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Message from CEO



Teresa Heeney
CEO, Early Childhood Ireland

I'm delighted to welcome you to issue no. 1 of Early Childhood Ireland's Research Day Proceedings publication, containing selected papers delivered at our research day in April 2019.

In 2019, 180 passionate early learning and care (ELC) students and early childhood researchers, practitioner-researchers, and early years specialists from private and community services, third-level institutions, children's charities, government departments and agencies, came together for a full day in Croke Park to listen to and learn from each other's original research studies and reflections on practice. I'm really pleased that Early Childhood Ireland's annual Research Day is becoming such a collegial space for knowledge creation, data generation and leadership.

This first research day proceedings issue captures a rapidly professionalising early learning and care sector, in the process of developing a body of child-centred research on and for practice, policy and services, seeking to really transform the ELC sector so that children learn and thrive, and have only the very best experiences.

I would like to thank all of the authors with papers in this issue for giving so freely of their time and expertise. You have created a wonderful resource for all those who care about early learning and care and want to constantly improve how it is experienced by babies, young children and their families.

You will find many interesting new ideas in their contributions that will help to shape educational and care practices, our own thinking and policy decisions, and actions concerning the major challenges facing Irish early learning and care into the future.

I look forward to meeting you at Early Childhood Ireland's next Research Day.

Teresa Heeney
CEO

Foreword

Lisha O'Sullivan
**Head of Department of Reflective
Pedagogy and Early Childhood
Studies,**
Mary Immaculate College



I have been invited by Early Childhood Ireland to write this foreword to this inaugural research day proceedings' publication. As the largest member-based organisation in the early years' sector in Ireland, Early Childhood Ireland engages in a range of complex and diverse initiatives, which support early years educators and providers in their education and care work with children during this early and pivotal period in child development.

Early Childhood Ireland provides an important forum for sharing early years research through its annual conference weekend, which involves keynote speeches by researchers, early years educators and children's advocates, and a dedicated research day. The conference weekend offers a powerful platform for disseminating up-to-date national and international research and fostering a culture of research-led practice within Ireland's early learning and care sector. The high quality of these research presentations and their capacity to inform evidence-based practices has been a deciding factor in publishing this inaugural volume of research day proceedings.

This exciting publication contains a range of empirical and reflective papers from authors who presented at the 2019 Early Childhood Ireland National Research Day. Collectively, these papers make an important contribution to policy and practice in Ireland, and beyond. Through this publication, Early Childhood Ireland continues to articulate the child-centred vision of First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028 (Government of Ireland 2018), and provides on-going leadership in relation to the implementation of the Strategy, to the benefit of children and families.

The papers in this volume provoke reflection and inspire readers to develop innovative approaches across key elements of early learning and care. A child rights-based approach to education permeates the volume, accentuating interactions, relationships and mechanisms for realising babies' and young children's participation, in line with their evolving capacities. The importance of consulting with children in relation to all matters which affect them, including existing early years regulatory inspection processes, is emphasised. These papers also serve to challenge our perception of what constitutes valuable learning in the early years, through questioning what drives young children's creativity, their need to discover and explore their world. The proceedings contribute to the debate on how best we can achieve truly inclusive early learning and care through exploring the design and composition of environments which are accessible to all, regardless of age, size or ability.

This volume pays due attention to early years educators' experiences in a rapidly changing sector. Issues relating to public perceptions and the challenges of the current professionalisation journey are explored, in addition to the realities facing Irish childminders. Notable findings relating to cross-sectional differences in experienced feelings of burnout, amongst early childhood educators, are presented. Consistent with the vision of the First 5 Strategy, several papers concentrate on quality early learning and care. There is a focus on: policy-led measures

to improve quality; identification of supports required to meet regulatory compliance; and the development of a robust and accessible professional education framework for early years' educators in Ireland. Mentoring supports, for example, are presented as a valuable mechanism for developing and maintaining high-quality early learning and care. The area of parental involvement and engagement, as it relates to high-quality provision, also features in the volume, which includes an evaluation of the role of Early Start programmes and community-based supports in developing and delivering parent and family programmes in disadvantaged communities.

This brief overview provides just a flavour of the breadth and depth of the papers included in this substantial first volume of Early Childhood Ireland's Research Day Proceedings. Early Childhood Ireland is to be commended for continuing to forge much-needed connections between research and practice through disseminating these empirical and reflective papers, to the wider early learning and care community. This volume will be of relevance to all invested in early learning and care including early years educators and providers, parents and families, policy makers, students and academics. Most importantly, through sharing these proceedings, Early Childhood Ireland challenges us to realise our collective responsibility in protecting and promoting the early childhood of all children.

As Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies, at Mary Immaculate College, where we share Early Childhood Ireland's commitment to the power of coming together as a community of educators and researchers, I would like to sincerely congratulate the organisation on this important milestone. The publication of these proceedings and those of future research days will continue to have a powerful impact on policy, research and practice in our ever-evolving early learning and care space.

Lisha O'Sullivan

About this Publication

We are delighted to launch our inaugural National Early Years Research Day Proceedings 2019. This publication includes a selection of the peer-reviewed academic and reflective papers presented at Early Childhood Ireland's National Early Years Research Day held on 12 April, 2019 in Croke Park, Dublin.

The process for this publication began back in June 2019 with the formation of our in-house editorial team, which consisted of Liz Kerrins and Kathleen Tuite as editors and Jenna Goodwin as managing editor. Guidelines for authors and submission forms were developed by the team. We recruited expert external members to our Scientific Committee and developed guidelines for the Scientific Committee for reviewing papers and making recommendations on publication. Each member of the Scientific Committee brought expertise from the field of early childhood care and education, as academics and/or researchers and as experienced educators from Early Childhood Ireland's membership. An online submission process was developed and presenters from our Research Day 2019 were invited to submit a paper. Presenters could submit under two strands: Academic or Reflective. Over the course of the next few months, each paper was double-blind peer-reviewed by members of our Scientific Committee. Feedback was then provided to authors for consideration and they were asked to return the updated papers. Each paper was then reviewed by our in-house Editorial Team and additional comments and feedback was provided to authors who were under consideration for inclusion in the publication. Finally, each accepted paper was read by an external proofer.

We would now like to thank our Scientific Committee, whose expertise in research on children's early years greatly assisted in selecting the papers published. The processes of review and editing have greatly contributed to the high standard and rigour of our inaugural publication.

We would also like to thank the authors who submitted to our inaugural publication. Thank you for answering our many emails and for taking the feedback of the Scientific Committee and the in-house Editorial Team on board. We know this was a long and rigorous process. Sharing your research with others benefits everyone, particularly as it has never been more important to have evidence-based practice in the Irish early learning and care sector.

This publication was a cross-team collaborative effort by Early Childhood Ireland. We would like to thank the Communications and Development team for their skills in designing this publication.

Finally, thanks to you, our readers, who have taken the time to read our conference proceedings publication. If you are undertaking research now or intending to do so in the future, we encourage you to consider submitting an abstract for consideration for one of our future research days.

Editorial Team
Liz Kerrins, Editor
Kathleen Tuite, Editor
Jenna Goodwin, Managing Editor

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Irish Childminding: An Eco-Cultural Perspective

Miriam O'Regan
Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny

Miriam O'Regan is a PhD candidate at TU Dublin (2017-2020), conducting research into childminding in Ireland, funded by the Irish Research Council, in partnership with Childminding Ireland. Prior to this, she has worked as Community Employment Childcare Programme Manager, and Childminder Advisory Officer for Wicklow County Childcare Committee.

Dr. Anne Marie Halpenny is the Chair of Child, Family Studies & Community Studies at Technological University (TU) Dublin, and is supervising this research into Irish childminding. Author of introductory guides to Piaget and Bronfenbrenner, her research interests include parenting and child development, family transitions, changing childhoods, and researching young children's experiences.

Keywords

Childminding (Family Childcare)

Ireland

Close Relationships Model

Ecocultural Theory

Abstract

This doctoral research, seeks to document the realities of Irish childminders, working with children in their own homes, as well as their distinctive nurturing praxis and pedagogy. (Hayes & Kieran, 2008; Hayes, 2007). Drawing on Ecocultural Theory (Bermheimer & Weisner, 2007; Tonyan, 2017), it uses the daily routine as a lens, viewing childminder and client families as an ecological niche, negotiating the work of raising children together (Tonyan, 2012). The study uses the Ecocultural Family Interview adapted for childminders (CCCRP, 2014; Weisner & Bermheimer, 2004), adjusted for language usage and the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system in Ireland.

As approved by the Ethics Committee of Technological University (TU) Dublin, in 2018, 17 childminders narrated their experiences: their economic situation, environment, domestic workload, relationships, education, and connections with support services. In addition, ten photographs, taken by each childminder, served as prompts to further explore underlying values. Interviews were coded and analysed using Dedoose® software (Salmona, Lieber, & Kaczynski, 2019).

The cultural model initially identified is a distinctively Irish model of *Close Relationships*. Childminders prioritise providing a setting for children which emphasises love and affection, often conceptualised as extended family. Support systems for childminding should be aligned with this cultural model to sustain childminding in the future.

Introduction: Childminding in Ireland

Home-based childcare of all types, paid and unpaid, forms the largest source of non-parental childcare in Ireland (29 per cent), along with preschools, crèches and afterschool provision. An estimated 10 per cent of children in Ireland¹ from infancy to 12 years of age receive childcare from paid professional childminders, including au pairs and nannies, with a further 3 per cent of children receiving care from a paid relative (CSO, 2017b). Based on the Census in 2016, this equates to approximately 88,000 children (CSO, 2017a), with widely varying estimates of 19,000-35,000² paid childminders caring for children aged 0-12 years nationally (DCYA, 2018, 2019).

¹ Childminding is also known as Family Day Care or Family Child Care in other jurisdictions.

² Only estimates are available due to legal exemptions allowing childminders to cater for up to 3 unrelated pre school children, in addition to school age children, until 2019. Varied estimates result from different average numbers of children per childminder considered, ranging from 2.5 (DCYA, 2018) to 4 (DCYA, 2019).

O'Regan, et al., 2019).

This form of childcare has been popular for many generations, as a traditional form of paid work for women (Corrigan, 2000; MacCurtain & O'Dowd, 1991). However, currently, there are only 81 childminders³ registered with Tusla⁴, under the most recent Early Years Regulations (DCYA, 2016); research has shown childminder disengagement is due to insensitive and inappropriate regulation (O'Regan, et al., 2019). Furthermore, since 2010, the decade-long National Childminding Initiative (NCMI)⁵ has been wound down, dismantling the nascent system of support for childminders. It appears that childminding may be in decline in Ireland, as it is in other jurisdictions (Ofsted, 2019; Vandenbroeck & Bauters, 2017).

There have been many calls for the proportionate regulation of childminding, appropriate for a lone worker in a home-based setting, with no more than six children at any one time (Daly, 2010; Start Strong, 2012). As the Government moves towards mandatory regulation of paid childminding (Government of Ireland, 2019), the unique nature of childminding needs to be described in order to develop a sustainable regulatory and support system for childminding.

Research into childminding

Although the use of childminders is widespread across the world, childminding has been under-researched in scope and in focus (Urban, Vandenbroek, Lazzari, Peeters, & van Laere, 2011). There is little attempt to document childminding practice on the ground or children's experiences with childminders (Ang, Brooker, & Stephen, 2016; Tonyan, Paulsell, & Shivers, 2017). Landmark studies focused on childminding (Kontos, Howes, Shinn, & Galinsky, 1995; Mooney & Statham, 2003) have identified indicators of quality in childminding settings, including: registration and regulation (Davis et al., 2012; Doherty, Forer, Lero, Goelman, & LaGrange, 2006); education, training and qualifications (Bauters & Vandenbroeck, 2017); employment status and working conditions (Letablier & Fagnani, 2009; Ann Mooney et al., 2001); and systems of supervision and support (Bromer, Van Haitsma, Daley, & Modigliani, 2009; Brooker, 2016). However, most childminding in Europe and the USA still operates in the informal sector (Child in Mind, 2017; Tonyan et al., 2017; Urban et al., 2011).

Moreover, investigators have also queried the very tools used in childminding research (Morrissey & Banghart, 2007; O'Connell, 2011). When considering quality in childminding, Tonyan et al., (2017) among others (Bromer, McCabe, & Porter, 2013) consider that few quality measures have effectively captured the potential strengths of childminding, proposing instead an ecocultural definition of childminding quality: "as the alignment of children's opportunities for learning and development with locally-relevant ideals or cultural models".

Theoretical framework

The current study references Ecocultural Theory (ECT) primarily, along with Attachment Theory. ECT emerged from cultural approaches to human development, which suggest that ideas about childcare mediate adults' daily child caring activity (Gallimore & Lopez, 2002; Rogoff, 2003). From an ecocultural perspective, childminding constitutes "a home-based ecological niche in which multiple families (i.e. childminder, children, childminder's own family, and children's families) work together in raising children" (Tonyan & Nuttal, 2014, p. 119).

Attachment is also a key concept in understanding the practice of childminders, particularly secondary carer attachment as seen in the child-childminder relationship (Bowlby, 2007), and the challenges of professional love (Page, 2011, 2018; Lightfoot & Frost, 2015). A meta-analysis

³ In September 2019, down from 250 in 2004.

⁴ Tusla is the national Child and Family Agency overseeing all forms of childcare, foster care and child protection issues.

⁵ The NCMI promoted professionalisation for quality childminding through training, local support workers, a childminding development grant, and a childcare Tax Relief scheme.

of research over 25 years has shown that "secure childcare provider attachments were more common in home-based than in centre-based settings, and that "care providers' sensitivity to individual children predicted attachment security only in the small groups that characterise home-based settings" (Ahnert et al., 2006, 675).

Methodology

The current research used a semi-structured interview, the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICh), adapted to capture the ecocultural features of childminding. The original Ecocultural Family Interview (EFI) (Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004) focused on a family's daily routines as these develop within the resources and constraints of their ecology shaped by beliefs and values within the family's culture. Since a childminding niche contains multiple families and operates as a business, the EFI was adapted for use in childminding research in California (CCCRP, 2014). This has been further tailored to the Irish context regarding Hiberno-English usage (e.g. family childcare=childminding) as well as Irish ECEC qualifications, government programmes and supports.

The EFICh research instrument has three main components: first, the semi-structured, conversational interview; second, childminder photographs illustrating their daily practice; third, the completion of rating scales by the researcher with qualitative vignettes from the interview or field notes, to exemplify the reason for each rating. The EFICh was supplemented by a background survey to gather information about the family's economic circumstances, the childminder's levels of agency, education, and views on early childhood.

In total, 17 childminders participated in this research: two were registered with Tusla, 15 were members of Childminding Ireland. All participants were female; 70 per cent were over 40 years old; four were non-nationals. Over 70 per cent held QQI level 5/6 in ECEC as their highest reported qualification. The EFICh protocol involved two visits to each setting: an initial visit to explain the research, deliver the background survey, and conduct a brief observation; on the second visit, an EFICh interview of approximately 1-1.5 hours was conducted. Field work was completed between May and November 2018.

Subsequently, the four sources of data were coded using Dedoose® mixed method software, to allow for a qualitative analytic process of structured discovery, "during which analytic strategies remained open to unexpected processes and patterns while focusing on project-specific topics" (Weisner, 2014, p. 167). This is an analytic approach which explores patterns through close, iterative listening, reading, and observing of the sample data, guided by project specific questions.

In the current research, as in the study carried out by Tonyan et al. in California (CCCRP, 2014), a key project-specific topic was cultural models, defined as "presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared...by the members of a society..." (Holland & Quinn, 1987, p. 4). Two main cultural models were identified in the Californian research, describing childminding interactions with children and families, specifically *Close Relationships and School Readiness*. Childminders were initially rated according to fit with these two models as either High, Medium or Low. To receive a HIGH rating, the childminder values a model in what she says, enacts it in her daily routine activities, and sees (or evaluates) its impact on the children's outcomes in some way. A MEDIUM rating means the childminder values, enacts or sees that particular model; perhaps she often faces barriers or simply prioritizes other things, while a LOW rating means that there is little or no evidence of valuing, enacting, or seeing the model.

This research was approved by the Ethic Committee of TU Dublin in accordance with its policies and procedures. There were no significant ethical issues, since the core research involved interviews with adult childminders, and no observations of individual children were conducted. Photographs were shared with parental consent, and any identifying features were removed to

ensure anonymity.

Initial findings

Among childminders in Ireland, initial findings suggest both similarities and differences with cultural models in California. *Close Relationships* was the most prevalent cultural model, with all 17 respondents scoring a HIGH rating. In this model, the childminder's primary goal is for each child to feel loved and special. The childminder prioritises demonstrating love and affection to children, interacting with the children through play and conversation, building and nurturing relationships through close interactions with children, consistent with previous research (Brooker, 2016; Fauth, Jelicic, Leo, Wilmott, & Owen, 2011). The childminder places great emphasis on strong relationships with children who are or who have been in their care, and perceives these as one of the primary rewarding aspects of the role. In addition, the *Close Relationships* model specific to Ireland includes a value for long-term, enduring relationships, and family-like belonging, beyond the confines of the childcare arrangement.

In the *School Readiness* model, a primary goal is seeing changes in what children know and can do in preparation for school. The childminder prioritises supporting the development of literacy and numeracy, as well as promoting positive social and emotional development, such as turn-taking, in order to prepare the children for learning in a classroom context. There was little evidence of this model being emphasised in the practice of most participants, apart from one childminder who ran a sessional morning service.

The close bond

A key finding in the current study is the pervasive references to emotional warmth and affection between childminders and the children in their care. This particular closeness was frequently described as a 'bond', reminiscent of the language of attachment. A key feature perceived to facilitate that bond was the intimacy and familiarity associated with the home setting, where close interactions with a small number of children occur on a daily basis. This feature of childminding was clearly identified as a motivating and rewarding factor in choosing to mind children in the home, as the following quote illustrates.

"I'd say one (reward) is the bond that you get with the children that you're looking after because it's a lot closer than say when you're in a crèche where it's bigger and you might not be with the same children all the time".

-SHONA

Meaningful interactions

Significantly, the present study findings also highlight the central role which regular, warm and meaningful interactions with the child play in developing this emotional bond with children. The value of having slow-paced, unhurried time for these interactions was underlined in photographs, emphasizing the time spent interacting with children: talking with children while making things, growing things, or going places. The unique quality of interactions which childminders can achieve with children, even with infants, is captured in the following quote:

"And he, he just loves if you talk to him, and he'll talk back to you. He gives it loads, and he just, he really enjoys that interaction. And he loves it and it's just beautiful. It's wonderful. I love it".

- CIARA

Enduring relationships

A further significant finding was the potential for enduring and lasting relationships to evolve from the relationships childminders developed with the children. Narratives in the present study reveal that for most childminders these emotional bonds were not experienced as temporary

or passing attachments, but rather as lasting and enduring. Bowlby (1988, p.32) distinguishes between displays of "episodic ... attachment behaviours" and "enduring attachments ... to particular others" (1988, p. 32) involving love and closeness between two people achieved through reliable, consistent, warm exchanges over time. Many of the older childminders described such enduring, long term relationships, caring for a child for up to nine years, or working with the same family over 12 years, or having a child return as a teenager to become the family babysitter. The nature of these enduring relationships is well illustrated in the following quotation:

"I have kids coming back to me, like S. comes back, she's 22, ...and she comes to visit. So that's lovely. I've had kids, who have had their kids, you know, and they'll go, 'Oh! They'll ring me up and they said, 'Any chance you're free? That's lovely, that's rewarding".

- MARIANNE

Extended family

Furthermore, in this study, these close, lasting relationships between childminders and the children and families were often conceptualized as extended family.

"I think well, you see, you grow to, you grow to love the children, and they become part of nearly your extended family."

- MARY.

Close sibling-like relationships were described between minded children and the childminder's children, with minded children involved in family activities outside working hours, because of their mutual affection, as photographs showed. When a client family had an emergency, such as a parent being hospitalised, childminders stepped into the breach to care for the children. Childminders in this sample also attended children's birthday parties, communions and confirmations and even weddings.

Discussion

The ecocultural approach, using the lens of the childminder's daily routine, documents the rhythm of regular interactions underlying childminding practice with children in Ireland (Tonyan, 2015; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004). The use of childminders' photographs gave voice to the meaning of their daily work and relationships with children, revealing a shared ecocultural model of *Close Relationships* (Holland & Quinn, 1987; Tonyan & Nuttal, 2014).

In this distinctive shared cultural model, childminders focus on giving children love and affection in a setting which resembles their home, building deep bonds with children through meaningful interactions which promote the development of the individual child, and which can endure throughout the life course, as part of the extended childminding family. This conceptualisation - of what childminding is, of how it ought to be done, of what the benefits are - seems to be shared by childminders and parents alike, as recent research in Ireland has shown (DCYA, 2018; O'Regan et al., 2019).

This model must be considered in light of *Aistear* and *Síolta*, which both highlight how the quality of young children's experience is closely linked to the interactions between child and caregiver (Duignan, Fallon, Dwyer, Schonfeld, & Walsh, 2007; NCCA, 2009, 2015). Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 60) underlines the central importance of facilitating learning and development through interactions with those with whom the child has developed "a strong and enduring emotional attachment". The early years of a child's life in particular are a time of unique dependency, during which caregiving routines give opportunities to develop a relationship with the child (CECDE, 2006).

Children in such secure relationships with adults are more likely to explore their environment, thereby enhancing their learning and development; becoming more sociable, interacting better with peers, and developing their verbal abilities (S. McLean, 2013; Sara McLean, 2016). In this

regard, positive impacts of childminding on children's early developmental outcomes have been noted in terms of verbal ability and social skills at ages three and five years in longitudinal studies, such as Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) (McGinnity, Russell, & Murray, 2015; Russell, Kenny, & McGinnity, 2016) and Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) in England (Melhuish, Gardiner, & Morris, 2017; Otero & Melhuish, 2015).

Policy implication

As the Government moves towards mandatory regulation of all paid childminding (DCYA, 2018, 2019; Government of Ireland, 2019) it is vital new childminding regulations and support systems are well aligned with Irish ecocultural model(s), if they are to succeed in sustaining childminding to provide continued support for children and working families in the long term.

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Young children's perspectives of child-teacher interactions when compiling learning portfolios: a case study to inform pedagogical assessment practice

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Keywords

Child's Perspective Learning Portfolios
Well-being Child-Teacher Interactions

Abstract

This qualitative research study explores preschool children's perspectives of child-teacher interactions when compiling learning portfolios in an Irish early years setting. The research was conducted by the assistant manager, who is a designated pedagogical leader in the setting. The review of relevant literature and analysis of findings is underpinned by child's rights, well-being and Bronfenbrenner's variables of Process-Person-Context-Time. Through child conferencing session, using an adapted form of the Mosaic approach; conversation, drawing and dramatization with puppets, rich data emerged that draws attention to the child's perspective of intrinsic well-being, placing well-being as central to and emerging from research theme of 'communicating', 'identity and belonging' and 'exploring and thinking'. Reflecting on the pivotal role of child-teacher interactions arising from the findings the researcher proposes a 'Well-being Radar' to support pedagogical interactions, where respecting a child's actions and thoughts guide teacher's thoughts and actions.

