 Balance Between Group Process and Task

Successful groups, as already indicated, pay attention to ‘task’ (what the group needs to do) as well as ‘process’ (how the group does it), and maintain a balance between the two. On the 5-point rating scale, lowest scores (1-2) represent a judgement that there is ‘too much focus on process’ while highest scores (4-5) represent a judgement that there is ‘too much focus on task’; the mid-point (3) represents a judgement that the balance is ‘about right’. The overall score on this dimension was 3.0 which suggests that the balance in the Learning Community was about right (Table 3.6). In addition, the balance improved since the mid-point assessment, moving towards more task and less process (from 2.6 to 3.0). However there is also a relatively wide range of scores on this issue (1-4) indicating that not everyone felt that the balance between process and task was right. Written comments on this aspect of the Learning Community are largely complementary. For example: *‘The meetings got this right and digression from the agenda was permitted where necessary – a good balance.’*; *‘Both were managed in balance, most of the time. This is a bi-product of competent facilitation and good planning. If process needed the attention it got it, likewise with task. It worked well from my perspective.’*

Table 3.6 Participants’ Assessment of Balance Between Process and Task in Learning Community

Balance Between Process and Task	Mid-Point Assessment			End-Point Assessment		
	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
3.1 maintaining a focus at each meeting on the ‘process’ and the ‘task’?*	1	4	2.6	1	4	3

Notes: Mid-Point Assessment (n=19) is based on the first five LC meetings. End-Point Assessment (n=21) is based on all nine LC meetings.

Rating Scale: 1=too much focus on process; 3=about right; 5=too much focus on task.

*The ‘process’ of the meeting refers to ‘how things are done’. The ‘task’ of the meeting refers to ‘what is done’. Successful groups maintain a balance between focusing on both task and process.

3.3.4 Group Learning Skills

Group learning skills involve attentive listening, interacting to produce sustained shared thinking, using open and exploratory statements in dialogue, and cultivating awareness of subjective as well as objective aspects of learning. The results in Table 3.7 indicate that the Learning Community rated itself at or above the mid-point (3) on the first three skills: attentive listening (4.0), sustained shared thinking (3.0), and using open and exploratory statements (3.6). Its focus as a group tended to be more on ‘objective’ rather than ‘subjective’ knowledge as captured in the comment of one participant, *‘facts and evidence were seen as essential’*.

Attentive listening received the highest rating and written comments frequently linked this to participants being *‘respectful’*, *‘interested’*, and *‘courteous’*. Sustained shared thinking was more in evidence within small groups which worked with a more narrowly defined focus and the experience of planning the national NEYAI event for May 2014 was cited as a good example of sustained shared thinking. Similarly, the use of open and exploratory statements were more likely to be experienced in small groups. Group learning skills tended to improve between the mid-point and the end-point assessments.

Table 3.7 Participants' Assessment of Group Learning Skills in Learning Community?

Group Learning Skills	Mid-Point Assessment			End-Point Assessment		
	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
5.1 How attentively did people listen to each other in the learning community?	2	5	3.7	3	5	4
5.2 Did the quality of interactions in the learning community create a space for 'sustained shared thinking'*?	1	4	3.1	1	5	3
5.3 How would you characterise the quality of dialogue in the learning community in terms of how people used 'open-and-exploratory statements'* or 'closed-and-declaratory statements'*?	2	4	3.2	2	5	3.6
5.4 Which aspect of learning was given greater emphasis in the learning community: 'objective learning' or 'subjective learning'?	2	4	3.2	2	4	2.9

Notes: Mid-Point Assessment (n=19) is based on the first five LC meetings. End-Point Assessment (n=21) is based on all nine LC meetings.

Rating Scale: 1=negative rating; 3=average rating; 5=positive rating.

*5.2 'Sustained shared thinking' is when a group works together to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or identify new ways of thinking.

*5.3 'Open-and-exploratory statements' normally contain a question and invite discussion. 'Closed-and-declaratory statements' tend to set out an established position which may not be open for discussion.

*5.4 'Objective learning' gives emphasis to facts and evidence, and to interventions that work. 'Subjective learning' gives emphasis to reflecting on how learning is framed by the subject and the limitations of knowledge.

3.4 Outcomes of Learning Community

Outcomes of the Learning Community are changes or impacts which happened and, it is presumed, would not have happened without the Learning Community. One indicator of outcomes is whether, as a consequence of attending meetings of the Learning Community, the thinking and actions of participants was influenced to improve outcomes for children, parents, staff, or early years sector. Data on this and related indicators was collected through the Monitoring Instrument. Another indicator is whether participants experienced any outcomes of the Learning Community at an individual-level, project-level, NEYAI-level or sector-level. Data on this and related indicators was collected through the Evaluation Questionnaire. Both sets of indicators are reported in this section.

3.4.1 Size of Influence on Thinking and Actions

The influence of each meeting on the thinking and actions of participants is summarised in Table 3.8. This shows that, on a four-point scale, the mean score was 2.9 across the nine meetings indicating a positive influence. This varied significantly between meetings although the overall influence was broadly the same irrespective of whether the focus of influence was children, parents, staff, or early years sector. The two most influential meetings in the Learning Community occurred at the beginning and end. At the beginning, the meeting in October 2011 was seen to have an influence on thinking and actions about the early years sector (3.4), possibly related to a presentation on the evaluation of Siolta QAP by Catherine Hynes and Maresa Duignan from the Early Years Policy Unit in the Department of Education & Skills. At the end, the meeting in April 2014, though not a formal meeting of the Learning Community but one for which the Monitoring Instrument was completed, had a particularly strong influence on thinking and actions about children (3.3), and involved a presentation on final results from the national evaluation.

