

## Empowering Schools to Meet the Needs of Every Child<sup>1</sup>

The transition from pre-school to nursery is a pivotal moment in a child's life, yet it is often fraught with pressure for families and schools alike. Traditionally, the burden of readiness for school has been placed on the child, focusing on their ability to meet specific developmental markers before entering the classroom. However, a new pilot project in South Wales called, Ready, Steady Schools<sup>2</sup>, is challenging this model, shifting the focus from the child being ready for the school, to the school being ready for the child. Through a collaborative, psychologically informed approach, those involved in the pilot programme demonstrated how schools can adapt their environments and practices to meet the unique needs of every learner.

### **The Ready, Steady, School Framework**

The aim of the pilot project has been to support schools in developing their practice towards an inclusive education system through the processes of reflection, co-production and collaboration with

### **From the child being ready for the school, to the school being ready for the child**

early years colleagues. Following a framework, alongside a piece of work created by Dr Rachel Hiles (Educational Psychologies, Newcastle Educational Psychology Service)<sup>3</sup>, schools were able to gain an understanding of the key themes and areas of priority.

A collaborative and holistic approach is crucial to the framework. Bringing in the invaluable expertise of other services helped to ensure a broader insight and draw upon the rich knowledge that different team members could contribute. From educational psychologists, to speech and language therapists, teachers, additional learning needs coordinators, and many more, a wide breadth of experience was utilised.

The process begins with a multi-agency meeting, allowing the opportunity to discuss key areas for

support and to highlight what was working well and areas requiring improvement. Practical tools such as '4 plus 1'<sup>4</sup> and 'What's Working/ Not Working'<sup>5</sup> tables were helpful in allowing teams to identify priority areas for support to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach.

This was followed by time spent in the classroom, considering how the physical environment could be modified to be inclusive of all learners, with a meeting and group discussions to share reflections and options going forward. With action plans in place, time was allowed to implement identified strategies, before a final project review and celebration meeting to praise the achievements of all involved and review the changes.

### **CASE STUDY 1: Melin Primary School**

Melin Primary School initiated the pilot after identifying an increased level of need within their incoming nursery cohort. The acting Headteacher recognised that the school could benefit from outside eyes to consider existing practices and suggest improvements.



**Gnoll Primary School: Before and After**

Melin identified several areas to focus on through the process, including:

- **Increased communication between school, pre-school settings, and families** The school implemented actions to bridge the gaps in communication, such as attending the 'Cuppa with a Cluster' session, where links were made with a parenting worker who runs groups with families in the community. The collaboration led to the creation of a community hub within the school, where different services can run groups, even on the weekends. A Supporting Transitions workshop was also facilitated and well-attended by prospective pupils.

- **Supporting the physical and sensory environment:** Guided by advice from an Occupational Therapist, Melin modified its classroom to be more inclusive. This included implementing Zones of Regulation and purchasing sensory equipment to help children manage their emotional needs.

- **Supporting staff well-being:** It was identified that staff well-being has a large knock-on effect on supporting the pupils within the school. Future sessions are planned to allow staff drop-ins, where staff can have a safe space for sharing struggles.

The impact at Melin was significant. Staff reported feeling

more confident in their abilities, and appreciated being listened to, with proactive steps being taken in looking for solutions to challenges. The multi-agency team was a very useful sounding board and easy to reach out to; one member of staff explained that it was reassuring to have someone to talk to about ideas and challenges. The shift in focus to the physical environment and early communication links led to increased family engagement and a more regulated classroom atmosphere.

### CASE STUDY 2: Gnoll Primary School

Following the success at Melin Primary School, Gnoll Primary School's ALNCo<sup>6</sup> expressed interest in Gnoll being the next school to participate in the pilot project. Gnoll's hopes were to ensure they were on the right track with their current strategies, while simultaneously developing confidence with supporting children with ALN within the classroom in a manner that was inclusive and supportive of all children.

Gnoll's approach was characterised by creative problem-solving and a commitment to inclusivity, and included:

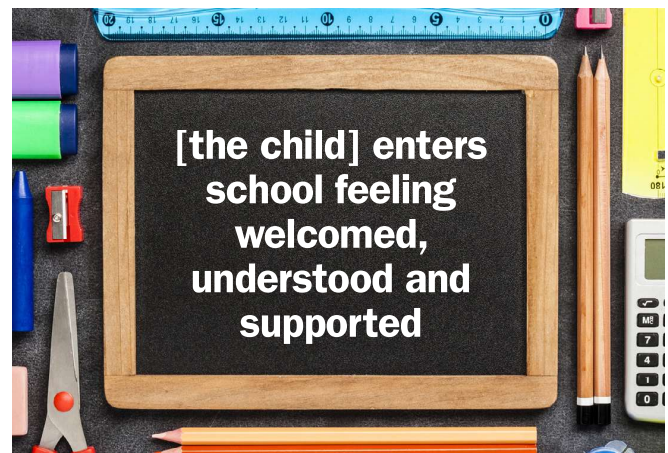
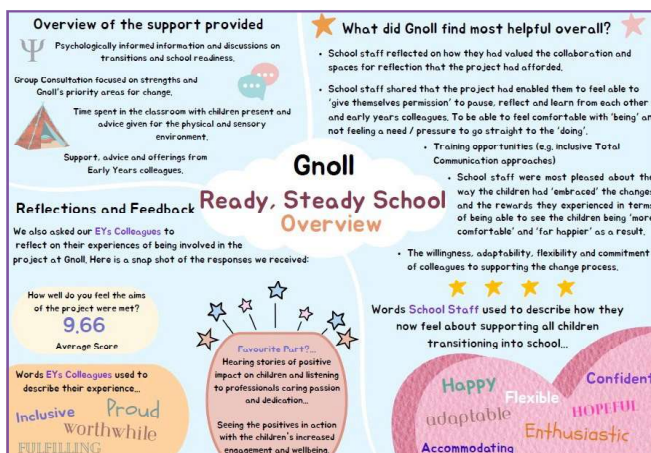
- **Supporting all children's speech, language and communication:**