Introduction

Internationally, learning portfolios are a popular pedagogical assessment tool to document children's learning and development (Glazzard et al., 2010), and are recommended in Aistear, the Irish early years curriculum framework, for the collection of a child's efforts, progress and achievements, telling the story of a young child's learning journey (NCCA, 2009, p.56). There is strong evidence that documenting early childhood experiences such as compiling learning portfolios have a positive impact on the young child's sense of well-being (MacNaughton, 2005; McMonagle, 2012; Bruce, 2011; Carr et al., 2010), as does the enablement of each child's right to express views and have these views given due weight with regard to learning and development (Lundy, 2007). Central to well-being and positive outcomes for children is quality bi-directional pedagogical interactions (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002).

The aim of this research is to value and explore young children's perspectives of child-teacher interactions when compiling individualised learning portfolios in an early years setting in Ireland, where the researcher is the pedagogical leader, coordinating the curriculum and assessment processes, and also the assistant manager. The aim is addressed by utilising an adapted form of the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011) to access the voice of the child. The findings are discussed in conjunction with a literature review that critiques international views of the topic. The theoretical framework employed of child rights and well-being (Te One, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Hayes, 2013), and the Bio-ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) underpin the research.

Methodology

Using a convenience sample method, eighteen children aged four and five years attending the researcher's setting were identified as possible participants from a population of 90, with a view to recruiting 12. Sixteen parents returned the 'Voluntary Consent Form', resulting in a revision of the initial goal to recruit 12 children, and a decision to include all 16 children, noting that, despite parental consent, some children might not assent to participate.

A case study was carried out, wherein, audio recorded child conferencing sessions (a researcher-led discussion in familiar surroundings to child) were conducted with 16 four- and five-year olds, two children at a time. An adapted Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011) to each conference session comprised multiple methods to access the voice of each child. This included open-ended dialogue initiated through review of each child's leaning portfolio (De Vocht, 2014), an invitation to draw pictures of their like and dislikes of making their portfolio with their teacher (Kennan, 2016); role play with puppets to elicit interactive dramatization and dialog (Epstein et al., 2008). Together these methods aided the review of each child's learning portfolio experiences. The data collected from each session was thematically analysed through review of audio recordings, researcher notes and transcriptions to extract major themes, and colour coding was used to extract subthemes.

Skånfors's (2009) 'ethical radar' was implemented to address the ethical complexity of conducting research with children. The 'ethical radar' requires the researcher to be continuously attentive to children's actions and responses in order to distinguish children's ways of expressing their wishes, acceptance and withdrawal within the research process.

This study is limited to a snapshot of the perspectives of sixteen children in one preschool in November 2017 and, as such, cannot be representative of their perspectives, or those of their contemporaries, at any other time. The researcher held a position of authority as pedagogical leader and assistant manager of the early years service. These factors may have had an impact on the response of parents regarding consent for their children to participate in the research, and may have impacted on the way children interacted with the researcher and each other during the child conferencing sessions, and also impacted on the way the researcher interacted with the children.

Research findings

In keeping with the Bio-ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the research findings were analysed through the lens of each variable of the Process-Person-Context-Time structure and underpinned by child rights and well-being. The data analysis began with the researcher listening to all session recordings, while noting any significant general findings. Through the lens of De Vocht (2014), Kennan (2016) and Epstein et al. (2008) theories of interpreting children's conversation, drawings and dramatized play, each recording was re-listened to, from which subthemes emerged. The findings highlight the richness of current portfolio compilation processes. The children who took part expressed feelings of happiness and were enthusiastic about the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings and imagination in and about their portfolios, while also acknowledging their own competency.

It emerged from a thematic review of the extracted subthemes that the major themes of the research corresponded to the *Aistear* curriculum themes of communicating, exploring and thinking, identity and belonging and well-being (NCCA, 2009).

Communicating

The use of drawing gave a voice to those children often rendered invisible within the research process (Clark & Moss, 2011). Most participants expressed feelings and contentment based on the ability to communicate with their teacher. However, participant 4 came across items in her

portfolio that she had not seen before, stating:
"I not see that before" (P4)

This suggests that some teachers may not communicate effectively and miss opportunities to review portfolios with the children. The findings highlight the participant's desire for their teachers to take the necessary time to listen beyond the spoken word, and to fully engage with all the participants' forms of expression, as a means to engage in bi-directional communication.

Exploring and thinking

The participant's expressed a desire that their actions, thoughts, interests and growing sense of agency be valued more within the process of compiling portfolios, such as participant 2, when discussing her drawing of what she does not like in her portfolio pointed to her drawing (see Figure 1.) and said:

"I don't like shapes. I don't like shapes" (P2)

P2's portfolio contains a number of shape activities. When asked why she does not like shapes she said, as she pointed to the left of her drawing:

"I don't know them. I want to cut" (P2)

P2 had numerous shape activities in her portfolio, but only one cutting activity, which questions the value participant 2's teacher placed on including her with the planning of the portfolio content, which is an integral aspect of *Aistear* as an emergent curriculum that values child-led exploration.

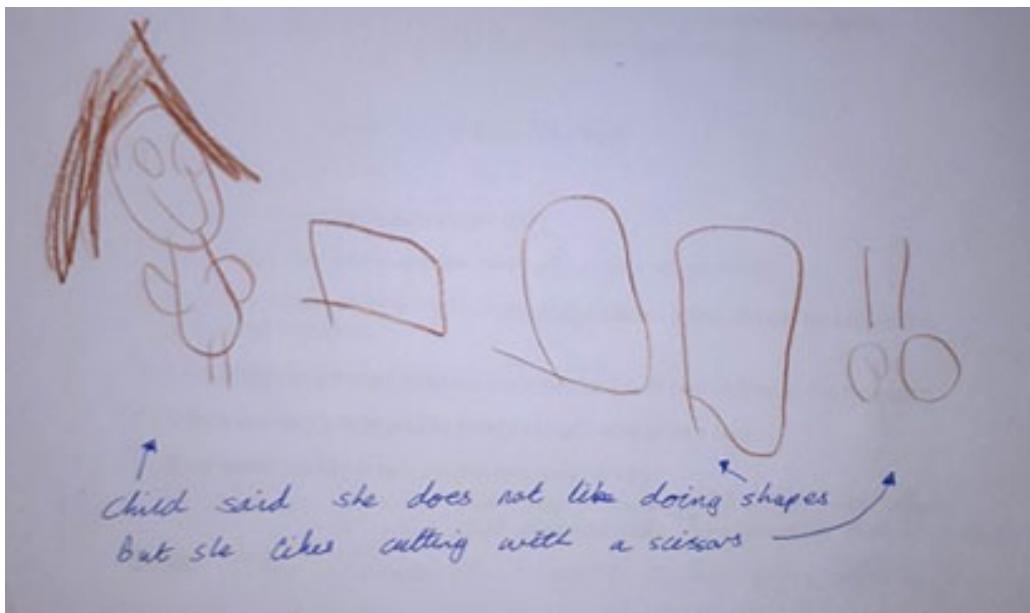


Figure 1: P2 Dislikes Drawing

Identity and belonging

The participants enjoyed pointing out the family page in their portfolio. The following was typical of the responses:

"That's me, and that's my family" (P2)

Findings highlight participant's desire for their family identity to feature more prominently within their portfolios, and more specifically, their own drawings of their families.

Also, some participants expressed their dislike when their personal identity was not represented in

keeping with their current abilities or appearance, such as participant 3, who now wears glasses but the photo of her on the front cover of her portfolio was taken the year previously when she did not wear glasses. With a sad expression on her face she told the researcher she no longer looked like the photo on the cover.

Well-being

The findings suggest collectively that the above three themes bring about holistic learning, development, and an enriched sense of intrinsic well-being within the child. This was evident from the many participants that expressed much elation linked to: communicating effectively with their teacher, a strong sense of value placed on individual, family and learning identity, a sense of belonging within the early years setting and the portfolio processes, and also the freedom to explore and express their thoughts. Where one of the above themes was absent this appeared to result in a negative impact on the child's sense of intrinsic well-being. An example of this is apparent when considering participant 18. When asked what he would like to put into his portfolios he replied with a puzzled look:

"What me say? [pause] No, teacher does that, not me" (P18)

This response indicates participant 18 was not included in the content planning of this aspect of his portfolio, and thereby negatively impacting on his sense of identity as a competent and confident learner as a constant when compiling his portfolio, a necessary element to bring about and maintain intrinsic well-being.

The findings suggest an alternative way to view the *Aistear* theme of well-being as subdivided into its intrinsic and extrinsic elements. The participants viewed the role of the teacher as the facilitator of the required resources to support the development of activities that would engender well-being. The ever-changing nature of the participants' intrinsic well-being required an ever-changing adaptation to the required resources facilitated by the teacher. The critical role of the teachers' pedagogical practice alongside the presence of physical resources came to the fore many times during the research. An example of this is where participant 2 expressed her annoyance and desire for her teacher to understand that she does not like shapes and would prefer to engage in cutting activities. Her shy nature and limited use of spoken language rendered her voiceless, thereby having a negative impact on her sense of well-being. This could have been overcome had her teacher sought out ways to access her voice beyond the spoken word by way of her actions and drawings.

The meeting point of intrinsic and extrinsic element of well-being is interactions: the child's interaction with the environment, with other children, and with their teacher. How the teacher navigates their interactions with the child depends on a myriad of pedagogical practice factors, including the passing of time as the child matures and staying attuned to the child's changing interests, needs and acquisition of positive learning dispositions. It would appear that positive child-teacher interactions can go beyond co-construction of knowledge to positively impacting a child's intrinsic well-being in the present, and positively impacting on the child's well-being into the future, otherwise referred to as well-becoming.

From the child's perspective they expressed a clear wish to be listened to beyond the spoken word (P3's facial expressions), for their individual identity (P2's desire to add in her drawings of her family) and family identity (P3's new glasses), and personal interest (P2's interest in cutting activities) to be up-to-date and celebrated in their portfolio. As evident from the enthusiasm of the participating children to share the content of their portfolios with the researcher, without exception all participants exhibited great pride in the ownership and content of their learning portfolios. Participants also took advantage of every opportunity to share its content with teachers, children, parents and researchers.

Recommendations

First recommendation

As advocated by Statham and Chase (2010), it is recommended to consider well-being as comprising both intrinsic and extrinsic elements. This conceptualisation suggests an alternative way to consider the relationship between the three *Aistear* themes of communicating, exploring and thinking, and identity and belonging (see Figure 2.). This configuration can guide teaching practice when compiling portfolios with young children, highlighting the crucial role of the teacher as facilitator of the extrinsic elements of well-being. Among these elements are the adherence to the policies of the setting, the preparation of the physical environment, and dedicating the necessary time to meaningfully interact with and listen to children, thereby, facilitating the emergence of children's intrinsic sense of well-being. By focusing on communicating, exploring and thinking, and identity and belonging when interacting with children during the compilation processes of portfolios, the teacher also creates a space to enrich children's intrinsic sense of well-being and learning experiences, therefore this configuration of the *Aistear* themes is recommended for in-house training and CPD programs for my and other early childhood settings.

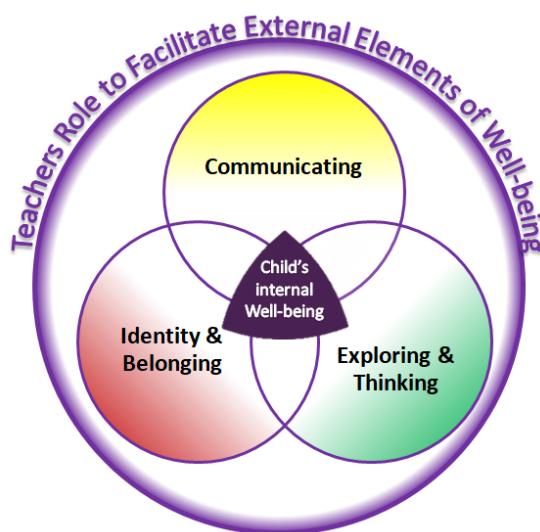


Figure 2: Subdividing well-being into intrinsic and extrinsic elements in relation to the remaining three *Aistear* themes

Second recommendation

The second recommendation of this research is for additional guidance to be made available to support early childhood teachers in navigating pedagogical interactions through the lens of well-being. In an effort to address this the researcher developed the 'Well-being Radar' for pedagogical interaction to guide pedagogical interactions (see Figure 3.). This model takes into account the ever-changing dynamic construct between temporal context and the maturation process of the young child, and the requirement of the teacher to respect the child's actions and thoughts to guide the teacher's thoughts and actions.

Well-being Radar for Pedagogical Interactions

Respect child's Actions & Thoughts to guide teacher's Thoughts & Actions



Figure 3: Well-being Radar for pedagogical interactions

The 'Well-being Radar' is recommended to guide the teacher's navigation within child-teacher interactions as the child journeys along the pathway of learning. The metaphor of an aeroplane represents the child and teacher on a learning journey together, open to the influences of the changing nature of their surroundings, where the process of child-teacher interactions is the engine that powers and steers learning, development, intrinsic well-being and well-becoming. The capacity of the teacher to detect, perceive and interpret the balance of power between the child and teacher, and the direction of this co-piloted learning journey, can be compared to a radar system, a system that considers and values well-being and well-becoming as an ever-changing dynamic intrinsic sense requiring continuous monitoring by the teacher.

The balance of power and direction of the learning journey are context dependent and influenced by the teacher's attentiveness to and respect for the child's actions and thoughts (nature). It is this attentiveness that can guide the teacher's thoughts and actions (nurture). Where this navigation is centred on safeguarding the child's well-being the child can strive to reach their potential and in turn safeguard the child's well-becoming. The 'Well-being Radar' approach recognises the child's need for nurturing support from the teacher. Such an approach to pedagogical interactions requires the ability of the teacher to reflect in the moment as they interact with the child, underpinned by knowledge of the child's natural development, strengths, needs, and interests. What is also required in early childhood pedagogical practice is to recognise and values the maturing process from inter-dependency towards independency, towards a time when the child can go solo and pilot their own learning journey. This is the space where learning opportunities present themselves for teachers to role model, guide and support learning and development and the emergence of dispositions and growth mind-sets to support learning now and into the future. Therefore, the 'Well-being Radar' for pedagogical interactions hinges on the ability of the teacher to reflect through the lens of well-being. This approach is proposed to guide and support pedagogical assessment practice and is recommended for in-house training and CPD programs for this of other early childhood settings.

Third recommendation

Two future research avenues are recommended: conduct the same research but with a broader sample at national level, ascertaining if the findings of this research are comparative to a wider national demographic, and the inclusion of the perspectives of teachers and parents in research

that explores child-teacher interactions when compiling learning portfolios.

Conclusion

Learning portfolios are not just a compilation of the child's work. They can also exemplify and provide insights into the child's knowledge, skills and competencies supporting the child to be a continuous self-motivated learner as they journey through a life of learning (Glazzard et al., 2010; NCCA, 2009). Where the teacher values the processes of assessment of and for learning as shared with the child, the teacher is valuing childhood as a 'time of being' and a 'time of becoming' (Hayes, 2013). When considered together these concepts value the child's journey of learning. To disentangle the complexity of the processes of compiling learning portfolios, the teacher needs to understand and value dialogue rich interaction and seek out the voice of the child beyond the spoken word (Lundy, 2007). The role of the teacher is complex, and as such, strategies to focus the role on that which is of most value to the child's well-being and well-becoming should be prioritised. The proposed 'Well-being Radar' for pedagogical interactions can help unpack the role of the teacher in guiding the lifelong learning journey of the child. By reflecting through the lens of well-being the teacher can translate the 'nouns' of the child's emerging dispositions into the 'verbs' of the teacher's pedagogical assessment practice (Carr et al., 2010). Early childhood teachers are required to value the richness of the process of planning, implementing and reviewing learning portfolios as much as children value their interaction with the teacher and their portfolio. When combined this creates the context from which a child's intrinsic well-being can flourish. As this research paper is now drawing to an end the last word should by right be with the child. Therefore, I conclude with a paraphrased statement that encapsulates the research findings from the child's perspective:



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Early intervention in the context of Family Support preschool

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Keywords

Family Support Early Intervention Preschool
Additional Needs Meaningful Interactions

Abstract

This study aims to examine the concept of early intervention within the Family Support preschool context. It presents an overview of a doctoral study researching preschool children with additional needs and how early intervention affects their outcomes. The paper includes specific objectives, context, theoretical framework, methodology and preliminary findings. The theoretical framework of this study is embedded in the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) which establishes the importance of proximal process as engines of development in the PPCT model: Process, Person, Context and Time. It is also guided by *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The Irish National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* (DCYA, 2014), including the prevention and early intervention approach, developed through a Family Support approach, which is based on integrated programmes (Pinkerton et al., 2004). This is a qualitative study, which includes interviews and focus groups with parents and preschool teachers and captures the voice of preschool children with additional needs through the Mosaic approach. This study was approved by the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee. Finally, this paper provides a critical approach to the role of additional supports and early intervention for preschool children with additional needs in the Family Support context.

Introduction

Early intervention and when it happens is crucial to support children's and families' needs. In order to demonstrate this study's research proposition, a story has been created to illustrate the scenario. It states:

"Caitlin is a 3-year-old girl. She has two older brothers, aged 8 and 5 years, a younger sister (18 months) and her mum is expecting a baby brother. She attends ECCE in her community. Her mother is a 'stay at home' mummy. Her dad works in a shop, working evening and weekend shifts. Caitlin's parents left school before they completed secondary school. They enjoy drinking and partying. Caitlin loves to go to preschool, but her attendance is very poor, and she may lose the ECCE scheme if her attendance does not improve. Also, she is showing speech delay."

What can be done by researchers, professionals and policy makers to help children in the same situation as Caitlin, by acting at the right time, before problems escalate? In order to answer this question, the following four objectives were developed at the outset of this study: (1) To consider the role of Family Support preschool¹ in early intervention with children deemed to have 'additional needs' (level 2 & 3 - see context); (2) To identify what preschool children and their parents perceive as significant/ meaningful interactions to support their additional needs; (3) To explore how these interactions are supported by the Family Support preschool setting and how this is experienced by children and parents; (4) To identify the extent to which early intervention

¹ Family Support Preschool means a preschool setting in a Family Resource Centre (FRC) in Ireland.

'happening early in the child's life' is offered to children with additional needs by support services agencies.

This paper will explore the context, theoretical framework, methodology and preliminary findings of this study.

Context of the study

Research has shown the relevance of positive foundations in the early years of children's lives and the importance of intervening at an early stage to prevent problematic issues from escalating (Devaney et al., 2013). The prime focus given to early intervention is connected to the need for specific services to respond to children's and families' specific needs as: "providing services with a focus on prevention and early intervention both early in a child's life, and early in the genesis of a problem, necessitates operating a range of services for different levels of need" (Devaney 2011, p. 23).

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (DCYA, 2014, p. 29) states in its second goal that: "prevention and early intervention initiatives aim to address the early indicators of developing problems and to support a trajectory to more positive outcomes".

In support of these early intervention strategies, a Family Support (FS) approach is suggested. The literature shows that there is a lack of consensus regarding the concept of FS. However, a widely used definition in the area of Family Support is the one presented by Pinkerton et al. (2004, p.22) which implies that activities are planned through integrated programmes, combining statutory, voluntary and community and private services, aiming to "promote and to protect the health, well-being and rights of all children, young people and their families, paying particular attention to those who are vulnerable or at risk".

While the concept of Family Support varies, Canavan (2006) suggests a Family Support approach has core principles that should guide the daily practice in services. These principles suggest that Family Support activities should not be designed and distributed generically. Family Support should be solution-oriented and prevention-focused, tackling the needs of the families in each specific case. It requires partnership with children, families and other agencies which occurs in a timely manner.

In order to facilitate the process of identifying a child's additional need in the FS approach, the Integrated Continuum Support Criterion (Crawley et al., 2013) is used. Levels of need and support can vary from universal (level 1), designed for children with no additional needs, children with additional needs (levels 2 and 3) who may need to access one or more integrated services, and finally, children with complex needs (level 4), who require intervention from the State. This study is focused on children with additional needs (level 2 and 3) receiving one additional support and others receiving integrated services.



Figure 1: Universal services for all children and young people

Further, over the last decade the early years sector in Ireland has seen considerable legislative and regulatory reforms. Notable was the introduction of "free preschool" as implemented by the ECCE scheme: Early Childhood Care and Education introduced in 2010 and extended to two years in 2015. The table below shows some of the most significant influential documents relevant to preschool settings.

Table 1: Main frameworks, regulations, inspections and guiding strategies in the Irish early learning and care sector

Title	Year	Name
Síolta	2006	The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education
Aistear	2009	Early Childhood Curriculum Framework
ECCE scheme	2010 (extended to 2 years in 2015)	Early Childhood Care and Education Programme
EYEI	2015	Early Years Education Inspections
Early Years Services Regulations	2016	Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 S.I. No. 221 of 2016
AIM	2016	Access and Inclusion Model
LINC	2016	Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years
QRF	2018	Quality and Regulatory Framework, Tusla Early Years Inspectorate
First 5	2018	A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families

Partnership with parents and working with families is a key approach in these frameworks. In addition, a child-centered vision, recognizing a preschool child as a competent learner having quality, safe environments and rich relationships, which enhance their holistic development, is central. Hayes states (2014, p. 3) "recognising children as holders of rights portrays them as competent, strong and active participants and meaning-makers... to facilitate their development and learning we must create environments where children can participate in a meaningful way...".

Theoretical framework

Hutchinson's statement that "much happens in all interrelated dimensions of development between ages three and six" (2013, p. 464), highlights that preschool children are in a vibrant and important developmental phase having major influences coming from family, school, peer groups, the neighbourhood, and the media.

This study is embedded in the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines child development in the context of interactions happening in a regular pattern between people within contexts connected to the child that influence her/his development. For example, Caitlin, the child in the initial story, is at the centre of a spiral circle, her preschool setting, her interactions in the playground, her visit to grandparents, these are all part of her immediate context (the microsystem).

She is also part of a mesosystem, "the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25) (mesosystem). Other factors affect her development, contexts that she may never enter, such as her parents' job (exosystem), or indirect norms invisible to her, such as national policies (macrosystem). Furthermore, time (chronosystem) is seen as a crucial element, as a child's development can be impacted by things that happen at the current moment, or things that happened in the past. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), these factors drive development.

Bronfenbrenner has updated his original ecological model. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggested the PPCT model: process, person, context and time. "Process" "involves all sorts of transactions between the child and the immediate surroundings that are responsible for the child's competencies and general well-being" (Krishnan, 2010, p. 6). "Person" includes personal characteristics, while "Context" includes the systems, from micro to macro.