In addition to the Learning Community, participants also attended other unrelated events such as conferences, seminars and training workshops. These were also assessed in terms of how they influenced the thinking and actions of participants. The results, also shown in Table 3.8, reveal that these unrelated events tended to have more influence on participants than the Learning Community. This finding suggests that these unrelated events may have been better at meeting the specific needs and interests of participants. This is consistent with the written comments which frequently referred to diversity among participants: *'I think each group were more committed to their own individual projects and it was difficult to find common ground with the 11 groups being so diverse'; 'I got a good insight into the complexities of diverse groups working together and the challenges of consortium working'; 'Because of the diversity of projects, approaches being taken and variety of stages in project timeline, sharing of info and ideas was mainly what happened in the 'space' - this was useful in itself'; 'It was a platform that helped to create a sense of identity among groups that are essentially heterogeneous. We may all work in the same sector but, as the LC clearly demonstrated, there are many different ethos, organisational learning cultures and objectives at play'.*

Table 3.8 How much has this meeting influenced your thinking or actions about ways to improve outcomes for children, parents, staff, sector, or other work?

Outcomes for:	Date of Meeting										Mean (ii)
	9-11	11-11	2-12	6-12	10-12	2-13	6-13	10-13	2-14	4-14*	
Children		2.9	2.5	2.7	2.5	2.7	3.2	2.6	2.8	3.3	2.9
Parents		2.8	2.7	2.8	2.2	2.9	2.9	2.6	2.2	3.0	2.8
Staff		3.0	2.8	2.7	1.9	2.6	3.2	2.6	2.8	2.9	2.8
Sector		3.4	2.9	2.8	2.2	2.8	3.3	2.9	2.7	3.1	2.9
Unrelated Events (i)		3.7	3.3	3.3	3.8	3.2	3.0	3.2	3.3	3.0	3.2

(i) Unrelated events are conferences, seminars and training workshops.

(ii) Mean Scores per project by date of meeting based on the following scale: (1=not at all; 2=very little; 3=somewhat; 4=a lot).

*This was a specially convened meeting of NEYAI projects for a presentation on final results from the national evaluation.

3.4.2 Sources of Influence on Thinking and Actions

Participants were asked to indicate who in the Learning Community – NEYAI projects, guest speakers, Pobal, facilitator, evaluation team - influenced their thinking or likely future actions at each meeting. The results, summarised in Table 3.9, indicates that the biggest source of influence was other NEYAI projects which is consistent with the idea of a Learning Community where participants learn from each other. The evaluation team was also a significant source of influence. Guest speakers and Pobal exercised some influence.

Table 3.9 Who influenced your thinking or likely future actions at this meeting?

Influence of:	Date of Meeting										Total
	9-11	11-11	2-12	6-12	10-12	2-13	6-13	10-13	2-14	4-14	
Projects		8	7	9	4	10	7	8	6	2	61
Evaluator		6	3	7	1	9	6	0	1	7	40
Guests		6	0	7	4	4	1	0	0	3	25
Pobal		4	3	2	1	5	3	3	2	1	24
Facilitator		3	1	3	1	1	1	1	0	1	12

3.4.3 Influence on Outcomes

The overall influence of the Learning Community on outcomes, in the assessment of participants, is summarised in Table 3.10. This is based on a 5-point rating scale and shows that the strongest impact of the Learning Community was on individual-level outcomes (3.1) which refer to learning outcomes that are personally important such as gaining a new insight, or unlearning or letting go of assumptions not supported by experience or other evidence. Outcomes in all other domains were slightly less and slightly below the mid-point for project-level (2.9), initiative-level (2.8) and sector-level (2.9) outcomes. Written comments on project-level outcomes of the Learning Community indicate that it was a useful source of ideas and contacts, and a source of affirmation that other projects were experiencing similar challenges (with their consortiums, for example). Regarding initiative-level and sector-level outcomes, the written comments acknowledge that this has not really happened yet but there are strong expectations that this will change when learning from NEYAI is published, particularly the national and local evaluations: *'I guess the biggest outcome will be the National conference which is being organised by a sub-group of the LC'; 'The findings and timing of the final evaluation present a wonderful opportunity to inform the sector about the choices to be made in the ongoing debate about quality, early intervention, how early and what type, and the introduction of a second FPY. It will leave a very significant legacy – the uptake depends on politicians, policy makers and the extent to which practitioners actively engage with the evaluation findings to raise awareness and to lobby for change'; 'A wealth of publications have been developed through the projects which should be grouped together now i.e. all transition documents, all S&L documents, all family support etc which could support practice in the early years sector. Learning from project which implemented quality mentoring should be consider during the development of the National Quality Support Service'; 'I think the findings of the national evaluation will be very influential overall and I hope that it will bring about changes in policy. Raising awareness of the importance of parent-child relationship in the formative years and highlighting the importance of maternal well-being, diet, the home learning environment and social class is crucially important for the early years sector to feed back to relevant departments'.*

Over time, the assessment of outcomes improved slightly between the mid-point and end-point. However there is wide diversity in the assessments of participants, at both the mid-point and end-point, reflecting a lack of consensus within the Learning Community on its achievements. This diversity of opinion reflects the diverse projects that made up the Learning Community and the different needs and expectations of participants. As already indicated, it may also reflect the fact that some outcomes of the Learning Community – and NEYAI – may only emerge after it has ceased to exist.

