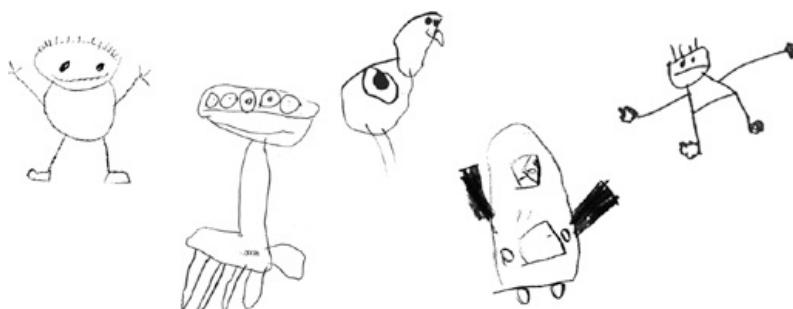




An Leanbh Óg

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Address: *c/o* Department of Education,
University College, Cork, Ireland.
Email: omepireland@eircom.net

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Editorial

This second issue of *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, once again brings together a selection of papers on different aspects of early childhood in Ireland. Early Childhood Studies includes the areas of education, social studies, child health and psychology, as well as those aspects of the law and of social policy that impinge on the lives of children and their families. The authors of papers in this issue cover a varied and eclectic range of topics, reflecting the nature of early childhood studies itself, and in this regard, the journal is becoming not only a record of current research in Ireland but also, we have been told, a valuable resource for students and their lecturers.

The aim of *An Leanbh Óg* is to be inclusive, and to bring to a wider audience some of the interesting work that is being done in the various areas. At the current state of development of early childhood studies in Ireland, much of the research is small-scale research projects undertaken for Masters or Doctoral degrees. These can nevertheless give great insights into the reality of everyday lives of children and their families, complementing the findings from larger national initiatives. It is important of course that the research is valid and authentic, and that it is presented in a way that enables one to see how the author reaches the conclusions drawn. Qualitative research has its own rigour, and if we are to advance the field, we need to present research in a convincing and intellectually valid way.

Not all the papers in the current issue are research based. Some are reflections on various aspects of early childhood. Many of them are based on presentations first made at the annual OMEP Ireland conference. They have however been considerably expanded and in some cases completely rewritten since then, as well as being sent for peer review. Some of them present the result of recent research projects, while others reflect on how we can learn from the great educators of the past. Anna Ridgway celebrates the centenary in 2007 of the establishment of Maria Montessori's first school in Rome, and reflects on how Montessori's insights and vision into the ways in which children learn have stood the test of time. Francis Douglas compares Montessori's underlying philosophy along with that of Friedrich Froebel, and identifies many similarities between them as well as some differences. He identifies enduring lessons from both of these great educators for early childhood practitioners today and advocates, as they did, keeping the child at the centre of our practice.

Thomas Walsh brings us an update on the second edition of the Audit conducted by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). The earlier part of his paper chronicles the exponential growth in early childhood publications and initiatives since 1990, while the later part documents the number of research publications and initiatives that have appeared and analyses them by theme. It is interesting to note that the updated Audit of Research adds a further 783 items to the 1,082 individual research publications and materials listed in the original 2003 Audit. The paper identifies a number of important areas that are currently under-researched, and suggests that there is a need for on-going research to inform policy and practice. Other aspects of quality are considered by Denice Cunningham, who looks in detail at quality in two early years centres, and through her case studies identifies funding for in-service training for staff as an important component in improving the quality of early years settings. Parent involvement has been identified as another important element of quality early years provision, and Shirley Martin in her paper looks at long-term effects of parent involvement in the Early Start pre-school programme. She identifies some positive effects both on parents' access to informal social support networks and their continued involvement with their children's education in primary school.

Maura Cunneen explores another aspect of parenting in her paper, this time looking at the day-to-day involvement of fathers in their children's lives, and also at their views on how children's gender identity develops.

An on-going topic of interest is the quality of early childhood education and care in Ireland, and several papers address this issue. At a national level, Jacqueline Fallon and Karen Mahony of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) describe how *Stolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, the development of which was described in Issue One of *An Leanbh Óg*, is being introduced to practitioners through a series of workshops.

The paper from Mary Daly and her colleagues in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) also follows up on a topic introduced in Issue One. This paper brings us some of the findings from the portraiture study conducted by the NCCA in order to include the voices of children in the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*, a

national early childhood curriculum framework which will complement *Síolta* in bringing greater continuity to early learning. The study identified some key messages from these children, the youngest of whom was only nine months old. The key messages included the importance for early learning of relationships and in particular the crucial role played by parents, the power of communication, the importance of a sense of identity and belonging and the benefits of observing and listening to children when planning for learning.

Jennifer Sturley brings us some insights from a very different setting, in her report on a visit to observe Danish after-school care. She uses a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework to analyse what she observed in Denmark, to set her findings in a broader societal context, and to note some contrasts with the situation in Ireland.

A number of papers in this issue relate to the broader area of children's well-being. Claire Nolan looks at children's experiences of shared parenting, which occurs when parents no longer live together and children share their time between two different households, an increasingly common phenomenon today. The children she talked to had very clear ideas about what they wanted; they wanted to be involved in decisions, to have time split fairly between parents, and they wanted their parents to communicate in a positive manner with each other. This paper takes a child-centred view of parenting, and child-centeredness is also at the core of Edel Daly's paper, which advocates for the right of every child to be valued and accepted. The different professionals who interact with children and their families can do this directly through their contact with the child, indirectly by supporting parents and carers, and finally by intervening appropriately when they observe that children's needs are not being met.

One important measure of children's well-being is their health status. Maria Cassidy reviews the literature on the health of Traveller children in her paper, and identifies some of the factors that lead to a higher infant mortality rate and a higher incidence of serious illness among Traveller children than among their settled counterparts. She concludes that "it would appear that poor living conditions, lack of adequate provision and punitive legislation combine to perpetuate rather than address negative health outcomes for Traveller children".

Another aspect of children's health is addressed by Patricia Radley, in her very topical paper on the effects of television food advertising on children, and on their diet in general. Among her findings were that the children in her study were watching programmes and advertising aimed at adults, although their levels of understanding varied. She also found some evidence that the Healthy Eating programme in schools was having a beneficial effect on children's knowledge about diet.

Children's sense of identity and belonging is another aspect of their lives that is fundamental to their general well-being. Sharon Phelan brings us an interesting and innovative examination of ways in which the performing arts can facilitate children to explore and become part of their own indigenous culture. The paper also highlights the potential of the performing arts to educate young children about other cultures existent within the Irish culture today.

The final section of the journal, the section entitled *From the Field: Perspectives on Practice*, brings us an update from Childminding Ireland on issues and concerns identified in their 2006 survey of childminders. This final section is open to all, and we would encourage practitioners and parents to submit short articles of general interest for inclusion in it. These need not be academic; indeed it is hoped to include practical examples of activities for young children in future issues in this section.

The fifteen papers included in this second issue of *An Leanbh Óg* once again reflect the many-faceted nature of early childhood care and education in Ireland. In keeping with OMEP (Ireland)'s mission statement, it aims to help children's lives to be better understood and thereby promote the optimum conditions for the well-being of all children, their development and happiness within their families, institutions, and society.

Rosaleen Murphy

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Maria Montessori 1907-2007: The Genius behind the Approach

Anna Ridgway, Dept. of Education, UCC.

Abstract

In 2007, the centenary year of the establishment of her first school, we celebrate the great genius of Maria Montessori. From humble beginnings in 1907, the Montessori approach is now known and practised worldwide. Montessori's insights and vision into the ways in which children learn have stood the test of time. Research has shown that Montessori's ideas are in keeping with what we know to be in the best interests of the child. It is psychologically sound and eminently practical.

Keywords: Montessori, centenary, structured approach, psychological development of the child, prepared environment, didactic materials.

Introduction

'He (the child) makes everything possible. On his work stands civilisation'

Montessori 1991: 104

This paper sets out to explore the impact of Montessori's approach to working with young children, one hundred years after the opening of her first school, in Rome, in 1907. Montessori offered a philosophy of education, a psychology of the child and a practical method of education, which has its roots in her Catholic, democratic and scientific background. It is a radically different approach to traditional education, in which she believed that children should be offered activities that would help them to develop holistically in body, mind and soul. As a democrat she upheld liberty and fostered full and free development of children; as a scientist she believed in educating the child through real experiences, by using concrete materials and providing learning situations where the child could work at his/her own pace. This aim was not incompatible with her religious beliefs as she aimed for the highest standards of discipline through individual self-control. She worked in an environment which did not rely on technology; an age which did not have television and computers. She also worked with large numbers of children of mixed ages in one class. Her vision for the young child has been welcomed worldwide, with

more than 22,000 Montessori schools in over one hundred countries. Standing (1957), Montessori's biographer, expressed the view that it would take one hundred years or more for the impact of her ideas to be fully disseminated. Therefore, it is timely to now ask what does the Montessori approach have to offer us as we celebrate its centenary?

The Power of Observation

Fortunately for generations of children, Montessori observed the children in her care very carefully to ascertain what they needed; she developed her practice from these observations rather than from a desire to make a theory fit the practice. Hurst (1994, p.47) refers to the power of observation and states

Observation is a complex and sophisticated pedagogic process through which practitioners learn about individual children ... using it (observation) turns the practitioner into a learner and often brings about a transformation of perspective.

Montessori certainly brought about a transformation of perspective and practice as she spent her life constantly learning from children and moderating her approach in the light of their needs. She believed that the teacher must be spiritually prepared for each class so that for the duration of the class she belongs to the children. She must spend her time constantly and vigilantly observing the child, without interfering with the child's freely chosen work. The child's ability to choose freely of the materials available would, she stated, fuse his/her mental and physical energies and aid his/her concentration, *'as soon as concentration has begun, act as if the child does not exist'* (Montessori 1991, p. 255). Montessori believed in the educability and enormous potential of every child. She did not see limits for the child, however, she realised that children were not all ready to do the same thing at the same age, as happens in single-age classrooms. Clarke (2003) concludes that many children believe they lack cognitive ability if members of their peer group learn something faster than they do. This has a detrimental effect on a child's self-esteem. The role of the Montessori teacher is key here; she must be so tuned in to her children that she knows when to intervene to help the child move to the next zone of development. Gardner's (1983, 1999) work on Multiple Intelligences theory attests to this. Gardner has shown us that each of us has at least eight intelligences, which work together to give us a unique intelligence profile. A child may be at different levels of achievement in the different intelligences, but because we all have the

potential to improve, we may develop our under-developed intelligences throughout life.

Play and the Work of the Child

Montessori advocated a play based curriculum, offered in a specially prepared environment which should *call* to the child. The child, through his/her unconscious memory or Mnème, is transformed by everything he/she sees, hears, touches or encounters in any way in his/her environment. *'whatever is formed at that time in the child's Mnème has the power to become eternal'* (Montessori 1991, p.108) She stated that play *is* the work of the child because it is freely chosen, absorbing and allows the child to make sense of his/her life experiences, concluding that children organise their personalities through their work. Montessori's grandson, in writing to explicate her ideas, reminds us of the genius behind the development of the didactic material,

It (the didactic material) offers children the opportunity to work independently and to have their own experiences with it. Since handling it demands the coordination of different functions, the entire personality is involved. (Montessori, 1992, p. 40)

Montessori believed the child had an instinctive and legitimate need for purposeful activity, which she likened to the work of adults; however, she made a clear distinction between the work of the adult and the work of the child. The child works to construct himself/herself, by acting on the environment. The adult admires his/her environment, remembers it and thinks about it, but the child absorbs it, *'the things he sees are not just remembered: they form part of his soul'* (Montessori 1991, p.56).

Vygotsky (1978, p. 96) believed in the enormous influence of play on child development. He reinforces Montessori's thoughts on real world activities for the young child stating that *'play in an imaginary situation is essentially impossible for a child under three in that it is a novel form of behaviour liberating the child from constraints.'* Montessori had stated that a child's education based on anything other than reality was based on sand (Montessori, 1965).

Freedom and Discipline

Montessori drew attention to the child's need to construct his/her intelligence by doing

things at his/her own pace. The child should not have to work to an adult's timetable as temporal awareness is very different in adult and child. She used the example of an adult polishing objects, pieces of silver or a pair of shoes until they shone, whereupon an adult will move on to the next task, however the child has a different focus:

the child watches the adult working methodically and carefully and repeats his actions methodically and carefully ... but ... he does an amazing thing, he goes on polishing it and often begins all over again a second, third and even fourth time' (Montessori, 1992, p. 79)

Freedom of choice and flexibility of time has been shown to lead to increased concentration, completion of work and greater ownership of that work '*even 2-month-olds appear to take positively to experiences of control*' (Lillard 2005, p.85).