Finally, "Time" (chronosystems) includes: (1) microtime, what a child experiences during an activity; (2) mesotime, which consists of what activities and interactions occur; and (3) macrotome, which relates to the historical context of child's development (Greene et al., 2010 cited in Hayes et al., 2017, p. 26).

The following diagrams show the main points of Bronfenbrenner's work.

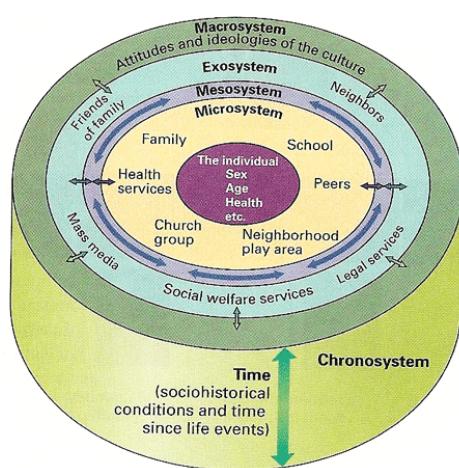


Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner Bioecological Model of Development

Source Figure 1: Lenka Janík Blásková (2016)

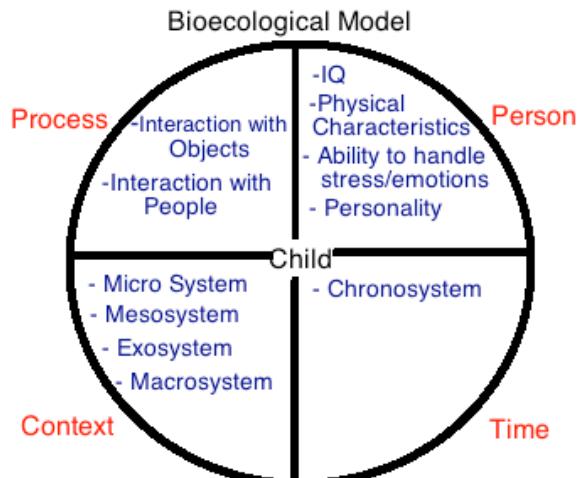


Figure 3: The PPCT Bioecological Model of Development

Source Figure 2: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/bioecological-model-theory-approach.html>

Therefore, child development in this research is studied by considering all levels of contexts around the child, the ones she/he has direct contact with and those that indirectly influence her/his development. Each environment and its interconnections are recognised, considering each person's characteristics, their interactions with other people and contexts, and the consequences of interactions at the present time and of events that happened in the past.

This embeds the early intervention vision, which requires that a child receives the appropriate support from early in life from a range of services (Devaney, 2011), and having the child's family engaged in non-invasive levels of partnership to support the levels of need in order to help the child to reach its full potentiality.

Methodology

This is primarily a qualitative study. The aim is to investigate preschool children with additional needs in the context of Family Support. Preschool settings in Family Resource Centres (FRCs) were approached. Through the FRC programme, Ireland's largest family support programme, families living in social disadvantaged areas receive universal services (Tusla, 2016). There are 106 Family Resources Centres in Ireland, of which 46 have childcare services and 40 have preschool services (Tusla, 2017).

Convenience sampling was applied. A letter was sent describing the research to the 40 Family Resource Centres (FRCs) preschools, with follow-up phone calls to each one of the preschool settings explaining the purpose of the research. Six FRCs and five preschool settings took part in this research.

Approved by the NUI Galway Ethics Committee, this research guaranteed ongoing informed consent/assent; anonymity was assured; participants were free to withdraw at any time. Particular attention was given to children's assent, which was an ongoing process according to children's interests, expressed by verbal and non-verbal communication. Also, a series of data protection protocols were followed to deal with the photographs taken by the children. Pictures of places and objects only were retained; no photographs of children or adult images were kept. The latter were deleted under scrutiny of staff in the preschool premises following a rigorous note-taking process.

The table below shows the number of participants and data collection methods used for each group.

Table 2: Research participants and methods utilised

Source of data	Methods
19 preschool children with additional needs	The application of the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005), a collection of children's arts, crafts and photos taken by themselves, compiled into a book; notes from the child, parents and teachers' reflections about the book and children's preferences.
18 parents of preschool children with additional needs	The use of My Family Star (Early Years), the Outcomes Star for parents of young children Semi-structured Interviews
12 preschool teachers	Semi-structured interviews and focus groups (according to availability)

Initial findings and recommendations

This research is currently in the analysis phase and only initial findings are presented here.

Preliminary findings indicate that the role of a Family Support preschool (objective 1) is being a place that offers an enjoyable and happy environment to children. Recurrent data shows that preschool appears as a place of support for parents of children with additional needs, highlighting the importance of an honest and supportive relationship, with open communication between parents and preschool teachers. It is seen that since preschool is supporting the child, the support is spread to the entire family, particularly to mothers: "I could bring my child in her pyjamas to preschool, so supportive they are" (parent 13).

What preschool children and parents perceive as significant/ meaningful interactions to support their additional needs (objective 2) included the power of inclusion in groups, making friends, having social interactions with other children and adults around them and, finally, spending time outdoors in contact with nature. Preschool itself is seen as a support for these children: "*What works for me? ... Basically, the preschool, that is it. ... He couldn't walk at all, and since he started to come here he was crawling, he was taking steps ... but basically if it wasn't for the preschool, (child's name) wouldn't be walking. And I meant 100%, he would still not be walking. He walked because of them*" (parent 10).

Children's views of what is significant/ meaningful for them complement some of the points indicated by parents. An analysis of their photographs indicates their pleasure from social interaction and being outdoors, reflecting parents' views of the importance of their child being part of the preschool group and spending time outside.

Furthermore, these significant/ meaningful interactions are supported by the FRC preschool (objective 3) through the role of social and emotional development in the preschool setting; and through observations; communications; relationships; and the curriculum itself:

"A lot of the long term is to make sure they are a confident and competent child, they are independent, they are able to make friends. They can use words to gather their emotions, so they are recognising their feelings and have a word to that feeling as well. But also, if they do come in and have a tantrum that they know they are safe" (preschool teacher 10).

In relation to family's perspectives of early intervention when accessing additional support (objective 3), it is acknowledged that cases where a child has a clinical diagnosis from birth, support is offered directly with no delays. Otherwise, parents and children may be facing difficulties in accessing support for these children's additional needs.

"We were looking for a speech therapist a long time ago and we didn't get until only a few months ago, the thing is that in fact his speech improved on his own, because we were waiting for so long" (parent 2).

To conclude, these findings show that Family Support preschools are playing a very important role for children with additional needs and their families. However, substantial work must be done to achieve additional support at the right time.

The Irish State's vision is to be "the best small country in the world for children to grow, where their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled; and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future" (DCYA, 2014, VI). This vision encompasses different dimensions of children's lives. Apart from visualising best places for children and their families, the guarantee of children's rights and mechanisms for children to achieve their full potential, this vision requires structured platforms, if it is to succeed.

In the future, this researcher hopes that an ecological framework for early intervention for children with additional needs will be designed in the context of Family Support to help any

child in situations like Caitlin. The framework would be embedded in the Bioecological model of development placing the preschool in a crucial role in supporting children with additional needs, including the range of meaningful interactions identified in this research (inclusion, social interactions and spending time outdoors among others). The framework should also be linked to the processes of supporting these meaningful interactions (social and emotional development; observations; communications; relationships; the curriculum itself) with the overall aim of helping a child access additional support in a timely manner.

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Encouraging Sparks to Ignite: An Exploration of creativity in the early years

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Keywords

Creativity

Art

Messy play

Resources

Abstract

In recent years, early years education policy focussed on the development of literacy and numeracy skills, with the aim to get children to a presumed starting line for primary education (Moss, 2014). This paper analyses the challenges and possibilities for moving creative learning to the centre of the curriculum in the early years. Using qualitative data, it investigates how creative learning is perceived by parents and practitioners. It then aims to unsettle commonly held assumptions relating to creative learning, whilst recognising that change is required in the way we approach creativity. Reflecting on Foucault's (1978, p.174) sentiment that 'there are a thousand things to do', this paper contends there is a great deal that can be done to enhance creative learning in early years settings. It argues that creative learning should not sit on the periphery of education but must be utilised as a way to teach and learn. This is not proposed as single truth, but, rather, as one element that can play a vital role in education.

Introduction

The last decade has seen a consummate growth internationally in the development of curriculum frameworks aimed at enhancing young children's learning experiences. Approaches to education across the world share a common thread that places an emphasis around play-based learning (Wood, 2013). Differences in the specifics of curriculum models exist, but it is generally held that they are built on the belief that the key to economic prosperity and productivity is a highly educated and skilled workforce (Berger & Fisher, 2013). This belief reflects an outdated educational system that was designed at the height of the industrial revolution to create a workforce that was compliant and conformist, yet it is still ingrained in the way education is approached in Ireland today. As such, elements like literacy and numeracy are often prioritised over the more creative aspects of curricula involving the arts (Robinson, 2008).

Creative learning helps children to make sense of their world and develop a sense of self through expressing themselves and problem solving (Bruce, 2004). Arts educators and early years professionals argue that creative activities and children's enjoyment of art stimulates involvement and a sense of community which enhances learning (Bamford, 2006). In Ireland, Early Childhood Education and Care is often characterised by a division between 'education' and 'care'. In an effort to redress the balance between the two, and reflecting international trends, in 2009 the *Aistear* Early Years Curriculum Framework was introduced across early years settings in Ireland. Focusing on the development of the child through active learning and the use of their senses under four key themes, the *Aistear* framework aspires to promote creativity and freedom of expression in ECEC settings. However, the pressures of an increasingly globalised mainstream steers the focus towards school readiness and literacy and numeracy skills in early years education (Moss, 2014). Observing how difficult it is to ensure every child learns to the same standard in formal education, Robinson (2008) argues that 'the gardener does not make a plant grow'. 'The job of a gardener is to create optimal conditions'. As such, this paper explores perceptions of what these optimal

conditions might be and examines the ways that these conditions are promoted or hindered, with the aim of demonstrating the strong benefits of creative learning, in early years settings.

Theoretical framework

The view that adult led activities restrain creative learning is maintained by Broadhead & Burt (2012, p.56) who argue that by 'restricting children's play opportunities to the themes and ideas of adults, we correspondingly restrict the capacities of their identities to blossom in accord with their own experiences, interests and motivation'. Similarly, Dewey (1933) identified the adult as being central to the child's experience of education through their interactions with the child and the reflective practice and skills they engage in. Else (2014) posits that for creativity to flourish, practitioners must be mindful, reflective, and less controlling, with learning being child-led. Dewey (1915) suggested that, for learning to be meaningful, the child's experiences must be considered. Equally, Eisner (1985) states that, in education, the pursuit of academic progression can come at a cost to the nurturing of the senses. He argues that the senses have become disconnected from learning and that creative activities facilitate opportunities for children to cultivate sensory awareness. Education should enable the child to develop their individual skills and talents rather than adhering to what Friere (1972, p.34) refers to as 'the banking concept' of education.

This research adopts post-structural perspectives, following Dahlberg and Moss (2005).

Consideration of socially negotiated subjectivities relating to creative learning in the early years fostered the researchers' interest in Foucaultian concepts of discourse, power and truth. Creative learning is challenged by several discourses about what it means to be creative, about normal and abnormal development, and notions that literacy and numeracy skills take precedence. Discourses that prioritise market skills over creative skills support capitalist ideas around production and consumption, instead of valuing creativity on its own terms.

Methodology

The methodological framework adopted here recognises that practitioners and parents are situated within discourses and circulating power relations, which impact creative learning. The table below outlines the recruitment, data collection process and analysis for this study.

Table 1: Methodology

Technique	Participants	Recruitment	Data Collection	Analysis
Semi-structured interviews	Five Parents	Emails were forwarded from parents known to researcher to recruit parents willing to participate in the study.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Semi-structured interviews were conducted.Each took between 30 and 40 minutes to complete.Audio recorded and handwritten notes were taken.	Thematic analysis (Audio recordings were transcribed to identify common themes throughout)
	Five Practitioners	Approximately 50 emails were sent to a list of childcare providers and the first five respondents were chosen as participants in the study.		

Data from semi-structured interviews in this research was analysed using thematic analysis techniques that offered a useful and flexible approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns in the rich data obtained (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The dataset was analysed as a whole to reflect thematic descriptions of the most prevailing themes from the interviews.

Reflective practice was an ongoing feature of this research. The researcher kept a reflective journal and reviewed the dataset with peers. Ethical approval for this study was granted by NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee and conforms to standards in the field. Ethical considerations centred on consent and child protection and safety including the provision of information sheets, consent forms and the removal of any identifying factors in interviews to ensure confidentiality.

While the research aims to present a reflective study of creativity in the early years, limitations were identified. The female cohorts of interviewees provide a gendered viewpoint. The interviews provide a brief snapshot of the educators' practice, and so limited, but valuable, conclusions can be drawn.

Main findings

Several factors were identified that impact on creative learning in the early years. These include:

Lack of resources

Research findings identified how financial constraints impact on creative learning. Practitioners explained how they often spend money from their own wages on art materials, as it is easier than trying to justify to management the need to spend.

Anne stated;

'Practitioners buy a lot of materials themselves because sometimes you don't want to go to your manager with a receipt for something that they might not find as beneficial as you would.'

Anne, Early Years Practitioner

Erika stated;

'I just buy it myself so that they can't come back to me and ask 'why did you spend that money?' ...at least if I buy a tub of glitter for myself and it spills then I don't have to explain why money was spent on it and now it's gone...'

Erika, Early Years Practitioner

Lack of space

Lack of space was another significant factor identified that impacts negatively on creative learning. Several practitioners stressed that space in their settings often affects their creative approach.

Juliet identified that:

'Definitely space impacts messy play. Because of space constraints we have to restrict art to a certain area of the room.'

Juliet, Early Years Practitioner

'We are limited for space if they want to do messy play. It's not always possible. It's not always practical.'

Úna, Early Years Practitioner

'It's very difficult, space is really an issue.'

Sarah, Early Years Practitioner

Lack of time

Lack of time also impacts creativity. The extracts below demonstrate parents and practitioners citing time availability as one of the main factors impacting how creative they are.

'I'm so busy; it does fall to the side. It comes at an expense to time. There's never enough time or help.'

Mary, Parent

'I just don't have enough time.'

Zita, Parent

'It took so long to collect that stuff. If you don't spend money, you'll spend time.'

Juliet, Early Years Practitioner

'With painting, I say it is 20 minutes preparing, five minutes fun and 20 minutes clearing up.'

Vera, Early Years Practitioner

Mess and Stress

The essence of creativity, according to O'Connor (2012), lies in problem solving, tenacity, an ability to take risks, and utilising failure as an opportunity for learning. She observes that adults tend to over-entertain children, supporting Aistear's view that the role of the adult is to support values that encourage and support individual funds of knowledge (NCCA, 2009). Consequently, the adult's style of engagement has a profound impact on the child's learning experiences (NCCA, 2015). The issue of mess was one that recurred in the dataset with both practitioner and parents with several suggesting the level of mess created when children are given free access to art supplies is problematic for them.

'Practitioners are stressed. They don't want mess....if you have ten minutes to clean up a room before another batch come in, you're not going to want to take out glitter and paint.'

Juliet, Early Years Practitioner

'I think practitioners are in such a stressful job that sometimes you forget that wiping paint all over the floor isn't a waste of time for the child...but when you have to mop out the floor with 21 other children there and your manager is worried that someone will slip..'

Erika, Early Years Practitioner

Parents also indicated a preference for 'clean' art in their homes that did not generate mess.
'not so much painting because it's really messy but we draw and make stuff, junk art.'

Mary, Parent

'she loves sticking and making but the glue gets everywhere and we're renting.'
Sile, Parent

'Certain things aren't allowed in the house. I learned my lesson with markers, we're back with crayons! I'm still trying to clean marker off the walls.'

Anne, Parent

But I'm not creative...

Dewey (1933) identified adults as central to the child's experience of education through their interactions with the child. One discourse that influences how practitioners engage with art is the belief that one must be artistic in order to facilitate creative experiences. Each early years setting, therefore, has its own limitations due to practitioners' experience; these, in turn, shape a child's response to creative activities. Creativity is not a select talent held by a few but is identified uniquely in each individual. While not everyone is artistic, everyone is creative. Equally, Craft (2005) explains that art and creativity are not synonymous, as not all art experiences are creative. Furthermore, the experience is more valuable to the child than the product. While it is accepted that a practitioner can teach literacy skills without possessing the ability to write a novel, or teach numeracy without holding a math degree, the rhetoric that one must be creative to create quality art experiences is deeply ingrained in early years education. This view was echoed in this research with practitioners stating:

'I know myself that some rooms will do lots of art and other rooms not so much and I know that these are the practitioners that are good at art.'

Vera, Early Years Practitioner

Data collected suggested a prevalence of what can be termed 'template art' and interviewees mentioned using websites like 'Pinterest' and 'Sparklebox'. Most viewed these websites as valuable resources for inspiration and as saving precious time when planning their curriculum. While resources such as these have a place in terms of ideas, the prescribed nature of the activities they generate can limit the child's creative experience as illustrated by Juliet:

'We wanted to make a caterpillar so obviously we had to influence them with paper plates for circles.'

Juliet, Early Years Practitioner

Here, the adults' perception of what a caterpillar 'should' look like supersedes the child's imagination and creative potential as the materials are limited by the adult.

Valuable learning

ECEC is becoming increasingly directed by policies that are heavily focused on school readiness and standardised testing (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). The pilot International Child Learning and Well-being Study (IELS) recently conducted standard testing for 5- year olds in England, Estonia and the US. Standardised testing like this highlights how educators are increasingly being required to focus on how the young child's learning experiences will play a part in their future academic success. Skills are considered the global currency of the 21st century (Robinson, 2008); however, it must be questioned how these skills can be provided for when the nature of the labour market in twenty years is not possible to envisage. The dominant truth that prioritises literacy and numeracy skills in the early years, devalues creative learning by implying it holds less worth than academic learning. Perceptions of what constitutes 'valuable' learning were reflected in the dataset of this research. Discourses pertaining to universal child development revealed opinions that identified creative learning as an 'add-on' that happens when other, more important, learning has occurred. One practitioner, Sarah, reflected on a parent who expressed concern over the length of time her son was taking to reach developmental milestones.

'She said he wasn't able to hold a scissors and he wasn't able to count to twenty. He's four.'

Sarah, Early Years Practitioner

While Úna reflected on the struggle faced by practitioners who address what is valuable learning for the child with parents.

'It's a struggle sometimes because you are trying to express what they are learning in messy play but they don't get it unless they literally see that they can count to 5, count to 10, count to 20.'

Úna, Early Years Practitioner

Conclusion

Key findings from this research identified that dominant discourses of early childhood education shaped the participants' subjectivities and what they perceived to be valuable learning. Parental and practitioners' approach to messy play, a lack of resources and time, and an over reliance on commercially sourced products all constrain how creative children can be in the early years. Children are born with a need to discover and explore their world, and this curiosity is what drives their creative development (Duffy, 2010). However, the ways that children engage with their environment and experiences affects their creative development. Duffy (2010, pp. 20-21) argues further that children must be presented with opportunities to practise and develop creative skills within a supportive environment that both recognises and encourages individual creative ability. Eisner (1992) argued that what we teach children demonstrates what adults believe it is important for them to learn and that the amount of time dedicated to a subject is a prime indicator of the importance placed on that subject. There is a danger in ECEC at present that the arts are merely being used, as per Eisner (1992, p.591), as 'vehicles to develop narrowly defined conceptualisations of literacy and numeracy'. Discourse within the sector needs to be robustly challenged to ensure that developmental and pedagogical concerns are driving curriculum forward and that they are not being overly influenced by perceived ideas of skills required for a future job market. Teaching creativity effectively means adopting a holistic approach that encompasses practitioner training and mentoring.

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Mentoring for Quality in Early Learning and Care Settings: The Development of the Theoretical Framework for Better Start's Mentoring Model

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Keywords

Mentoring model

Theoretical Framework

Better Start

Abstract

Research indicates that mentoring is an effective form of professional development in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings (Howe & Jacobs, 2014; Peterson et al., 2010; Ramey & Ramey, 2008). However, many mentoring programmes in ELC settings have developed in an organic way, in response to local and targeted needs without articulating or presenting a model framework or approach for others to draw on. This paper looks at the background to and the development of the *Theoretical Framework for the Better Start Mentoring Model*. It describes how reflection on, and learning from, years of implementation, combined with the emergence of knowledge informed by key theories of mentoring and coaching in early years settings influenced and guided the development of the *Framework*. The paper presents a brief outline of the theoretical framework for the *Better Start Mentoring Model*. The model is underpinned by a developmental, reflective and strengths-based approach, drawing on adult learning and change theories in the context of the Irish ELC sector.

Introduction

Policy-led measures to improve quality of ELC have included development of the national frameworks, *Síolta* and *Aistear*, training, upskilling, regulation and inspection processes. Mentoring is internationally acknowledged as a key support in ensuring quality in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings (OECD, 2012). The *Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service* was established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2014, to work alongside, and complement existing national ELC curricula and quality-inspection services. *Better Start* adopts a voluntary, strengths-based, and whole-of-ELC setting approach to mentoring Irish ELC services. The service provides a highly skilled and experienced Early Years Specialist team to work directly in a mentoring capacity with early years services. The role of the specialist is to work directly

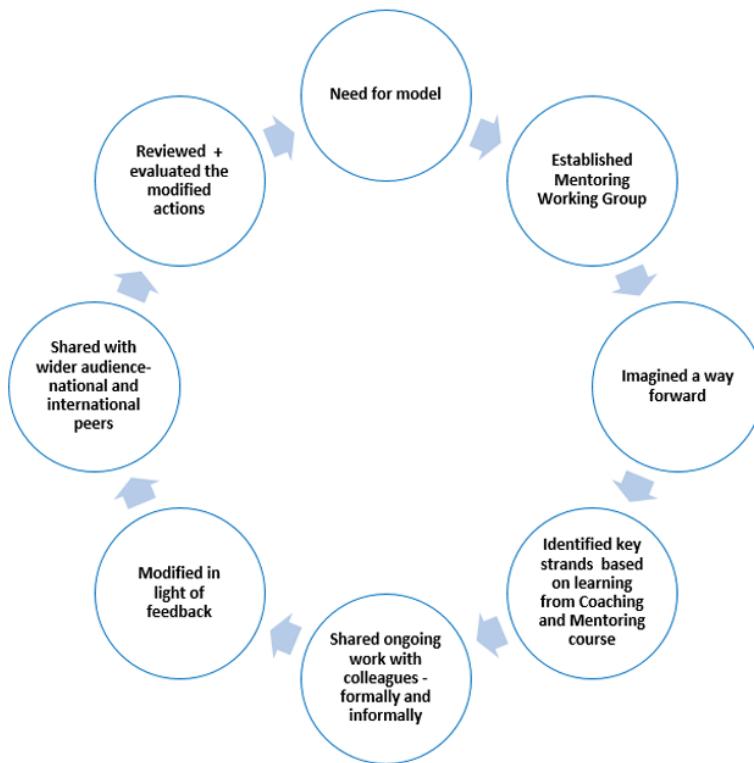
with ELC services to build their capacity to deliver high-quality, inclusive early education and care experiences for children and families. The Early Years Specialist supports practitioners to engage in behaviours, practice, and thinking that lead to positive educational experiences for children, at the same time promoting in the practitioners a sense of personal accomplishment, competence, and empowerment to sustain and develop quality independently. This work is guided by the principles and standards of *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009).

