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FINAL REPORT

AN EVALUATION OF EARLY LEVEL CLASS PROVISION IN FIVE SETTINGS ACROSS ARGYLL AND BUTE

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INTRODUCTION

This evaluation project was commissioned by Argyll and Bute to inform future Early Level Class delivery as part of the local authority's 1140 hours Early Level Class provision Delivery Plan. Issues in relation to funding and staffing in recent years have affected Early Level Class provision and there is a risk that the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare provision may have an additional impact on Early Level Class provision. The findings from this project will help decide whether to make a more significant commitment to Early Level Class provision through their Early Learning Childcare Delivery Plan. This will provide a formal commitment as well as funding to support Early Level Class provision.

The project ran from March 2018 to June 2018 and involved a total of 17 practitioners and head teachers from across six primary schools in Argyll and Bute. Designed and conducted by the University of Strathclyde, the project evaluated the existing Early Level Class provision in these settings. The project sought insight from practitioners and head teachers on the value and challenges of the Early Level model. Informed by project findings and staff perspectives, we describe the benefits of Early Level class provision for staff, children and parents and make recommendations for the future success of Early Level Class provision for Argyll and Bute.

PROJECT OUTLINE

This project evaluated the existing Early Level Class provision in five settings across Argyll and Bute. The project was managed and conducted by Ms D. Grogan (Senior Knowledge Exchange Fellow) and Dr P. Duncan (Postdoctoral Research Associate) from the School of Education, University of Strathclyde.

The evaluation process and instruments were informed by current research and policy on learning and education in the early years including the influential work of Fisher¹, Moylett² and Stephen's³ work, and Education Scotland's 'How good is our early learning and childcare' (HGIOELC) framework⁴. HGIOELC compliments the fourth edition of 'How good is our school?'⁵ (HGIOS) and takes full account of policy initiatives including National Practice Guidance on Early Learning and Childcare: Building the Ambition⁶, Pre-birth to Three⁷, Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)⁸, and Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)⁹.

¹ Fisher, J. 2013. Starting from the child, 4th edition, McGraw Hill Education, Open University Press.

² Moylett, H. 2013. Active Learning (Learning and Teaching in the Early Years), Practical Pre-School Books.

³ Stephen, C. 2010. Pedagogy: the silent partner in early years learning, Early Years, 30(1) 15-28.

⁴ Education Scotland 2016 How good is our early learning and childcare? Available at https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/Frameworks_SelfEvaluation/FRWK1_NIHeditSelf-evaluationHGIELC/HGIOELC020316Revised.pdf

⁵ Education Scotland 2015. 'How good is our school?' (HGIOS). Available at <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/self-evaluation/HGIOS4>

⁶ Scottish Government 2014. National Practice Guidance on Early Learning and Childcare: Building the Ambition. Available at <http://hub.careinspectorate.com/media/201173/national-practice-guidance-on-early-learning-2014.pdf>

⁷ Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families, Learning and Teaching Scotland. Available at <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/Pre-Birth%20to%20Three>

⁸ Scottish Government 2012. Getting it Right for Children and Families. A guide to getting it right for every child. Available at <http://www.gov.scot/resource/0039/00394308.pdf>

⁹ Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) <http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/226155/0061245.pdf>

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The evaluation involved five forms of data collection:

1. Semi-structured observations
2. Informal discussions with children during observations
3. Semi-structured interviews with practitioners
4. Practitioner questionnaires
5. Interviews with head teachers (HT)

The project involved visits to six primary schools involving observations in five of the settings and teacher interview in Inveraray only. These settings provide, or plan to provide, joint early level sessions with Pre-5 and P1 (some up to P3) children.

- Rhunahaorine
- Port Ellen
- Port Charlotte
- Bowmore Sgoil Araich
- Inveraray
- Colgrain

The visits were approximately two hours in duration and involved classroom observations and discussions with the practitioners about their practice and views on the current Early Level Class provision. Practitioners were given a questionnaire to complete prior to our visits. These provided in-depth accounts of their thinking around key aspects of Early Years pedagogy and quality provision, and the ways in which Early Level Class provision impacts children and families. These were used to prompt further reflection on teaching and learning within Early Level Class provision. School visits concluded with head teacher interviews.