Montessori believed the child achieved an inner peace and self-discipline by freely choosing work where the '*hand is at work and the mind guiding it*' (Montessori, 1991, p. 185). This discipline comes through liberty; it is freedom without licence as she believed that free choice was one of the highest of all the mental processes. The child perfects his /her own discipline, moving through stages until she/he achieves an inner moral code. This concept is difficult to understand today as it is very common for the teacher to be the authority figure in a class. Kelly (1995, p.114) refers to the situation where the teacher must be *an* authority rather than *in* authority in the classroom where the teacher and taught meet as individuals and equals. Chattin McNicholls (1992, p.55) takes this point further, stating that

one effect of making the teacher one source (rather than the only source) of information ... is to free her up from constant correcting, enabling her to do more individual and small group lessons and more observing of students.

Montessori believed a child behaves well because, in a Montessori classroom, the child's whole personality is absorbed in the task in hand. He/she does not have to be coerced into doing anything; he/she is seeking self-perfection and the development of his/her full potential '*the child who cannot yet obey an interior guide is not that free being who sets out to follow the long and narrow path toward perfection*'. (Montessori 1988,

p.247). Children should be fulfilled and enjoy what they do in an environment where their interests should direct their learning. Children learn the important skill of directing their own time. Lillard (2005) refers to wide ranging research studies showing the motivational and performance aspects of allowing the child to freely choose a piece of work, by stating that free choice is clearly associated with initial level of performance, task persistence and increased levels of creativity. The child is empowered by showing how capable he/she is, by working freely and independently, *'He (the child) constructs his mind step by step till it becomes possessed of memory, the power to understand, the ability to think'* (Montessori 1988, p. 25)

Motivation

Montessori believed in the child's intrinsic motivation to work without external rewards. Her observations of children showed her that the child was capable of and, interested in, multiple repetitions of an activity until he/she had drawn the essence from it and was satisfied with himself/herself. When children were offered rewards they frequently ignored them. The work they engage in provides its own satisfaction and reward due to its high level of stimulation. Why does this decrease as children get older and progress through school and, why does the desire to continue with a system of rewards and punishments persist in our schools today? One piece of research, which illuminates this conundrum, was conducted by Eccles, Wigfield *et al.*, (1993) and showed that children's intrinsic motivation declines with each year they spend in traditional schooling. This is a grave cause of concern when one considers that in Ireland, in the 2005-2006 school year, there were eighty one thousand, six hundred 4-5 year old children in formal schooling. These were in Junior and Senior Infant classes in Primary Schools and represent 18.4% of children in mainstream primary classes (Government Statistics Office August 2007). One of the factors cited for this decline was the over reliance on grades and other extrinsic motivators. In particular, the research has shown that children experience a marked decrease in motivation when the extrinsic motivator is removed. Children become accustomed to working for the rewards and, once this is removed, they find they have lost interest in the work. Children are intrinsically motivated to be active constructors of their own learning, without extrinsic reward, and they need to be allowed to follow this very natural inner need. Clarke (2005, p.117) on the question of intrinsic motivation and creating a good learning environment, reminds us that

Everyone has the potential to learn and improve: we just have to create the environment in which it can happen ... Teaching and learning are fundamentally enjoyable and rewarding activities, yet the motivation and engagement of our pupils and staff remain central to why many of our pupils underachieve.

Montessori believed young children often like to work alone and most of the instruction in a Montessori school is individualised. We often try to arrange it in our classroom so that young children work together in groups. Montessori believed this was a natural choice for older children. Conversely, in the more senior classes in our Primary Schools, children are encouraged to work individually. This would appear to counter the natural order as dictated by the child Montessori observed so very carefully. The young child's absorbent mind motivates him/her to become a researcher, tireless worker and constructor of his/her intellect. In later childhood, children work in an integrated manner, *'social integration has occurred when the individual identifies himself with the group to which he belongs. When this has happened, the individual thinks more about the success of his group than of his own personal success.* (Montessori 1988, p.213). The time has come for us to radically rethink our approach to external motivators and, to how we structure our classes in the light of the children's needs.

Prepared environment

Montessori spoke of transforming the environment in which children worked. She designed her prepared environment to allow the children to learn by doing, to be active constructors of their own learning. The environment is very carefully planned and organised with child-sized furniture and materials arranged in an aesthetically pleasing manner. The child is in control of this environment, which empowers him. The material he/she wishes to work with is within his reach on a child-sized shelf and, he/she is comfortable on furniture made to suit his/her physical size. *'Children in Montessori classrooms work as motivated doers, learning through self-instigated actions on the environment'* (Lillard 2005, p.28). Montessori referred to the need for sufficient space for *physical* movement for the child in this environment, but she referred to the materials as catering to the child's *psychical* development. In this environment children work individually and in groups as *they* desire.

Meadows (1997) specifies eight key elements of the Montessori Prepared Environment which are, freedom and discipline, structure and order, reality and nature, simplicity and

beauty, Montessori material, normalised children, community responsibility and the Montessori teacher. The teacher, or Directress, is a key part of this learning environment.

Movement

Movement is essential for the development of the child as he constructs his own learning *'it is through movement that the higher life expresses itself'* (Montessori 1988, p.130). Montessori (1991, p.138) believed that *'the hands of man express his thought'* and that through movement we come in contact with external reality and, through these contacts we acquire abstract ideas. Working with the materials in the Montessori classroom demands constant movement as the child chooses *what* to work with and *with whom* he wishes to work. Learning, therefore, is accomplished through movement in line with Montessori's belief that movement and thought are closely linked. Many theorists now refer to this as *'embodied cognition'* (Lillard 2005, p. 39).

Montessori summarised her key belief in active learning by stating, *'Everything in the living world is active. Life is activity at its peak, and it is only through activity that the perfectionments of life can be sought and gained'* (Montessori 1988, p.83)

Lillard (2005, pp 41-42) reviewed widespread current research which attests to the veracity of this premise. She states that this research shows that infants as young as 3.5 months who were given opportunities to reach for objects during the research, showed far more visual attention to new objects and a much greater desire to reach for those objects. In fact, this active engagement helps the young child to develop a sense of self, sense of spatial awareness and greater self-confidence. Lillard (2005, p.44) shows from her literature review that current research supports Montessori's beliefs on the importance of active learning and physical manipulation of material, particularly by using one's hands.

Purposeful activities are self-reinforcing for infants, and self-generated movement is clearly tied to even very basic processes of mental development. These research findings support Dr. Montessori's contention that, to assist development, children should be encouraged to move their hand and their bodies from an early age.

There is, therefore, a need today for more active learning in all early childhood settings,

particularly in primary schools.

Montessori Curriculum

The constraints of this paper do not allow for a full exploration of the breadth of Montessori Math materials, which really demonstrate the genius behind the approach. Each area has a large number of exercises, graded in difficulty, which are presented to the child in sequence as he/she is ready for them.

a. Practical Life exercises

Montessori worked with real materials in an everyday setting and she emphasised the need for real world experiences. She stated that ‘only *practical work and experience lead the young to maturity*’ (Montessori 1988; 20). The four categories of Practical Life exercises, Elementary Movement, Care of the Person, Care of the Environment and Grace and Courtesy, have multiple and complex aims. Initially they help the child to master everyday practical skills, which brings the child to a state of independence and self-confidence. However, the concentration and expenditure of energy is out of proportion to the external purpose of the activity. The child, thus engaged, is fulfilling a biological need, working in an ordered way and bringing harmony to mind and body. The experienced Montessori teacher relies on this area of the curriculum to draw the child into purposeful activity, especially if the child is distracted or deviated. There are graded exercises in each of the four areas and within each exercise there is a sequence to be mastered. These activities help the child to develop his/her hand-eye co-ordination, strengthen his/her pincer grip and build up his/her competence and independence. As with all Montessori materials they provide an indirect preparation for other work, particularly reading, writing and number work.

b. The Sensorial Materials

Sensorial activities convey an abstract idea in concrete form ‘The hand and the brain act in unison making a mental connection between an abstract idea and its concrete representation’ (Polk Lillard 1996, p.36). Montessori subscribed to the Aristotelian belief that nothing forms in the mind that is not first in the senses. The sensorial curriculum provides graded exercises to develop all the senses. Each piece of material has one quality or difficulty to be isolated, but may have several indirect aims. The material is auto-correctional and this allows the child to complete the cycle of work without adult help, which builds self-esteem and self-confidence. Most importantly, this material allows the

child to own and accept her errors. Montessori felt one should cultivate a friendly feeling towards error, which is a companion inseparable from our lives. The sensorial exercises assist the child in the development of his/her intelligence, which depends on organising and categorising his/her sense perceptions. The material is brightly coloured and is designed to educate and refine the senses.

However, one single property is accentuated in each subdivision of the material. A child is thus invited to direct its attention to a special objective quality....the material itself makes the child aware when something has not been done correctly. Its intelligence is then challenged to find a better solution. In this way the ego functions are differentiated, trained and integrated without strain, more or less playfully, while the child is stimulated to perform meaningful acts. (Montessori, 1992, p.40)

c. Number work

The mathematics curriculum is also sensorially based and each child learns at his/her own pace. Montessori was very concerned with abstraction rather than memorisation; with the process rather than the product. The longer the child uses the material the more abstract it becomes. All the child has learned in the Sensorial areas is in the unconscious, in engrams, which are traces left in the subconscious mind by experiences in the physical world. The child takes the information he/she has stored and uses it when it is required, thereby applying his/her knowledge. This increases his/her attention span and prepares him/her for number work. The child always begins work with concrete material, learning to count using number rods, golden bead or sandpaper numbers; the golden bead also introduces him/her to the decimal system. Children in Montessori pre-schools perform quite complex mathematical operations at an early age. They do this effortlessly as they gain a firm grasp on the concepts being taught.

d. Language

The child in a Montessori class is indirectly prepared for Language work in many ways, for example through the Practical Life and Sensorial curricula. He/she has classified, sorted, learned left to right orientation, developed the pincer grip and a lightness of touch. The child begins to write before he/she can read, and reading follows very quickly after the first attempts at writing. Written communication is visualised language and,

therefore, an extension of oral language. The classroom environment is so structured that all activities feed naturally towards the development of the skills required for reading and thus, reading is experienced as part of the process of living. Vygotsky (1986, p.113) states *'Writing, in its turn, enhances the intellectuality of the child's actions. It brings awareness to speech'*. Freedom to speak and to initiate activities, Montessori believed, ensures that language becomes an integral part of the classroom with continuous encouragement for self-expression and communication. Montessori considered writing and reading as integrated and closely related to the child's oral language. The child is taught through the phonic method and learns to read by grouping the sounds together to form words. The child begins with the individual phonemes in sandpaper, which he/she may trace with his/her fingers while saying the sound and visually absorbing the shape of the letter. This multi-sensorial approach aids the child's absorption of the sounds of his/her language. The experienced Montessori teacher relies on 'Circle Time' to aid the child's oral language and this is an important part of the school day. Language is attached to an abstract idea and transforms the knowledge gained into a key, which the children can use for further exploration in their world. One of the misconceptions about Montessori education is that the classrooms are not language rich environments. This comes about perhaps due to the quiet nature of a Montessori classroom where children are fully engrossed in their work. However, there is a wide range of language material available in each classroom and a great emphasis placed on language development. Montessori understood fully the links between thought and language and worked to ensure her children were skilful communicators. Vygotsky (1986) and Piaget (1963) both remind us of the reciprocal reinforcing links between thought and language.

Conclusion

In contrast to other constructivists, Dr. Montessori left the legacy of a broad, field-tested curriculum covering all the major subject areas – math, music, art, grammar, science, history, and so on – for children ages 3 – 12. This system was developed by trial and error over her lifetime, with children in places as diverse as Rome, India, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United States. (Lillard, 2005, p.18)

Montessori education promotes the development of the child's potential to the full. It

seeks to make him/her independent with the skills to be a lifelong learner. Montessori children are seen as highly competent, social, disciplined human beings who are ready for life's challenges. This is a challenge for any education system today as we seek to prepare our children for the increasing diverse and rapidly changing demands of today's world. It is clear that Montessori's understanding of the child's needs, developed through rigorous research and a life time of reflection is very much suited to the needs of today's child. Her approach was developed from close observation of the child. The child inspired her to develop a way of teaching that truly reflected his/her needs. As a Montessori teacher this author has truly experienced the 'genius behind the approach' in many classrooms. One hundred years after the opening of the first school, Montessori education is still vibrant and active throughout the world.

Contact details for author:

Dr. Anna Ridgway, Dept. of Education, UCC.