Methodology

From 2017, a four-member working group was established to develop and document a theoretical framework and implementation guide for the Better Start Mentoring Model. The objective was to define a theoretical mentoring model for Better Start, drawing on existing and new aspects of the model and informed by the literature and research on mentoring/coaching and strengths-based approaches to change. This would allow for replication and evaluation of the model and sharing of the learning with national and international colleagues and academics.

The research methodology considered most suitable for this study was a qualitative, action research design. Qualitative research endeavours to 'understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors' (Cohen et al., 2010, p.28). Action research is characterised by 'the active and deliberate self-involvement of the researcher in the context of his/her investigation' (McKay & Marshall 2001, p.49). Fig 1 illustrates the cycle that was used as part of the action research conducted.

As part of the initial funding provided to *Better Start Quality Development Service*, provision was made for upskilling of Early Years Specialists (N=34) through a formal qualification in mentoring and coaching. Participation in this programme had resulted in a wealth of knowledge across the team and stimulated reflective discussions on the theory and practice of mentoring, coupled with individual research projects on varied topics related to mentoring and coaching. Using an action-research paradigm, the group drew on the co-occurrence of the group's work and the ongoing study and research, undertaking a thematic analysis of all research projects and assignments submitted as part of the formal qualification in coaching and mentoring. This led to a national and international desk-based literature review to develop a theoretical framework. As strands of the model were developed the group consulted with colleagues, presenting updates informally at team meetings and formally, at communities of practice sessions where model elements were presented for discussion, interrogated and modified based on group feedback.



**Figure 1: Action Research Cycle for Planning and Conducting Research
(McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996)**

Participation in the Early Childhood Ireland self-organised symposium out of which this paper arose was planned as part-fulfilment of a triangulation approach to model validation, involving three strands of collaboration; with industry partners, academic partners and with the wider ECEC policy audience to disseminate learning and foster further enquiry and discussion. This paper is intended to widen the opportunity for sectoral and academic consultation that participation in the conference provided, by presenting the development of the model to a wider audience. While articulating the *Better Start* approach to mentoring for quality development, it is not intended as an 'out of the box' solution to ensuring quality, given that ELC quality is acknowledged to be a complex, multi-faceted concept. It includes reflection on, and learning from, four years of implementation, combined with the emergence of knowledge informed by key theories of mentoring and coaching in early years settings.

Mentoring for quality

Research on quality within ELC has consistently illustrated that practitioners are the cornerstone of quality provision and that their learning and development influences positive outcomes for children (Urban et al., 2011; Peeters, 2008; Moss, 2000). Both *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) stress the importance of highly skilled, knowledgeable and competent adults supporting the well-being, learning and development of children. Sheridan et al. (2009) state that early years practitioners engagement in continuous professional development is a critical component in the quality of the experiences afforded to children and is central to the professionalisation of ELC services.

One approach to improving the quality of ELC settings is to strengthen the knowledge and skills of practitioners through professional development initiatives. Historically, such initiatives focused on transmitting knowledge through coursework and training. However, recent research indicates that the degree to which professional development is individualised and emphasises the application of

knowledge to practice is a critical factor in ensuring professional development.

Mentoring is not a recent phenomenon. Callan (2006, p.5) states: 'From the responsibility accepted by Mentor for the son of Odysseus in Greek mythology, through the pre-industrial guilds and later apprenticeships in industrial trades, the concept of a more experienced individual assisting others to learn and develop has become culturally embedded'. Although, mentoring has been viewed as a one-way process in the past, current literature contends that adopting a more developmental and reciprocal approach can influence the effectiveness of the process for both the mentee and the mentor. (Chu, 2014). The focus in this approach is on the mentee's responsibility for their own learning and the role of the mentor is in facilitating and enabling the mentee to reach their full potential.

In the ELC sector, mentoring for quality focuses on the quality development needs of individual ELC services. It offers opportunities for meaningful and lasting change. The fact that mentoring is a flexible and an open-ended process ensures that each service is given the opportunity to reflect and prioritise areas for further development. The mentoring process provides opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation. When underpinned by a well-defined, child-centred curricular framework, mentoring ensures that children and their development are kept at the centre.

Towards a definition of mentoring

There is no universally accepted definition of mentoring, due to the fact that mentoring needs to be defined differently in different contexts. Mentoring has been defined by *Better Start* as:

'A supportive, relationship-based learning process between an early learning and care practitioner and an Early Years Specialist. This relationship is based on the values of respect, openness and a commitment of both parties to quality early learning and care experiences for children. The process is reflective, strengths-based and tailored to the individual context of each early learning and care setting.'

The Model is underpinned by a developmental, reflective and strengths based approach. In addition, Early Years Specialists are influenced by adult learning theories and change theories. The Model is not a one size fits all proposition. The Early Years Specialist implements a professional relationship approach whereby quality supports are individualised and are responsive to the context in which the practitioner works. Research demonstrates that professional learning programmes that provide situational learning experiences over an extended period of time are more likely to engage practitioners and effect change (Peterson et al., 2010). The *Better Start* mentoring process focuses on the self-directed and active learning of the practitioner. The approach adopted by the Early Years Specialist is underpinned by a socio-cultural view of learning as it promotes the early years practitioner as a competent and active agent in his/her own learning through respectful and meaningful relationships.

Bokeno, (2000,p.5) describes the mentoring relationship as a 'learning relationship'. He proposes that the 'nature of learning is woven into the fabric of the relationship between two people'. Therefore, a key element to the success of the mentoring is the quality of the interaction between the mentor and the mentee (Rodd, 2013). The purpose of the process is to support the development of a competent and confident ELC workforce who are committed to providing high quality early childhood experiences and promoting best outcomes for children and families.



Figure 2: Visual representation of the Better Start Mentoring Model
As the work progresses this diagram continues to be developed.

Developmental model

As previously outlined, the *Better Start* mentoring model is informed by a number of theoretical perspectives, but is primarily influenced by the developmental mentoring model. Clutterbuck (2014) describes this model as one which draws on a range of styles where the mentor sensitively responds to the mentee's need by choosing appropriate responses and strategies. It is concerned with personal and professional change through reflection on experiences. The focus is on the mentee's responsibility for their own learning and the role of the mentor is to facilitate the mentee to reach their full potential (John, 2008). This approach takes into account the context and the individual, and mentors need to select an approach to fit the needs of the adult at a particular time. (Garvey et al., 2014)

The adoption of a developmental model in the *Better Start* programme supports individuals to develop their reflective practice, identify and achieve their own goals which will lead to the sustainability of the quality development in the service. There are two dimensions involved in the developmental model: the power balance and the need of the adult. Clutterbuck (2007) describes an effective mentor as having the ability to move along the dimensions in any direction, responding to the observed need of the mentee. The effective mentor draws from a range of styles depending on the mentee's needs and the context in which they work (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2009). It is imperative that the mentoring approach allows for individual practitioners and services to engage at a level that is appropriate to their individual situations.

Andragogy

Andragogy, pioneered by Knowles (1970), is the art and science of teaching adults. The concept suggests that adults learn best when they want to learn something or when it is important for them to learn. Andragogy is premised on a number of assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners; self-concept and self-directed learners, the role of experience, readiness to learn, orientation of learning, the need to know and motivation.

These assumptions provide a foundation upon which mentoring practices can be built. The adult is recognised as an active participant in the mentoring process, one who brings their own knowledge, ideas and values. Learning and development of the mentee can be supported when

the mentor acknowledges and builds upon this.

The concept of andragogy is not without criticism. The extent to which the principles apply to adults only has been questioned. The shift in education towards a constructivist approach would imply that the perceived differences between the way children and adults learn are not so evident. Aistear defines pedagogy as “*all the practitioners’ actions or work in supporting children’s learning and development. It infers a negotiated, respectful and reflective learning experience for all*” (NCCA, 2009,p.56).

The *Better Start* mentoring approach is underpinned by a synthesis of the core elements of both developmental model and andragogy whereby the self-directed, active role of the individual adult learner is emphasised. The approach adopted by mentors promotes the adult as a competent and active agent in his/her own learning through respectful and meaningful relationships, mirroring the view of children in *Aistear*.

Reflective practice

Schonfeld (2015) proposes that deliberate and critical reflection contributes to high standards of quality and improved outcomes for all children. Schön’s (1987) theory of reflective practice underpins the approach to reflection within the model. This theory proposes two approaches to reflective practice:

Reflection in action: The practitioner thinks during a particular event and acts accordingly to the situation.

Reflection on action: The practitioner makes time to think about particular events and how they could be handled differently in the future.

Self-reflection is an integral part of the *Better Start* quality development process, the role of the Early Years Specialist is one of a ‘critical friend’ facilitating reflection and asking questions in order to support the practitioner to identify their own solutions. This model of reflective practice is complemented by the implementation of a strengths-based approach.

Strengths based-approach

Better Start’s strengths-based mentoring approach has as its focus the identification, exploration, and use of strengths in participants to foster positive working relationships and ensure meaningful and sustainable quality development. A strengths-based approach to mentoring allows for practitioners to engage at a level that is suited to them and their individual circumstances. The *Better Start* model is informed by Kisthardt’s (2006, p.172) approach that ‘place[s] the person not the problem at the centre of ... deliberations’, resulting in an outcome that is co-constructed and mutually satisfactory to both parties and also more likely to be sustained. It means that the strengths-based mentor supports mentees to set and realise goals they want to achieve, not the goals that the mentor thinks they need to achieve. While being person-centred, the strengths-based approach also relies on a concept Kisthardt terms ‘normal interdependence’ which is a term in social work practice that describes behaviour that is regarded as tolerable or acceptable according to prevailing social/cultural and legal standards. He uses it to emphasise the fact that, the strengths-based approach does not suggest that ‘anything goes’.

Both Saleeby (2006) and Kisthardt (2002) have identified principles of a strengths-based perspective, which have been adapted for *Better Start*’s strengths-based mentoring approach:

- Every child, practitioner, family, ELC service and community has strengths.
- Everybody has the capacity to learn, grow, and change.
- Focus on strengths, interests, knowledge, and capabilities, not on diagnosis, deficits, symptoms, and weaknesses.

- Practitioners are capable of directing and implementing their own changes/learning
- Strengths and resources that are already in place or easily available are utilised as a starting point for development.
- The relationship is collaborative, mutual and respectful and assumes good intentions of all parties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the publication of the theoretical framework and implementation guide for the *Better Start* mentoring model will mark an important milestone for ELC in Ireland. It will add to the national and international literature on ELC mentoring and will have a particular focus on the Irish policy context. This framework will allow for replication and evaluation of the model and sharing of the learning with national and international colleagues and academics. It also provides solid foundation for Early Years Specialists to draw upon in order to continuously support ELC services in a coherent and consistent way, so that those services are of high quality and deliver positive outcomes for children. Work on the implementation guide for the model is ongoing and scheduled for conclusion in 2019. Once finalised it is intended that both will be published and made available to the wider ELC sector.

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Taking account of the voice of the child within the regulatory inspection process of early years' services

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Keywords

Regulatory Inspection Voice of the Child
Preschool Early Childhood Early Years



Abstract

This study, entitled 'Taking account of the voice of the child within the regulatory inspection process of early years' service's has been inspired by the absence of the views of children in the regulatory inspection process in this country. The researcher sought the views of preschool

children in relation to their preschool experiences. The study was carried out in 2018 as part requirement for an M. A. in Early Childhood Studies and Practice at N.U.I. Galway . Qualitative research was selected so as to provide meaning. The primary research methodology viewed the children as a source of their own knowledge. An approach inspired by the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss 2001) multi-method method was used. The study involved thirty preschool children in two preschool settings. The research question posed was 'How could the child's views be heard in the regulatory inspection process of early years' services?' The objectives were to see if young children hold views on their preschools, to explore methods through which children may express their views, and by including children as co-constructors, to collect and document their views and to extend current thinking within the regulatory process. This study established that children hold views on their preschool experience and are prepared to share them. It explored the possibility of eliciting children's views in a manner that could enhance the existing regulatory inspection process. It found that further research is required and recommends that a pilot study be carried out further to this research.

Introduction

This particular study has its roots in a gap identified in the current regulatory inspection process. Hanafin (2014) suggested that consideration should be given to the child's views on their preschool experiences. Later, Einarsdóttir (2015) lamented the lack of literature on the subjective experiences of children in early years' settings. The study has been inspired by the absence of the views of children in the existing regulatory inspection process of preschools in this country. There was a strong rationale for this study in terms of existing practice and policy, given that the regulatory requirements in relation to inspection and registration of early years' services under the present early years regulations (Government of Ireland, 2016) does not document views of children. Review of current Irish policy shows that the Government has in fact committed to the inclusion of children's views in policy-making as evident in the first National Children's Strategy (2000), which as one of its goals states that children should have a voice in matters that affect them. The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 (2014) called for children's voices to be heard. In reality a number of initiatives have been put in place to achieve such a goal. This can be seen in the appointment of the first Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 and establishing TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency in 2014. The latter's participation strategy for children (2015) drew upon the work of Lundy (2007).

The idea of a child-centred, rights-based approach to the inspection process inspired this study. The notion is rooted both in international and Irish law. In 1992 Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Especially pertinent is Article 12, and Irish law also champions children's rights in so far as the Thirty-First Amendment to the Constitution (Children) Act 2012 asserts that the best interests of the child are paramount and that children views should be respected. The research took a strengths-based approach. Similar to Clark (2010) the study viewed young preschool children as competent beings who are experts in their own lives, skilful communicators, active participants, interpreters, researchers and explorers.

Aim

The aim of this study was to establish if preschool children hold views on their preschool experience and to explore the possibility of eliciting these in a way that could complement the regulatory inspection process.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. It reflects a child's rights perspective, Article 12 UNCRC (1989). The researcher's lens reflects the influences of participation. (Lundy, 2007). The pedagogy of listening and theory of children's competency as described by Edwards et al. (1998) frames this study relative to the Italian Reggio Emilia approach which advises us to listen carefully to the hundred languages of children.

Methodology

The methodology used was rooted in the social constructivism field of thought as outlined by Vygotsky (1962). The epistemological influence came from social constructivism exploring the belief that knowledge can be constructed through making sense of experience. This ethnographic study focused on the collation of qualitative data in two Irish preschools using the Mosaic Approach (Clarke & Moss, 2001).

Purposeful sampling was employed with the selection of two preschools. Data collection was carried out over four days on sites which included Stage 1: inspection day and Stage 2: data collection day in both services. Data collection methods involved artwork, children's explanations of their drawings and expressions of their views (individual and group). Observations of the overall interactions, play and conversations had by children with each other and with adults and the researcher were recorded. This was achieved by note taking by the researcher throughout the time on site and dictaphone recordings. In essence the researched became the researchers within the research.

<p>Purposeful Sampling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2 preschools• 1 urban• 1 rural <p>Participants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 30 preschool children age 3-4 years.	<p>Similarities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regulatory Compliance.• Physical structure.• Organizational governance.• Enrolment.	<p>Data Collection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 4 days on sites• Stage 1 and Stage 2• Mixture of artwork, group and individual pieces.• Children's verbal explanations of their drawings.• Observations of preschool children by researcher.• Data collected by site note.• Dictaphone aural recordings.• Observations.
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The data was analysed based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This produced themes and sub themes which were subsequently coded to produce the research information. The children were not involved in the analysis. The themes emerged naturally from the data and were not preselected or pre-coded.

Ethical considerations

Child protection and welfare were paramount as this research was carried out with very young children. The work of Alderson and Morrow (2011) inspired the ethical approach. In practice the researcher's ethical radar (Skånfors, 2009) was raised. Ethical considerations included child assent, informed parental consent, freedom to withdraw from the study, anonymity, participant safety and wellbeing were adhered to. Consent to carry out study in the two settings was also obtained from service owners and staff consent was secured from staff who were present on days of data collection. An option to leave the study was provided should a child not wish to participate; child care staff were available to children to support alternative activities if needed. In the period leading up to the study care was taken to communicate with all involved in the proposed study.

Ethical approval was obtained from National University of Ireland Galway as this work was part of MA studies. Approval was also secured from TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency as the researcher was employed as an Early Years Inspector. All data was stored with utmost care and ethical consideration under lock and key in a secure cabinet. All data protection compliance was in place for the technology used in the study. Parents and children had given consent for the data and drawings to be shared and used both in research and as material for presentation later.



Children referred to their families while discussing their art work
'my daddy and my brother' Cian (3y. 7m.)

Main findings and implications for practice /policy

Findings confirm that preschool children hold views on their preschool experience and are prepared to share them. From a theoretical perspective the research identifies that a culture of listening to children could extend to the practice of regulatory inspection. To meet this policy commitment further research will be necessary so that a regulatory inspection system that includes the voice of the child will be developed.



The main findings have been divided into four particular headings:

- 1. The worlds of the child** (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998)
- 2. Lived experiences.** Vista of daily experiences
- 3. The views of the child.** Linked to Child Care Act 1991(Early Years Services) Regulations 2016
- 4. The child's landscape.** Landscape of the environment in the settings, both physical and abstract.

The worlds of the child

Fusion / Interconnectedness

This involves the worlds of home and preschool, which were fused together by the children. The study shows the meaning the children place on their worlds, exploring the children's perceptions of the worlds and highlighting their readiness to connect these as they move between both.



'my daddy is picking me up today', Sarah (3y.6m.)



This study witnessed the interconnectedness of the worlds of preschool and home, Theresa (4y.7m.) referred to having a 'parrot at home.'

The importance of those two worlds was seen in the children's conversations on site in the preschool. Anna (4y.2m.) gave expression to the worlds by depicting her family enroute from home to preschool in a picture she described as 'me, my mammy and my sister' Anna (4y.2m.)



As Seamus played with play dough he created three hearts for his mammy and said 'I love my mammy' Seamus (4y. 3m.)



Both parents were equally mentioned by name, mammy, daddy, while siblings were also mentioned.

The researcher's earrings were '*like my mammy's earrings*' Sally (3y.8m.)

It was clear that going home time was important and children looked forward to stepping back into their home world. Reflecting this, Peter, in conversation with the researcher at the table when outlining what appealed about preschool stated '*I like going home time*', Peter (3y.10m.) He then added '*I like going to playschool*'.

Lived experiences

This theme presents the views of the children and portrays their interpretation of their own experience. Conversations were found to be a feature of the child participants' preschool experience where children conversed freely between themselves and staff. The preschool children were willing and able to engage in conversation with the researcher and give their views on their preschool.

Activities

The children spoke of what they liked about their preschool, these included dressing up, playing with farms, drawing, running and climbing, potting and growing, playing with dolls and teddies. Other activities mentioned included story time, jigsaws, water play, football, playing on the mat on the floor and playing with the kitchen and home corner. From their spoken accounts and creative works it was clear that these activities had meaning for the child.



The views of the child: Outdoor Play

It emerged that the views children held were reflected in the Regulations. A particular area of importance for the children that is also a requirement from regulatory perspective is the outdoor play facilities. Play and "playing outside" was a recurring issue in the children's narrative of what they liked about their preschool. All the children highlighted to the researcher in verbal or through their representations the regard they held for the outdoor play areas.

Seamus (4y.3m.) was so impressed with what he called 'stones outside' the 'big ones and small ones' that he drew circles, similar to those 'stones' on which he played.



Teresa said she likes 'running and climbing' Teresa (4y.7m.)

Emma said she liked 'going outside' Emma (3y.)

The child's landscape

It was observed as the children talked of what surrounded them in their preschool services and that the physical environment and landscape were very important. It emerged that they valued the outdoors, indoors, the relationships around them and including them. Relationships with family, staff, and other preschool children were important. Children were clear in their views on the physical space, and knew what areas they preferred.



Contributions of the study

Considering the central research questions, '*How could the child's views be listened to in the regulatory inspection process of early years' service?*' this study points towards listening to the views of preschool children and also shows a way of collecting these views. This study recognises the capacity of the preschool child to hold views on what they themselves consider relevant to their preschool experience.

Implication for Practice/ Policy

Through this study, the researcher came to believe that listening to children in the regulatory inspection process could enhance the inspection process and afford children respect which is their right.

The stem approach to regulatory inspection

Formation of a new participative inspection approach that is reflective of a living stem is recommended as a possible outline for the process of statutory regulatory inspection. It is suggested that such a theoretical approach could be modelled on a living stem with a central vein, different leaves representing aspects, including consultation and participation. This approach could be used as a tool by the inspectorate and could have capacity for expansion and development. It would be open-ended and organic so as to allow for further additions with time, such as parental involvement and child participation.

Throughout this study, a continuity of innocence was observed. By respectful engagement the children's own knowledge became clear. The key finding was that preschool children hold views and are prepared to share these views given the right chance. A gap previously identified by Hanafin (2014) has been explored in this study in relation to the possibility of including children's voices in the regulatory process of early years' services.

Overall the need for review and a further pilot study in respect of the regulatory inspection process was recommended. Going forward caution and consideration is advised. The researcher concludes that in the early sector in this country to date there has been much change with the possibility of more to come. However, as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, of the USA Supreme Court, pointed out (Rojas 2018) "Time is on the side of change".

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Supporting children's home learning environment through partnerships with parents - findings from a national study

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Keywords

Home Learning Environment Education Partnership
Parental Involvement ECEC Policy

Abstract

This article is part of a larger research project conducted for the National Parents Council and commissioned by the NCCA, on parental involvement and engagement in their children's learning during the primary school years. The overall research consisted of two phases: Part 1, a literature review (O'Toole et al., 2019)¹, and Part 2, a case study of five schools across Ireland (Kiely et al., 2019). Here the conceptual material identified through the literature review in Part 1 will be presented. Conceptualisations of parental involvement and home learning environments, and how these can be strengthened through partnerships between educational settings and parents, including junior primary schools and early childhood settings will be discussed.

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition that the most powerful aspects of parents' involvement in their children's education may take place outside of the formal education system (Brooker, 2015). Experiences at home, resources, home routines and other aspects of the home environment can significantly impact on a child's experience of education (Dockett et al., 2012). Home-based involvement includes any activities parents implement in the home that reinforce school-based learning (Benner & Sadler 2016).