The school implemented Total Communication strategies, with

training sessions for both staff and parents and carers. Core Boards<sup>7</sup> have been used to provide a structured and visual method to address the speech, language and communication needs of nursery children, in a way that staff have found to be more effective and supportive than relying solely on their whole class visual timetable.

- **Supporting the physical and sensory environment to be inclusive of all learners:** The project budget was used creatively by the nursery teacher, who had her father, a carpenter, build a bespoke wooden dome structure within a quiet sensory area. It provided a much-needed retreat for children seeking regulation, and staff noted that children were actively seeking this space.

- **Collaboration with parents, health and school to support toilet training:** Staff have worked collaboratively with families to support toilet training, and reported that progress had been made within this priority area, with all children in the morning nursery session now potty-trained. School staff were able to share information from the ERIC website<sup>8</sup>, along with links to webinars for parents / carers on potty training, and staff are considering more collaborative support in this area with the Health Visiting Service.



School staff at Gnoll Primary School were particularly pleased about the way children had embraced the changes. They commented that the children appeared more comfortable and far happier as a result. For the staff, the project enabled them to feel able to give themselves permission to pause, reflect and learn from each other and early years colleagues. There was an appreciation of being able to feel comfortable with 'being' and not feeling a pressure or need to jump straight into 'doing.'

### What makes this model work?

The success of *Ready, Steady, School* across both sites highlights several critical factors for effective early years transitions. The first is the power of multi-agency collaboration. By bringing together Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists and specialist Teaching Assistants, the project provided schools with a wealth of expertise that would otherwise be fragmented.

Second is the importance of time and space for reflection. In the busyness of everyday school life, the project carved out dedicated hours for staff to consult professionals and each other. This soundboard approach reduced the

pressure on staff to have all the answers immediately and instead fostered a culture of collaborate problem-solving.

The project emphasised empowerment through training. From 'Bucket Time' and ASD training at Melin, to 'Total Communication' workshops at Gnoll, staff were equipped with practical, evidence-based tools that they could implement independently.

Though there were similarities in how the pilot project was rolled out at Melin and Gnoll, perhaps its greatest strength was in recognising that each individual school is unique, and that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for bringing new children into the classroom. The opportunity to pause and consider what will work in your particular environment was helpful, and reflected in the positive outcomes registered by both schools.

### Conclusion and future thoughts

The *Ready, Steady, School* pilot has demonstrated that when schools prioritise being ready for their children, the entire school community benefits. It moves away from the stress of standardised readiness, and toward a more compassionate, inclusive system that values the unique developmental journey of every child.

Looking ahead, there is a clear appetite for this model to expand. Potential next steps could include providing sharing spaces, informed by psychology, to support ongoing staff well-being and rolling out the project to more schools. By continuing to foster these positive ripples of change, schools can aim to work to ensure that every child – regardless of their needs – enters school feeling welcomed, understood and supported.

<sup>1</sup> This summary is based on reports compiled by the Melin and Gnoll *Ready, Steady Schools* teams and summarised by Becky and Lucy Waterman. AI was used to help summarise the two reports

<sup>2</sup> The *Ready, Steady, Schools* project is a combined project between Neath Port Talbot Council, NPT Education Inclusion Service, Welsh Government Early Years & Flying Start NPT and Swansea Bay University Health Board

<sup>3</sup> Ready Schools framework <https://www.servicestoschools.org.uk/Event/Download/224247>

<sup>4</sup> 4 plus 1 toolkit <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-12/person-centred-reviews-toolkit.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> What's working/not working tool [https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Practice\\_Tool\\_2-Information\\_and\\_advice-working-not-working%20WEB.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Practice_Tool_2-Information_and_advice-working-not-working%20WEB.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo) is a statutory role in all schools in Wales

<sup>7</sup> Core Boards an example: [https://tamesidechildrenandyoungpeople.nhs.uk/application/files/2517/6846/8853/Modelling\\_Activity\\_Boards.pdf](https://tamesidechildrenandyoungpeople.nhs.uk/application/files/2517/6846/8853/Modelling_Activity_Boards.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> ERIC The Children's Bowel and Bladder Charity: <https://eric.org.uk/>