Email: aridgway@education.ucc.ie

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Some Implications of the Froebelian and Montessorian Methods of Educating Young Children for Effective Schooling Today

*Francis Douglas, Director of Early Childhood Studies,
Education Department, UCC.*

Abstract

In this paper Froebel's and Montessori's philosophy and methods of education are highlighted. This has been undertaken to emphasise the similarities rather than the differences in the two systems. The key findings are listed at the end of the paper and show some of the implications of these two systems of education for effective schooling today.

Introduction

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel was born on April 21, 1782 in Oberweissbach, Thuringia, Ernestine Saxony (Germany) and died on June 21, 1852 in Marienthal, near Bad Liebenstein, Thuringia. He was one of the most influential educational reformers of the 19th century.

In 1826 he published "*The Education of Man*" and later his collection of "*Mother Play and Nursery Songs*" with lengthy explanations of their meaning and use. This immensely popular book was translated into many foreign languages. He insisted that improvement of infant education was a vital preliminary to comprehensive educational and social reform. In 1837, after five years in Switzerland, he returned to Germany and realised two of his most important ideas: an infant school in Blankenburg originally called the "Child Nurture and Activity Institute", which by happy inspiration he later renamed the Kindergarten, and a small boarding school for future teachers.

Maria Montessori was born on August 31st, 1870 in Chiaravalle, near Aricona, Italy and died on May 6th, 1952 in Noordwijk aan Zee, Netherlands. She was an important Italian educator who founded the system of education which still bears her name. The Montessori system is based on a belief in the child's creative potential, his or her drive to learn and his or her right to be treated as an individual. In 1907 Montessori opened the

first Casa dei Bambini (“Children’s House”) which was a school for young children from the San Lorenzo slum district of Rome. Her successes led to the opening of other Montessori schools and for the next 40 years she travelled throughout Europe, India and the United States lecturing, writing and establishing teacher-training programmes. Montessori’s methods are set forth in a series of books which she wrote commencing with “*The Montessori Method*” published in 1909 and concluding with “*The Absorbent Mind*” published in 1949.

In this paper Froebel’s and Montessori’s philosophy and methods of education are highlighted. This has been undertaken to emphasise the similarities rather than the differences in the two systems. At the end are listed some of the implications for effective schooling today.

Froebel and Montessori: The child and the environment

Montessori defines her method of education as follows: “What I have done is merely to study the child, to take and express what he has given me, and that is called the Montessori Method” (Montessori, 1946, p4). The revelations that came from the observations of the children in her care included tremendous mental concentration; a love of order and work; a desire to repeat activities many times; a preference for structured activities over idle play; an indifference towards rewards and praise; an innate sense of personal dignity; respect for others and an inner discipline resulting from normalisation through work. With respect to the development of their spirit she felt that there should, after the children had been normalised, be periods of silence in the classroom. “It is in silence and when movements are ordered that the inner sensitivity that is called “religious sense” or “spiritual sense” can be developed” (Montessori, 1948, p346). It is interesting, in this context, that Froebel had been trained in his youth as a scientist and believed that the observation of the child was the key to that child’s education.

Both Froebel and Montessori agreed that the provision of a prepared environment was the first principle in the educational development of the child for as Montessori said: “The first thing his education demands is the provision of an environment in which he can develop the powers given him by nature (*ibid*, p91)” Both Froebel and Montessori were very aware of the horrors of the school system at their time and this coloured much of their thinking. As Montessori said about discipline:

If discipline is founded upon liberty, the discipline itself must necessarily be active. We do not consider an individual disciplined when he has been rendered as artificially silent as a mute and as immovable as a paralytic. He is an individual annihilated, not disciplined. We call an individual disciplined when he is master of himself, and can, therefore, regulate his own conduct when it shall be necessary to follow some rule of life (Montessori, 1912, p56)

Montessori perceived the teacher as part of the prepared environment for the child. Like Froebel she saw the teacher as a guide and facilitator rather than as someone engaging in didactic teaching. “With my method the teacher teaches little and observes much; it is her function to direct the psychic activity of the children and their physiological development. For this reason I have changed the name of teacher to that of Directress” (Montessori, 1912, p 173). In common with Froebel, Montessori thought that it was vital that the teacher had to have the right attitude of mind for as the latter said: “A teacher, therefore, who would think that he could prepare himself for his mission through study alone would be mistaken. The first thing required of a teacher is that he be rightly disposed for his task” and he must prepare himself interiorly by “systematically studying himself so that he can tear out his most deeply rooted defects”(Montessori, 1936, p149).

Froebel’s second most important principle concerned his love of nature and everything that is concerned with it. The very word “kindergarten”- the “child’s garden”-shows the importance that he attached to it. In the traditional Kindergarten there would be a garden outside the school where each child would be given their own small plot of land in which to grow a variety of flowers and vegetables. There would also be facilities for pets, like rabbits, to be cared for, fed and observed by the children. Inside the school there would be a nature table with plants and seeds on display and, maybe, an oak tree growing in a pot and a goldfish bowl beside it. Froebel believed that children were like plants and that they should be allowed to grow at their own pace and reach their potential in their own time. “ Growth takes time. The potential is the seed” he said and that “as every plant needs care, attention and nourishment according to its condition, so every child needs individual tuition according to its ability” (Liebschner, 1992, p42). According to Montessori, the child’s natural affinity with nature is often lost amid the comforts of modern urban life. Efforts are made to recapture this through the teacher’s own attitude of respect for plant and animal life. Care of plants and animals is stressed and the

Natureshelf is an important feature of the prepared environment. The beginnings of classification are introduced with pictures of “animals that gnaw”; “animals that eat meat” *etc.* Pictures are supplied of various fruits; trees; “vegetables that grow below the ground” *etc.*

Play

One of the key components of Froebel’s educational system was play. He stressed the crucial role of play in the process of the child’s development in terms of learning. He wrote that: “I studied the boys’ play, the whole series of games in the open air and learned to recognise their mighty power to awake and to strengthen the intelligence and the soul as well as the body.” (Froebel, cited in Liebschner, 1992, p52) and “... play is the fundamental medium and instrument through which the child, out of his own impulses and inward resources, effects his growth in every direction that is open to him ...” (*ibid*, p18). Froebel also realised the importance of freedom in play. He thought that “each person, each child has a particular gift which will become visible if circumstances are right and freedom for expression of the same is given”. According to Froebel such play, which springs from an inner urge encourages imagination and creative thinking and develops autonomy in younger children. In addition, he intended that play should lead to self discipline and to order and authority, for in play a child becomes aware of himself/herself as an individual by the experience of freedom of choice, and becomes aware of the need for authority and order by his dependence on others and limiting factors of the material he uses. However, he also asserted the importance of the role of adults as a guide in play. In the *laissez-faire* situation, play does not show its potential because play can only function and develop when the rules are understood by the players, and the continuation of play depends on the frequent introduction of new materials and ideas. Therefore, the interaction with adults in play is crucial to support and to maintain interest (Liebschner, 1992, p36).

Both Froebel and Montessori believed in structured play although Montessori defined this as “the child’s work”. Froebel and Montessori believed that it should not be left to chance. As Froebel said, it was through such organised play that children learnt much which was of importance to them and because of this it was a vital part of the curriculum. He believed that the educator should not only guide this play but, upon occasion, actually teach it. And he believed that without rational guidance childish activity degenerates into aimless play and that without guidance there is no free development (Froebel, 1826).

Froebel believed that through play, the natural growth of children was achieved in every direction. It is all based on his principle of unity. “The inner life of man, just like the outer world of nature, were both governed by the same laws, the laws of God. Just as God mediates through life in nature and man through his actions, so does the child in his play.” (Liebschner, 1992, p95) “while the child expresses his inner life in his play, he simultaneously opens up the world to his own understanding.” Through play, the inner life of the child, and his inner development could easily be expressed. (*ibid*, p97). Froebel advocated that in play the child discovers his possibilities of will and through exerting his power spontaneously, develops all his powers. He believed that play makes him master of himself. (Froebel, 1826). He provided children with many stimulating materials for the continuation of play.

Learning in early childhood

Montessori maintains that during the first three years of life, the child unconsciously absorbs knowledge into his psychic life. “Impressions do not merely enter his mind; they form it. They incarnate themselves in him” (Montessori, 1949, p25). While the first three years are given to the creation of faculties, the second three years of life are given to the development of these faculties. Through his absorbent mind, the child now brings into consciousness all that he has created in the first three years. It is as if the child, having absorbed the world by an unconscious kind of intelligence, now “lays his hands” to it (*ibid*, p166).

It is during these first six years of life that the various “sensitive periods” come to the fore. Montessori defined these as the various stages in the child’s life when he finds himself attracted to certain elements in his environment to the exclusion of others. These sensitive periods relate to such acquisitions as language, movement, order refinement of the senses, interest in small objects, acquisition of culture, social development, reading and writing. The child’s attraction to these areas lasts only for a limited period and if the characteristics in question are not acquired during this time they are lost forever or can only be acquired with extreme difficulty. The acquisition of language is an obvious example of a sensitive period at work. A very important but less well known one is that for order which occurs during the first year of life and lasts until the third year. The infant is building his world from the elements of his environment and unless there is order in this environment he can be upset “ to the point of illness” (Standing, 1957, p127). The need for order explains many of the tantrums which occur in the young child and which can be dealt with

effortlessly by the person in tune with the child's sensitive period. So damaging can the effect of limiting a child's activity during the sensitive period for movement that Montessori claims that one who is "a prisoner of the flesh undergoes more dramatic and profound sufferings than one who is blind or deaf and dumb" (Montessori, 1936, p101). Deprived of one of the senses, one can compensate to some extent through the keenness of the other senses but physical activity on the other hand is "intimately connected with one's personality, and there is no substitute for it" (*ibid*, p.101). She deplors the situation where tiny children are confined unnecessarily to prams, cots or playpens when every opportunity should be given for them to develop their motor skills. She decries the situation she witnessed in the traditional elementary schools where little children were restricted in movement, social interaction and activities.

The intense mental activity provoked in the child during these sensitive periods discredits the common assumption of traditional education that the child learns the same amount every day. Observations in Montessori schools have shown that the child learns most in a given area when going through the sensitive period for that particular area and often learns more in a few weeks than he might have learned in several months at the enforced tempo of traditional class teaching. A prime example is the explosion into writing that Montessori observed in the first *Casa dei Bambini* (Children's House) in Rome before the first World War. Montessori's preparatory exercises on preparing the hand led to a spontaneous explosion in writing, accompanied by an excitement and enthusiasm for this feat, which was to last several months and attract visitors from all over the world to visit the school. This skill was followed some months later by a realisation that words lie hidden on paper and that people can communicate with each other in this mysterious way. The parents of most of these children were illiterate. Froebel had his own system of sensitive periods which he called "Budding Points", but they were not as comprehensive as Montessori's (Froebel, 1826).

Both Froebel and Montessori agreed that writing came before reading, indeed Montessori said that: "Written language can be acquired much more easily by children of four years than by those of six years of age – the time at which compulsory education usually starts" (Montessori, 1955, p94). Both, however, agreed that it depended upon when the child reached the "sensitive period" or "budding point" for writing and that this would differ from child to child. Mathematics was a key concern for both of them with Froebel of the belief that his first

“gift” a woolly ball should be presented to the infant at the age of approximately three months and the wooden sphere, the first part of his second “gift” at approximately six months (Froebel, 1826). Montessori believed, like Froebel, that the mathematical mind is active from birth. She bases this belief on the fact that exactitude exerts itself on every action that a very child performs and in the craving by this young child for order in everything. (Montessori, 1949). Montessori pointed out that mathematics deals with abstractions and abstractions cannot be taught. Only by presenting the child with concrete objects can these abstractions be materialised. She said that the process of abstraction can be facilitated by two processes; namely, absolute clarity in the concrete and a certain maturity of mind on the part of the child. Repetition is essential in this process and the operations must be repeated continuously until the knowledge is absorbed into the unconscious mind. Critics sometimes point out that a child in a Montessori school is over-dependent on concrete materials, not realising that concrete materials merely act as a “crutch” until the child reaches the point where, through constant activity and exercising of the senses, he can with confidence, and effortlessly, discard such materials and write out mathematical operations unaided.