The literature review uncovered the significant importance of the home learning environment in children's educational experiences and achievements and presented important evidence on how educators can approach parental involvement more inclusively. Implications for partnerships with parents in ECEC settings will be considered and key recommendations will be outlined and discussed.

¹ This literature review draws extensively on the doctoral thesis of Dr. Leah O'Toole.

Introduction

Drawing on the literature review conducted as part of a national research project on parental involvement in their children's primary education (O'Toole et al., 2019), this article discusses conceptualisations of parental involvement and home learning environments, and how these can be strengthened through partnerships between ECCE settings and parents.

In recent years, educational research has highlighted the importance of understanding children's learning as embedded in the social, cultural and family contexts in which it occurs (Alanan et al., 2015). This has led to an increasing focus on the role of parents and the home learning environment (HLE). Many studies have identified the profound influence these may have on children's learning and development both within and beyond formal educational settings (Hayes et al., 2017). Extensive international research shows that children do better when their parents are actively involved with their education (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Desforges & Abouhaar, 2003; Emerson et al. 2012; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2008). Thus, designing learning environments to maximise opportunities for bridging communication between children's home and school may be a significant factor in children's educational outcomes (Hayes et al., 2017).

It is important to theorise explorations of the home learning environment and the role of parents in children's learning, as otherwise there is the risk of viewing certain homes, parents and children through a deficit lens, and misconstruing seeming disengagement as disinterest (Brooker, 2015). Hartas (2008) indicates that "parental involvement works indirectly on school outcomes by helping the child build a pro-social, pro-learning self-concept and high educational aspirations" (p. 139). Parents may be particularly powerful role models for children since Bandura's work has shown that models are most influential when they are perceived by the child as similar to self, and when there is familiarity and shared history of context and experience (Bandura, 1969). Studies have also specifically highlighted the importance of parental involvement for children's successful transitions (O'Toole, 2016), both from preschool to primary school (Brooker, 2008; Dockett et al., 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Margetts, 2002; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011) and from primary to secondary school (Anderson et al., 2000).

Parental engagement, involvement and partnership

Not all research is clear in defining what exact behaviours are expected of parents, and there are many different, sometimes conflicting, definitions and terminology used in the literature, such as 'parental involvement', 'parental engagement' and 'partnership' (Harris & Robinson, 2016; Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013; Kavanagh, 2013; Robinson & Harris, 2014). Conceptual differences have led to some confusion regarding the impact of parents on their children's learning and appropriate ways to support them (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Harris & Robinson, 2016; Robinson & Harris, 2014).

Goodall and Montgomery (2014,p. 400) propose a continuum approach to elucidate the subtleties of involvement and engagement, "between parental involvement with schools, at one end, and parental engagement with children's learning, at the other", recognising it not as a linear progression but as a 'messy web' of interactions. The authors outline three 'points' along the continuum:

- parental involvement with the school (agency of the school),
- parental involvement with schooling (processes surrounding learning and the interchange between parents and schools staff) and,
- parental engagement with children's learning (parental agency, choice and action).

They suggest that whilst involvement suggests taking part in something or an activity, engagement is more than just activity or involvement but a 'feeling of ownership', with the potential to influence approaches taken to learning, collaborate with educators and have an input into co-constructing the ethos of the educational setting. Yet the authors caution as to how we recognise 'engagement'. For example, parents from minorities or facing economic challenges

might find engagement with the school challenging but may still want to be involved in their child's learning.

Harris and Robinson (2016, p. 188) argue for a new understanding and framework for home-based parental involvement utilising a theatre metaphor of 'stage setting' and 'performance'. Stage setters are in charge of setting the context and creating 'life space', which the authors (2016, p. 188) deem to be "...the parameters within which the actor's performance occurs – that corresponds with the intended action." This resonates with Bronfenbrenner's image of an active child influencing and being influenced by his or her environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In their re-conceptualisation of parental involvement, Harris and Robinson (2016) argue that whilst traditional understandings of parental involvement include a multitude of parental activities, stage setting comprises of just two elements: messages and life space, shifting away from engagement in actual activities and rooting it more in lifestyle, which allows for busy parents with minimal direct involvement in their child's schooling to be successful stage setters.

Harris and Robinson (2016) in arguing for a new conceptualisation of parental involvement build on their previous suggestion "...that no clear relationship exists between parental involvement and student outcomes" (Robinson & Harris, 2014, p. 322). Other critiques of parental involvement come from Epstein who argues against the use of that term, favouring instead 'school, family and community partnership' (as cited in Goodall & Montgomery 2014 p.401), thus recognising the embeddedness of children's learning. While Epstein and Sheldon acknowledge 'community', Goodall and Montgomery (2014, p. 401) prefer to focus on the 'triad' of parent, child and school. This points to the continued contentiousness of our understanding of the concept of parental involvement; in how it is conceptualised by stakeholders, its relationships to outcomes or whether there is a need to re-conceptualise models that move away from activity to more flexible models.

The home learning environment

In recent years, there is increasing recognition that the most powerful aspects of parents' involvement in their children's education may take place outside of the formal education system (Brooker, 2015). Experiences at home, resources, home routines and other aspects of the home environment can significantly impact on a child's experience of education (Dockett et al., 2012). Researchers often distinguish between home-based parental involvement, like helping children with homework, or reading with them, and school-based parental involvement, like attendance at parent-teacher meetings (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Robinson & Harris, 2014). The effectiveness of both types has been widely supported in the literature (Jeynes, 2005; 2007). According to Dockett et al. (2012) 'family readiness' or the ability to support children's learning at home is crucial to the development of 'school readiness' in children.

Gileece's (2015) research found that informal, home-based measures of involvement (e.g. high academic expectations, and the number of books in a home) were identified as more influential than formal, school-based measures. These findings regarding the relative effectiveness of home-based and school-based involvement have been replicated internationally. According to Benner and Sadler (2016), parents' formal involvement in school-led activities tends to have more variable outcomes, whereas the areas, most strongly linked to students' achievement are involvement in home-led activities like enrichment activities (e.g. swimming, visiting zoos, museums and other interesting activities, exposure to music and drama, etc) and parents' academic socialisation.

However, some critics of approaches that focus on home learning environment identify the fact that there may still often be an emphasis on schools dictating to parents the types of learning that should be happening in the home, rather than drawing on the 'funds of knowledge' that children and families draw from their own cultures and ways of learning (Brooker, 2015; Hayes et al., 2017). Edwards and Warrin (1999) indicate that this may mean that schools "use parents to help deliver an over-loaded curriculum" but fail to recognise the "real role" of parents as the

child's earliest teachers and as the builders of learning identities on which all learning is based" (p. 325). They refer to this as "a form of colonisation, rather than collaboration" (p. 330). An example of such colonisation of home lives might be seen in the recommendation from the authors of the *National Assessments of English Reading and Maths* that parents limit children's time spent playing with friends as less time spent with friends is correlated with higher scores on standardised tests (Kavanagh et al., 2015). This is highly questionable when one considers the extensive evidence that play supports children's learning in areas that are arguably more important than measures of standardised tests such as oral language skills, social skills and self-regulation skills (Hayes et al., 2017). Equally, it is perhaps unfair to expect parents who have had negative educational experiences and maybe even experienced prejudice within education systems, such as that documented in groups from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, to transmit positive messages of academic socialisation to their children (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Similarly, evaluations of parenting and what constitutes a 'good' home learning environment must be treated with caution, since they are so emotionally and culturally loaded (O'Toole, 2016).

Parental involvement in early childhood care and education

As children's and parents' first encounter with educational settings, early childhood care and education settings are particularly well-placed to initiate positive parental engagement experiences that can be transferred to the primary school setting upon children's transition to school. The importance of parental involvement is recognised in the First 5 Strategy (DCYA, 2018) where two goals revolve around parents and families and their key role in children's early learning and care. Thus, Goal A has as its overall objective to support parents in their ability to care for their children and appropriately access suitable early educational settings and services, while Goal C identifies the importance of supporting parents in creating playful home learning environments as well as supporting parents' involvement in ECEC settings (DCYA, 2018). The strategy in particular emphasises the importance of play-based learning and story reading and therefore sees local libraries and ECEC settings (termed Early Learning and Care (ELC) in the strategy) as crucial to the promotion of such care and learning. Within this context, parents' ability and availability to play and read with their children from birth are seen as paramount (DCYA, 2018, p.140).

Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) can provide a key component of supporting the enrichment of children's home learning environment (HLE) through engagement with parents. Several of the *Síolta* Quality Standards (3: Parents and Families, 4: Consultation and 13: Transitions) revolve around or include significant reference to parents and their role in their children's care and learning. In these standards, ECEC settings are advised to work in close partnership and collaboration with parents around their children's learning and care. Thus, as identified in the *Síolta* Research Digest for Standard 3: Parents and Families,

"As early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings play a strategic role in both the current and future learning patterns of children, and in their socialisation, encouraging partnership with parents and families should be seen as an integral component of quality provision. This requires a proactive partnership approach and should be evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures." (CECDE , 2006)

Such partnership, *Síolta* Standard 3 advises, must be respectful, inclusive and "build sustainable 'interpretive communities' based on shared understanding of the child" (CECDE, 2006), which can be facilitated through appropriate policies and procedures being in place and strong, continuous two-way communication between the home and ECEC settings. More specifically, ECEC settings are encouraged to keep parents informed of their children's performance and setting activities, regular updates such as newsletters on aspects of the curriculum being covered in the setting, as well as having information sharing events or meetings and providing opportunities for parents to visit the setting, observe and provide feedback, and potentially contribute to activities within the setting (*ibid.*). As identified in the literature review, however, concepts of parental involvement vary

greatly and are immensely culturally influenced. Thus, research testifies to the fact that parental involvement varies not only according to societal contexts and cultural values, but according to the status of ECEC teachers within a country and according to parents' abilities to develop and maintain partnerships, partly due to socio-economic and cultural factors (Hujalaa et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2018). Current policy documents within Irish ECEC are cognisant of such contextual factors on parental involvement and therefore advocate for an inclusive approach to parental involvement (NCCA, 2009), as the literature review also outlines for primary education (O'Toole et al., 2019).

Such advice is very similar in nature to that identified in the literature in relation to primary schools (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). It is perhaps, however, particularly pertinent for early childhood as an early creation of strong parental involvement may set families up for continued parental involvement throughout children's educational journeys (O'Toole, 2016). If parents see the benefit and merit of their involvement in their children's learning from the beginning of their children's encounter with educational settings, they may be more likely to continue such involvement long term. This is especially so where parents feel valued and respected due to their invited and encouraged involvement, building confidence and acknowledging strengths (Keyser, 2017). This may especially bring parents into educational settings where socio-economic disadvantage and other causes of marginalisation such as language, culture, and personal experiences of education, might otherwise hinder such involvement (O'Toole et al., 2019). As ECEC settings may appear as less frightening to disadvantaged parents, due to the lesser likelihood of having former personal negative experiences with such settings, working on building strong parental involvement in ECEC may be beneficial for later involvement in education. Strong parental involvement in ECEC, as advocated through *Síolta* and *Aistear*, is also particularly important due to the important role of parents and partnerships between home and educational settings in children's successful transition to primary school (*Síolta* Research Digest 13 and *Aistear*). In this regard, Mhic Mathúna et al., (2017,p.7) have identified that ECEC settings are significantly more likely to discuss transitions to school with parents than are primary schools, suggesting that ECEC settings are aware of their important role in cultivating meaningful partnerships with parents that can last into children's future education by facilitating appropriate transitions to primary school through conversations with parents around children's readiness for school.

For educators to be most successful in these endeavours requires a new conceptualisation of *parental engagement* rather than merely *involvement*, moving beyond traditional roles for parents in supporting (but never questioning) the ethos and approaches of educational settings. Instead, drawing on the most up to date literature and research, early childhood educators and primary school teachers can move towards genuine partnership with parents with foundations rooted in mutual respect. In spite of the challenges this poses, there now exists an extensive body of research highlighting the necessity of proactively working towards meeting these challenges for the benefit of children's learning across the early years.

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The role of the Early Start Programme in preparing disadvantaged children for primary school

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Keywords

Transition

Parental Involvement

Disadvantage

Early Start

Abstract

Research highlights that tackling disadvantage in the early years can improve children's learning outcomes (Kiernan et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2004). According to Kiernan et al., "benefits are evident in terms of life skills, greater social and economic life chances and success and a decrease in outcomes including early school leaving, literacy difficulties, unemployment and delinquency" (2008,p.121). This article explores how the Early Start Programme supports children's readiness for school from the perspective of educators and parents. The article is based on a small scale student research project and investigates some of the impacts that social disadvantage has on children in terms of their school readiness, before analysing how the Early Start Programme specifically seeks to address some of these challenges. A qualitative approach was used, including semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The findings from the study highlight the holistic benefits the programme has on children experiencing disadvantage, the positive effects parental involvement has on preparing their child for school and the importance of supporting transitions for children into primary school.

Introduction

As suggested by Whelan and Brosnan (2019) in this journal, the Early Start Programme has received little attention in terms of research, evaluation and policy development. Little is therefore known in terms of its benefits for the children who attend the service. According to Faller (2014), Early Start teachers suggest the programme is of great benefit to children in making them more independent, giving them and their families a sense of identity and belonging in the school environment, and smoothly transitioning to primary school. This article discusses research conducted in one Early Start unit in the greater Dublin area, focusing on its specific role in preparing children for school and the role of play based learning and parental involvement herein, speaking to significance of the points made by Brosnan, O'Brien and O'Toole (2019) regarding the role of school-home collaboration in creating play rich learning environments for children to improve their learning experiences and outcomes.

Research highlights that tackling disadvantage in the early years can improve the learning outcomes of children (Kiernan et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2004). According to Kiernan et al., "Benefits are evident in terms of life skills, greater social and economic life chances and success and a decrease in outcomes including early school leaving, literacy difficulties, unemployment and delinquency" (2008,p.121). The Early Start Programme is one approach adopted in Ireland to help

tackle disadvantage to improve children's learning outcomes long term. The first Early Start Unit opened in 1994 in 40 primary schools in areas of urban disadvantage, in particular to support children's transition into primary school.

The Early Start Programme takes inspiration from Head Start in the United States. Head Start programme improves the school readiness of children from birth to five years in low income families and focuses on the development of a child's social, emotional and cognitive skills (Head Start, 2019.) The programme includes parental involvement as some parents need assistance with their own education and literacy problems, and it supports the 'the whole child approach' to ensure the child and their family are given the necessary services to ensure adequate school readiness (Miller et al., 2015).

The Early Start curriculum focuses on the development of the child's socio-personal, language and cognitive skills (Ryan, Ó hUallacháin & Hogan, 1998). Its key foci are language development, cognitive development, personal development, emotional and social development (de Róiste et al., 2012). Thus, De Róiste et al. (2012) recommend that: "high-quality educational play equipment is used, enabling a wide variety of different play contexts such as sand and water play, block/construction play, socio-dramatic and creative play, jigsaws, story, art, games, music and movement" (de Róiste et al., 2012,p.181).

A key element of the programme is the role of parents and parental involvement with schools; parents are encouraged to engage in school events, classes and activities in the classroom such as outings and play sessions (DES, 2012; de Róiste & Gilmore, 2012). Parents are invited to spend a full day in the classroom once a month in order to spend time with their child. This also allows the parent to enhance their own educational and personal skills (De Róiste et al., 2012). According to Faller (2014), Early Start staff create a rota for the parents, so that each parent comes into the class to help out. This active involvement helps the parent to focus on the child's attendance and supports their activities within the class (Faller, 2014).

Research design

The article is based on an undergraduate research project in an Early Start Unit in the greater Dublin region. The student researcher partook in a ten-week placement in the Early Start Unit and conducted the research as part thereof. It is a qualitative research design, consisting of interviews with different stakeholders of the Early Start Programme, as well as open-ended questionnaires. Purposeful sampling was used, a process that includes the informed selection of appropriate persons that will potentially benefit the study by providing information, opinions and new perspectives (Lewis et al., 2014). Participants included the four staff in the two Early Start Units within the school, as well as 15 parents, half of the parents of children attending one of the units. Due to the small scale nature of the research, children were not consulted for this project, which poses a limitation to the research. Permission was sought from the principal of the school in which the Programme was situated and ethical approval was granted by Marino Institute of Education.

Findings

The research presented here focuses on the Early Start Programme's role in preparing children for primary school; specifically on teachers' understanding and support of school readiness, the role of play and language development herein, as well as the role of parental involvement. In this article, the focus is exclusively on supporting school readiness through parental involvement. Parents' views are also presented.

During semi-structured interviews, primary school teachers as well as childcare workers were asked about their understanding of the term school readiness and what it means to them. Although each interviewee had a different response, they all focused on the child's individual

development rather than the academic skills a child acquires when they begin school, a view that is supported by research literature (Kiernan et al., 2008).

All Early Start staff and the primary school teachers interviewed for the research commented on the importance of parental involvement and working with parents to support their children's transition to school. When the child begins in the Early Start Programme, the parents and teachers work in partnership to support a child's learning and development. Before beginning the programme, parents are invited into the classroom in June for a meet and greet with the Early Start teachers. This allows parents to voice any concerns they might have, to ask any questions about how the programme operates and to get to know the staff. The Early Start staff explain the curriculum used and the parental involvement element of the programme. All interviewees agreed that parental involvement is vital and is central to support a child's school readiness. Thus, the teachers noted:

"Bridging the gap between the home setting and the school and working alongside parents."

"Recognising that parents are the main educators and they are going to be with their child on that journey and that they're supported and that they feel confident about their role in education too."

The staff in the Early Start Programme portray different approaches to how they can get parents involved. They have a parent's notice board outside the classroom to keep the parents up to date on latest projects, reminders for upcoming events and pass on information. They also send out regular texts and have progress phone calls with the parents. According to one teacher, *"We have already said it to the parents in June when we had our meeting that parental involvement doesn't mean you have to be physically in the room, you are involved like we see them every day, you bring them in and the notice board is outside so they're getting notes, they're getting texts, they're getting phone calls if needs be."*

One of the primary school teachers emphasised "your special day", where the parents are invited into the class and can spend the day with their child to see what the children do in the class every day, their interests and how independent and confident they have become. Finally, a teacher emphasised that they meet parents on a regular basis at drop off and collection times. This allows the parents and teachers to discuss different issues or scenarios that have occurred either in the class or at home. Thus,

"So it is kind of a reciprocal situation where they can share issues with us, we can discuss issues that happened perhaps in the room during the day so it is an ongoing situation like that ongoing contact."

The teacher and the parents can assist each other to support the child if they encounter difficulties.

Questionnaires were sent out to the parents of the children attending the Early Start Programme, and a question was included on parents' perceptions of whether they think parental involvement in the class supports their child's learning. The majority of parents agreed that parental involvement supports their child's learning.

"It makes them confident to see parents at school with them."

A few parents disagreed and thought that class based involvement in the Early Start did not support their child's learning. This group of parents highlighted that their participation in the classroom has negatively affected their child. The parents felt their child's behaviour had deteriorated and resulted in the child becoming hyper.

The Early Start Programme receives funding specifically towards parental involvement (de Róiste, 2012). The interviewees expressed how lucky the class is to receive the funding and how the funding incorporates parental involvement, benefiting the children's learning. According to one

childcare worker this funding is used for birthdays, trips for the children and their parents, class mascot, art supplies for various special occasions during the year such as Christmas and Easter days.

"Parental involvement funding would cover things like birthdays and having simple things like birthday cake and badges and cards and the parents being involved."

Childcare worker D. tells us how they have a class mascot "Fred the Ted". Fred gets to visit each child's house for the weekend. Fred has a camera that the parents use to take pictures of their child with Fred on their adventures.

"It's great we can do the photos as well and it is quite expensive so it is great that they are there for the parents, especially for the parents that are not able to get into the classroom."

Discussion

According to Hanniffy (2016), school readiness means different things to different people. This is also evident in the data collected from both the interviews and questionnaires. However, one aspect all interviewees commented on was the individual skills (such as independence and ability to function in a classroom) as opposed to more academic abilities, reflecting Kiernan et al.'s (2008) emphasis on the importance of various competencies for school readiness, including cognitive skills, language, social, physical and motor development.

Considering the prominent role of parental involvement in the Early Start Programme, and the emphasis placed on this by staff in terms of supporting children's transition to school, it is more apt here to consider 'family readiness' (Dockett et al., 2012) – the ability to support children's learning at home. Parents are a child's first educator and this role continues even when they begin early childhood education and primary school (Kalayci et al., 2018). Such findings also reinforce De Róiste's point (2012) regarding the importance of parents engaging in school activities such as 'special day', which particularly speaks to the role of home-school communication and links with regards to children's learning. Thus, the CECDE (2006) supports and identifies how important the role of communication is between parents and educators, which must be an ongoing process during the child's education.

Yet the fact that some parents did not feel their involvement in the Early Start classroom had an effect on their children's education speaks to the importance of distinguishing between home-based and school-based involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011) and recognising the role and significance of each. It was, however, evident that some of the parents may have misunderstood the question and many parents assumed the question asked whether they support their child's learning at home. They refer to themselves as the child's first teacher before they reach Early Start. Another response says "*Learning starts at home.*" Interestingly, a significant number of the parents answered that they don't know, perhaps speaking to a lack of confidence identified by Kiely et al. (2019) with regards to parents from particular SES groups in relation to their child's education.

It is evident from the data collected that the funds the programme is receiving are being used to support parental involvement within the setting in a variety of ways (DES, 2019) and that the majority of parents and all staff find this beneficial. However, involvement in the classroom is not always straightforwardly positive, according to some parents, and where this may be the case other avenues for parental involvement may need to be strengthened.

Conclusion

The importance of the Early Start Programme in supporting and enhancing a child's school readiness was demonstrated within this research. It is evident from the findings that the programme has some influence, through strong parental involvement, on the holistic development of a child enhancing the child's school readiness. It appears to offer support mechanisms for families to become ready for school and build up a positive home-school

connection before junior infants. Parental involvement is one of the most crucial aspects of a child's educational adventure and is a key element in preparing children for school. This suggests that the focus should not exclusively be on a child's readiness for school but a family's readiness for school and thus widens the focus from school readiness to family readiness. This is where the Early Start Programme is particularly strong due to the particular focus here on involving the whole family in the school setting and in creating a positive home learning environment.

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Public perceptions of early childhood practitioners: questions of instrumentalism or productive pedagogy?

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Keywords

Quality Professionalisation Discourse Care Autonomy

Abstract

This research examines public perceptions of early childhood practitioners as questions of instrumentalism or productive pedagogy. This critical interpretivist doctoral study consists of a select critical literature review (2005-2018); a critical review of policy documents for *Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) and an empirical study, comprising questionnaires ($n=104$) and eleven semi-structured interviews, capturing the perspectives and understandings of ECEC workers in Ireland.

Theoretical frameworks for this study drew from Foucault's (1994) writings on power, Bernstein's (2000) concept of the pedagogic device and Apple's (2012) work on inequality in education - they all proved valuable in understanding the origin and impact of public perceptions of early childhood practitioners.