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Observations

D. Grogan and P. Duncan carried out classroom observations using a semi-structured observation schedule designed around HGIOELC quality indicators. The schedule acted as a framework for evaluating the learning environment and pedagogical approaches in the setting.

Practitioner interviews and questionnaires

The semi-structured discussions with practitioners explored their current thinking, pedagogy, and their imagined future for Early Level Class provision in Argyll and Bute. Interviews and questionnaires explored the following themes:

- The impact of Early Level Class provision on children and families
- The strengths of current provision
- Challenges and constraints of the Early Level Class model
- The characteristics of an effective learning environment
- The characteristics of quality learning opportunities
- Planning, observations and involving children
- The role of play and creativity
- Children leading learning

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HT interview themes

The semi-structured interviews with HTs explored their experiences of Early Level Class provision past and present, the challenges of running Early Level Class provision settings, the impact of quality provision on children and families, and their imagined future for Early Level Class provision in Argyll and Bute.

The data was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings were synthesised to form our evaluation of the current Early Level Class provision in Argyll and Bute.

Recommendations are made as to how Early Level Class provision in Argyll and Bute could be developed.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Case studies

Port Ellen Primary School, Islay

The Pre-5 unit is situated on the ground floor adjacent to the more traditional primary 1-3 classroom. Its location facilitates Early Level working. The Pre-5 unit is a very large, bright and open space. Peppered with natural resources, neutral décor, canopies and wooden furnishing - the space is a calm and welcoming environment. There are sizable open spaces for children to play, learn and collaborate. There are distinct areas such as the home corner, water and sand areas with tubes and equipment, a reading area with soft furnishings, creative area with a large easel and attractive creative resources. The construction area is

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rich with interesting resources such as natural wooden blocks, bamboo guttering, hard hats, and inspirational blue prints. Topic tables are set out to prompt exploration with books, resources, images, and prompt questions. Displays are attractive and showcase children's interests and activities such as a 'We are independent display' (e.g. recycling, washing up, pouring drinks). The Unit looks out onto green space within the school's large playground where children have access to diverse spaces such as garden areas, 'mud café', a boat and crab baskets. There is also an activity trail, all weather pitch, pond and round house. The current Early Level Class provision is one hour per week of joint sessions.

Rhunahaorine Primary School

The primary school is set within a very rural location. The Pre-5 unit is located within the school building. The more traditional primary 1-4 classrooms are located at the opposite side of the building, across the main entrance foyer. The Pre-5 unit is very light and airy, with a natural smell of wood from the furniture and extensive natural materials. The atmosphere is warm and welcoming, with open spaces for children to play and collaborate. Wicker baskets are filled with rich and varied resources (material, blocks, art supplies), all easily visible and accessible to children. There is evidence of the forest and beach in the classroom with shells and driftwood featured in classroom displays and activities. Neutral colours are used throughout. The children's work and images of them doing activities (such as 'our outdoor learning', art, crocodile camp) is prominent – including children's comments and photography. The school has a large outdoor area with mature trees, wooded areas, mud kitchen and outdoor classroom (wooden chalet). A larger forest and the beach are nearby and used regularly for Forest School and Beach School where children have unique opportunities to learn in and with natural elements such as sand, seaweed, crabs, and the sea. Children learn bush crafts skills such as building fires and shelters. The current weekly Early Level Class

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provision is one full day of joint working between the nursery children and primary 1 and 3 at Forest (winter season) or Beach (summer season) Schools. The nursery also participates in a 40 minute PATHS session each week led by our Primary 1 – 3 teacher.

Bowmore Primary School

This rural primary school has an Early Level Class situated in a self-contained modular unit attached to the school. Its Gaelic immersion model means that all books, labels, text, and practitioners' communication is in Gaelic. The unit is small but bright with natural resources. A wide range of resources are available such as playdough, tadpoles, sand pits and stones, rock pool water area, and Tee-Pee, to prompt learning and exploration. Children's voice is present in the classroom. Their comments and art work are displayed throughout (such as hand art crabs on the wall and art on large wooden easels) and photos of children doing activities are visible. The current Early Level Class provision is for children from 3 years old to Primary 3 which is the Total Immersion phase in Gaelic Medium Education. Each day, part of the session involves one practitioner extracting the older children for teaching. Joint session time varies daily.