There is a considerable literature on the differences between Montessori and Froebel but upon closer examination these often turn out to be the result of the reinterpretation of the Froebelian system for larger classes which was much practised in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. For example it is often said that in the Froebelian school the class are treated as a whole whereas in the Montessori school the unit of teaching is the individual child but Froebel himself, like Montessori was adamant that the child’s work should be tailored to that child. It might be fair to say that Montessori has a greater faith in the spontaneous intellectual and social powers of the child whereas Froebel requires greater guidance from the teacher. It is also true that the “gifts and occupations for the child” which Froebel developed are different from the Montessori materials and apparatus but both are arranged in ascending order of complexity and nothing is introduced until the child is “ready”. Some commentators have referred to the difference between the two philosophies as being between “Dolls Houses” and “Children’s Houses”. In the early years Montessori places a very heavy emphasis on teaching the children only about reality – real cups of tea and not pretend cups of tea – as she makes the point that human beings cannot productively exercise their imaginations until they have grasped reality. Our ordinary social environment has been made for

adults, and is not suitable for the creative activities of the child. The child thus escapes into make-believe. Montessori believes that if you prepare an environment based on the child's needs you will find that he or she will be occupied with "real" things, whereas Froebel gives "make believe" a slightly more important role.

Compared to the Froebelian or Montessorian classroom, the fact that the child in the traditional classroom moves around very little fits the Lockean model of the child. Locke viewed the child as a 'tabula rasa' or 'blank slate' on to which knowledge could be imprinted; thus in the Lockean model the child is required to take in new information and commit it to memory. It is interesting to note that behavioural psychologists believe that the children do this because they are rewarded or punished, as behaviourists are not concerned with what goes on inside our heads, only with the outcome. Movement is not important to learning in this view. In fact, it is easier to pour things into an empty vessel or to write on "blank slates" if children are still!

Movement and cognition are closely intertwined. Our brains evolved in a world of movement in which we did things, not a world in which we sat at desks and considered abstractions. Piaget would agree with Froebel and Montessori that thinking seems to be expressed by the hands before it can be put into words (Ginsburg and Oper, 1979). Children better imagine how objects and substances move when they carry out actions that stimulate those movements. In recent years there has been an explosion of fascinating research on the connection between movement and cognition. One study asked people to judge the angle at which a wide and a thin glass, each containing the same amount of imagined water, would pour. People were often wrong when they simply thought about the problem – they judged that water would pour out of both glasses at the same angle. However, when they were allowed to tilt actual glasses of imaginary water, even with their eyes closed, they correctly tilted the narrow glass farther than the wide one (Schwartz and Black, 1999). Thus, when cognition is aligned with movement, more accurate representation results. This finding implies, as do the Froebelian and Montessorian methods of education, that movement enhances learning.

Both the Froebelian and Montessorian systems allow the child an element of choice. Research in psychology suggests that freedom and choice within carefully defined limits are linked to better learning outcomes. For example, people have a basic need for

autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000). They like to feel that they have choices and they flourish if they do. However, too much choice can be debilitating and serve to undermine one's sense of control (Schwartz, 2004).

The best type of learning occurs when the learner is interested. Interest can be personal, as when the individual has a fascination for ladybirds or dogs, or it can be situational whereby large numbers of people are naturally interested in a topic, such as football. As a result of close observation with respect to the child's "budding points" or "sensitive periods", both Froebel and Montessori learnt to captivate the children's interest. As the sensitive period for language occurred the Montessori teacher concentrates on new words, labels and pre-writing exercises for example. In terms of specific personal interests both Montessori and Froebel believe that children should be encouraged to follow that which fascinates them. This allows more general learning to accrue through pursuit of these individual interests. It is obvious that an obsessive interest in frogs will allow the child to learn about biology. More generally, however, such a child will also learn how to research information, write notes and reports, practise penmanship, spelling and punctuation, as well as engage in the skills of realistic drawing. The child might also use frogs as a springboard to study sound (beginning with croaking) or adaptation (how different species of frogs have adapted to different environments). One role of the teacher in this situation is to connect the child to the various areas of the curriculum through the child's personal interests. Hence, the teacher ensures that the child's education is broad despite the child's narrow enthusiasm. Thus, rather than "learning by rote", children following Froebel's and Montessori's curriculum study their own innate interests.

Music, Art and Creativity in all subject areas are essential parts of the Froebelian and Montessorian systems. Both methods of education encourage children to think divergently. In other words, children are encouraged to think of novel and unique answers to problems rather than just concentrating on the 'correct' answers. Divergent thinking contributes to, but does not fully explain, one's creative accomplishments (Runco, 1992; Torrance, 1988). Recent multi-component perspectives, such as the investment theory of creativity, specify that a variety of cognitive, personal, motivational and environmental resources continue to foster creative problem solving. This theory looks very promising in terms of both its existing empirical support and its suggestions for fostering creativity (Sternberg and Lubart, 1996; Lubart and Sternberg, 1995). Both the Froebelian and

Montessorian methods of education incorporate this multi-component approach into their philosophies. Children's intellectual curiosity is encouraged and they are allowed the freedom to pursue their own interests in depth.

Extrinsic rewards, such as gold stars and sweets, are believed by both Montessori and Froebel to disrupt the child's concentration. Sustained, intense periods of concentration are central to both methodologies. It is not unusual for older children to work on a project for several days at a time and even young children can be seen concentrating for thirty minutes, or more, at the same task. A good deal of research suggests that interest in an already loved activity is best sustained when extrinsic rewards are not part of the picture (Horgan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In many primary schools, the teacher gives the children information. The children rarely learn from one or other or directly from materials. Tests, problems and exercises are usually undertaken alone. In many pre-schools the children usually play in groups. This is the opposite of the Froebelian and Montessorian systems where, based as they are on the careful observation of children, pre-school children are mostly involved in working on their own or in adult/child interaction while older children are involved in co-operative activities with mostly peer interaction. This is strongly supported by research; for example Piaget and Vygotsky both assigned peers a prominent role in development. Piaget argued that peers are important because by presenting different ideas, they create a state of disequilibrium in the child. The child tries to "accommodate" to this disequilibrium and in so doing develops. Thus peer involvement becomes an important engine for development (De Lisi and Golbeck, 1999; Piaget, 1926). Vygotsky argued that learning occurs in a "zone of proximal development", which meant that tasks that the child could not yet accomplish alone could be accomplished with the help of another who was more advanced. In his view, slightly more advanced peers serve as important leaders in development (Hogan and Tudge, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978).

In a Froebel or Montessori school, if they are true to their founder's spirit, the children, rather than learning largely from what the teachers and the textbooks say, learn from "doing". As a result of learning by doing, rather than merely hearing or writing, their learning is situated in the context of actions and objects. For example by physically separating learners from the sites where their knowledge will be applied, traditional

schooling reduces both contextual support and motivation for learning. In an interesting experiment with three year olds Istomina (1975), found that those children who were told to memorise lists of items to be purchased in a shop were far inferior to those children who played “shop” and were asked for the same items. Indeed those that played “shop” remembered twice as many items as those that did not and it was concluded that this was entirely the result of the meaningful context in which the learning took place.

Both Froebel and Montessori suggest that adults should provide clear limits but set children free within those boundaries. Macoby and Martin (1983) illustrated this when they put forward four styles of parenting – authoritarian, permissive, neglecting and authoritative. They say that it is only the latter which is characterised by being high on control, high on discussion, high on expectation and high on warmth and that such adults tend to have very clear easily understood rules which they enforce. However, within these rules the child has considerable freedom (unlike the child in the authoritarian setting). Children of authoritative parents are clearly the best off, high in achievement motivation and in self-control. They tend to be more popular, competent, and self assured than other children. Children of authoritative parents also show high levels of social responsibility. In encouraging this type of control both Montessori and Froebel showed great insight for their time.

Research in psychology suggests that order is very helpful to learning and development and that children do not fare so well in less ordered environments. For example, with respect to family organisation, regularity and family routines are related to positive outcomes in children. Fiese (2001) asked parents of four year olds to fill out an extensive questionnaire about their family routines and rituals in a variety of circumstances, including dinnertime, weekends, and cultural and religious events. Two principle results emerged from the responses: regularity and predictability of family routines, and the degree to which a routine had symbolic significance. These children’s academic competence was also assessed four years later at age eight. The results indicated that both predictability and symbolic meaning of routines at age four were significantly related to these children’s overall academic achievement at age eight. As we have seen both Froebel and Montessori placed a high emphasis on order and predictability.

To summarise, the key components of the Froebelian and Montessorian methods of education as discussed above are:

1. Close observation of the child is vital.
2. The prepared environment is crucial.
3. Much can be taught through ‘nature’.
4. Play is “the child’s work”.
5. “Sensitive periods” when the child is particularly likely to learn a particular skill, or gain a certain type of knowledge, must be taken into account.
6. Writing comes before reading and maths comes first.
7. Movement is an important component of cognition. A child’s intellectual performance is reduced by sitting still and being “tied” to a desk.
8. An element of choice for the child is important, too much choice can be debilitating.
9. The best type of learning occurs when the child is interested.
10. Children who are allowed the freedom to pursue their own interests in depth will produce creative solutions to problems.
11. Extrinsic rewards disrupt the child’s concentration and are not necessary, indeed they can act negatively on the child’s motivation.
12. Group work can be highly beneficial to learning particularly in the primary school.
13. Children learn best by ‘doing’.
14. There should be ‘freedom within limits’—there must be rules and they must be obeyed.
15. Order in the environment is beneficial to children.

These fifteen points should be born in mind by the educator when planning their curriculum for the young child. The wisdom of Froebel and Montessori who have had such a strong influence on schooling today should not be lightly disregarded.

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An Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland, 1990-2006 (Second Edition)

Thomas Walsh, CECDE

Abstract

This paper overviews an audit undertaken by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education of Irish research in the area of early childhood care and education between 1990 and 2006. It begins by documenting the wider context for ECCE research in Ireland since 1990. The methodology employed in assembling and analysing the research is briefly described. Comprising in excess of 1,800 research documents, the paper identifies trends in research in Ireland over the last sixteen years. It focuses on twenty-four themes in which the research is categorised, including the sixteen national Standards of Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Gaps in the research are also highlighted and recommendations for further research are indicated.

Introduction¹

This paper introduces the Second Edition of the Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland, which spans the entire period 1990 to 2006 (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2007a). This update is warranted owing to the efflorescence of research within early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland in recent years, displaying the vibrancy of the developing and evolving early years sector. Moreover, the Second Edition of the Audit is timely in order to inform research priorities into the future, both for the CECDE and the wider ECCE sector, to ensure that policy and practice in the Irish context is informed by current indigenous research.

This paper is presented in three substantive sections:

Context for the development of the Second Edition of the Audit of Research;

A description of the initial Audit of Research produced in 2003 (CECDE, 2003);

An overview of the Second Edition of the Audit of Research, including the methodology employed in its compilation, an outline of the twenty-four themes and their associated sub-themes, findings of interest, research gaps identified and details of the online searchable research database.

Context for the Second Edition of the Audit of Research

The update of the Research Audit is timely in the Irish context. The initial Audit of Research (CECDE, 2003) has been widely welcomed by the sector. However, since its publication in 2003, the policy, practice and research context for ECCE in Ireland has evolved and developed significantly. This section focuses on the nature of these changes in recent years and analyses their impact on the development of research within the sector.

A number of landmark policy documents and decisions in recent years have been informed by, and indeed catalysed, Irish society's view of children. The recent CECDE publication, *Insights on Quality* (CECDE, 2005a), is testimony to the wealth of documentation that has been generated in the Irish context since 1990. This vibrancy is particularly evident in the years since the millennium, reflecting the sector's endeavours to provide high quality services. These are now outlined briefly below in chronological order.

In 1991, the *Child Care Act* (1991) (Department of Health, 1991) was introduced and this was subsequently given practical application through the associated *Child Care (Preschool) Regulations* that apply to all preschool settings (with the exception of childminders caring for three or less children [excluding their own] in their own home and Early Start) (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 1997). One of the key catalysts for evolving attitudes and increasing provisions for ECCE in Ireland in recent years was Ireland's ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1992 (United Nations, 1989). In 1994, a Minister of State for Children was appointed and the Early Start pilot project was introduced into primary schools. The Children's Rights Alliance was established in 1995. The Report of the Commission on the Family, *Strengthening Families for Life* (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1998) was published in 1998, at a similar time to the *Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (Coolahan, 1998).

One of the most fundamental pieces of educational legislation in Ireland, the *Education Act* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1998), was passed in 1998 and this was followed in 2000 by the *Education (Welfare) Act* (DES, 2000). 1999 was a pivotal year in relation to policy development for ECCE in Ireland, with the publication of the

seminal White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a), the introduction of the *Revised Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999b) and the completion of the *National Childcare Strategy* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 1999). Child protection and welfare came to the fore of policy provision around the millennium with the publication of guidelines including *Children First* (DHC, 1999) and *Our Duty to Care* (DHC, 2002).