The select critical literature review shows the multiple roles early childhood practitioners are expected to play (Moss, 2006) and how an increasingly performative and market-led discourse of ECEC education (Osgood, 2010) has shaped public perceptions and understandings of early childhood practitioners. Mooney Simmie and Moles (2019) show how this market-led discourse of education based on the primacy of the markets has penetrated into policy and practice in Ireland.

Data analysis of the self-selecting participants in this study, reveals early childhood practitioners in contemporary Ireland as a precariat workforce with very poor conditions of employment within a fast-paced policy reform sector where policy increasingly overvalues performativity, standardisation and qualification and where there is either an undervaluing or non-recognition of care responsibilities.

This research argues for a holistic and emancipatory understanding of ECEC, encompassing recognition of care responsibilities of early childhood practitioners. The findings from the study show that policy and inspection alone, while necessary, will not be sufficient to recognise the significance of ECEC in the lives of very young children and to assure the employment conditions and prospects of this workforce in the education sector.

Introduction

This paper aims to critically examine understandings of early childhood practitioners in Ireland, emphasising policy discourses of professionalisation. The study explores these understandings

from two different perspectives - the rhetoric-reality contradictions at play between the stated official policy for ECEC and the lived reality experienced, expressed in the understandings of early childhood workers employed in the sector.

My rationale for this study was prompted by years of experience in ECEC practice and the rapid and unprecedented rate of change in official policy without any commensurate level of state investment. I wished to examine what was happening in reality and to explore the notion promoted by policymakers that ECEC is moving in a positive direction

In the 'pedagogic device' Bernstein (2000, p.34) recognised discursive gaps present within a healthy education system whereby spaces for dialogue, meaning-making and challenging exist between policy and practice as opposed to top down, prescriptive and authoritarian approaches. It is the existence and preservation of these gaps that led to the development of my research questions.

Two research questions were asked in this study:

(1) How does the official constructions of early childhood education policy impact on the professionalism and professionalisation discourses of early childhood workers in Ireland and who benefits? (i.e. discursive positioning).

(2) How does early childhood policy impact on the espoused practices of early childhood workers in Ireland, their contextual understandings and perspectives? (i.e. securing the gaps in their lived reality).

These research questions focused on why and how early education policy impacted childcare workers, both in terms of how they discursively positioned the workers through official policy and how this policy impacts on their contextual understandings and perspectives. The ECEC policy discourse emphasises the benefits of professionalisation for pre-school children. However, as the role of power became increasingly obvious in my work, the asking of the question 'who benefits' from this professionalisation process became important.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Foucault's (1994) understanding that wherever there is power there is also resistance, Bernstein's pedagogic device in the analysis of discursive gaps and Lynch, Grummell and Devine's (2012) understanding of the erosion of care theory within education. Feminist perspectives of what Warin (2014) terms 'educare', whereby education and care are inseparable and equally valued, were important in shaping this study and directed the research through the use of three lenses. Basil Bernstein's work was important in explaining the 'silencing' and ethical suppression of childcare workers in Ireland, allowing official ECEC policy positioning of an ideal type to take precedence over any alternative conceptualisations of the workers themselves. Michael Foucault's work on power and punishment supported analysing the discursive positioning of childcare workers in this study. Foucault claims we all possess agency, but this did not capture the degree of repression experienced by childcare workers. As a precariat workforce, with no access to trade union solidarity, the lived reality for these ECEC workers was little or no agency. Apple and his work on power and inequality which recognised that while we all have agency, our ability to act upon this agency is contextual and this uneven playing field is heavily tilted in the direction of the powerful. Apple's work on pink collar workers, who he identified as female and employed in poorly paid and low status jobs, was also of particular relevance to the status of early childcare workers in Ireland.

Literature review

Through a critical review of the literature, the questioning of professionalisation emerged as necessary with Evetts's (2011) recognition of the distinction of occupational and organisational

professionalisation being particularly relevant to this study. Peeters (2008) recognises the professionalisation of ECEC as important on the political agenda across Europe. However, Urban, Robson & Scacchi (2017) suggest within an Irish context, the professionalisation of ECEC is still largely regarded as, 'at an emergent level'.

Key issues arising from the literature in relation to the professionalisation of early childhood education were, the devaluing of care (Taggart, 2011) the relative diminished authority of childcare workers (Bown & Sumision, 2007) the role of ECEC in furthering human capital (Elwick, Osgood, Robertson, Sakr & Wilson 2017) and a merging discourse between quality and professionalisation (Urban, 2008). Multiple professional identities, the absence of a professional body for ECEC and shared codes of practice were recognised by ECEC workers as detrimental to the further sector professionalisation (Urban et al., 2017).

Recognising the historically gendered nature of ECEC, Peeters (2008) suggests future conceptualisations of ECEC must be gender-neutral for increased salaries and qualifications to be achieved within the sector. Further complicating the professionalisation of ECEC, Urban et al. (2017) recognise the existence of a contradiction between training/working conditions for ECEC and the 'public rhetoric' concerning the importance of preschool children and their early experiences.

Methodology

This critical interpretivist study (Creswell, 2014) utilised mixed methods research. Critical interpretation of policy documents 1999-2018 revealed the positioning of the ideal early childhood worker. An empirical study, questionnaires ($n=104$) and interviews ($N=11$) captured the contextual understandings and perspectives of a sample of early childhood workers. Non probability, purposive sampling was used to identify potential research participants, with participants self-selecting to participate. Ninety seven per cent of the research participants were female with 64 per cent of participants aged between 18 and 34 years.

An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods design was used to analyse the data. SPSS assisted quantitative data analysis while NVIVO supported qualitative data analysis. Descriptive statistics supported the building of a profile of early childhood workers in this purposive sample in Ireland while inferential statistics were valuable in understanding participants' conceptualisations of professionalisation.

Both data sets were subjected to complex processes of inductive and deductive analysis and to critical interpretation (Silverman, 2013). Throughout this process, there was ongoing interrogation of my personal reflexive positioning to assure validity.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted for this study, Rhetoric-Reality Contradictions: examining the discursive positioning of Early Child Care Education Practitioners in the Republic of Ireland (Murphy, 2018) by the University of Limerick. Data was securely stored and anonymised. Participant consent was sought prior to questionnaires and interviews.

Main findings and implications for policy/practice

The findings from the study reveal ECEC workers in contemporary Ireland are predominantly a precariat workforce, operating within a superstructure of policy flows and politics (Murphy, 2018). Despite requirements for higher levels of qualification, the worker profile in this study corresponded to Apple's (2012) description of 'pink collar workers'. Rates of pay, working conditions and status remain low. When asked about their ongoing participation in further education, participants identified multiple challenges, outlined in Table 1. A policy imperative for the advancement of human capital theory has seen a performative approach to inspection

and standardisation within the ECEC sector which is deeply contradictory to traditional holistic and emancipatory perceptions of a professionalised workforce. Current ECEC policy encourages low trust towards workers, legitimising oppressive and reductionist policy interpretations of professionalisation.

Table 1: Challenges to engagement with further education

Challenge	Degree of significance
Conflicting course and work days	p = 0.059 – Not significant
Loss of earnings	p = 0.027 – Significant
Little availability of weekend and evening courses	p = 0.017 – Significant
Time commitment	p = 0.01 – Significant
Few job opportunities	p = 0.081 –Not significant
No increase in wages	p = < 0.05 Significant
Cost of courses	p = < 0.05 Significant

Critical interpretation of policy

The critical interpretation of policy clearly shows a market-led model of ECEC in Ireland facilitated by austerity economics and minimal government funding and responsibility for the sector. The introduction of the ECEC scheme in 2009, the workforce development plan of 2010 and the revised preschool regulations of 2016 were recognised as key developments in the changing policy landscape of early childhood education in Ireland. The introduction of the *Early Childhood Education and Care Scheme* (ECEC) in 2009 started to atomise and fragment 'educare' whereby increased government funding was made available for preschool age children while younger children were overlooked. Furthermore, the provision of increased rates of capitation for staff employed in ECEC rooms further prioritised the education of children in these preschool rooms and again overlooked younger children in the service.

The introduction of the preschool regulations (2016) legislated for minimum level five qualification for ECEC employment, thus beginning the shifting sands of qualification and credentialism aligned with human capital theory. This results in increasingly higher levels of qualification being sought by employers while working conditions and rates of pay, in what is for the most part a publicly-funded private enterprise, remain largely unchanged or have deteriorated.

Quantitative findings

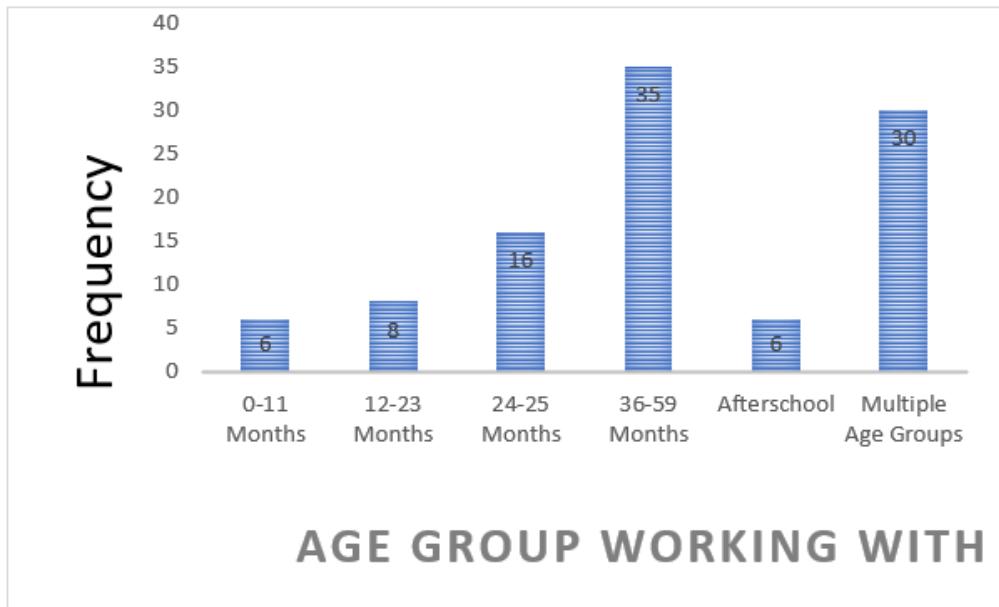
Research participants were asked to identify the age group they worked with, with 3-5 year olds, the ECEC age group, being identified as the most common (Figure 1).

Interestingly, despite the majority of ECEC workers being in rooms with older children, 63 respondents identified their work as primarily a care role (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Age group participants worked with



Figure 2: Attitudes towards ECEC as a primarily caring rather than educative role



Quantitative findings

The key themes emerging from the interview data included: (a) the non-recognition of care relations in ECEC policy in an era of performativity; (b) the anxiety and dissatisfaction experienced by workers regarding service inspections; and (c) the pressure on these precariat workers to achieve increased levels of qualification and credentialism with all the associated workplace contradictions.

The non-recognition of care relations was consistently raised in interview data, with participants believing the importance of their work was not always appreciated by parents using the service.

This is captured in the following quote from one ECEC worker: "When the parents are dropping them in, it's like, oh you get to play all day while I go to work" (Emma)

Research participants also expressed anxiety in relation to ECEC inspections. Participants did not contest the need for inspections for the sector, but rather the narrow instrumental focus and top-down nature of the inspections. "The inspectors need to look at not just the little bits of health and safety, but see what's different in this setting that makes the children enjoy it so much more" (Cian)

Qualification for ECEC employment was identified by research participants as an area of gross contradiction. Participants felt pressurised to achieve ever higher levels of qualification whilst being acutely aware this would result in little if any changes in their pay or working conditions. "The lady encouraged or forced staff to go and get more qualification" (Claire). A treadmill of credentialism was rolling in haste for this cohort of ECEC workers and it appeared as only a matter of time before holding onto their precariat working conditions would come under threat from more qualified graduates.

Discursive gaps identified (Rhetoric-Reality)

The gaps identified in this doctoral study may be understood as theoretical, professionalism and professionalisation. While professionalisation typically has positive connotations, the adoption of an OECD performative discourse within Irish ECEC policy has seen working conditions deteriorate while inspection and standards become increasingly oppressive. The ongoing erosion of discursive gaps between policy documents and childcare workers, serves to insulate policy interpretations of early year's professionalisation.

Study implications

The current dominant ECEC policy discourse, valuing early childhood education primarily for its ability to contribute to human capital theory, with its emphasis on the ideal type and the tyranny of a fixation on metrics, silences alternative understandings expressed in the literature and denies the critical social and heuristic purposes of educational research (Osgood, 2010; Hunkin, 2017).

However, undermining the importance of ECEC education for the purpose of human flourishing and emancipation has serious consequences not only for policy, conditions and practices of childcare workers at this time but also for education's social responsibility for public interest values, for the good life and for democratic society.

Conclusion

From this study, public perceptions of early childhood practitioners are recognised as complex and almost contradictory. While research participants were clear about the centrality of care to early childhood education, this was not reflected in policy. The introduction of the ECCE scheme in 2009 is recognised as exacerbating distinctions between Early Years Care and Education in Ireland rather than unifying the sector. The school readiness emphasis of the ECCE scheme further undermines public perceptions of ECEC. Framing ECEC within the context of national school preparation fails to recognise the value of ECEC in its own right, rendering early childhood practitioners inferior to teachers. This negative positioning of ECEC is detrimental to public perceptions of the sector, reinforcing existing distinctions between care and education.

At policy level, the professionalisation of ECEC is a consistent theme. However, despite increased qualification requirements for early childhood workers, public perception of the sector remains contested. Moss (2006) and research participants identify care as critical to the provision of ECEC, a reality the policy cannot be allowed to render invisible through its focus on performativity. While the provision of care cannot be quantified as can staff qualifications, it is none the less important. The incorporation of 'educare' at policy level need not detract from the importance of qualification

for early childhood workers, rather its principles must be supported both within policy and education programmes for early childhood workers. Care is not secondary to education but critical to its effective provision. The incorporation of the principles of 'educare' within policy for early childhood education is fundamental to public perceptions of the sector. Furthermore, the current professionalisation journey of early childhood education offers an opportunity to develop the sector in a direction that will provide children with the best possible early years experiences whilst also establishing a sector which supports rather than conflicts with a professionalised workforce.

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A policy analysis of the Early Start Programme

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Keywords

Policy

Working Conditions

Early Start

CPD

Disadvantage

Abstract

The Early Start Programme is an early intervention preschool programme in Ireland that was established to increase educational attainment and prevent school failure of children living in areas of urban disadvantage in Ireland (Lewis, Archer & Short, 2002). The programme is delivered within primary schools and caters for children the year before entering junior infants. Introduced in 1994 as a pilot programme, the programme currently targets children in 40 DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools. There has been limited research on the impact of Early Start but overall the programme has been well received by policy makers, government bodies and departments and participants of the programme. Based on a small scale undergraduate research project consisting of a policy analysis of the programme, this article presents key findings in relation to the policies underpinning the Early Start Programme. Such findings include the difficulties associated with the Programme's continuing pilot status, teacher status and inspection of Early Start Units, all of which raises questions around the future of Early Start in light of the expansion of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019).

Introduction

This article presents the findings from a small scale student research project on the Early Start Programme. The research consisted of a policy analysis of the programme and involved interviews with policymakers, school leadership and Early Start educators, exploring participants' understanding of the policies informing the Early Start Programme. Educators, school leadership and policy makers find the programme beneficial and effective in supporting children's transition to primary school in disadvantaged areas but identify challenges around dwindling student numbers and the lack of policy commitment to develop the programme beyond the pilot stage.

The Early Start Programme

The Early Start Programme is an early intervention preschool programme in Ireland that was established to increase educational attainment and prevent school failure of children living in areas of urban disadvantage (Lewis, Archer & Short, 2002). The programme is situated within primary schools and caters for children the year before entering junior infants, typically in the same primary school. Introduced in 1994 as a pilot programme, the programme currently targets children in 40 DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools. There has been limited research, data and reports on the impact of the Early Start programme, especially when compared to the Head Start programme on which it is based. Unlike Head Start (Miller et al., 2015), there

has been no longitudinal study evaluating its effectiveness. Overall, the programme has been well received by policy makers, government bodies and departments and participants of the programme (Faller, 2014).

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) portrays the Early Start Programme as "a one-year intervention scheme to meet the needs of children, aged between three years and five years, in September of the relevant year, who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the education system. The project involves an educational programme to enhance overall development, help prevent school failure and offset the effects of social disadvantage" (DES, 2019). Since the introduction of Early Start, early childhood education and care in Ireland has seen major growth in terms of policy and programme development, staff training and qualifications, research and funding (Urban, Robson & Scacchi, 2017; Walsh, 2017). The Early Start preschool programme has not seen the same changes and retains its status as a pilot programme (DES, 2014).

Unlike other government funded and implemented early childhood schemes such as the free preschool year, Early Start is the sole responsibility of the Department of Education and Skills and not the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. This means that funding for the programme comes under the Department of Education budget. From a policy perspective, the programme does not have to comply with policies and regulations such as the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016), despite providing education for children of preschool age. Early Start is instead regulated through Whole School Evaluations by the DES (DES, 2012).

The Early Start programme is delivered within DEIS Band 1 schools and caters for children the year before entering junior infants, typically in the same school. Many offer additional programmes such as parent support and school completion programmes. The staff team in an Early Start classroom consists of a teacher with a primary school qualification and a childcare worker with an early childhood qualification. The programme in each school is primarily overseen by the school principal. The Early Start programme is a sessional programme that gives access to two and a half hours of education every day and runs in accordance with the school calendar. Typically, schools offer two sessions of the programme each day. The maximum capacity in an Early Start classroom is 15 children per session (DES, 2012). In accordance with the guidelines for the programme, children must be aged between three years and two months to four years and seven months and must be from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to be eligible.

In contrast to the Early Start Programme, which appears to have stagnated somewhat politically, mainstream early childhood care and education has grown exponentially in terms of policy development and attention. In 2010, the first free preschool year was introduced, followed by a second free preschool year in 2016. These two years involve 38 weeks per year of 15 hours of free preschool for children the two years preceding school start. With three hours provided a day, rather than the two and a half provided through Early Start mainstream early childhood care and education has become more attractive to parents compared to the Early Start Programme. Other differences exist between the two types of provision, which are also relevant here, namely the different status of staff within the respective educational settings, the inspection regime and the level of funding. According to the Focussed Policy Assessment (DES, 2014), Early Start is a well-funded programme, but with a declining intake, while early childhood care and education is poorly funded but with an increasing intake of children. Related to funding, Early Start is staffed by primary school teachers who belong to a well-established professionalised workforce, while educators within early childhood care and education settings are yet to experience this professionalisation with its associated recognition of status and working conditions (Moloney, 2010).

There is limited research, inspections and reviews investigating the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme by state bodies and independent researchers. From the available research and

data, Early Start can be viewed as successful in terms of school readiness and transitions (DES, 2014; Lewis, Shortt & Archer, 2011). However, the data also indicates that children attending Early Start do not achieve statistically significant differences in terms of educational outcomes when compared to children who have not attended preschool or who have attended an alternative form of preschool (DES, 2014). Since the 2014 publication of the Focused Policy Assessment of Early Start Programme by the Early Years Policy Unit there has been no more research or analysis on the programme.

Research design

This article is based on a qualitative, undergraduate research project conducted in an Early Start Unit in the greater Dublin region. The research consisted of open-ended questionnaires and interviews with different stakeholders of the Early Start Programme, including the principal, teachers in junior infant classes receiving children from Early Start, staff in the Early Start Units and a member of the DES team overseeing the programme. Purposeful sampling was used, a process that includes the informed selection of appropriate persons that would potentially benefit the study by providing information, opinions and new perspectives (Lewis et al., 2014). Fifteen people were interviewed and surveyed. A research journal was also kept. Permission was sought from the school principal and ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee at Marino Institute of Education. As the research was conducted during the time of practice placement, the researcher had to balance multiple demands and was limited by the amount of time participants could give. Coding and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from both the survey and the interviews. Whole school evaluation reports were also examined for evaluations of Early Start Units. Reports were examined in detail for the schools in which research was conducted but a select number of other reports were also consulted.

Findings

A number of key findings emerged from the research with regard to the policies underpinning the Early Start Programme, including its continued status as a pilot programme, inspections carried out in Early Start Units, professional identity of staff and the introduction of the ECCE scheme and consequent dwindling numbers.

Status of the Early Start Programme

It became apparent while researching the structure of the Early Start programme that its status has become problematic. The DES officer described the status of Early Start as follows:

"They are unfortunately in a very anomalous position because they were piloted for a national programme that is now being replaced by a different national programme."

The programme referred to is the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019), which as mentioned provides two years of free preschool education for 15 hours a week for children preceding primary school. Similarly, the DES member of staff described the current position of the programme as "*being piloted for a national roll out that won't happen is the current condition*" as a result of policy recently taking a different trajectory. The available literature on Early Start does not clarify the status of the programme and fails to mention the reasons why it still holds a pilot status. With more education being offered to children through the ECCE scheme compared to the Early Start Programme, parents may be choosing mainstream early childhood care and education over Early Start, which may explain the dwindling numbers.

Inspection of Early Start

Some challenges were identified with regards to how the programme is inspected. Early Start units are subject to inspections by the Department of Education and Skills as part of the Whole School Evaluation. When examining Whole School Evaluation reports of DEIS schools running the Early Start programme, it becomes evident that Early Start does not feature to the same extent as other classes in the reports. Little is said in the reports about teaching practices, interactions with the children, use of the Aistear curriculum framework, and the care needs of the children. Below

are two examples of the extent of Early Start featuring in the Whole School Evaluation reports. "Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework is implemented in the Early Start setting and the infant classes. In most cases, pupils' language acquisition skills are developed very successfully, most notably through socio-dramatic play. Very good links have been made with external agencies, and teachers in the Early Start setting and the infant setting liaise very effectively" (DES, 2018b.)

"Early Start provision for pre-school pupils is very good. High quality teacher-pupil interactions are in evidence and play-based methodologies are used to optimum effect. Commendable attention is given to the incremental development of pupils' language skills and their learning dispositions." (DES, 2014b.)

Compared to the lengthy reports published by TUSLA and DES on early childhood services teaching and caring for children in a similar capacity, the Whole School Evaluation reports appear quite limited in providing information on the quality of Early Start classes. One of the childcare workers identifies limitations in the Whole School Evaluation in capturing the work of Early Start.

"We were included in the Whole School Evaluation, we were only inspected once when the whole school was being inspected and the two inspectors who were inspecting the school had no idea what Early Start was, even though they were school inspectors from the Department. It was very disheartening after all the work we do with our children."

Thus, while ECEC settings feel over-inspected and regulated while underfunded, the reverse is true for Early Start, creating challenges in terms of establishing its effectiveness in addressing educational disadvantage.