Port Charlotte, Islay.

Port Charlotte Primary School has classrooms for P1-P4 children and has a separate Pre-5 Unit operating from a designated space within the school grounds. The Pre-5 unit is an intimate space with natural décor. Resources and activities include an art gallery, role-play area, tent, water play, music area, and investigation station. Postcards from Noah and children's art work are displayed on the walls with children's comments reviewing other children's work. Children have access to a stimulating outdoor play area which is for sole use of the Pre-5 unit

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and is separate from the main playground. This outdoor area includes a mud kitchen with utensils such as metal spoons and pans, a 'creative shed' with tools and wooden toys which children make, a totem pole for story-telling, plant area, picnic table, tree stumps to jump to and from, bark covered area, shells, sand pit and astro-turf. The current Early Level Provision includes timetabled sessions throughout the year for joint working; visits from older children who read to the younger children; joint physical education sessions, and collaborative PATHS sessions with Pre-5 and P1 and P2 children.

Colgrain Primary School

The Pre-5 unit is located within the school building across a corridor from traditional primary 1 classrooms. The Pre-5 unit operates morning and afternoon sessions. The room is full of resources, natural wooden equipment, and wooden furniture. Areas include musical instruments, art and creative materials, messy play area, magnifying glasses, reading area, science area, TV and DVDs. There is a children's 'learning wall' and planning chart at the entrance and photos of the children doing different activities. The playground has a metal steam train, vegetable patch, wooden pavilion with birdwatching posters, picnic tables, sand pit, and a substantial wooden decking area designed as pirate ship with steering wheel. The current Early Level Class provision consists of 'Freeflow' one morning per week where primary 1 classes and nursery children come together for joint sessions. These Free Flow sessions often include Gaelic, French and the outdoor learning.

What are the benefits of an Early Level Class?

The key advantage of the Early Level Class model for the more rural schools in Argyll and Bute is that it creates functioning learning groups. For many of these schools, a Pre-5 unit or P1 classroom may have as few as two children. An Early Level Class therefore creates a group of learners which provides these children with a valuable context for learning, social and emotional development, collaboration and friendship. Practitioners reported that they saw increases in children's confidence levels and improved language. These smaller rural schools also described their commitment to embracing the outdoors as this was central to rural and island life and culture. These settings had the advantage of easy access to large and varied outdoor spaces and long periods of outdoor learning which included Beach and Forest schools, gardens, mud kitchens, and outdoor 'classrooms' (wooden chalets).

One reason for implementing an Early Level Class was due to the low numbers of children in the Early Years of Total Immersion. At one point there was more staff than pupils. PQ¹⁰:HT2+team

Benefits include social, emotional, behavioural improvements. Children talk and share ideas with other children. We have very small numbers therefore encourage quality conversations – variety of children – social and communication development. HT1

Having them all working together. Learning opportunities without a ceiling or what's developmentally appropriate for that child. We wouldn't be teaching reading to 3yr olds but when the P1s come in, they're reading too. They have exposure to more things. HT4

¹⁰ PQ = Practitioner questionnaire

Children can benefit from an Early Level Class from the perspective that it is an extended learning community with greater opportunities for learning and development within a naturalistic social culture with multiple age groups working together. In these smaller communities this may be siblings and relatives. Learning through modelling skills, resource use and behaviour across age groups is strong.

It has a positive effect on both children and families, for instance children with older siblings within the ELC benefit from shared learning and experiences and often these learning experiences are developed at home. Families with an only child who are mostly interacting with adults benefit from interacting with a larger peer group. PQ:EYP9

Practitioners and head teachers from all schools described how the Early Level Class model fostered smoother transitions. This was due to children building relationships across different age groups and becoming familiar with teachers and classrooms.