The publication of the National Children's Strategy, *Our Children, Their Lives* (DHC, 2000) marked a milestone for policy development relating to children in Ireland. In the same year, the National Children's Office was established and the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) was introduced. In 2001, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and its associated awarding bodies, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, came into existence. Additional legislation relating to children was also introduced in the form of the Children Act, 2001 (DJELR, 2001). The National Coordinating Childcare Committee and a network of thirty-three City/ County Childcare Committees (CCCs) were also established in 2001-2002. The publication of *Quality Childcare and Life Long Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002) was instrumental in providing a framework for the professional development of ECCE practitioners. The CECDE became operational in 2002, funded by the DES. In 2003, an Ombudsman for Children was appointed and the Family Support Agency was established.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* as a consultative document in 2004 (NCCA, 2004). This was followed by the launch of the National Play Policy for Ireland, *Ready, Steady, Play* (National Children's Office, 2004). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) produced a *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* (OECD, 2004), which provided an external lens through which to view ECCE provision in Ireland. Strategic legislation for the provision of education to children with special educational needs was forwarded in the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (DES, 2004). This was followed in 2005 by the establishment of the National Council for Special Education.

2005 also witnessed the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), which fulfils a coordinating role for the ECCE sector. The publication of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) of the *Early Childhood Care and Education Report* (NESE, 2005) also proved a valuable catalyst for policy debate at that time. Ireland submitted the second report on the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (National Children's Office, 2005). Other important events in 2005 include the introduction of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) strategy, with a specific strand relating to ECCE provision (DES, 2005) and the launch of the Irish Childcare Policy Network.

In 2006, the Early Years Education Policy Unit, co-located in the DES and the OMC, was established. Another key event in the policy framework for ECCE was the publication and dissemination of *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). A successor programme to the EOCP, the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) (2006-2010), providing €575 million over the lifetime of the programme, was introduced in 2006. An interesting development relating to the documentation of childhood as a phenomenon in Ireland in 2006 was the inception and commencement of a longitudinal study on children, *Growing up in Ireland*. The DHC also published revised regulations for pre-school services (DHC, 2006). In early 2007, the National Childcare Training Strategy was established by the DES, while the embryonic stages of planning for a Constitutional Referendum on the Rights of the Child in Ireland are also evident.

As is evident, these publications and initiatives have grown exponentially in recent years, until the time of preparing this paper in April 2007. These wider policy developments and activities have had a positive impact on the range and nature of research undertaken within the sector by providing increased funding for research and developing a cohort of researchers with specific expertise in the field of ECCE. Furthermore, the revival of the OMEP Ireland conference since 2002 and the expansion of similar fora for the sharing and dissemination of information have enhanced the utility and accessibility of such information. Ireland's hosting of the European Early Childhood Educational Research Association (EECERA) Conference in September 2005 is further evidence of the growing prominence of the research context. The CECDE hosted its first international conference on ECCE in

2004 (CECDE, 2005b), followed by a second international conference in February 2007. This has coincided with increased opportunities for postgraduate training and education in ECCE in a number of third level colleges and universities, increasing the pool of research expertise available in Ireland. These developments have undoubtedly impacted positively on the array and quality of the research produced in recent years.

Initial Audit of Research, 1990-2003

Since the launch of the CECDE in October 2002, a significant programme of research, consultation and development has been undertaken in close collaboration with the DES and a broad range of stakeholders within the ECCE sector. In 2003, the CECDE conducted the initial Audit, *i.e.*, the collection and collation of all research relating to ECCE in the Republic of Ireland between 1990 and mid-2003 (CECDE, 2003) to guide and inform its work in relation to research priorities. This initial Audit not only identified research priorities into the future but also collected and organised, for the CECDE and other stakeholders, a significant array of research material. Since its publication, an online database of research has been maintained and updated on the CECDE website (www.cecde.ie) and has proven a valuable resource to those with an interest in ECCE research.

As with the Second Edition of the Audit of Research, a liberal interpretation of the term 'research' was utilised in 2003. The initial Audit included research on ECCE relating to the Republic of Ireland, including books, chapters in books, journal articles, conference presentations and papers, unpublished reports, international comparative reports that included Ireland, submissions and postgraduate theses. As the remit of the CECDE spans both formal and informal ECCE provision, the initial Audit focused on research relating to both preschool provision as well as the infant classes of primary schools. In total, this initial Audit, covering the period 1990 to mid-2003, collected 1,082 individual pieces of research and categorised them into twelve sections, as outlined in Table 1 (overleaf).

Table 1: Themes and Number of References in the Initial Audit of Research, 1990-2003

Theme	Number of References
Childhood and Society	84
Children's Rights	59
Cultural Diversity	119
Curriculum and Methodology	89
Early Childhood Services	345
Educational Disadvantage	128
Irish Language Education	132
Parents and Families	112
Quality	59
Special Needs	123
Staffing, Training and Qualifications	77
The Developing Child	117
Total	1,444*

Source: CECDE (2003:10)

* The total number of publications is greater than the number of individual pieces of research collected as a number of publications related to two or more of the themes identified.

Each of these themes was further divided into a number of sub-themes to assist the easy identification of research materials. While this range of research was impressive for a sector in its embryonic stages of development, a number of research gaps were identified, including research that involved consulting children, research on quality in the Irish context, research on the inclusion of children with special needs within mainstream settings and longitudinal research on all aspects of ECCE.

Second Edition of the Audit of Research, 1990-2006

Owing to the rapid increase in the production and dissemination of research since 2003, the CECDE updated its online database of research on an ongoing basis. In mid-2006, a formal review and update of the initial Audit of Research was initiated in order to collect research produced between mid-2003 and December 2006, and to re-categorise all research completed between 1990 and 2006.

Methodology

At the outset, the initial Audit of Research (1990-2003) acted as a foundation document to inform the development of the Second Edition. To this was added any research that had come to our attention in the interim relating to the period 1990 to mid-2003. A diverse range of strategies was then employed to elicit relevant research publications and reports for inclusion in the Second Edition to ensure it was as representative as possible of the range of research conducted in Ireland since mid-2003. First of all, the extensive databases of contacts developed by the CECDE since 2002 were used to alert the ECCE research community to the production of the Second Edition of the Audit of Research. Individuals and organisations were requested to submit any research they had undertaken, or were aware of, between mid-2003 and 2006 relating to the care and education of young children aged birth to six years. The scope of this request within the sector was wide and included relevant government departments, most notably the DES, the DHC, the DJELR and the newly formed OMC.

In addition, a large number of non-governmental organisations, voluntary childcare organisations, CCCs, Area-based Partnerships, and academics and researchers within third level institutions were also contacted and requested to submit titles or references for pertinent research they had conducted. As copies of research reports and publications submitted were incorporated into the CECDE resource library, bibliographies within these were reviewed to identify further relevant research for the Second Edition. National and international journals with a remit for ECCE were examined and relevant articles were recorded for inclusion. Online databases of research such as the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Register of Theses were also examined, as were the library catalogues of third level colleges for relevant postgraduate theses. General Internet searches were also conducted using

salient keywords and search parameters, which also resulted in the unearthing of a large volume of research material and sources. The participation of CECDE staff at a number of national and international seminars and conferences also proved valuable in the identification of conference papers presented by individuals and organisations.

Research Findings

Although there was a level of awareness that the capacity and productivity of the ECCE research sector had developed significantly in recent years, the CECDE was gratified at the range and extent of research publications and materials collected. The Second Edition of the Audit of Research contains 1,820 individual pieces of research that have been identified for the period 1990 to 2006. This represents an additional 738² pieces of research relating to the period mid-2003 to 2006, in addition to the 1,082 publications identified in the initial Audit for the period 1990 to mid-2003.

The categorisation process for the Second Edition of the Audit of Research has been informed by the development of *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). This is the national quality assurance programme containing sixteen national Standards relating to the achievement of quality practice in ECCE settings. In order to support and inform the development and implementation of *Síolta*, the research collected has been categorised under these sixteen Standards, as well as eight additional general themes. The scope of this research is displayed in Table 2 (right), listing first of all in alphabetical order the *Síolta* themes, followed by the eight general themes.

Table 2: Themes and Number of References in the Second Edition of the Audit of Research, 1990-2006

Theme	Number of References
Síolta Themes	
Communication	1
Community Involvement	23
Consultation	50
Curriculum	207
Environments	21
Health and Welfare	87
Identity and Belonging	165
Interactions	7
Legislation and Regulation	63
Organisation	51
Parents and Families	170
Planning and Evaluation	32
Play	43
Professional Practice	144
Rights of the Child	59
Transitions	5
General Themes	
Childhood and Society	114
Child Development	105
Disadvantage	178
Early Childhood Services	401
Irish Language Education	150
Quality	113
Research	47
Special Needs	191
Total	2,427*

* The total number of pieces of research is greater than the number of individual pieces collected, as a number of publications necessitated inclusion in two or more themes.

Furthermore, the majority of these themes are further broken down into a number of sub-themes in order to make the Audit more accessible and navigable. In general terms, themes that contain in excess of forty references have been further sub-divided. In the Second Edition of the Audit of Research (CECDE, 2007a), each theme and sub-theme is preceded by a short narrative, outlining the main focus of the research contained therein and analysing the key trends. The twenty-four themes are presented in alphabetical order in order to facilitate ease of use. Finally, the publication concludes with an A-Z author bibliography of the entire contents of the Second Edition. This is preceded by an Author Index to assist the location of specific authors throughout the Audit.

Table 3 provides a detailed breakdown of the year of publication of the 1,820 references contained within this Second Edition of the Audit of Research. As is evident from the table, there has been a continuing increase in the quantity of research conducted in Ireland relating to ECCE in the last sixteen years. It is immediately apparent that there was a significant lack of publications until the late 1990s, with only 354 references relating to the eight-year period 1990 to 1997, or an average of 44 publications annually. The most recent eight-year period 1999-2006 has witnessed a huge increase, represented by 1,358 publications or an annual average of 170.

Table 3: Year of Publication of the References contained within the Second Edition of the Audit of Research, 1990-2006

Year of Publication	Number of References
1989*	1
1990	28
1991	20
1992	31
1993	31
1994	44
1995	59
1996	63
1997	78
1998	105
1999	116
2000	179

Table 3 (continued):

Year of Publication	Number of References
2001	126
2002	191
2003	175
2004	186
2005	180
2006	205
N.d.	2
Total	1,820

* The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was published in 1989 and ratified by Ireland in 1992. It is included here considering it was a seminal policy document and impacted greatly on subsequent policy and practice in Ireland.

Table 4 documents the nature of the research conducted in Ireland over the past sixteen years. All of these categories increased significantly in recent years with the growth in research activity in general. The largest category relates to reports by non-government agencies, many of which are funded by a range of government departments. Increased activity in postgraduate studies is evidenced by the large number of theses produced, while the number of conference presentations is increasing in tandem with the number of fora for the presentation and discussion of research material. The miscellaneous category incorporates a number of annual reports, resource packs, videos and unpublished research material.

Table 4: Nature of the Research Undertaken, 1990-2006

Nature of the Research	Number of References
Books	92
Chapters in Books	124
Conference Presentations	191
Government Publications	159
Non-government Agency Reports	743
Papers in Conference Proceedings	139
Periodical Articles	147
Postgraduate Theses	144
Submissions	30
Miscellaneous	51
Total	1,820

Gaps Within the Existing Research and Recommendations for the Future

Undoubtedly, the identification of research gaps in the initial Audit in 2003 focused researchers on previously under-researched themes and it is envisaged that recommendations from this Second Edition will have a similarly positive effect. Based on an analysis of the findings of the Second Edition, the following paragraphs detail a number of evident trends.

There has been a huge upsurge in the undertaking and publication of research pertaining to ECCE between mid-2003 and 2006. This is proven by the fact that while the thirteen-and-a-half-year period from 1990 to mid-2003 yielded 1,082 pieces of research, the three and-a-half-year period from mid-2003 to 2006 witnessed the production of 738. This corresponds to an average of 80 research publications per annum between 1990 and mid-2003 compared with 211 per annum between 2003 and 2006.

One of the main gaps in the research identified in 2003 related to the theme of quality in the Irish context. Great strides to address this deficiency have been made in the interim with 113 publications relating specifically to this theme. Moreover, *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education has been developed and published (CECDE, 2006) and is informing policy and practice relating to quality at a national level.

Many of the themes that are immediately comparable between the initial Audit (1990-2003) and the Second Edition (1990-2006) show a huge upsurge in the number of publications in the past three years, as illustrated in Table 5. It is also important to keep in mind that many individual publications in the initial Audit may have been assigned new, more appropriate themes, in the extended range of themes used for classification in 2006.