Table 3.10 Participants' Assessment of Outcomes of Learning Community

Outcomes	Mid-Point Assessment			End-Point Assessment		
	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
6.1 Have there been any individual-level outcomes for you as a person* as a result of attending the learning community?	1	5	3.1	2	5	3.1
6.2 Have there been any outcomes for your NEYAI project* as a result of attending the learning community?	1	4	2.6	1	5	2.9
Have there been any outcomes for the NEYAI initiative* as a result of attending the learning community?	1	4	2.5	1	5	2.8
6.4 Have there been any outcomes for the early years sector* as a result of attending the learning community?	1	5	2.3	1	5	2.9
6.5 Overall, do you think the outcomes of the learning community have been worth the time and effort spent on this aspect of NEYAI?	1	5	3.6	2	5	3.8

*6.1 This should be something that your regard as personally significant. For example, learning something important; gaining a new insight; unlearning or letting go of assumptions not supported by your experience or other evidence.

*6.2 This should be something that has made a significant difference to your project. For example, an improved way of implementing the programme, a better way of managing your consortium, or more supportive way of working staff in the centres.

*6.3 This should be something that your regard as significant for the initiative as a whole. For example, it could include joint actions, statements or publications by projects on behalf of NEYAI. It should not include casual contacts between projects such as emails and phone calls.

*This should be something that goes beyond the NEYAI and has an influence on wider practices or policies in the early years sector.

Notes: Based on Evaluation Questionnaire. Summary of Answers to Q6.1-6.5 at Mid-Point Assessment (n=19) and End-Point Assessment (n=21).

Rating Scale: 1=negative rating; 3=average rating; 5=positive rating.

3.4.4 Were the Outcomes Worth the Time and Effort?

The overall assessment of participants is that the Learning Community was worth the time and effort. The mean score, on a 5-point scale, is 3.8 which indicates a broadly positive assessment of the Learning Community (Table 3.11). As with the other assessments, there are diverse opinions on this topic (1-5) but the balance is decidedly positive. Many of the written comments accompanying this overall assessment refer to the importance of the idea or concept of a learning community, in the generic sense of the term, because it provides an opportunity to be '*part of something bigger*' and creates an opportunity to think and act within a wider framework. Examples of such comments are: '*Yes, it was necessary to have the support of the other NEYAI projects and to know what was happening with the other projects. The LC was also necessary to get updates about the National Evaluation*'; '*I think that the learning community was a good idea and was worth the time and effort. It was the first of its kind and I think that a lot of leaning can come out it. It is also influencing the development of the ABC learning community. It may have been over ambitious in its aims but I think that a lot has been achieved through it*'; '*The Learning Community reflects an almost 'old fashioned' approach to support peer learning interspersed with 'expert' inputs and collective analysis of issues and trends. ... It offers a very good sounding board and allows projects to develop a programme view and the possibility of two-way communication*'.

Table 3.11 Was the Learning Community Worth the Time and Effort?

Outcomes	Mid-Point Assessment			End-Point Assessment		
	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
6.5 Overall, do you think the outcomes of the learning community have been worth the time and effort spent on this aspect of NEYAI?	1	5	3.6	2	5	3.8

Notes: Mid-Point Assessment (n=19) is based on the first five LC meetings. End-Point Assessment (n=21) is based on all nine LC meetings.

Rating Scale: 1=negative rating; 3=average rating; 5=positive rating.

3.5 Summary

This chapter assessed the nine meetings of Learning Community (LC), summarising the experience of participants in terms of three broad concepts: inputs, processes and outcomes. Beginning with inputs, an average of 23 persons attended each meeting: 20 from the projects and 3 from Pobal. Closer analysis revealed that most of the meetings were attended by the same 12 people, mainly but not exclusively the coordinator of each project. These provided continuity and consistency of attendance since the majority of participants from projects (61 in all) attended no more than three meetings. The overall assessment of the input to meetings was positive and particularly positive regarding facilitation and back-up support. The written comments are replete with complements to the staff team in Pobal for their role in this. It is noteworthy that the assessment of meetings improved between the mid-point in December 2012 and the end-point in April 2014 which is consistent with other findings showing an improvement in the functioning of the Learning Community.