Instead of moving into a new classroom with a new teacher, children are familiar and comfortable with their environment, adults working with them and pedagogical approach. PQ:T3¹¹

Early level class provision is very good for transitions. Getting used to the teachers and the environment. EYP¹²10

There are lots of opportunities to learn from peers. Children become familiar with the 'bigger' school setting and they get to know other adults and teachers within ELC.

¹¹ T = Teacher + participant number

¹² EYP = Early Years Practitioner + participant number

Primary 1 teachers have a greater knowledge of the children coming from nursery and their styles of learning. Children are also very settled and transition from Nursery to Primary 1 is smooth. They cope with change. Free Flow parent information sessions have been well attended and feedback in the form of questionnaires has been most positive. PQ:HT3

We want to help children with transitions. This achieves it. They know the teachers, know the rooms, where the toilets are etc. EYP4

Transitions are better – coming into P1, the children are more confident with the nursery next door, knowing familiar ladies. Especially the younger children, who still require nurture and that environment. T2

They have experiences which wouldn't happen if we didn't have the shared ELC time outdoors – such as in the garden, they were looking at snails....As it's on a Wednesday, it breaks up the week. T1

Other benefits included unique opportunities for older children to develop leadership skills and model learning and behaviour for the young children. The evaluation suggested that the Early Level Class model primarily benefited younger children as it was described as an opportunity for children to work and engage in dialogue with 'expert' older children, learn new skills through modelling, support transitions, absorb new knowledge, consolidate learning, and have their learning scaffolded by older children. Younger children are immersed in opportunities to extend their learning and development.

High quality ELC provision allows for clear progression throughout all stages of early learning and development. Children learn in an engaging and stimulating environment, with experienced practitioners at a pace that is right for them. For younger 2- and 3-year olds, the ELC environment provides opportunities to play and learn alongside 'expert'

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pre-schoolers and P1s. Pre-schoolers and P1s can take on a leadership role within the class, modelling and explaining learning to others. PQ:T3

Granny was impressed that her grandchild could carry their own lunch and backpack, and can get dressed themselves – into outdoor wear, or put shoes on. They couldn't even put on a jacket when they first arrived. Things were done for them. Here they learn to be independent. They see the older children doing it themselves. They become more independent. EYP9

Children have the opportunity to talk about their learning with P1s – what they could do to take it forward. EYP4

What are the challenges of running an Early Level Class?

Staff and head teachers described a range of challenges and issues to be addressed in the running of an effective Early Level Class.

Staff team: Consistency of thinking and practice

Staffing is central to ensuring the consistency of an Early Level Class model. Firstly, the model requires all staff to understand and have awareness of its principles and practices. Due to the high staff turnover, and at times lack of staff, reported by schools participating in the evaluation - maintaining consistency of practice and level of understanding and commitment to the Early Level Class model was challenging.

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Changes to P1 staff over the years have caused interruption to the provision. New members of staff take time to learn the workings of the ELC experience... All staff should have sound knowledge of the aim of ELC and how to implement it. PQ:HT3

Staffing is in an issue – I can't put four Primary 1 children in the nursery base because we don't have the staffing for 10 children in the nursery. We'd need a teacher in there. HT1

You need the quality of staff. It's very difficult to secure a staff member with qualifications. We need to support the staff to get qualifications. Encourage them. HT2

Secondly, some settings reported a lack of consistency in thinking and practice between Early Years Practitioners and Primary 1 and 2 teachers and that nursery practitioners were driving the model. Some teachers expressed that they would not want more than the current Early Level Class provision (e.g. half day per week) on account of issues regarding Primary 1 children's workload and progress. Time was also noted as a barrier to more collaborative working between Early Years staff and teachers. As it was not made a priority, the necessary planning and documenting for Early Level Classes was not being implemented.