Table 5: Comparison of Themes from the Initial Audit of Research (CECDE, 2003) and the Second Edition of the Audit of Research

Theme	1990-2003	1990-2006	2003-2006
Cultural Diversity*	119	165	46
Curriculum	89	207	118
Disadvantage	128	178	50
Early Childhood Services	345	401	56
Parents and Families	112	170	58
Quality	59	113	54
Special Needs	123	191	68
Staffing, Training and Qualifications†	77	144	67

* This has been renamed Identity and Belonging, † This has now been renamed Professional Practice.

The theme of Communication, one of the national Standards in *Siolta*, is particularly underrepresented with only one specific reference. This is surprising considering the essential nature of communication as a two-way process in multiple contexts, including between the home and the ECCE setting, between staff and management and between staff and children. While a number of other publications contain some information relating to communication, further focused research on the way in which information on children is gathered, stored and shared within settings and in the wider context would be of great benefit to the ECCE sector.

A number of other themes within this Second Edition contain a surprisingly low number of publications, including Community Involvement (23), Environments (21), Interactions (7), Planning and Evaluation (32) and Transitions (5). These themes relate to a number of Standards within *Siolta* and indigenous research is necessary to inform the implementation of these Standards in practice in Ireland. It is important to remember that many other research publications relate to these themes in some way, without being the principal focus of their work. However, it is necessary to prioritise such themes in future research strategies and plans within the sector considering their critical importance in the achievement of quality practice in ECCE settings. The CECDE has recently published Workshop Materials for *Siolta*⁴, including detailed Digests of Research on each of the sixteen national Standards. In the main, these draw on international literature. However, they do offer valuable insights for the Irish research community considering research under these themes.

As identified in 2003, there is a distinct absence of a critical mass of longitudinal research relating to ECCE in Ireland. The commencement of the national longitudinal study on children, *Growing Up in Ireland*, is a welcome development in this regard and this must be complemented by additional longitudinal research focusing on specific aspects of ECCE provision in Ireland.

Children's rights, whilst attracting much attention heretofore, has focused on making the case for recognition and respecting these rights. With national and international legislation beginning to influence practice, research into the nature of the impact would be useful.

The issue of Professional Practice in ECCE is one which is beginning to attract national policy attention and again would benefit from research in the Irish context. In particular, the issue of leadership is of importance for the future development of the sector in all its dimensions.

Additional areas that merit specific attention can be identified from the thematic analysis contained in the Second Edition of the Audit of Research. These include:

- Researching children's experiences and perceptions of growing up in Ireland, especially children of newcomer families and children with disabilities;
- Producing international comparative studies which reflect on current policy and practice in Ireland and in other jurisdictions would be useful to update existing studies which in the main pre-date 2000;
- Exploring the compatibility of policy and practice in Northern Ireland, given the new political developments, would also be worthy of attention.

Despite the demonstrated and dramatic increase in research activity in the ECCE sector in Ireland in the period 2003 – 2006, it is important that this dynamism is sustained and expanded in order to support continued development of EECE provision and practice in Ireland into the future. We must continue to be committed to developing an indigenous evidence base that is embedded in the realities of Irish culture, economy and society. We must encourage the involvement of practitioners in research activity and inspire funding agencies and policy developers to invest substantially in research activity in the ECCE sector. The creation of a vibrant, active research community is a necessary prerequisite for the achievement of a strong early years sector that can respond effectively to the demands of children and families into the future.

Online Searchable Research Database

Work is at an advanced stage in updating the online searchable research database on the CECDE website: www.cecde.ie. This facility has proven to be very popular in recent years, most notably among researchers, policymakers and students. Each of the 1,820 publications is included in this database and publications can be located based on a number of search criteria, including author, title or research theme. In this way, it will be accessible to as wide a range of stakeholders as possible. Many of the publications listed in the Second Edition of the Audit of Research are available within the CECDE Resource

library (an online catalogue of library holdings can also be viewed on the CECDE website) and can be consulted on request. As previously, this will be updated on an ongoing basis to ensure it remains a valuable and current centralised resource and reference point for the entire ECCE sector.

Conclusion

It is evident from the analysis of research conducted in Ireland between 1990 and 2006 that the ECCE research community has much to feel proud about, considering the context of a fledgling sector that has been traditionally under-funded and under-resourced. The impact of increased investment in ECCE services in Ireland is mirrored in the quality and quantity of research that has been produced in recent years, most notably since 2003. However, there is no room for complacency as many research gaps still exist in the Irish context and there is a continuous need for ongoing current research to inform policy and practice. Furthermore, the dissemination and sharing of research is of critical importance so that by impacting positively on practice, it can ultimately benefit our youngest children.

- ¹ I would like to gratefully acknowledge the contribution of my co-author, Peadar Cassidy, in the compilation of the Audit of Research (Second Edition).
- ² A small number of these relate to pieces of research from the period 1990 to mid-2003 that were inadvertently omitted from the initial Audit.
- ³ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was published in 1989 and ratified by Ireland in 1992. It is included here considering it was a seminal policy document and impacted greatly on subsequent policy and practice in Ireland.
- ⁴ Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2007b). *Stolta Workshop Materials*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

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Supporting Quality Experiences for Young Children: The *Síolta* Workshop Model

Jacqueline Fallon and Karen Mahony, CECDE

Abstract

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in consultation with the broad range of stakeholders in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland. The CECDE has developed a workshop model through which to offer practitioners a ‘hands-on’ experience of reflecting on their own practice, with their peers. This paper introduces the workshop model and outlines its purpose in promoting good practice in continuing professional development. The characteristics of the model which support the overall purpose include self-reflection, a focus on process and an emphasis on building on existing expertise.

Introduction

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is an initiative of the Department of Education and Science (DES). It was established in 2002 to further the aims and objectives of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999). One of its primary objectives on its inception was to develop a set of national standards for quality practice in early childhood education, and this objective was achieved with the publication in May 2006 of *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006).

These materials are comprised of the following elements:

- **Principles:** The twelve Principles express an agreed vision for quality provision of early childhood experiences in Ireland¹
- **Standards:** There are sixteen standards which translate the vision of the Principles into statements for practical implementation²
- **Components:** Each Standard is further broken down into its component parts which function as indicators of quality practice
- **Signposts for Reflection:** In order to prompt and promote reflective practice within the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) community, each Component is

accompanied by a selection of open ended questions and related prompts as a basis for discussion and reflection

Taken together, these elements are described as the Defining Quality strand of *Síolta*, the first of the three strands which, it is envisaged, will form the entirety of the completed framework. In the Introductory Handbook which accompanies the materials, preliminary discussion documents on the remaining strands of Assessing and Supporting Quality are included. This paper describes the *Síolta* Workshop Model which was initially devised to progress the Supporting Quality strand of the Framework. The paper gives the rationale for the model and describes the workshop and its implementation. It then goes on to give an overview of a *Síolta* Workshop Seminar which was developed to disseminate the model to City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) as a support for their role in the development of quality childcare provision.

Context for the *Síolta* Workshop Model

In the months before and immediately following the publication of the Framework, the CECDE focused on engaging with practitioners and other stakeholders in disseminating the materials and raising awareness of the potential of *Síolta* to support quality practice. Initially, this involved presentations on the materials to a variety of groups and audiences. It became clear within a very short period, even prior to publication – both from CECDE staff experience of presenting and from the responses and requests of practitioners themselves – that a more direct experience of the materials and processes involved in implementing *Síolta* was required. This prompted the CECDE to prioritise the development of a workshop for practitioners which could be implemented in a variety of contexts but whose ultimate aim is the achievement of quality practice.

Rationale for the *Síolta* Workshop Model

In devising the workshop model, the CECDE was clear as to its purpose. The overall purpose of the workshop is to support implementation of the quality Standards defined in *Síolta* in the context of the Principles of quality practice. The aims of the workshop are as follows:

- To promote reflective practice
- To support collegiality among practitioners
- To embed theory in practice and foster deepening of subject knowledge

- To provide a structure for engagement with *Siolta*
- To facilitate networking among practitioners
- To effect change in practice.

Tucker *et al* (2002:2) have noted that “... *reflection and self-monitoring ... are the hallmarks of the true professional.*” A characteristic of *Siolta* is the centrality of, and respect for, the ECCE professional and the clearest manifestation of this is the unambiguous focus on reflective processes demonstrated through the Signposts for Reflection. Engaging with fellow professionals in reflective processes in a spirit of collegiality is also supportive of quality practice and is of particular relevance in the Irish context in which early childhood provision has traditionally been diverse and fragmented (CECDE, 2004).

The aim of embedding theory in practice is an extension of the CECDE commitment to evidence informed development (CECDE, 2003a; CECDE, 2003b; CECDE, 2004). However, specific conditions are required to achieve this aim, and the *Siolta* workshop model also aims to provide those conditions and contexts. In the context of promoting evidence-informed development, Sanderson (2002:8) refers to “[n]etworking (or ‘relational interaction’)” and Kirst (2000:385) notes that “... *the primacy of personal contact emerges as a major aspect of successful research dissemination.*” The workshop provides a structured context, able to address all the Standards, in which professionals and other stakeholders can interact and network in a manner conducive to improved quality practices in early childhood education. This workshop has been designed to demonstrate to participants the flexibility of the *Siolta* materials for use by individual practitioners, in team-working, in management and for education and training purposes.

Underpinning the aims and purpose outlined above is the value of the workshop to practitioners in terms of continuing professional development in a context of rapid change. The *Siolta* workshop model is informed by Mezirow’s work on the transformative dimensions of adult learning (Mezirow, 1991). This seeks to explain the way in which adults adapt to change through reflection and critical discourse, leading to paradigm shifts in existing perspectives. *Siolta* represents a significant development in the history of ECCE in Ireland and implementing change of this degree is challenging for all stakeholders, particularly practitioners. Mezirow has identified a set of goals which should be adopted by those wishing to achieve transformational learning in adults. These goals have been summarised as follows:

- Foster independent learning
- Develop problem solving abilities – provide real life situations that are meaningful and reflective of actual challenges in practice
- Foster decision making skills – offering opportunities for choice and supporting understanding of the range and nature of choice and promoting confidence in the decision making process
- Foster a self-corrective, reflexive approach to learning
- Emphasise experiential, participative and projective instructional methods and use modelling where appropriate
- Reinforce the self concept of the learner as an active agent in the learning process by providing opportunity for progressive mastery, supportive feedback, participation in mutual support networks and avoiding competitive judgment of performance (Duignan, 2005).

These goals have influenced the processes incorporated into the *Stolta* Workshop Model, with particular emphasis on reflection and experiential learning centred around the critical activities of professional practice.

Workshop Structure

The workshop is structured in two parts, and each part is further comprised of a number of defined sections. The workshop structure is the same for all sixteen Standards, with the content adapted for the specific Standard under consideration.

Section 1

The initial section of the workshop introduces the work of the CECDE, its role and objectives as well as the research dimension of our brief. The workshop then moves on to describe *Stolta* to the participants. This includes an overview of its development; its place in the landscape of ECCE in Ireland; an introduction to the Principles, Standards and Components and the interconnectivity of these elements; and an explanation of the way in which it is mediated for different settings and age groups.

Section 2

Introduction to the Standard

The workshop then moves on to the interactive section of the programme. The Standard under discussion is introduced, followed by a brief statement sourced from the literature

to establish the relevance and importance of the standard area and the rationale for its consideration through the workshop. This also introduces the participants to a source of significant research and information on best practice.

Group Discussion

The next stage of the workshop is to introduce the participants to the Discussion Points which will form the basis for the group work, the core activity of the workshop. In this model, in order to encourage the participants to make full use of the flexibility and adaptability of the *Stolta* materials, the discussion points are based on the Components but are not word for word transcriptions. Participants are encouraged to adapt the Components when working with *Stolta* in their own setting subsequent to the Workshop. At this point, the participants are invited to break into small groups. Each participant will have been allocated to a group and given a copy of the appropriate Discussion Point for that group. One person in each group is given responsibility for providing feedback in the form of an agreed three-point action plan which is the focus for the group discussion, although not a necessary outcome.

Participants are asked to bear in mind what has come to be referred to as the ‘Monday Morning Rule’; *i.e.* any action proposed must be implementable under current conditions in the setting as opposed to being dependent on increased resources or other significant structural change. The practitioners are asked to consider and reflect on current practice and endeavour to identify change which is achievable and will improve the quality of the practice under discussion. The time allocated to this activity is 30 minutes, a reasonable time for practitioners in busy settings to allocate to review and planning activities where longer periods are not an option. In this way, the workshop demonstrates to practitioners how *Stolta*, a substantial document, can be adapted for use on an ongoing basis.

Following the group discussion, the convenor of the Workshop arranges for the collected action plans to be shared with the larger group in one of a number of ways, detailed in the Facilitator’s guide which is described in a later section of this paper.

