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Major new evaluation launched in Ireland

The National University of Ireland, Galway, is conducting one of the largest ever evaluations of *Zippy's Friends*. The study, involving 800 children in schools in four counties, is looking at both how the programme is implemented and the effects it has on children.

Zippy's Friends was launched in Ireland earlier this year. A total of 31 rural and urban schools across the northwest of the country are taking part in the first year - 19 in Donegal, 7 in Sligo and Leitrim, and 5 in Galway.

The Irish pilot differs from other countries in two ways. Firstly, *Zippy's Friends* is running across the second half of one school year and the first half of the next. This means that it will be taught by two different teachers, which in turn means that twice as many teachers need to be trained. Secondly, half of the participating schools have been randomly selected to run the programme in its entirety, and half have the option to use it as a resource and choose which parts of it to teach. This is because the Department of Education promotes resources for schools, rather than complete programmes.

Partnership for Children's Director Chris Bale said, 'We usually insist on *Zippy's Friends* being taught in its entirety because we know it works like that and each session builds on the one that went before. But we respect the Department's policy for Irish schools, and so have made an exception for this pilot. It will be interesting to see what the evaluation shows.'

The study is being led by Professor Margaret Barry, Head of the Department of Health



Professor Margaret Barry

Promotion at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Prof Barry is an internationally recognised expert on mental health promotion and has led many national, European and international research projects.

Of 800 children involved in the evaluation, 400 are taking part in *Zippy's Friends* and another 400 are in a control group. Of the 400 who are participating in the



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programme, half are doing the whole thing from start to finish, and half are in schools where it has been left up to teachers to decide how much to use.

Prof Barry's team is using a range of methods and measures to assess *Zippy's Friends*. For instance, teachers are assessing the emotional literacy of all 800 children at the beginning, middle and end of the programme, and those in participating schools are giving feedback on a weekly basis. Observation visits are being made to some classes, and further feedback is being collected at the teachers' support meetings which are held during the programme. A Masters student from NUI Galway is looking in detail at two schools - one urban and one rural - to see how *Zippy's Friends* fits in with other activities and the involvement of the wider community.

The evaluators are also gathering information directly from children, using the 'draw and write' technique.

'At this age, children's writing abilities are limited, and they are often more comfortable drawing,' said Prof Barry. 'So we get them to draw a situation in which they had a particular difficult issue, and then they describe the issue and tell us how they resolved it.'

The evaluators plan to feed back information about how things are going during the pilot year, but their full report will not be available until mid-2009.

Zippy's Friends in Ireland is being managed and funded by the Health Service Executive, and facilitated by the Department of Education. Three training sessions were organised in January, and co-ordinator Anne McAteer said that teachers were enthusiastic.

'The immediate reaction was that they really, really liked the materials and thought they were very teacher friendly,' she said. 'They could see that, in terms of what they need to teach the children in the SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) part of the curriculum, Zippy is a beautiful fit.'

In the last few months, Anne has visited classes to see the programme being taught, and reports that things are going well.

'At the first training course, one teacher said "I've been trying to get my class to use some more vocabulary for their feelings. All they can say is that they're happy or sad." When I saw her recently, I asked whether they'd made any progress, and she said "Yes, they're gradually getting better, coming out with things like I'm feeling angry or I'm a bit worried."

Zippy's Friends will expand to more Irish schools in January, and a number of teachers have asked for the programme to start each September, so that they can run it through one school year.

Meanwhile, the evaluation study continues. All the baseline information has been gathered and feedback from teachers is coming in steadily. The evaluation results will be carefully considered by a National Advisory Group which is overseeing the pilot and includes representatives from the Department of Education and Science.

'It was a big heave getting this much information in,' said Prof Barry, 'but it's going well. So far, so good.'

NUI Galway is now looking for funding to continue the study beyond the first year, and to assess the impact of *Zippy's Friends* on children one year after they complete the programme.

To find out more about the Health Service Executive, go to <http://www.hse.ie/eng/>

To read more about NUI Galway's Department of Health Promotion, go to <http://www.nuigalway.ie/hpr/>

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