We're [Nursery staff] driving it. ELC needs to keep evolving. It's static at the moment. It's difficult with staffing. The P1 teachers change then we start from the very beginning again. They need to learn about the model again. Not all teachers agree with it or understand it. For instance, the P1 children's writing – it's being moved on by nursery staff. EYP6

First term - it was a whole day of Freeflow (ELC). But the following term, we reduced it. We only had it for part of the day. They [P1] were missing a lot of time from class. It's already difficult to cover everything in the limited time such as the nativity play, reading groups, support assistants, Gaelic. We're so busy. T2

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The P1/3 teacher said children could come through daily for 30 min in the afternoon - but she moved schools so this isn't happening anymore. We only have ELC once a week. There's an issue of consistency and now there's a big gap because that teacher is no longer here. You need the teachers to want it too. EYP9

The P1 teacher is very traditional so ELC didn't work – it was two separate classrooms rather than working together. PQ:T3

Teachers can be over controlling. HT2

At the beginning of term we had agreed to have an ELC time at the end of the day for 30 minutes. This has proved too difficult to manage due to lessons over-running and nursery children getting picked up early. PQ:HT4

Progress, Challenge and Pace

The benefits of the Early Level Class model for younger children were clearly evidenced by staff and HTs from all the participating schools. However, the benefits for older children were not as evident. The issue of pace and challenge was highlighted by the majority of staff and management. Appropriate time and prioritising meetings for collaborative planning, documentation and discussion of next step for all children was noted as lacking which is necessary for ensuring challenge and progression. Teachers also reported that parents expressed concerns over challenge and pace for older children learning within the Early Level Class model.

I used to be a teacher, so if I had the same opportunity like they [P1 teachers] do here, it's a dream! To have all your children occupied and be able to extract groups and not worry about the others. The P1 teacher doesn't extract during free flow (ELC) time... We

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[Early Years practitioners] would like to have more ELC days. If we had more days, even everyday – it wouldn't be such a novelty for the older children. Extracting for teaching would be easier because children would be more willing rather than thinking this is the only time they get to play. EYP6

Concerned parents. Feeling that P3 held back – it's tricky. PQ:T3

Ensuring challenge in the P1 learning during ELC sessions is a challenge for me. Free flow [ELC] is new to me. We try to set teacher-led activities. The children don't always want to do them. We wouldn't want ELC all day. T1

Some things you have to consider are ensuring challenge for primary 1s and ensuring it's maintained and documented. I have to ensure P1 learning is happening. Ensuring it's not a wasted day for the Primary 1s. HT3

Practical issues

For some schools, there were obvious practical challenges to providing Early Level Classes. For example, nursery rooms were not large enough for the very large groups of nursery children and Primary 1 children coming together in Early Level Class sessions. Practitioners described issues with access to relevant resources for different ages and abilities across contexts. In some cases where Early Level Class sessions were held in Primary classrooms – these were not always appropriate for all children across the Early Level and when joint sessions had high numbers. For example, one setting reported that costumes and bikes were too small for older children, while traditional classroom designs where tables filled the room, resulted in a lack of space for children to collaborate and play.

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We had an Early Level Class four or five years ago but it stopped due to numbers. The room only allowed so many children. 26 children in nursery. 26 children in P1. Next year 12 children in P1. PQ:T3

What schools and practitioners believe makes a successful Early Level Class

Head teachers and staff were asked about their imagined future of Early Level provision and what this would look like in their current setting or if they were to design a new environment. For many, it was important that children in the Early Level were not divided physically or academically. Therefore an open plan area was sought, where children across age groups worked and interacted fluidly together with shared access to resources and shared topics for learning.

Child-led experiences with resources that are freely accessible and well-organised. Quality dialogue between adults and children, but also children and children. Children being able to access activities and opportunities to experience challenge. Learning opportunities should encompass all elements of the design principles...Logistics – P1 and Pre-5 are next to each other and allow for 'flow'. PQ:HT3

Beach and forest schools every day. Better designed outdoor to indoor space access. Although it's a nice big room – no direct access to the outdoors. Make it private and not shared with remainder of school – not main playground. Uninterrupted play periods. HT4

Timetables/ logistics - looking for opportunities to have whole class gather rounds, small group activities and quieter times for P1s to carry out longer, more focussed tasks. PQ:T3

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The location of classes – ours are next to each other, so it works – but I don't know how it would work if the classes aren't nearby? EYP8

Staff and HTs believed that a shared understanding of Early Level learning was vital as well as shared responsibility for its implementation. They also felt that all staff must be committed to ensuring children are progressing at an appropriate pace in their learning and development, through effective communicating and planning as a team.