Turning to ‘process’ – which was measured through the concepts of group cohesion, group identity, balance between process and task; and group learning skills – the overall assessment was generally positive. The assessment of group cohesion was above average in terms of general feeling within the group, feeling safe, feeling supported, and enjoying meetings. On every aspect of group cohesion, there was an improvement between the mid-point and the end-point, while many of the written comments noted how meetings became more positive and constructive with each additional meeting. Group identity was not strong in terms of the bonds holding it together, seeing its work as necessary and urgent, or its desire to succeed. Written comments by respondents suggest a number of reasons for this: projects were busy and preoccupied with their own work; project participation was obligatory rather than voluntary; changing membership reduced the sense of continuity. The balance between process and task was felt to be ‘about right’ and improved since the mid-point assessment. Group learning skills were rated as average or above depending on the particular skill. For example, attentive listening received the highest rating and written comments frequently linked this to being ‘respectful’, ‘interested’, and ‘courteous’. Sustained shared thinking was more in evidence within small groups which had a clearly defined focus and the experience of planning the national NEYAI event for May 2014 was cited as a good example of sustained shared thinking. Similarly with the use of open and exploratory statements, which were experienced more frequently in small groups. Group learning skills tended to improve between the mid-point and the end-point assessments, in line with the maturing of the Learning Community.

Outcomes were measured in terms of whether the Learning Community influenced the thinking or actions of participants and whether there were outcomes at an individual-level, project-level, NEYAI-level or sector-level. As regards influence, the two most influential meetings occurred at the beginning and end of the Learning Community. At the beginning, the meeting in October 2011 influenced thinking and actions about the early years sector, possibly related to a presentation on the evaluation of Síolta QAP. At the end, the meeting in April 2014, though not a formal meeting of the Learning Community but one for which the Monitoring Instrument was completed, influenced thinking and actions about children, and involved a presentation of final results from the national

evaluation. By contrast, events unrelated to the Learning Community (such as conferences, seminars or training workshops) tended to have more influence on participants than the Learning Community.

One of the strongest impacts of the Learning Community was on individual-level outcomes which refer to learning something that is personally important such as gaining a new insight, or unlearning or letting go of assumptions not supported by experience or other evidence. Regarding initiative-level and sector-level outcomes, the written comments acknowledge that this has not happened to any great extent but there are strong expectations that this will change when learning from NEYAI is published, particularly the national and local evaluations. Although the assessment of outcomes improved slightly between the mid-point and end-point there remained a wide variation in these assessments reflecting the diversity of projects and the fact that the Learning Community met the needs and expectations of some participants more than others.

Finally, participants felt that the Learning Community was worth the time and effort. Most of the written comments accompanying this overall assessment refer to the importance of the idea or concept of a learning community, in the generic sense of the term, because it provides an opportunity to be 'part of something bigger' and creates an opportunity to think and act within a wider framework.

4 Summary and Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

This study is an evaluation of the Learning Community which was established in 2011 as part of the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI). In this final chapter we summarise the findings, beginning with a brief description of NEYAI (section 4.2) and then clarifying the concept of a learning community (section 4.3). We then describe the purpose of the Learning Community in NEYAI (section 4.4) and how it was implemented (section 4.5). The methodology used in the evaluation is explained and involves analysing the Learning Community in terms of its component parts: inputs, processes, outcomes (section 4.6). Mirroring this methodology, we summarise results under the headings of inputs (section 4.7), processes (section 4.8), and outcomes (section 4.9). Finally, we discuss some of lessons emerging from the NEYAI experience of the Learning Community since this may be useful in setting up learning communities for similar initiatives such as the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme⁴¹ (section 4.10).

4.2 National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI)

The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) is a three-year programme (2011-2014) to improve quality and outcomes in the early years sector. NEYAI comprises 11 projects mainly located in disadvantaged areas of Dublin, Cork and Limerick and two rural locations in Longford/Westmeath and Donegal. It was officially launched by the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs in June 2011 who referred to NEYAI as being made up of local demonstration projects with ‘a focus on evidence-based practice and ongoing project evaluation for the purpose of advising future policy and the mainstream provision’. A substantial body of evidence has been created through NEYAI including a national evaluation of the initiative, local evaluations of each NEYAI project, and this report on the NEYAI Learning Community⁴².

4.3 What is a Learning Community?

The idea of a ‘learning community’, like the idea of a ‘learning organisation’⁴³, suggests that learning can occur through collaborating with others while also suggesting that organisations and ‘communities’ can be learners, just like individuals. The idea of collaborative learning, and the ideal

41 In November 2013, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced an extension of the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme till 2016, extending it from 3 to 13 projects with a budget of €30m co-funded by the DCYA and Atlantic Philanthropies. Building on the earlier Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) in three sites (Ballymun, Tallaght and Darndale), the ABC Programme aims to improve long-term outcomes for children and families living in areas of disadvantage (Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2013).

42 Copies of NEYAI reports are available at these websites: www.pobal.ie; www.kieranmckeown.ie; www.trutzhaase.eu;

43The term ‘learning organisation’ was coined by Peter Senge and popularized through his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). The term denotes a group of people working collectively to enhance their capacities to create results that are important to them. In this book, Senge proposed the following five disciplines which characterise a learning organisation: (i) Personal Mastery: An individual holds great importance in a learning organisation. Personal development holds as much importance as commitment and work for the organisation. Employees need to grow and work on their own goals. (ii) Mental Models: This is the organisation’s culture and the diverse theories and mind-sets that serve as a framework for its functioning. Learning organisations look for how these affect organisational development. (iii) Shared Vision: A learning organisation’s employees share a common vision. Personal goals must be in synchrony with the goals and vision of the organisation. (iv) Team Learning: This emphasises the importance of dialogue and group discussion. For a team to learn, they must be able to reach agreement. (v) Systems Thinking: Organizations are a system of interrelationships. To become more successful, an organisation needs to analyse these relationships and find the problems in them. This allows the organisation to eliminate obstacles to learning.

which underpins it, is not new but the extent to which it occurs in practice – where collaborative learning is adopted as a specific objective – is more difficult to determine. In the field of education, for example, there is compelling evidence that collaboration between teachers to solve routine teaching difficulties and classroom challenges, has a measurable effect on pupil outcomes, over and above individual characteristics of teacher or pupil⁴⁴.