Follow-on Information and Conclusion

Once the group discussion and feedback session has been concluded, and while the discussion is still fresh in the minds of the participants, items of research information on the topic under discussion are presented and the references made available for follow-up

by the participants. The facilitator can make connections between the research points and the group discussion by referring to examples given in the feedback session which illustrate specific research points. To conclude the session, the focus is brought back onto *Siolta* and its contribution to the achievement of quality in the Standard area. Workshop participants are also given information on the supports currently available to those wishing to engage further with *Siolta*, for example, online supports and library facilities.

Summary

The Workshop described above takes between one and a half and two hours to conduct. The main focus of the Workshop is the group discussion and the supporting research information. It should be emphasised that the presenter of the workshop is there to facilitate the group in the discussion, and not as an ‘expert’ to validate or otherwise evaluate the outcome of the discussion. The focus of the workshop is on peer networking, reflective practice and developing action plans.

Further Developments

Following a period of almost six months in which workshops on a number of different Standards were conducted, the CECDE reviewed the process. Demand for the workshops had far exceeded expectations and there was a continuous stream of requests for more workshops. The CECDE review noted the following:

- The CECDE objective of disseminating the *Siolta* Workshop Model, raising awareness of its potential as a resource for practitioners and its capacity to enhance practice had been achieved
- At the end of the six-month period, demand for the Workshop far exceeded CECDE capacity to deliver
- Achieving the aims of the *Siolta* Workshop as cited earlier in this paper could not be accomplished by CECDE staff conducting stand-alone Workshop events on individual Standards with no follow-up on other Standards

Therefore, the CECDE decided to develop a method of facilitating wider application of the Workshop.

***Siolta* Workshop Seminar**

In the first instance, the CECDE developed a *Siolta* Workshop Seminar on the same

principles as the Workshop itself. The CECDE had a number of objectives in developing the Seminar, for example:

- To support agencies with a remit to enhance the quality of ECCE in Ireland
- To respond to the demand from practitioners for opportunities to engage with *Síolta*
- To provide agencies operating practitioner networks with a method of facilitating discussion on quality improvement issues in the context of *Síolta*

On Wednesday 25th and Thursday 26th April, 2007 a two-day *Síolta* Workshop Seminar was delivered by the CECDE to a number of City and County Childcare Committee (CCC) representatives in The Clock Tower, Department of Education and Science, Marlboro Street, Dublin 1. The aim of the seminar was to familiarise the participants with *Síolta*, demonstrate the processes that go into preparation for facilitating a workshop and induct the participants into the *Síolta Online Network*. It was decided to target the CCCs for this initial seminar on the basis of the objectives listed above. Each CCC was invited to nominate two staff members to attend the Seminar. A total of sixty-eight people were originally nominated to attend the seminar, with sixty-three representatives attending on the first day of the seminar and fifty-eight attending the second day.

The Workshop Seminar covered the following areas:

- Context and Rationale for the Workshop Seminar
- *Síolta*: Context and Content
- Workshop Model demonstration
- Generating Discussion Points
- 7 Steps to a Successful Workshop
- Research Digests: Purpose and Use
- *Síolta* Online Network
- Action Plan for Evaluation

Several of these sessions included a group work component which mirrors the core activity of the Workshop itself. Indeed, as part of the Seminar, CECDE staff conducted a Workshop on the Identity and Belonging Standard to give the participants a direct experience of the Workshop processes. As outlined above, the Workshop Seminar is focused on the facilitative skills required for conducting the Workshop rather than on ECCE theory and practice.

Given the level of requests from groups and individuals involved in supporting practitioners to attend the Workshop Seminar, the CECDE intends to hold at least one more Seminar in the Autumn of 2007. The evaluations provided by the participants in the first seminar will be most helpful in adapting the Workshop Seminar format to make it even more effective in the future.

Upon analysis of the participants' evaluations of the first Seminar, the key points that emerged (relative to improvement of the Workshop Seminar) related to the structure and follow-up of that event. They were as follows:

- A detailed trajectory of *Stolta* as a national quality framework should be provided at the beginning of the Workshop Seminar – including an approximate timeframe for its implementation, whether it will be a compulsory framework, how it will be assessed, the role of quality marks and the CCCs position in relation to the framework.
- The Seminar would benefit from the introduction of additional group-work activities and less PowerPoint presentations/lecture-type formats, which would assimilate nicely with Mezirow's theory of adult learning (transformative dimensions of adult learning) (Mezirow, 1991).
- The provision of practical and logistical information relative to accessing future participants for regional workshops, as administered by the CCCs, would ease the process of scheduling and coordinating such events.
- The Seminar should ideally be administered over a one and a half day period, with additional coffee breaks (as opposed to two days). Such a timeframe would be much more conducive to learning than a two-day event with two small coffee breaks.
- The CCCs would welcome additional CCC staff members being invited to participate in any future Workshop Seminars.
- The participants would benefit from a follow-up seminar to discuss their regional workshops, but also to learn from and feedback to the other CCCs relative to personal and organisational experiences of conducting a regional workshop.

The above suggestions are of considerable value. It is anticipated that such significant suggestions for improvement, which will be referred to for future delivery of Workshop Seminars, will greatly improve both the structure and format of such events. Additionally, they will provide lasting benefits for the sector with regard to quality provision.

Síolta Workshop Materials

In advance of the *Síolta* Workshop Seminar and to further support the participants in facilitating workshops, the CECDE developed the *Síolta* Workshop Materials resource pack (CECDE, 2007), the production of which was supported by FÁS, the National Training and Employment Authority. These materials are available only to those who have participated in the *Síolta* Workshop Seminar and been inducted into their use. The *Síolta* Workshop Materials are made up of the following elements:

- **Research Digests:** Each digest reviews current research literature with particular reference to the Components of each Standard. There is one digest per Standard. The digest provides the research information for the workshops in concise form, with details of the sources of the information to facilitate follow-up reading. These Research Digests will be issued as a single publication for general dissemination towards the end of 2007.
- **Facilitator's Guide:** This booklet outlines all the steps required to prepare and deliver a *Síolta* Workshop. It also contains a hard copy sample of the PowerPoint templates with a sample script for delivering the presentation. Additionally, the Feedback Templates used by the participants are included in hard copy in the guide.
- **CD Rom:** The PowerPoint templates for each Standard Workshop are available to download from the CD Rom. The templates can be edited to suit the circumstances of the facilitator. The CD Rom also includes all the Research Digests, the Facilitator's Guide, Feedback Templates and Evaluation Templates required to conduct workshops on all the *Síolta* Standards.

A future evaluation of the roll-out of the workshops by the initial group of participants in the first Workshop Seminar will inform adaptation of the Workshop Materials and the seminar itself. It is further envisaged that a number of such seminars will be held to disseminate the *Síolta* Workshop Model as a resource to the ECCE community in Ireland. As an additional resource, the CECDE has begun work on a dedicated website for the *Síolta* Workshop Model. Persons who have participated in the Workshop Seminar may register with the website and become part of a *Síolta Network*. Registered users will have access to materials and support via the website which will be responsive to the needs of those registered.

Conclusion

The impetus which led the CECDE to devise this workshop model came from the ECCE sector itself and demonstrates the commitment of the sector to ongoing quality improvement. CECDE staff who conducted workshops were constantly surprised at the sheer numbers of practitioners who attended, further evidence of that commitment. There is an obvious thirst for opportunities and contexts in which practitioners can address issues of quality practice. By making this structured Workshop Model available, along with the *Síolta* Workshop Materials through the Workshop Seminar, the CECDE hopes to support and facilitate ongoing consideration of quality practice which empowers practitioners and other stakeholders. Ultimately, all our efforts must focus on improving the quality of early childhood experiences for our youngest children.

Contact details for authors:

Jacqueline Fallon: jfallon@cice.ie

Karen Mahony, CECDE: karen.mahony@spd.dcu.ie

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APPENDICES

Appendix One: *Síolta* Principle Statements

The following is a list of the Principle Statements contained within *Síolta*, of which there are twelve in total. The twelve Principles and their accompanying Explanatory Notes are the ultimate benchmark for all quality practice and service provision in early education in the Irish Republic. The accompanying Explanatory Notes can be accessed at www.siolta.ie/principles.php. The following Principles are not listed in order of importance.

The Value of Early Childhood

- Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.

Children First

- The child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences.

Parents

- Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.

Relationships

- Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the wellbeing, learning and development of the young child.

Equality

- Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education.

Diversity

- Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.

Environments

- The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development.

Welfare

- The safety, welfare and well-being of all children must be protected and promoted in all early childhood environments.

Role of the Adult

- The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.

Teamwork

- The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.

Pedagogy

- Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.

Play

- Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child.

Appendix Two: *Síolta* Standards

The following is a list of the *Síolta* Standards, of which there are sixteen in total. The sixteen national Standards cover the areas of practice to be addressed and translate the vision of quality contained in the Principles into the reality of practice. The accompanying definitions can be accessed at <http://www.siolta.ie/standards.php>. The following Standards are not listed in order of importance.

Síolta Standards	
Standard 1: Rights of the Child	Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.
Standard 2: Environments	Enriching environments, both indoor and outdoor (including materials and equipment) are well maintained, safe, available, accessible, adaptable, developmentally appropriate, and offer a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences.
Standard 3: Parents & Families	Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.
Standard 4: Consultation	Ensuring inclusive decision-making requires consultation that promotes participation and seeks out, listens to and acts upon the views and opinions of children, parents and staff, and other stakeholders, as appropriate.
Standard 5: Interactions	Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.
Standard 6: Play	Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and 'meaning making' in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and alone, where appropriate.
Standard 7: Curriculum	Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.

Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation	Enriching and informing all aspects of practice within the setting requires cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation, undertaken on a regular basis.
Standard 9: Health and Welfare	Promoting the health and welfare of the child requires protection from harm, provision of nutritious food, appropriate opportunities for rest, and secure relationships characterised by trust and respect.
Standard 10: Organisation	Organising and managing resources effectively requires an agreed written philosophy, supported by clearly communicated policies and procedures to guide and
Standard 11: Professional Practice	Practising in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported, ongoing
Standard 12: Communication	Communicating effectively in the best interests of the child requires policies, procedures and actions that promote the proactive sharing of knowledge and information among appropriate stakeholders, with respect and confidentiality.
Standard 13: Transitions	Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, relevant professionals.
Standard 14: Identity and Belonging	Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practice that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self- and group identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.
Standard 15: Legislation & Regulation	Being compliant requires that all relevant regulations and legislative requirements are met or exceeded.
Standard 16: Community Involvement	Promoting community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections evidenced by policies, procedures and actions which extend and support all adult's and children's engagement with the wider community.

1 Síolta's Principle Statements are listed in Appendix 1

2 Contained in Appendix 2

The NCCA'S Portraiture Study – Key Messages

Mary Daly, Arlene Forster, Rosaleen Murphy, Avril Sweeney
The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Abstract

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is developing a curriculum framework called *The Framework for Early Learning*. The Framework which will be completed in 2008 is relevant to all adults who support children's learning and development from birth to six years of age. The development of the Framework was informed by an extensive literature review and consultation process.

As part of the consultation a portraiture study was undertaken to include the voices of children in the Framework. This paper looks at what the children in the study said, and highlights a number of key messages based on their experiences in their settings. These messages focus on holistic learning and development through play and active exploration, the importance of relationships, and in particular the crucial role played by parents, the power of communication, the importance of a sense of identity and belonging and the benefits of observing and listening to children. *Children's voices in the Framework for Early Learning – A portraiture study* (Daly et al. 2007) provides background information on the study and outlines the methodologies used. This paper concentrates on the valuable insights into children's early learning and development that the study provided. These insights have informed the *Framework for Early Learning*.

Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory body that advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum for early childhood, primary and post-primary education as set out in Article 41-1[b] of the Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1998). As part of this remit the NCCA is developing the *Framework for Early Learning*, which is a curriculum framework for children from birth to six years of age. The Framework is relevant to all adults who support children's learning and development including parents¹, practitioners² and childminders.

Background to the portraiture study

In 2004, the NCCA launched the consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*. This document outlined the purpose of the Framework, its vision and aims, its proposed themes, and the model for presenting children's early learning and development. The consultation process that followed enabled the early childhood sector to contribute to the ongoing development of the Framework. The consultation findings were presented in *Towards a Framework for Early Learning: Final Consultation Report* (NCCA 2005). The consultation participants highlighted the importance of continuing to represent children's, parents' and practitioners' experiences and voices in the development of the Framework. The NCCA decided that a portraiture study provided a vehicle for doing this. The study, *Listening for children's stories: children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA 2007) which was completed in 2006 is available on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie.³

The children in the portraiture study

Seven NCCA researchers worked with twelve children in eleven settings in the portraiture study over a maximum of six visits between March and June 2006. Collectively, the settings reflected an urban/rural representation, private, community and statutory provision, and cultural and linguistic diversity. They included a home, a childminder's, two crèches, a nursery, a Montessori pre-school, a naónra, a Traveller pre-school, an Early Start⁴ setting and infant classes in two primary schools. The children included four girls and eight boys ranging in age from nine months to almost six years. Due to the ages of the children involved the issue of informed consent was especially relevant and children's participation was subject to their parents'/guardians' consent. In keeping with good practice and with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1990) children were also asked to give consent or assent as it is known in these cases (Murphy, 2005).