Learning in an Early Level Class is individualised. Careful differentiation (through interactions with practitioners and questioning) allows younger children to be challenged and older P1 children that require support to be supported. PQ:T3

Staff need to be collegial with each other - not hierarchical. It's not about the teacher's role being more important or children learning more with teachers, or that teachers should lead, while nursery staff less so. We must all view each other as equal for this to work. It has to be a partnership. HT4

In order to engage children and families we recognised that it was important to have and share a clear rationale, clear vision, values and aims at the beginning of this session. HT2

It is important that practitioners have a sound understanding of Argyll and Bute's developmental milestones. All practitioners should use the principles underpinning GIRFEC. PQ:HT2+team

Planning – ensuring our planning is in keeping with the expectations of the Argyll and Bute Learning and Development Framework, but also fits with the models used by the P1 pupils. PQ:HT3

Need lots more getting together – more time for meetings. EYP4

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More staff – and quality staff. Practitioners’ commitment to the children and child development and learning. Giving them (staff) opportunities to develop. Ensuring sustainability. HT4

All staff need to be involved in challenge. Speaking with P1 teachers important. We need to make time to meet as a team a priority. On a weekly basis. We need to make time. EYP8

Positive relationships with Early Level Team are vital - you are working closely with others at all times, sharing an environment and pedagogical approach. If you don’t have a shared understanding of early level learning ELC provision will look like two different classes trying to share the same space. Communication is vital - you are always working with other professionals. A shared understanding of early level learning with other colleagues and parents. PQ:T3

It’s about ‘sticking to the principles’. Need the understanding behind it. Need the parents to be behind it. PQ:T3

Things in common. Similar thinking. Open to sharing ideas. EYP1

Staffing - It is essential that all adults understand the importance of ELC and they need to facilitate and interact with activities thus enriching the learning experience.

Communication – time to plan and reflect as a whole staff. PQ:HT3

Important to evaluate the learning. Observation. Seesaw is good as it allows parents to see the progress made by their children. EYP8

RECOMMENDATIONS: THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF EARLY LEVEL CLASS PROVISION

Informed by practitioner and head teacher insights and our observations in each setting, we conclude that there are three core principles of successful Early Level Class provision.

1. A **shared vision and understanding** of the Early Level learning model
2. Strong staff **partnerships** and collaborative culture
3. The model adopts key elements of Early Level **pedagogy** for individualised learning

By ensuring that the three principles are in place, each setting should be able to address the issues identified through the evaluation for effective service delivery.

A shared vision and understanding of the Early Level learning model

Teachers and Early Years practitioners have a shared vision of the Early Level Class model. All staff have the same level of commitment to model and the required knowledge and understanding of the underpinning pedagogical approaches within it (for example, play-based pedagogy, Fisher's model of teacher-led, teacher-initiated and child-led learning).

Strong staff partnerships and collaborative culture

With a shared vision, Early Years practitioners and teachers work in partnership to plan for challenging, stimulating and quality learning experiences across the Early Level. A collaborative culture will ensure that thinking and practice is consistent and an ethos of shared responsibility is fostered. Critical peers are important in the process of evaluation and

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can encourage more reflexive practice. Strengthening partnerships can also help address existing or perceived hierarchies within staff teams. This can be achieved by clarifying roles and responsibilities for teaching, documenting and planning across the Early Level. Working in collaboration will ensure that the shared vision is achieved through joint implementation of the model.