In practice, the meaning of the term ‘learning community’ has been strongly influenced by the education sector – particularly primary and secondary levels of education – where the preferred term is professional learning community (PLC). In that context, PLCs have a clear meaning and methodology: ‘A professional learning community is a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.’⁴⁵ This terminology has become standard across the OECD⁴⁶ as well as in Ireland⁴⁷, Northern Ireland⁴⁸, England⁴⁹, Scotland⁵⁰ and Wales⁵¹. At the same time, concerns have been raised about loosely using the term PLC to describe any ‘community of professionals’ or ‘virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education’⁵². The concern here is that while ‘terms travel easily concepts do not’ with the result that, when not applied correctly, a PLC may not generate the improvements in teaching and learner outcomes that are possible with this method.

44 A study of more than 1,000 pupils in a representative sample of 130 primary schools in New York measured the influence of human capital (teacher qualifications, experience and classroom skills) and social capital (such as asking other teachers for advice and trusting the advice) on improvements in maths scores in fourth and fifth class. The results found that: ‘students showed higher gains in math achievement when their teachers reported frequent conversations with their peers that centred on math, and when there was a feeling of trust or closeness among teachers. In other words, teacher social capital was a significant predictor of student achievement gains above and beyond teacher experience or ability in the classroom. And the effects of teacher social capital on student performance were powerful. If a teacher’s social capital was just one standard deviation higher than the average, her students’ math scores increased by 5.7 percent. What happens when you combine human and social capital? We found that the students of high-ability teachers outperformed those of low-ability teachers, as proponents of human capital approaches to school improvement would predict. More significant were the interactions between human and social capital. Students whose teachers were more able (high human capital) and also had stronger ties with their peers (strong social capital) showed the highest gains in math achievement. Conversely, students of teachers with lower teaching ability (low human capital) and weaker ties with their peers (weak social capital) showed the lowest achievement gains. We also found that even low-ability teachers can perform as well as teachers of average ability if they have strong social capital. Strong social capital can go a long way toward offsetting any disadvantages students face when their teachers have low human capital.’ (Leana, 2011; Pil and Leana, 2009).

45 DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many. 2006; see also DuFour, DuFour and Burnette, 2006.

46 Vieluf, Kaplan, Klieme, Bayer, 2012:118.

47 See, for example, The Teaching Council (www.teachingcouncil.ie), Irish National Teachers Organisation (www.into.ie). See also McDermott, Parsons, and O’Sullivan, 2011; Malone and Smith, 2010.

48 See, for example, the Regional Training Unit at www.rwtuni.org.

49 See, for example, Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, and Wallace, 2005.

50 See, for example, www.educationscotland.gov.uk Donaldson, 2011.

51 See, for example, Welsh Assembly Government, 2008; Harris, 2011.

52 DuFour, DuFour and Burnette, 2006. The authors add: ‘Throughout North America schools, districts, professional organisations and occasional gatherings of educators proudly proclaim they are professional learning communities (PLCs), but few have come to implement the underlying concepts of the term. It is difficult to bring these concepts to life in a school or district when there is a common, shared understanding of their meaning. It is impossible when the terms mean very different things to different people in the same organisation. Therefore, school leaders who hope to build the capacity of their organisations to function as PLCs must first engage their staff in building shared knowledge of PLC concepts, and then hold people accountable for acting in accordance with those concepts’ (Ibid)

In Ireland, learning communities are still relatively rare in primary or secondary schools. This was revealed in a survey of primary teachers which was undertaken as part of a 34-country study in 2011, referred to as PIRLS and TIMMS⁵³. It showed that 'Ireland is unusual, in international terms, for the very low level of collaboration and sharing of professional expertise among teachers of Fourth class pupils. For example, about one-quarter of Irish pupils are taught by teachers who never or almost never discussed teaching with their colleagues, or worked with their teaching colleagues in preparing instructional materials.'⁵⁴ A review of professional practice in Ireland's post-primary schools also suggests that learning communities may be relatively rare since 'the professional practice of Irish post-primary teachers is characterised by didactic teaching, coaching for examinations and individualism and by apathy towards Education Studies, associated research and reflective practice.'⁵⁵ In other words, despite the evidence that learning communities are an effective way of improving quality and outcomes in education⁵⁶, it would appear that the practice in Ireland falls short of the ideal.

The decision to create a Learning Community as part of NEYAI is significant and offers an opportunity to learn how this works in the early years sector. It is true that learning communities are, to some extent, part of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (Síolta QAP)⁵⁷ but these are different to idea of a learning community in NEYAI, which is essentially a group of projects and professionals with a commitment to sharing and learning.