Teacher status and professional identity

Due to the scarcity of published literature on Early Start, the roles, responsibilities and status of the staff working within Early Start units are unclear. The guidelines of the Early Start programme refer to staff qualification requirements. The Early Start classroom requires a fully qualified primary school teacher and a childcare worker who since 2012 must hold a minimum level 5 FETAC qualification in childcare (DES, 2012.) The Early Start programme was set up as a primary teacher led model with the childcare worker as an assistant (Lewis & Archer, 2003). According to the DES officer interviewed for the research, "*the childcare worker was introduced to the model to offer the care element of ECCE*" as opposed to education. The division of duties at policy level speaks to the current lack of status and respect surrounding early childhood care and education educators in Ireland (Moloney, 2010).

Based upon observations made in the researcher's reflective research journal, the policy-prescribed division of education and care was not observed in practice. Both childcare worker and teacher emphasised the importance of working as a team, including designing and implementing the curriculum and activities for the children in their care. Observations made showed the roles and tasks carried out by both as being equal. This is mirrored in Faller's (2014) article discussing the Early Start programme where the childcare worker and primary school teacher interviewed for the article speak of the importance of working together and describe this partnership as being a team. Thus, the policies underpinning the Early Start Programme seem to fail to recognise the knowledge and expertise that childcare workers bring to the programme by referring to their roles and responsibilities as of less importance than the primary teachers. The policymaker interviewed as part of this research confirmed the status of the roles and responsibilities of the childcare worker and primary school teacher as being different based on their varying qualification requirements. The Early Start programme was set up as a primary teacher-led model with the childcare worker as an assistant (Lewis & Archer, 2003). This is recognised not only in the job titles in an Early Start classroom but in the working conditions as the childcare worker is paid less than the primary school teacher in the Early Start unit. This is particularly problematic as unlike

the primary school teacher who changes classroom most years, the childcare worker remains in Early Start, gaining further experience teaching and caring for young children in this environment. According to the participants in the questionnaire, all five of the childcare workers have over 20 years' experience within the Early Start Units. The Department of Education and Skills (2014) contemplate whether qualified early childhood practitioners may be better suited to teach Early Start given their training specific to the age cohort of Early Start children. Significantly, all five of the childcare workers who filled in the questionnaire felt appropriately equipped to work with young children within Early Start, in comparison to only 2 of the 9 of the primary school teachers. Responses by the Early Start teachers recognise that they have learned to work in Early Start from experience in the school rather than from their previous qualifications and training.

All of the participants working in Early Start identified issues surrounding continuous professional development (CPD) and training. The research found that there was a lack of training provided by the Department of Education and Skills specifically aimed at Early Start, with primary school teachers having greater access to training as part of CPD. There is no such continual professional development or training aimed at childcare workers.

Conclusion

Despite running over two decades the Early Start programme has seen few changes in guidelines, practices, policies and regulation. While the early childhood sector has seen many changes over the past decade, most recently the publication of the First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families that seeks to reform the early learning and care sector whilst giving parents of all incomes greater access to high quality and affordable childcare, Early Start remains relatively unchanged from when it was first introduced. The findings have reflected the anomalous position and characteristics of the Early Start programme as a pilot programme run solely by the DES without governance or affiliation with the DCYA. Findings from the study show the effects of this in terms of inspection and regulation.

While this study is not claiming to have made any transformational findings, it has succeeded in identifying areas of the programme structure that, if re-evaluated, could enhance the effectiveness of the programme. Its conclusions are supported by previous assessments of Early Start along with issues raised by Early Start staff. The programme has held a pilot status since its introduction. Now, however, since the initial plan for Early Start has ceased to attract further development, a more permanent status would be more appropriate. It is recommended that the Department for Education and Skills reconsider whether the current structure of the programme as a primary-led model is the most effective model. Responses to the questionnaire suggest that childcare workers have the most experience of Early Start and feel better equipped based on their training to care and educate preschool children. In light of this, the evidence points to a need for restructuring and reassessment of the programme moving from a primary-led model to a model where childcare workers are considered teachers and leaders alongside the Early Start teacher, matched by pay, working conditions and opportunities for CPD.

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Inclusive teaching and learning through visual arts integration with reuse materials

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Keywords



Abstract

People have constructed and communicated important messages through the arts for thousands of years, but the arts have yet to assume their legitimate place in the education system in what arguably is an over-crowded curriculum in Ireland and internationally. Recent and emerging research in neuroscience, embodied learning, and whole-child-development, is providing incontrovertible evidence that arts integration addresses the needs of 21st century learners where the connections between mind (cognition), body and emotions are strengthened rather than disconnected as has been the practice heretofore (Krakaur, 2017). Set against the backdrop of two recent innovative studies designed by ReCreate Ireland, this paper offers a theoretical reflection on visual arts integration in inclusive ECE settings and early years primary classrooms, arguing for process based and sustainable practices.

Introduction

ReCreate's mission is to be an inclusive and successful social enterprise inspiring curiosity, creativity and care for the environment. We do this by providing accessible and affordable art materials and educational supplies to all sectors of the community across Ireland. We champion awareness around reuse and diverting materials from landfill and encourage social inclusion [...] where people with and without atypical or special needs work, learn and play together. Arts-based approaches in such educational settings have long been perceived to be more effective in progressing the learners' cognitive, socio-emotional, physical, motor and linguistic abilities.
(Heeney 2016, p. 5)

As part of their ongoing research activities, ReCreate developed two interconnected studies, 'Heads Up' (Connolly, Rogers, O'Sullivan & Ridge, 2016) and 'All Heads Together' (O'Sullivan & Rogers, 2018), evaluated by the Arts Education Research Group (AERG) in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. 'Heads Up' was designed to explore the benefits of creativity through the reuse of materials and examine whether these materials encouraged greater flexibility and creativity in inclusive educational settings. As ReCreate's work entails taking end of line and surplus stock from businesses and making them available as arts materials through reuse (www.recreate.ie), this study examined the learning potential of creative reuse from a visual arts integration (VAI), and environmental care and awareness perspective.

It was hypothesised that learners with a disability, working with reuse materials alongside peers who did not have a disability, would demonstrate co-equal creativity and success with respect to visual arts and non-arts outcomes. The results revealed persuasive evidence that the high-quality and flexible reuse materials supported all learners in art classes, establishing the efficacy of the materials as equivalent or better than non-reuse art materials in all cases. In addition, the study highlighted the benefits of integrated learning achieved through the visual arts, and created valuable links to other areas of the school curriculum (Connolly et al., 2016).

Building on the success of 'Heads Up', ReCreate commissioned AERG to do a further study exploring the impact of a professional development module for teachers, artists and special needs assistants, introducing them to the relevant pedagogy of teaching, learning and assessment across the curriculum using an arts integrated (AI) approach in inclusive education settings. 'All Heads Together' found that the training resulted in a marked increase in artists' awareness of the demands of classroom life, of curriculum coverage, and opportunities to meaningfully integrate the arts processes, skills and experiences with other areas of the curriculum. Participating teachers better understood the role of the artist, actively participated throughout, and took on shared responsibility for the implementation of the process-based arts project. The module training facilitated the teaching artist in sharing the latest ideas from arts education, and when combined with the pedagogical expertise of the early years teacher, created an active learning environment where knowledge was used by the children to create and 'make things happen' using an AI framework (O'Sullivan & Rogers, 2018).

This paper explores some of the theory underpinning AI in early years classrooms which supports deep rather than surface level conceptions of learning for both children and teachers. Deep learning was a feature of the 'Heads Up' and 'All Heads Together' studies, and describes an approach whereby understanding, seeing things in different ways, construing knowledge to have personal and abstract meanings, and connecting ideas to previous experiences and external reality reflect learning and teaching practices in early years settings and classrooms (Niikko & Ugaste, 2019). The purpose of this paper is to share some theoretical findings from the literature reviews from the 'Heads Up' and 'All Heads Together' studies about AI and specifically VAI in inclusive classrooms using sustainable materials. It is hoped that this will highlight an increasing body of research calling for inquiry-based, inclusive and authentic AI instruction in early years classrooms to meet the unique needs of 21st century learners.

Inclusive education in the context of this paper is about making transformative changes across all aspects of schooling and education, to embrace all children regardless of ability or need. Traditionally, educational inclusion has been located within a special education and disability framework, but is increasingly understood more broadly as supporting and welcoming diversity among all learners, including race, ethnicity, gender, gender diversity, age, religion, sexual orientation, appearance, culture, language and accent, socio-economic difference, thinking style and personality type (O'Sullivan & Rogers, 2018). An inclusive learning environment ensures equitable access to resources and opportunities for all, enabling individuals and groups to feel safe, respected, engaged, motivated and valued for who they are and for their contributions to

Integrated Learning

Integrated or cross-curricular learning has been a key principle of learning underpinning diverse educational contexts for many years (Kerry 2015). The foundations for children's later cognitive, social and sensory development is laid early on, and the value of rich and stimulating environments is implicated in determining an increase in neurons, and the complex connections and relationships that can occur between them (Bulunuz & Koç, 2018). Integrated or cross-curricular learning occurs whenever students and their teachers apply learning in more than one subject to an experience, problem, question or theme. Learning transcends traditional subject divides and is more holistic and effective as a result. Cross-curricular approaches exemplify the educational learning theories of many well-known writers and have become synonymous with learner-centred education (Barnes, 2011). Ongoing neuro-scientific research supports connectivity in learning and unity of teaching (Sousa & Pilecki, 2013), and recent research points towards the value of integrating learning through the arts to meaningfully connect learning and teaching (Dobrick & Fatal, 2018; Fleer, 2017; Ruokonen & Ruismäki, 2015). Using an AI pedagogy has been shown to result in significant cognitive, affective, linguistic and social developments with diverse learners in different education settings for both the arts and non-arts subjects.

Arts Integration

Arts integration (AI) is commonly described as teaching and learning in and through the arts. Krakaur (2017, p. 23) has helpfully clarified the distinction as follows:

'Learning in the arts describes high quality instruction in an art form or discipline.'

'Learning through the arts describes high-level integration when concepts and skills are explicitly taught in the art and non-arts disciplines to elevate and deepen student understanding.' [emphasis in the original]

AI, as a co-equal process, rather than arts enhancement, where the arts are subservient to another subject, occurs when teachers incorporate artistic elements, processes, and ways of knowing across disciplines to address the needs of the 'whole learner' (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005).

Connections between arts and non-arts domains have been explored by researchers with the aim of attaining a more holistic, comprehensive and appealing learning experience for learners (Zhou & Brown, 2018). For a long time, AI has been promoted as a means of reaching and teaching diverse learners of all ages and stages (Bumaford et al., 2007). Integrating the arts in conjunction with experience-based approaches has been used as an alternative to more conventional mainstream education methodologies which have failed to meet the developmental needs of diverse learners (Loughlin & Anderson, 2015). Therefore, arts-based approaches within inclusive educational settings are perceived by professionals working in early childhood education as being more effective in progressing diverse students' cognitive, social-emotional, physical-motor and linguistic abilities. Integrating the arts in routine classroom activities challenges all children, regardless of ability, to engage in higher-order thinking, to work on relationships within the classroom, and to empower them to reach their potential.

For many, the arts can be perceived as a fourth 'R' in the classroom (alongside the traditional 'three Rs' of reading, writing and arithmetic), recognising that in curricula they are "valid routes of learning, not only as art forms in their own right, but as arteries that invigorate other fields of learning" (Bloomfield & Childs, 2000, p. 3). Importantly, all modes and types of AI share a common core characteristic - that *learning in and learning through* the arts is woven into learning in other non-arts domains – cognitively, linguistically, motivationally, affectively or socially (Loughlin & Anderson, 2015). Many contend that deeper engagement, learning and reflection are achieved in both the arts and non-arts areas as a consequence of AI where teacher and child genuinely co-create in a multi-disciplinary, knowledge-based learning continuum (Portaankorva-Koivisto &

Havinga, 2019).

The Arts Council in its publication entitled *Early Childhood Arts: Three perspectives* (2013) undertook its own literature review regarding the perceived non-arts benefits of arts intervention on early childhood development. It outlines how it increases self-confidence, motivation and self-expression and improves children's behavioural health and wellbeing. It helps young children to live and learn with others and build positive and respectful relationships. It develops their capacity to become active and critical learners and become better at communicating feelings, emotions, thoughts and ideas. It equips them to become better adapted to live and learn with others. Integrated learning is considered to be an inclusive approach in that it aims to include everyone from a multiple intelligence, interest and abilities perspective. From an early years teaching perspective, it is widely appreciated that younger students do not perceive subject divisions when exploring their environment and they instinctively learn in a holistic manner (The Arts Council, 2013). From a lifelong learning viewpoint, it is posited that older students also obtain broader and richer perspectives through the interconnectedness of knowledge and the acquisition and application of diverse skills from different subject disciplines. Consequently, many educational programmes, projects, practices and paradigms encourage linkage within and between disciplines or domains of learning and the transfer of skills and dispositions from one context to another.

Visual arts integration (VAI)

Visual art by its very nature is *a priori* integrated, as visual artists observe, absorb, question and respond to the world around them in visual and tangible ways. Visual art is connected with culture in terms of inspiration and contribution. It is both shaped by and shapes culture. Therefore, visual art like any other arts mode is perceived to have rich potential as a trigger or mode for integrated learning. Correspondingly, it is believed that visual arts can elucidate and consolidate complex concepts from other disciplines in an imaginative, multi-sensory and empathetic manner. Many curricula worldwide exploit visual art as a multimodal springboard for subject integration (Mills & Doyle, 2019), and social and emotional learning, particularly with early years learners (Müller et al., 2018).

Art-based inquiry has emerged as a key motive for embracing VAI (Smilan, 2016). Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), the Reggio Emilia approach to learning and teaching, and the Arts Integration Mentorship Model (AIM) are but some examples of programmes that very deliberately explore the potential of VAI with respect to inquiry in terms of non-arts outcomes concerning the cognitive, linguistic, psychomotor, social, emotional domains, and transfer of key habits of mind (Burnaford et al., 2007). Stevenson and Deasy (2005) found that AI enhanced students' metacognitive skills, cognitive processing and perseverance. Using the lenses of social learning theory and self-efficacy, other studies found that AI enabled or encouraged students to exercise more problem solving, self-initiating, asking questions and enhanced self-regulation (Catterall & Peppler, 2007). It motivated students to pay greater attention than in more conventional non AI classes and increased students' capacity and willingness to engage in learning (Durham, 2010). Öztürk Yilmaztekin & Tantekin Erden's study (2017) found that VAI in early years science positively contributed to children's interest in maths and science and also contributed to teachers' assessment as they were able to determine children's understanding and progress in light of their art work. Bulunez and Koç (2018) found that integrated experiences using art, music and drama enhanced children's guided reading practices through creating more active, creative, and hands-on sensory experiences which further improved children's listening skills, focus and concentration, problem solving, creative and critical thinking skills, and observation.

Through visual arts, children develop subtle and complex forms of thinking (Eisner, 2002). When visual art is taught well, students view the world from an aesthetic perspective and can perceive relationships between things more easily. They can greater appreciate and attend to nuance.

They are better able to perceive problems as having multiple solutions and appreciate the 'grey' in everything. They are enabled to exercise their imagination and make decisions in the absence of overt rules.

Inclusive practices through visual arts integration

Hurwitz and Day (2007) summarise the key learning derived from visual arts/visual arts integration for students with intellectual, cognitive, social cognition or developmental disabilities in the following ways: creation of work that is not noticeably inferior to those of other children, and where differences in approach, technique and style are celebrated. Quality of product is of secondary importance in process-oriented learning and teaching. The processing of conceptual information through visual arts takes place for students with cognitive disabilities as it does for other children. All learners can formulate and "present ideas that may otherwise be denied expression because of limited ability in handling language skills" (Hurwitz & Day 2007, p. 79). Artwork produced by children with special educational needs can provide important diagnostic clues to emotional difficulties that sometimes accompany their learning difficulty or disability. The therapeutic capacity of visual arts can provide a unique source of satisfaction and stability to children who have a history of challenge, failure or personal difficulty. The psychomotor and physicality of making work and manipulating media provides important sensory and motor experiences that exercise and challenge the mental and physical capabilities of all children. Visual arts engagement provides all learners with tangible experiences in responsible decision making and problem solving, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship skills (Müller et al., 2018).

Implications for practice and policy

While Nutbrown (2013) testifies to the importance of arts-based learning in the early years, arguing that children respond through their senses and aesthetically to the world, she also recognises that many curricula internationally do not yet show due regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31). Despite being naturally attuned to learn in and through the arts as human beings, arts-based learning and arts-infused curricula are poorly conceptualised and rarely embedded in the day-to-day life of early years classrooms. While the arts are often first to be sacrificed when national priorities focus on a 'back to basics' agenda (i.e. typically literacy and numeracy), Nutbrown (2013) points towards 21st century skills and characteristics which are uniquely facilitated by arts-based learning contributing to all aspects of children's early learning. However, research shows that teachers tend to implement AI at a shallow or superficial level with a focus on quantitative knowledge (Irwin et al., 2006) and not on deepening understanding or supporting 21st century skills, knowledge, and dispositions. Teachers who implement AI as a 'sound pedagogy' are able to integrate the arts and non-arts in a balanced, fluid and authentic manner (Krakaur, 2017). Writing more than twenty years ago, Bresler (1997), as cited by Krakaur (2017) argued that a co-equal style of integration (where the arts and non-arts subjects are respected equally), represents the most robust approach to education to move learners forwards from isolated units of knowledge to more contemporary ways of knowing in the 21st century. However, disappointingly, Krakaur (2017) found that implementation in practice is still relatively rare. The 'Heads Up' (2016) and 'All Heads Together' (2018) studies which generated the theoretical discussion in this paper, reflect models of sustainable practice where the emphasis was on the process rather than purely on outcomes. Recommendations arising from these inclusive education studies call for a diversity of pedagogical approaches within the framework of 'good teaching for all'. In keeping with the findings of Krakaur (2017) who identifies the need for high quality teacher professional development in process-based AI, ReCreate's studies demonstrated that the understandings that children, teachers and artists develop in and through the arts are transferable to many contexts and work across disciplinary boundaries to mediate human and cognitive experiences. This paper concludes with the hope that in the third decade of the 21st century, implementation in practice of AI and VAI will become the norm and not the exception in ECE settings and early years classrooms.

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Reflective Papers

Children's rights education: Can it be transformative and empowering for ECEC students and leaders?

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Keywords

Children's Rights Education

Participatory pedagogies

Background

The aim of this paper is to reflect on my experiences of participating in a twelve-week interdisciplinary Children's Rights Education (CRE) module as part of an MA in Leadership in Early Years Education and Care at Institute of Technology Carlow. The literature on CRE suggests that strong pedagogical foundations are required for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) students to learn about children's rights (Long, 2019; Jerome et al., 2015). In this paper I discuss my personal experiences of the content and pedagogy of CRE. I focus on the cognitive, behavioural and affective domains of my learning (head, hands and heart). I reflect on the impact of this learning on both my personal and professional practice. Drawing on Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1991) and aspects of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) to understand my journey, my reflections suggest that authentic and intentional participatory methodologies aligned with an emphasis on critical reflection on self, practice and the bigger picture, were of particular value to me. CRE is an approach that cannot be summed up in one or two sentences. I was, however, surprised by how much it illuminated and clarified significant aspects of Aistear: *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* that I had previously overlooked. The following quotation in particular, now cannot be ignored.

'Help me to learn about my rights and responsibilities, model fairness, justice and respect when you interact with me...Involve me in making decisions' (NCCA, 2009, p. 8).

CRE opened up spaces for me to feel and think differently and more deeply about the possibilities of the principle of participation and its interconnections with all the other provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) for my practice with babies and young children. It has helped me put Aistear into action in a more meaningful way.

What prompted this transformative learning experience?

Midway through the module, I encountered what Mezirow (1991) terms a 'disorientating dilemma'. The following excerpt from my personal reflections at the time (2018) illuminates how I had misunderstood the principle of participation.

'I thought that listening to children and giving them a choice between 'A' and 'B' was upholding... children's rights. Article 12 is often reduced, albeit not rightly so, to [narrow] concepts of voice and choice...'

It was through in-depth discussion with my lecturer and peers and honest, sometimes difficult reflection on every aspect of my daily practice with young children that these misunderstandings became apparent to me.

I experienced a wobble in my professional confidence. I wasn't sure if a child rights-based approach

was for me. I wasn't sure if I had the knowledge, leadership skills, or the heart to want to persevere with learning what a child rights-based approach might mean in my practice with babies and young children.

How was learning about children's rights experienced?

While the comprehensive knowledge of the UNCRC and its interactions with Irish law, ECEC policy and practice gained from this module was highly relevant to an understanding of a child rights approach, the 'heart' element of the learning was something I did not expect. I was enabled to explore my feelings and reservations about babies and young children's rights in practice in a safe, respectful learning environment. This environment was effectively and intentionally created to be the 'third teacher'. Olser and Starkey's (2010) rights-based pedagogical principles guided the group learning processes and interactions between the lecturer and the students. As a result, we not only learned about rights, but experienced participation and other rights as part of our education. This, for me was an important part of the process which helped to provoke respectful yet open dialogue and debate with my peers about the value of a child rights-based approach. It helped me to think about participation in a way that suited my own professional practice and the children I currently work with. Mezirow (1991, p. 4) suggests that when 'experience is too strange or threatening to the way we think or learn we tend to block it out or resort to psychological defence mechanisms to provide a more compatible interpretation.' This can happen. We can make all sorts of assumptions about what we know and don't know about children's rights. However, the group process and participatory pedagogies enabled me to get beyond these blocks and see things from multiple perspectives, including the child's. Thus, it felt both safe and necessary to query my current thinking and actions (Christie et al., 2015).

What happened then? How did it work out?

At times, I felt unsure about what I was learning, as this reflection, from my reflective journal written midway through the module shows.

'This module is like a rollercoaster. At first, I felt okay about my practice, then I felt inadequate. Then I felt I was making progress in my efforts to engage [with] children's rights... I now feel like I am back to square one again...'

Some of the stages of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, which describes the impact of disorienting dilemmas are evident in my excerpt above. By sharing my discomfort in small groups and having the opportunity to critically reflect on the process, these feelings could be articulated and examined. The following excerpt is taken from my reflections toward the end of the module.

'The process of participating in class has led me to re-evaluate my own professional values in relation to working with young children. Through ongoing dialogue with classmates and analysis of my own practice, in conjunction with new knowledge gained around children's rights, I have repositioned myself as a student with a lot more to learn...'

In this instance, the learning opportunities, encouragement and time given to reflect, allowed me as a student to become comfortable with new knowledge of the children's rights framework, and the principle of participation in particular, along with the feelings it invoked in me, as an educator, so that it could be accommodated into a new, more expansive frame of reference.

Nevertheless, the process was hard, and at times along the way I felt disheartened.