The model adopts key elements of Early Level pedagogy for individualised learning

- The learning environment is conducive to independent learning.
- Resources are suitable for wide range of ages, abilities, interests and individual learners. Staff should provide open and adaptable resources and loose parts e.g. instead of having age based/fixed resources such as pre-set purchased costumes made to fit a age range, provide deconstructed role-play with resources which are more adaptable and malleable such as material, paper, card, fabric pens where children can use imagination and creativity to make their own costumes and characters.
- Pedagogy (shared and defined practice i.e. play-based, child-led, active)
- Differentiation: adult-led, adult-initiated and child-led learning – each has its own purpose and different learning outcomes. Each places different demands on the child and the teacher.
- Planning and documentation involving children, diverse evidence of learning, pace/challenge, extending learning within play experiences.
- Observation is routine and documented – informing planning for personalised learning.

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Based on our evaluation and the areas of development identified by schools and staff, we suggest that there are key areas within the existing Early Level Class provision that would benefit from further development. These key areas are listed below. Many of the staff have a strong foundation of knowledge and skills and provide stimulating environments and learning experiences for their children. For others, more reflexive and collaborative practice, and prioritising Early Level team planning, can improve the effectiveness of current provision fairly quickly and independently. We also suggest additional training and/or further reading¹³ in the following areas to refine thinking and practice for those who identified more extensive development needs.

- Play-based pedagogy (P1/P2 teachers)
 - Learning through play and the role of the adult
 - Play theory
- The learning environment (all staff)
 - Designing for Early Level classes
 - Resources for Early Level classes
- Ensuring challenge and progression through play experiences (all staff)
- Shared planning and documenting – planning together for Early Level learning and teaching, documenting and extending learning in Early Level classes and outdoor contexts.
- Routine self-evaluation and reflexive practice across the Early Level

¹³ Starting points for further reading can be found in earlier citations in this report within the project outline section.

Individual settings also had a number of more specific suggestions for areas of improvement:

- Prioritising, continuity and organisation of staff meetings
- Ensuring planning is in keeping with the expectations of the Learning and Development Framework and P1 model
- Outdoor learning training
- Networking with staff in other settings
- More opportunities to develop an understanding of progression
- Develop use of digital technologies for learning, CLPL, and training on the use of GLOW
- Increase parental involvement

Conclusions

Argyll and Bute have a broad spectrum of schools – varying greatly in size, location and pupil numbers. With consideration to the smaller rural schools in Argyll and Bute, there is a real need for Early Level Classes to be effective and successful. Small numbers in nurseries and classrooms, and the small and intimate communities in which these schools are embedded point toward a community of learning approach to schooling where siblings, friends, and different age groups, can learn and socialise together.

The highly diverse settings within Argyll and Bute mean that strengths, opportunities and development areas can vary greatly. Where one setting excels at outdoor learning and

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parental involvement, another may require targeted support in advancing these same areas. It is therefore important to focus on the individual needs of settings to foster more consistency of provision across the local authority.

As expected, Early Level Class provision afforded younger children many opportunities for learning and progression through interactions with older children. These children were engaged and independent. However, the main concern that the evaluation raises, is the challenge and progress experienced by older children. This needs to be a focus for the future of Early Level Class provision. By refining Early Level environments to be conducive to independent learning that ensures pace and challenge for every individual – irrespective of age – continual progression can be achieved. If all learners follow personalised learning pathways and are supported by strong, collaborative staff teams, then the Early Level Class model should be successful.

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF PARTICIPATING PRIMARY SCHOOLS

	School	Head teacher/ ADHT/PT
1	Rhunahaorine	Ruth Reid HT
2	Inveraray [interview only/no OB]	Kirsten Rennie PT, former PT Tarbert Early Level Class
3	Colgrain	Johanna McClelland HT Linda Candlish Acting DHT
4	Bowmore Sgoil Araich, Islay	Maureen MacDonald HT
5	Port Ellen, Islay	Maureen MacDonald HT
6	Port Charlotte, Islay	Mrs Danielle Vessey HT

APPENDIX 2: PROJECT TIMELINE

DATE	ACTIVITIES
March	Project initiation Planning dates for Early Level Class visits Travel co-ordination
April	Design and prepare evaluation tools
May	Visits x 3 locations
June	Visit x 3 locations Transcriptions
July	Analysis & synthesis of findings
August	Synthesis of findings & recommendations Final report

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