4.4 Purpose of NEYAI Learning Community

The overall outcome of the Learning Community, as envisaged by the Steering Group for NEYAI, was to create 'shared learning in and between sites and with government stakeholders in influencing mainstream practice and policy'. This was adopted by the Learning Community and, during its first two meetings, it was extended to form the following statement of purpose: 'To learn from and with each other through engagement by: reporting and reflecting on project progress; sharing information and different perspectives; sharing & solving problems; informal dialogue & peer support; access to expert input & research; disseminating collective learning; influencing national policy.'

53 In 2011, Ireland along with 34 other countries took part in an assessment of fourth class pupils (9-11 years) in reading, mathematics and science based on PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and TIMSS (Trends in International Maths and Science Study). In Ireland, the stratified random sample comprised 151 schools, 221 classes, and 4,825 pupils who were assessed in March / April 2011. As part of this study, the teacher of every pupil completed a questionnaire and the results relevant to the concept of a learning community showed that 'Ireland is unusual, in international terms, for the very low level of collaboration and sharing of professional expertise among teachers of Fourth class pupils. For example, about one-quarter of Irish pupils are taught by teachers who never or almost never discussed teaching with their colleagues, or worked with their teaching colleagues in preparing instructional materials.' (Clerkin, 2013:100-101).

54 The report adds: 'Unlike some other European countries (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2013), participation in CPD is optional for Irish teachers rather than being a contractual requirement or a necessity for promotion.' (Clerkin, 2013:101).

55 Gleeson, 2012:1.

56 PLCs have been cited as a key ingredient in whole system reform in education (Fullan, 2010). In a study of 20 education systems around the world which achieved significant, sustained and widespread gains in student outcomes as measured by international tests (eg PISA), learning communities were found to be characteristic of education systems which were on an improvement journey from 'great to excellent' (Mourshed, Chinezi and Barber, 2010:42-44).

57 The Síolta quality assurance process begins with a baseline assessment using the Síolta Self-Assessment Tool and involves the staff team going through the following steps: '(a) reflect on your current level of practice, (b) describe quality and quality-practice within your setting and (c) provide evidence of the quality described under each individual component. However, your setting (in conjunction with your Síolta Coordinator) will also describe how you can develop quality and quality-practice under that Component in order to progress from where you currently stand to a higher level. This development work will include setting goals, naming actions, as well as listing resources required, to reach the specified goals.' (Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education:13).

4.5 Implementation of NEYAI Learning Community

The Learning Community was implemented through 9 meetings between 2011 and 2014. The first 5 meetings were facilitated by Jane Clarke, an outside facilitator. The second 4 meetings were facilitated by Bernie McDonald, Manager of NEYAI. These meetings tended to follow a relatively standardised format comprising the following elements:

- (1) brief updates from each project usually in the form of 'two positives and one challenge'.
- (2) presentation by each project, about 20 minutes per presentation, with 2-3 presentations per meeting; this ceased after the first five meetings since all projects had presented by then.
- (3) small group discussion with feedback to plenary session for wider consideration. These discussions tended to focus on three generic themes: training, mentoring & continuous professional development; language, literacy & numeracy; coordination of services for children & families including the role of consortiums.
- (4) presentations by invited speakers; these comprised speakers from Department of Education & Skills, Child & Family Support Agency, Prevention & Early Intervention Network.
- (5) inputs from the evaluation team, comprising presentations on the overall evaluation framework, updates on data collection, interim and final results; plus additional presentations on inter-agency working and implications of the new Child & Family Agency.
- (6) discussion on the dissemination of NEYAI learning which assumed more importance from the sixth meeting onwards, particularly the legacy emerging from local and national evaluations.

4.6 Methodology

The methodology is based on a logic model which defines and measures the Learning Community in terms of inputs, processes and outcomes. The concept of 'input', in this context, refers to attendance at meetings of the Learning Community as well as participants' assessment of the adequacy of those meetings in terms of number, duration, attendance, physical environment, facilitation and back-up support. The concept of 'process' refers to the factors normally associated with effective groups and comprise: group cohesion (such as whether interactions are safe, supportive and enjoyable); group identity (such as the bond holding the group together and its desire to succeed as a group); balance between group process and task; and group learning skills (such as attentive listening, using open-and-exploratory statements, capacity for extended purposive conversations). The concept of 'outcome', in the context of this study, refers to changes or impacts which would not have happened without the Learning Community and includes: influence on the thinking and actions of participants to improve outcomes for children, parents, staff, or early years sector; and whether participants experienced any individual-level, project-level, NEYAI-level or sector-level outcomes.

The main sources of data used to assess these inputs, processes and outcomes were: a Monitoring Instrument completed on-line after each meeting of Learning Community; and an Evaluation Questionnaire completed at the mid-point (after 5 meetings) in December 2012 and at the end-point (after 9 meetings) in April 2014. This data was supplemented by the minutes of each meeting and by attendance of the evaluation team at each meeting of the Learning Community. The response rate to the Monitoring Instrument was 50% (n=100 responses), and was higher among those who attended more frequently. The response rate to the Evaluation Questionnaire was 30% (n=21 responses) but was 73% among those who attended 6-9 meetings. Given that response rates are directly related to the frequency of attendance, this report tends to reflect the views of those who are more familiar with the Learning Community and, in that sense, can be taken as a reliable account of how it was experienced in practice.