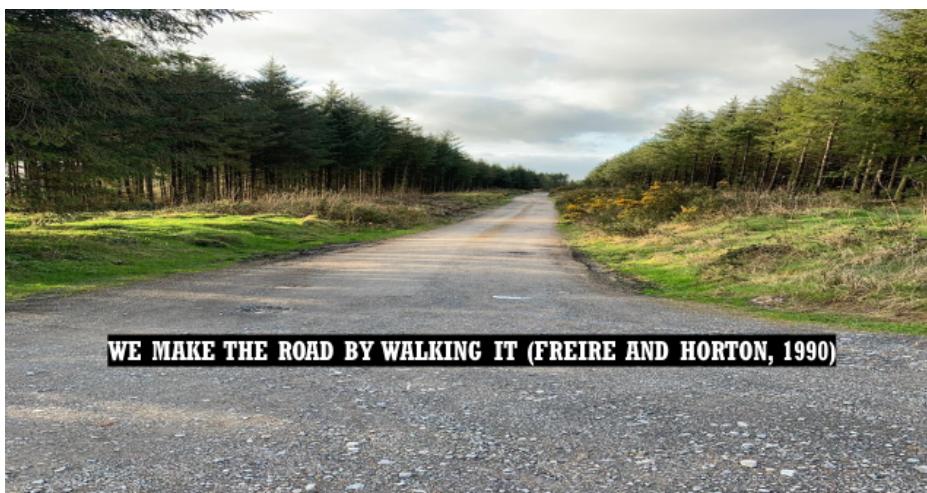
'I feel the process is too long and I do not see any immediate benefits...it is hard to stay patient.'

However, as students and educators of babies and young children, I now believe we, as adults, need time and space to experience rights in education ourselves and reflect on them with others along

the way. It is important that we feel supported in our encounters with disorienting dilemmas so that we are not abandoned, or that the bigger learning is left in the classroom, never to be brought into practice with babies and young children.

What are you planning to do next?

Children's rights education has for me, revealed the particular emphasis in *Aistear*, on the centrality of interactions and respectful relationships for the realisation of babies and young children's participation and education rights in ECEC contexts, in line with their evolving capacities. As a result of being exposed to CRE through participatory and critically reflective pedagogies and processes, I have been empowered to grapple with and better understand the children's rights framework (head). I feel obliged to use my new knowledge in my practice (hands), and through experiencing transformational and participatory methodologies myself, I feel a deep sense of connectedness and empathy with children and their rights (heart). I am confident that this learning has not only strengthened my practice with babies and young children, but as I continue my postgraduate studies, already I know I have developed the confidence and leadership skills to put this learning into practice. With plans to critique my practice and hold myself and others I work with, accountable to the standards of children's rights which were presented to me throughout the module I will ensure that a child rights- based approach is embedded in the planned and unplanned experiences which make up the curriculum of my setting.



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Predictors of burnout amongst Irish Early Childhood Educators

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Keywords

Burnout Work-Life Workload

Early Childhood Educators Emotional Exhaustion

What did we do? Where?

The aim of this research study (Oke, Lambert, Filipovic & Hayes, 2018) was to understand the nature of burnout experienced by Irish early childhood educators and its relationship with areas of work-life. This study examined cross-sectional differences in experienced feelings of burnout amongst early childhood educators, as well as differences in degree of fit with their job environments in Ireland.

Data was collected from a sample of the 216 educators and completed responses we received from 170 respondents. Our participants came both from urban (64 per cent) and rural (36 per cent) settings, and from a variety of services: 65 per cent from private services and 35 per cent from community services. Furthermore, 67 per cent of the respondents were employed on a full-time basis while 33 per cent worked part-time, and 60 per cent had more than 10 years of experience. The study was undertaken by Dr. Meera Oke (NCI), Professor Nóirín Hayes (TCD, TU Dublin), Jonathan Lambert (NCI) and Katarina Filipovic (NCI, TU Dublin).

Why did we do it?

International studies report high numbers of early childhood educators suffering from burnout symptoms, with numbers ranging from 10 per cent to 56 per cent (Blöchliger & Bauer, 2018; Løvgren 2016). Burnout manifests itself as severe emotional, mental and physical exhaustion due to excessive demands on energy, strength or resources (Freudenberger, 1974).

Studies such as Rentzou (2012) and Jeon, Buettner & Grant (2018) have identified working in the early childhood environment as particularly stressful and instrumental in high levels of burnout. Some of the challenges early childhood educators face are: long hours, inadequate working conditions, limited or non-existent non-contact time, low wage and benefits, piles of paperwork, understaffing and work overload (Blöchliger & Bauer, 2017).

Despite educators' passion for the child-focused aspect of their jobs, external pressures such as legislative changes, financial pressures and increased levels of paperwork are having an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many educators (Preschool Learning Alliance, 2018). Talking about paperwork specifically, participants perceived it as a 'tick-box' exercise, which limited quality time spent with children, while adding little to children's learning and development. In Ireland, Early Childhood Education and Care is undergoing a significant transformation requiring educators to extend and deepen the quality of their practice. In addition to the complexity of the role, research suggests that poor working conditions and significant inspection, regulatory and administrative demands may add to the stress levels of educators, leading to burnout (Blöchliger & Bauer, 2017).

How did we do it?

Participants received a secure link to an electronic questionnaire. We used two instruments to collect our data: Maslach burnout inventory (MBI) - educators survey (Maslach, Jackson & Schwab, 2016) and Areas of Work Life Survey (Leiter & Maslach, 2011).

MBI is a standardized measure of an individual's experience of burnout. Three core aspects of the burnout syndrome are: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lack of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. Depersonalisation scale measures instances of cognitively and emotionally distancing oneself from work, and an impersonal response towards people one works with. Personal accomplishment measures the tendency to positively or negatively evaluate the work one does.

Areas of Work Life Survey (AWL) measures the fit between the person and their job environment. Leiter and Maslach (2011) look at the relationship between the person and the work environment from the angle of 'job-person fit'. The problematic relationship is described as imbalance or misfit such as when "the demands of the job exceed the capacity of the individual to cope effectively (p.2). The authors propose that the greater the misfit between the person and their job the higher the chance of burnout will be. The six domains of job environment measured are: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. Taking the domain of reward as an example, perceived lack of recognition from service recipients, colleagues or managers devalues the work and is associated with feelings of inefficiency (Leiter & Maslach, 2011).

What happened then? How did it work out?

Our findings indicate high emotional exhaustion, low depersonalisation and high personal accomplishment amongst Irish early childhood educators. Specifically, 75 per cent participants reported feeling emotionally exhausted several times a month. At the same time, 75 per cent participants reported rare feelings of being impersonal towards children, while 25 per cent reported feelings of depersonalisation at least once a year. Overall, participants reported positive sense of accomplishment (several times a week on average).

Looking at the person-job fit, we found 75 per cent of early childhood educators being unhappy with workload and almost 50 per cent being unhappy with financial reward and recognition of their work. Emotional exhaustion significantly correlates negatively with workload and reward. The more unhappy the early years educators are with workload and reward, the higher the emotional exhaustion.

What are you planning to do next?

As a follow up to the quantitative study, we presented the emerging findings from the study at 'The profession of Play and Inquiry' Conference held at National College of Ireland (14 November 2018). The presentation was followed by a roundtable discussion with 65 participants around desired changes in job conditions; value placed on early childhood education practice and type and nature of support. Several themes emerged from this professional conversation.

At the micro level, desired changes included reduced hours at work, lower ratios and increased resources for working with children with additional needs. At the personal level, increased pay and financial security, with holiday pay and non-contact time. Other desired systemic changes include increased collaboration between state departments, parent and societal recognition of qualifications, reduced imbalance in funding between private and community settings, and improved access to external professionals.

Educators also expressed the desire for more support and recognition from their managers, colleagues and parents. When talking about the aspects of work that they value the most, educators identified directly interacting with children and supporting their growth and development as the most valuable aspects of their jobs.

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Social Collaboration: Developing Community Engagement through fostering exploration, curiosity and resilience for learning for life

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Hafsha Shaikh is a leading Family Learning expert who researches, provides training and consultancy, lectures and advocates on using Family Learning to engage parents and children to start their learning journey, together. Hafsha works nationally and internationally to supports practitioners and the sector in their planning and to influence Government policy.

Keywords

Community Engagement Communities of Practice
Mental Health Parenting Families Learning

Introduction and background

This reflective paper presents an insight into a project undertaken (2017-2018) and based in Birmingham, an inner-city community identified as one of the most deprived areas in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2011-2016). The project involved three community- based organisations which have been developing and delivering family support parenting programmes over the last 17 years, in the community, adopting a Communities of Practice Model (Wenger, 1998). Funded by the Local Innovation Fund (LIF), the Local Authority (LA), set the challenge for community groups to come up with ways of 'doing things differently in neighbourhoods to make better places to live' with a focus on partnership, collaboration and active citizenship, supporting the core priorities for the city.

The early findings presented at the Early Childhood Ireland, Providing Leadership to the First 5 Annual Conference (12/13 April 2019) form part of the doctoral study of the lead author, based on Children's Centres in the UK and served to illustrate one element of the project - parental engagement.

Rationale

Early Years and the Voluntary Sector had experienced a significant decline in funding over a period of years leading up to the LIF initiative. The LA announced one of the worst funding crises

it had ever faced resulting in budget cuts and closures of community services. Our approach was to consider how these services could be delivered differently, in a period of austerity. The data reflects the stark reality and diversity of the community we are working in, which is ranked the 'third most deprived core city after Liverpool (1st) and Manchester (2nd)' (Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2015). In 2017, 97 per cent of the families with children under five, were living in abject poverty, residing in the most deprived streets in England. Educational attainment is lower than national average with a large percentage of parents holding basic or no formal qualifications. Poor literacy skills affect parents' ability to effectively support their children's education and children remain at a disadvantage as they may continue in the intergenerational cycle of poverty, with low aspirations and poor socio-economic lives (Desforges & Abouhaar, 2003). Health determinants relating to maternal mental health, attachment and healthy lifestyles showed a detrimental impact on a child's long-term development (Sylva et al., 2002-2004; Rees et al., 2018)

What did we do?

Epstein's (2011) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, served as the model for the partnership to develop, create and enable parents to access support for themselves and their children. The project involved the delivery of parenting programmes, families learning together and volunteering opportunities and grew from nationally recognised work (Nursery World, 2012, 2014, 2018), previously delivered in Birmingham e.g. Sparklers Peer Mentoring Project (2014), a project that evolved from support from the Innovation Unit, London and; #GetBalsallHeathReading (2018). Our approach used a pathway model that enabled families to engage and learn together. We sought to engage families first and then to encourage them to move between the programmes and on to volunteering. Of significance was that the sessions were delivered in local spaces that included: a children's centre, library and bespoke family spaces. The success of the project came from the partners 'overlapping' their strengths and experiences. Families had choice and a 'voice' in their own learning, taking the opportunities open to them.

What happened then?

The Children's Centre was pivotal in initially registering families and receiving multi-agency referrals into and out of the service. Families were engaged through workshops, events and parenting programmes that were delivered through a commissioned process and additional funding streams were accessed to increase delivery.

A running theme expressed by parents was social isolation and descriptions of feeling – "alone in a way". Parents may have a support network around them but still have a sense of being alone – "I don't want to talk to anyone". Following the programme parents said "*I improved learning about pregnancy how to communicate with the baby inside the womb*" and "*It's helped me very much with bonding with my daughter*". Parent's lack of literacy and language skills means they will not explore or seek experiences outside of their immediate social circles. The project helped parents to meet, "a lot of new parents" and gave them the "push" to come and experience new learning opportunities.

The project has given parents the self-confidence and skills required to volunteer. Parents describe the programme as: "*doing something... they changed me bit by bit as a person from this isolated, don't want to know kind of person to this really out going want to be on the ball, want to know different things.*" By engaging and supporting parents' learning, they in turn are enabled to support their children's learning – "*Learning a lot about behaviour and different types of play*".

What we are planning to do next

In summary, our experience shows that the development of a new approach and way of doing things differently for families is a sustainable model. The project's innovation and practice continued beyond the life of the funding by replicating lessons learnt and applying in new contexts. Partners have developed their services and received recognition at local, national and international level gaining national awards. Research continues through published papers (Thomson et al. 2018) presentations (Maternal Mental Health Conference, September 2018), M.A. and Ph.D. studies as well as expanding into new ventures which include: Maternal Mental Health; Financial & Digital Inclusion; Employability and Democracy workshops.

The approach behind the project, especially the notion of a pathway model of family learning, is now part of mainstream work within the three partner agencies. In addition, local community members and families who previously did not engage in services and would not use venues such as the library, children's centre or access parenting programmes are now doing so. This also means that these venues are more sustainable for the future.

Due to the successes they have had, the partners believe that the three organisations will continue to work on the pathway model of family learning approach in future and as long as the parents want to be involved. In summary this demonstrates a more sustainable approach to community partnerships and way of providing support to families.

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Children and Chores

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Keywords

Time Independence Chores Families Education

A study conducted to investigate children's independence through participating in household chores

Independence has been described as a freedom from higher powers or the ability to support one's self either intellectually or functionally (Dorer, 2018). Becoming independent is one of the most important tasks for a child in their early years and they strive tirelessly to develop independence in any way they can. From learning to walk, to reading and writing, a child as young as one is working towards these goals of independence every day. I have been working in the area of childcare and education for over a decade and I have seen this quest for independence first-hand time and time again. It is clear to me that young children strive for independence from an early age and it has always amazed me to watch these skills develop and to see the pride that comes with these achievements for the child. The challenge with the development of these skills is that it takes time and adults sometimes find it difficult to be patient and to allow children to develop skills in their own time.

I decided to research the notion of independence through the lens of household chores. This study was conducted as part of a dissertation for a BA (Hons.) degree in Montessori Education. Montessori said, "The child's nature is to aim directly and energetically at functional independence" (Montessori 1949, p.83). I feel that participating in adaptive skills such as household chores is an ideal opportunity to foster independence in day to day life and I was curious to see what role children play in family life today.

The study was conducted using a quantitative approach. Raham (2016) states that quantitative research focuses on aspects of human and social behaviour which can be quantified and generalised to a whole population or sub-population.

An online survey was distributed to approximately 140 parents of preschool and primary school age children in the South Dublin area. The majority of these children attend the same childcare and afterschool facility, with some being cared for at home. The age of the children varied from 3 to 11 years; the individual age of children was not asked for in the survey.

The survey was designed to determine how often children participate in household chores and to gain some understanding of the challenges parents face in balancing work and family life as well as their perceptions of children's abilities.

From my research, it appears that family life has changed drastically over the past number of decades. Stella O'Malley (2015) argued that parenting styles have taken on a new perspective with parents expecting less from their children in terms of participation in the family home and prioritising their interests and desires above many other aspects of life. I was intrigued to see how these societal changes have impacted on the lives and development of children.

The data gathered from this survey gave me an insight into the lives of parents and families today. I discovered that parents (mothers in particular) feel a lot of pressure in managing their homes and the responsibilities that go with it. Many expressed guilt for not spending as much time with their children as they would like "Not being able to drop or collect her at school" and admitted they would appreciate more help with household tasks.

By and large regular participation from children was statistically low, even with some of the most common and basic tasks. I wondered if this was indicative of parental guilt and parenting styles or simply due to the amount of time children spend out of the family home each day compared to generations past. In terms of parental perceptions, I learned that parents do not seem to be as aware of their children's abilities in the early years of childhood, although they seemed to have a better understanding once they reached seven or eight years of age. I found this to be significant as I wondered whether it is these parental misconceptions of children's capacity that are impacting the statistics of the survey. Are parents unsure of what their two or three-year-old is capable of and therefore help them more than they need? If so, what impacts could this have on the child's development? This type of 'over-parenting' has been linked to traits such as lack of autonomy and motivation in college students (Schifrin et al 2014).

From this study, I have expanded my knowledge of the lives of children in Ireland today. Coupled with my extensive experience in childcare and education this gives me a deeper understanding of some of the routines and challenges Irish families face today. The limitations to this study, including time and financial constraints, restricted the amount of data I could gather and narrowed the population I could study. I would recommend further research and a mixed method approach which would support and build on the information this study has provided.

I see now that balancing family life today is an intricate task. Parents are constantly working to maintain the best balance and achieve the best quality of life for themselves and their children. For this reason, I feel it is imperative that we investigate this further and support people on how they can use their time effectively. I suggest that as a society, we take on a new understanding of the words "quality time". If there are chores that need to be done or meals to prepare, then could a family not work together in these tasks and could this in turn, not be deemed "quality time". The benefits of this for family life are three-fold: Parents can feel they are receiving support from their children and family in completing house-hold tasks; Parents can use this time to bond with their children; and for the children themselves, these experiences could be opportunities for them to feel as though they are contributing to their family home and develop their independence through participating in tasks (Donaghy, 2014). As an early years educator, I feel it is our duty to create environments which can further enhance the development of this functional independence and support families on ways in which they too can foster these ideas. By doing this, we will be best serving not only the children in our care but also the lives of families in Ireland today.

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Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings

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Keywords

Inclusion Environments Síolta Design Accessibility

Introduction

In 2017, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) asked the Centre of Excellence for Universal Design (CEUD) at the National Disability Authority (NDA) to commission the development of Universal Design (UD) Guidelines for Early Learning and Care (ELC) Settings. Following a competitive tendering process, a consortium comprising Early Childhood Ireland, TrinityHaus, Mary Immaculate College, and Nathan Somers Design, was commissioned to research and develop the UD Guidelines with DCYA/CEUD/NDA. The Guidelines, launched in June 2019, comprise a Literature Review, the Guidelines (with 10 Case Studies) and a Self-Audit tool. The Guidelines form part of the supports provided under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), which is a publically-funded model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access and participate in Ireland's national universal preschool programme. This paper outlines the process by which the UD Guidelines were developed, and summarises the content.

Objectives

The overall objectives of the Guidelines and Tool are to support:

- the ELC sector in creating universally designed environments for all users;

- built environment professionals in developing better designs of newly built settings and in giving clear, detailed information on the retrofit of existing settings, and
- practitioners in carrying out self-audits, in order to identify steps to be taken to ensure inclusion.

Universal Design (UD) is the design and composition of an environment so it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. This includes public places in the built environment such as buildings, streets or spaces that the public have access to; products and services provided in those places; and systems that are available including information communications technology (ICT) (CEUD/NDA 2018).

Methodology

The Guidelines and Self-Audit Tool were developed through a literature review, ten case study visits to explore their accessibility, and stakeholder consultation. Ireland's national ELC quality standards, *Síolta*, underpinned the Guidelines.

Literature review

The review examined evidence-based best-practice research in ELC and Universal Design. It synthesised the findings and provided key recommendations to underpin the documents.

Case study settings

Early Childhood Ireland identified 10 member settings using criteria such as location, size, building type among others and the Pobal Early Years Sector Profile (2016/2017).

The settings ranged in size from 14 to 105 children in a variety of Irish locations and building types.

Ethical considerations

Comprehensive materials were circulated to the ELC settings and consent forms were signed to ensure informed consent. Children's assent was also sought, by asking them if they would like to talk to us or to take photos. All General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) were complied with.

Surveys were sent in advance of the visit to a sample of practitioners and parents and a sample of parents and staff were interviewed. The researchers observed how the environment worked for all users. Children were invited to take photos of the part of the environment they liked best. This data informed the content of the Guidelines.

Design requirements framed by Síolta standards

The development of the Guidelines was guided by seven of the 16 *Síolta* Standards, one of which is environments which underpins all aspects of these guidelines and provides the backdrop for the other six *Síolta* standards.

Key Design Issues framed by Síolta



Findings

The *Síolta* standards framed the key design issues emerging through the literature.

Standard 1: Rights of the child

- Ensure all children are represented and can express themselves in many ways.
- Provide environments where the child can engage with adults and peers.

Standard 3: Parents and families

- Create accessible, welcoming spaces, reflecting family diversity so relationships can be built, including space for staff-parent events.
- Make curriculum visible in the environment and provide formal and informal staff-parent meeting spaces.

Standard 5: Interactions

- Provide indoor and outdoor spaces for children to explore, including quiet spaces for children to be alone or in small groups.
- Create spaces for communication, connections and engagement.
- Modify stressful environmental stimuli such as sounds, smells or lights.

Standard 6: Play

- Ensure accessible space for children to play, with access between indoor and outdoor, when possible.
- Consider covered areas outside for play and those who might need additional shelter outdoors.
- Provide a range of spaces and materials to attract and stimulate interests, promote communication, identity and belonging and encourage critical thinking.

Standard 11: Professional practice

- Encourage a culture of reflection, by allocating space for practitioners to discuss and reflect.

Standard 16: Community involvement

- Promote visibility in the community through permeable boundaries, with materials that capture

local diversity.

Key case study findings:

The case study findings came from the surveys, interviews and observations from site visits.

Findings include:

- A lack of space, especially indoors, for children, staff, parents and storage.
- Narrow doors made entering/exiting difficult for wide buggies, wheelchairs or those carrying bulky items.
- All settings had outdoor space, but in some it was small with few natural features. Some had limited opportunities for children to be challenged physically. This was highlighted by parents and practitioners.
- Shortcomings in signage especially in full-day care settings. For example, authorised people collecting children were unsure where a room is, or what a name means: what age group is in 'Bunnies' room?
- Shelter and access were sometimes problematic.

Guidelines

The built environment must be accessible, usable and easily understood by all users. The setting is a dedicated child-centred environment. While this differs from one context to another, the setting must facilitate the needs of children including play, exploration, movement, stillness, interactions and risk-taking.

Site location, approach, entry and design: Typical settings have users of diverse ages, sizes and abilities who arrive in many ways. The setting must provide for pedestrians, cyclists, and car users.

Entering and moving about: Enabling users to comfortably enter and move around is a basic requirement and means providing accessible routes for everyone. A setting must provide a welcoming, comfortable and spacious environment.

Key internal and external spaces: Spaces must support play and interactions with a range of learning provocations and ensure home-like conditions. Spaces should afford outdoor play and connection with nature with connectivity between indoor and outdoor and covered outdoor spaces and allow families and staff to interact with each other.

Elements and systems: These should ensure comfort and safety. Technology plays an important role. The internal environment is determined by lighting conditions, thermal comfort, air quality and acoustic conditions. Diverse users experience these conditions differently.

Self-Audit tool

The tool enables people to assess how UD principles are being used and to plan improvements. Key aspects are listed and criteria not relevant (e.g., sleep spaces in a sessional setting) can be excluded. Using the same section headings as the Guidelines, the self-audit tool encourages reflection and planning.

Conclusion

The Guidelines and Self-Audit tool provide an opportunity for reflection and evaluation by staff and users of settings of their current environments to make them universally accessible and can also be used by those designing new ELC settings.

The full suite of materials can be found at: <https://aim.gov.ie/universal-design-guidelines-for-elc-settings/>