4.7 Findings on Inputs

The average number of persons attending each meeting of the Learning Community was 23 comprising 20 from the projects and 3 from Pobal. Closer analysis revealed that most of the meetings were attended by the same 12 people, mainly but not exclusively the coordinator of each project. These provided continuity and consistency of attendance since the majority of those attended any

meeting of the Learning Community (totalling 61 from the projects) attended no more than three meetings. The overall assessment of inputs to meetings was positive and particularly positive regarding facilitation and back-up support. The written comments in the Evaluation Questionnaire are replete with complements to the staff team in Pobal for their role in this. It is noteworthy that the assessment of meetings improved between the mid-point in December 2012 and the end-point in April 2014 which is consistent with other findings showing an improvement in the Learning Community's group cohesion and group learning skills.

4.8 Findings on Process

Group cohesion was assessed as being above average in terms of general feeling within the group, feeling safe, feeling supported, enjoying meetings. On every aspect of group cohesion, there was an improvement between the mid-point and the end-point, while many of the written comments noted how meetings became more positive and constructive with each additional meeting. By contrast, group identity was not as strong in terms of the bonds holding the Learning Community together, seeing its work as necessary and urgent, or having a desire to succeed. Written comments by respondents suggest a number of reasons for this including: projects were busy and preoccupied with their own work; project participation was obligatory rather than voluntary; changing membership reduced the sense of continuity. The balance between process and task within the group was felt to be 'about right' and improved since the mid-point assessment. Group learning skills - defined as attentive listening, using open-and-exploratory statements, capacity for sustained shared thinking - were rated as average or above depending on the particular skill. Attentive listening received the highest rating and written comments frequently linked listening to being 'respectful', 'interested', and 'courteous'. Sustained shared thinking was more in evidence within small groups which had a clearly defined focus; the experience of planning the national NEYAI event for May 2014 was cited as a good example of this. The use of open and exploratory statements was also found to be more frequent in small groups. As with other aspects of process, group learning skills tended to improve between the mid-point and the end-point assessments.

4.9 Findings on Outcomes

The Learning Community had a positive influence on the thinking and actions of participants. The two most influential meetings occurred at the beginning and end of the Learning Community. At the beginning, the second meeting in October 2011 influenced thinking and actions about the early years sector, possibly related to a presentation on the evaluation of Síolta QAP. At the end, the meeting in April 2014, though not a formal meeting of the Learning Community but one for which the Monitoring Instrument was completed, influenced thinking and actions about children, and involved a presentation on final results from the national evaluation. Participants were also influenced by other events unrelated to the Learning Community (such as conferences, seminars or training workshops) and these tended to have more influence than the Learning Community.

One of the strongest impacts of the Learning Community was on individual-level outcomes which refer to learning something that is personally important such as gaining a new insight, or unlearning or letting go of assumptions not supported by experience or other evidence. Regarding initiative-level and sector-level outcomes, the written comments acknowledge that this has not happened to any great extent but there are strong expectations that this will change when learning from NEYAI is published, particularly the national and local evaluations. Although the assessment of outcomes improved slightly between the mid-point and end-point, the wide diversity in assessments reflects both the diversity of projects and the uneven impact of the Learning Community in meeting the needs and expectations of participants.

Overall, participants felt that the Learning Community was worth the time and effort. Many participants referred to the importance of the idea or concept of a learning community because it provides an opportunity to be 'part of something bigger' and creates an opportunity to think and act within a wider framework.

4.10 Implications

In this concluding section, we draw some broad lessons from the findings. Our purpose in doing so is highlight lessons that may be useful in setting up learning communities for similar initiatives such as the ABC Programme. The main lessons are about: creating conditions for success; understanding the implications of membership; recognising group support as well as group learning; setting realistic expectations of outcomes; respecting roles and boundaries.

4.10.1 Creating conditions for success

The NEYAI Learning Community existed primarily through 9 one-day meetings, apart from the first meeting which was two-day. A necessary condition for the success of the Learning Community is that meetings were well-prepared, well-attended, and well-run. The findings clearly indicate that this was the case and some of the highest ratings in the evaluation were for the back-up support and facilitation of meetings. This work was largely the responsibility of Pobal (in addition to an independent facilitator during the first five meetings) and the written comments of participants are replete with complements for the Pobal team responsible for managing and administering NEYAI: Bernie McDonald, Nuala Kelly and Emily Cunningham. The work involved in preparing and facilitating meetings was considerable – particularly since it tried to be responsive to the needs and interests of participants - and contributed significantly to the success of the Learning Community.

4.10.2 Understanding the implications of membership

The core membership of the Learning Community consisted largely of one person from each NEYAI project, usually but not always the coordinator. This was normally supplemented by another person from the project, either from the staff team or the project's consortium. The practical consequence of this arrangement is that, of the 61 people from the projects who attended any meeting of the Learning Community, only a fifth (12, 20%) attended most of the meetings (6-9) while the vast majority attended just a few (1-3). This arrangement, which was part of the terms of reference for the Learning Community and agreed at its first meeting in September 2011, was acknowledged to have both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that it provided some consistency in attendance and also gave an opportunity to include a wider range of people in the Learning Community. The disadvantages are that it contributed to some inconsistency in attendance and made it more difficult to sustain a learning process in any depth. It is clear that consistency of attendance is one condition for successful learning outcomes and it is possible that a more stable membership of the Learning Community would have resulted, other things being equal, in bringing more breadth and depth to the learning. At the same time, the more flexible approach adopted by the Learning Community generated wider participation and sources of support but possibly at the expense of learning. This trade-off needs to be recognised and is implicit in the comment of this participant: *'The learning group were a very welcoming and supportive group. In general however every meeting felt almost like a stand-alone workshop with little or no connectivity apart from the project updates/ national evaluation. I am not sure 'learning community' was the right name for this group. NEYAI support group may have been more appropriate as I do not feel it met the aims that it set out in the original proposal which was to be a forum for sharing the learning from each of the projects with each other and other groups including those who had not been successful in the application for NEYAI funding.'*

4.10.3 Recognising group support as well as group learning

The focus on 'learning' in the term 'learning community' contains a clear signal that the purpose envisaged is about generating, acquiring and disseminating knowledge, skills and competencies. The vision of the NEYAI Steering Group is that the Learning Community would create 'shared learning in and between sites and with government stakeholders in influencing mainstream practice and policy', and this purpose was adopted by the projects. In practice, the Learning Community also operated as a

source of support as much as learning, particularly for participants who attended frequently. A number of the written comments by participants suggest that support may have been even more important than learning as these examples illustrate: *'It was interesting to hear about the other projects and good to get the broader perspective at National Level. Attending the Learning Community opened my eyes with regard to the evaluation and its purpose. I also learned about the broader context of our project within the NEYAI at the learning community. The meetings were useful for all this, but they weren't a huge learning opportunity, and did not have a huge impact on my work at local level. Despite this, I did enjoy the meetings. A little break from the day to day hard slog and some distance from the project was always welcome also!'. 'The group was always supportive however it was disappointing that the learning community did not get to fully focus on 'learning'.'* These comments suggest that the term 'learning community' may not reflect adequately the support as well as learning functions which it performed and may generate a sense of failure in situations where support is experienced as more important than learning. These two functions are combined in the thinking of one respondent who wrote: *'The Learning Community reflects an almost 'old fashioned' approach to support peer learning interspersed with 'expert' inputs and collective analysis of issues and trends. It offers a very good sounding board and allows projects to develop a programme view and the possibility of two-way communication'.*

4.10.4 Setting realistic expectations of outcomes

The Learning Community created positive outcomes in terms of influencing the thinking and actions of participants. At the same time, it tended to have less influence than other events unrelated to the Learning Community such as conferences, seminars or training workshops. Its impact on the initiative and the early years sector – for example, through joint actions, statements or publications – has been rather modest. Nevertheless there remains an expectation among many participants that this will change following publication of the national and local evaluations. Given that outcomes inevitably come at the end of a process, it is also inevitable that the impacts of the Learning Community, prior to publication of national and local evaluations, may also come after the Learning Community has ceased to exist. In that sense, it may not have been realistic to expect the Learning Community to have a significant impact on outcomes – particularly on policy and practice in the early years sector – in advance of completing the national and local evaluations. Despite these inevitable constraints – inevitable by virtue of how initiatives like this are designed and funded - participants felt that the Learning Community was worth the time and effort and many referred to the importance of the idea or concept of a learning community because it provides an opportunity to be 'part of something bigger' and creates an opportunity to think and act within a wider framework.

4.10.5 Respecting roles and boundaries

A significant influence on processes within the Learning Community, particularly during its early meetings, arose from lack of clarity about the boundary between the Learning Community and the national evaluation. Within the structures for NEYAI, oversight of the national evaluation was the remit of the Evaluation & Learning Expert Advisory Group (ELEAG). As a sub-committee of the Steering Group, ELEAG had responsibility for the selection of tenders, adoption of the research protocol, and overseeing every aspect of the research design including sampling strategy, comparison group, measurement instruments, data analysis, write-up of baseline and final reports. This structure meant that every aspect of the national evaluation was approved by ELEAG and adopted by the Steering Group on its recommendation. Within these structures, the Learning Community had no formal remit for the national evaluation, apart from implementing the research protocol. Nevertheless, there were numerous protracted discussions within the Learning Community on various aspects of the national evaluation which were a source of some negativity, at least for a minority of participants. In the main, the source of negativity arose from an expectation that the national evaluation would provide a detailed evaluation of each of the 11 projects which was impossible because the interventions and target groups in each project were so diverse. These discussions were not fruitful for the Learning Community - or indeed the national evaluation – and could have been avoided by drawing a clearer boundary between the role and remit of the Learning Community *vis á vis* the national evaluation. Reflecting on this experience, one participant observed: 'it is potentially

disastrous to separate out programme design and evaluation frameworks, or to retrofit an evaluation framework to a complex programme design - this reality had the potential to destabilise the LC but thankfully it didn't'.

4.10.6 Concluding Comment

The findings of this report – both Main Report and Technical Report - provide a record of the substantial amount of work that was invested in the Learning Community as part of NEYAI. It shows that the basic inputs to allow the Learning Community to function effectively were in place – notably well-prepared, well-attended, and well-run meetings – due in large measure to the work of Pobal. The group processes at work within the Learning Community were generally positive and conducive to learning as well as supporting participants. Outcomes of the Learning Community were positive but modest. However, since the main learning outcomes of NEYAI may only become evident after publication of the national and local evaluations, and after the Learning Community has ceased to exist, it seems likely that this report may understate the true impact of the Learning Community.

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