Portraiture as a methodology

Portraiture is a form of qualitative research enquiry. Its aim is to give a voice to the research participants in the study, in this case the children. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) describe portraiture as *painting with words*. They talk about their search for a form of inquiry that would bridge the realms of science and art in order to create stories that would show the views of the people involved in the research and the

meaning they attribute to what they do and say and how they behave. More detailed information on the methodology of the study is available in *Listening for children's stories: children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA 2007) and in *Children's voices in the Framework for Early Learning – a portraiture study* (Daly et al. 2007).

In the NCCA study, portraiture as a methodology

- described children's rich, complex and diverse experiences
- used multiple methods (See details on the Mosaic Approach below)
- included multiple perspectives (children, parents, practitioners, researchers)
- recognised the social and cultural context
- focused on understanding rather than generalising.

In portraiture, the researcher sets out to discover what is *good and healthy* about the participants' experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997). While portraiture has been criticised for this emphasis on the positive (English, 2000), this positive focus was ideally suited to the NCCA's priority to bring children's good experiences to the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*. The second defining feature of portraiture is that the researcher *listens for* a story whereas in other forms of ethnographic research the researcher *listens to* the story of the research participants. Again this was very pertinent to the NCCA's work given the age range and communicative abilities of the participating children. The NCCA portraiture study was not intended to be an evaluation of practice or of the setting. It was undertaken to find out about children's experiences in a variety of settings in Ireland at a particular point in time. As is often the case in qualitative research the study focused on understanding, not generalising, about children's experiences (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996).

- The key questions guiding the NCCA researchers were
- What are the child's positive experiences in the setting?
- What does the child enjoy doing in the setting? Why?
- What places does he/she enjoy being in? Why?
- Who does he/she enjoy being with? Why?

In designing the study, the NCCA examined work in the field of listening to young children. In particular, it drew on the work of Clark and Moss (2001) and Clark,

Kjørholt, and Moss (2005) in identifying methods for gathering and analysing information which would be sensitive to the strengths and abilities of children from birth to six years. The approach known as the Mosaic Approach provided the **how** of the study (see Daly *et al.* 2007 and NCCA 2007 for more information). This mixed-method approach enabled the researchers to use a combination of observation, photography of and by the children, child conferencing (interviews with the child, always in company with at least one other child), walking tours of the older children's favourite places and activities, along with interviews with parents, practitioners/childminders to gain perspectives and insights into the children's experiences. This range of methods allowed the researcher to choose the most appropriate methods for the age/stage of development of the individual children.

Developing the portraits

Collectively, the information gathered through the different methods provided the pieces of the mosaic which the researchers used to create portraits of the individual children. Following the visits to the settings, the data gathered was analysed and used to compile the portraits. The portraits (draft and final versions) were shared with the children (as far as was practicable given their ages), their parents and practitioners/ childminders.

For reasons of confidentiality, names and other identifying details were changed in the finished portraits. Each portrait began by describing the child and the setting, and presented a picture of the child's experiences and favourite activities in the setting. The four interconnected themes of the *Framework for Early Learning* - Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking gave a common structure to the portraits. The portraits were presented in the three age groupings used in the *Framework for Early Learning*:

- babies (birth to eighteen months) – two portraits
- toddlers (twelve months to three years) – two portraits
- young children (two and a half to six years) – eight portraits.

The portraiture study was unique in that it highlighted those aspects of children's lives which were most important to the children themselves. The portraits celebrated the positive experiences of the children in their settings and as such this focus on the positive

is subjective, based on the children's, parents', practitioners'/childminders' and researchers' perspectives. The portraits were also deeply embedded in the context in which they were developed. As such the portraits reflected the type of setting selected, the perspectives of the children/families and members of staff involved. As Dunn (2005, p.98) points out researchers need to be *very cautious about making inferences of any generality* from naturalistic observations. However, as Dunn also points out naturalistic observations such as those undertaken in the portraiture study are *an invaluable tool* (2005, p.99) as they show the researcher *what the children themselves are interested in, curious about and amused by (ibid.)* The completed portraits reflect the richness of the children's everyday experiences. While the individual portraits are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context of the settings in which they were developed, and do not claim to be generalisable nationally or to represent best practice, they give rich and generative insights into the twelve participating children's interactions, interests, activities and experiences in a range of early childhood settings in Ireland as interpreted by the NCCA researchers.

Messages from the portraiture study

The portraits reflected the particular experiences and feelings of the individual children at a particular point in time in their particular setting. Collectively, the portraits highlighted, to a lesser or greater extent,

- holistic learning and development through play and active exploration
- the importance of relationships, in particular the crucial role of parents
- the power of communication
- the importance of a sense of identity and belonging
- the benefits of observing and listening to children.

These features of early learning and development connect with the findings which emerged from the NCCA's consultation with the early childhood sector in 2005. They were also reflected in background papers commissioned by the NCCA as part of the preparatory work on the Framework (Dunphy 2008; French, 2007; Hayes, 2007; Kernan, 2007) and in the extensive literature review carried out by the NCCA in supporting the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*. The portraiture study has enabled the NCCA to see the messages from the literature in the context of children's real-life experiences in early childhood settings in contemporary Ireland. Outlined below

are some of the messages from the study with extracts from the portraits showing the messages in action.

Holistic learning and development through play and active exploration

Learning and development in early childhood are profoundly integrated (French 2007). Play and active exploration provide integrating mechanisms for all aspects of this learning and development. Children need and have a right to play, and play occurs in a social and cultural context (Dockett and Fleer 2002). Children can play on their own or with others. The environment (indoors and outdoors) needs to support rich learning opportunities for children (Kernan 2007). The holistic nature of learning and development and the value of play were clearly evident in the portraits:

Matt and his classmates observed and talked about the spirals on the snails' shells and learned from Ms. Molloy as she described spirals on the walls in Newgrange. Ms. Molloy guided the children in exploring how to make spirals and to use spiralling to mix colours. The children made snails with spiral shells using márla (playdough). Matt created a family of snails, some having small shells and others, larger ones. He made food too in case the snails were hungry! (Extracted from Matt's portrait, 5 years and 9 months, a junior infant class).

One morning, Caroline, Rory and David were standing around the water tray. They filled and emptied containers, poured water into the waterwheels and watched them turn. There were balls floating in the water. Caroline picked up an orange ball and put it on top of the waterwheel. Rory watched intently as she poured water from a colourful teapot and the ball rotated in place. They had discovered how to make the ball move using the water. Caroline poured carefully until the teapot was empty and then refilled it and began to make the ball rotate again (Extracted from Caroline's portrait, 4 ? years, an Early Start setting).

Amy felt the lentils running through her fingers. She held an empty plastic water bottle and carefully poured the lentils into it with a spoon and then emptied it out, repeating the activity over and over again. Anne (*the room leader*) talked to Amy about filling and emptying, about heavy and light ... Lily came over and wanted to take Amy's bottle. Amy started to cry and complained to Anne that

Lily was trying to take her bottle. Anne asked how they could solve the problem and Amy found an empty bottle and handed it to Lily and they began to play together. Here Amy is not only exploring the nature and properties of materials but is able to use her social and problem-solving skills to come up with a solution when Lily tries to take the bottle from her. (Extracted from Amy's portrait, aged two and a half, a crèche/naíonra).

Outdoor play was another favourite, and again, the children were observed showing great enjoyment and concentration over extended play episodes:

Alan told me that he loved being outside and that his favourite things to do outside were playing with the balls and the bikes. I watched him one day kicking a ball at a target, retrieving it and lining the ball up to kick at the same target again. He was absorbed for more than ten minutes in the activity, clearly repeating and revisiting the same activity in an attempt to perfect his aiming skills. (Extracted from Alan's portrait, aged almost five years, a Montessori community pre-school).

The importance of relationships, in particular the crucial role of parents

Children's learning and development are enhanced through warm and supportive relationships (Daly 2004). Children are social beings and have a fundamental need to be with familiar, caring adults as well with other children (French 2007). Learning occurs in the context of family, home and community. The portraiture study vividly demonstrated the importance for the twelve children of loving and trusting relationships with parents, practitioners, childminders, siblings and other children:

Cathal smiles and uses positive body language such as smiling and waving his arms when he comes into the setting in the morning. He interacts well with staff and he sleeps and eats well. Cathal's parents recognise that he has a special relationship with Linda, his Key Worker. They find it comforting and reassuring that he has the continuity of one key person outside the home to relate to closely during the day ... The Manager of Happy Start Nursery mentioned that she *recognises the positive effects of a good relationship between nursery staff and parents*

for both Cathal's feelings of security and progress in learning and development.
(Extracted from Cathal's portrait, nine months, a crèche).

It is also important to remember that building a relationship takes time.

Jayne joined Lisa's Childminding Service when she was nine months old. She attends for five days per week between 9.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. Lisa commented that when Jayne joined the setting initially, *she found it difficult to settle* as she had been at home full time with her Mum until this time. However with consistent care and attention, she developed a relationship with Lisa and learned to trust and feel secure in Lisa's home (Extracted from Jayne's portrait, seventeen months old, a childminding setting).

Peers and friends play a very important role in children's lives as they grow and develop (Bukowski, Newcomb, Hartup 1996, Kostelnik 2002, Paley 1992). The researchers often observed the development of strong friendships throughout their visits to the children's settings, such as the friendship that was developing between Alan and Bill, and between Andrew and his friends:

Alan's special friend is a little boy called Bill. I notice that when the children are engaged in child-initiated activity during the day, Alan often chooses to work with and chooses similar activities to Bill such as puzzles and jigsaws or trays for spooning and pouring. (Extracted from portrait of Alan, almost five years, a Montessori community pre-school).

Andrew's best friend Robert sits beside him in class and his other particular friends are Megan, Keith, Connor and Jamie. He usually chooses to play with this group at break times and they have a repertoire of games that they like to play. (Extracted from Andrew's portrait, almost six, a junior infant class).

Parents play a vital role in promoting their children's well-being, learning and development (Murphy 2001, Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000, Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2002). The parent-child relationship is qualitatively different from relationships children have with other adults. Parents support children's learning through relationships, conversations, activities and routines which are informal, fun, appealing and relevant. The

strong relationship the children had with their parents was evident across all the portraits and in particular in the home setting.

The power of communication

The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development (French 2007). Most children are naturally disposed to communicate and this enables them to establish and maintain social relations with others, to express and to share their thoughts and feelings, to represent and to understand the world around them. They do this through their words, but also through their body language and the non-verbal signals they give to others. Throughout the study the researchers observed children communicating in a variety of ways, verbally and non-verbally, through music and dance, through gesture and body language, through their home language and through the language of the setting they attended. Outlined below are two examples of children communicating:

Zachary joins his group for Circle Time. The activity usually involves him recounting his experiences outside the centre, an opportunity for the staff to link Zachary's experiences in the naíonra with his other experiences. When his turn came Siobhán said to him, *An bhfuil aon scéal agat Zachary?* (*Have you a story Zachary?*) He told her, for example, about going to the park with his Dad and what he did there. She prompted him to use as many Irish words as possible and, where necessary, offered the Irish word or phrase, for example, *Ó bhí tú ag sígradh.* (*Oh, you were playing.*) (Extracted from Zachary's portrait, four years, a naíonra).

Some children need additional adult support to help them communicate as shown in the next example. Harry, who was diagnosed with autism, had a very close affectionate relationship with Molly, his Key Worker. To facilitate the development of his communication skills Molly talked and played games with him and included lots of singing activities, mirror games and one-to-one activities in his daily programme:

Molly, took Harry's hand and began to play 'Round and round the garden like a teddy bear', running her finger round the palm of his hand and then up his arm. When she tickled him at the end of the verse he laughed. She repeated the activity and then stopped. Harry waited for a response, and when none was

forthcoming, he took her hand and put it back on his for the game to begin all over again. (Extracted from Harry's portrait, three years old, a crèche).

The importance of a sense of identity and belonging

It is important for children to develop a healthy and positive sense of their own identity and their place in society (Rogoff 2000). Positive messages about their family, culture, faith/no faith and language help children to feel valued and respected (French 2003). The positive messages that the children in the study received about themselves and their families helped them to develop their identities as individuals and as members of families and communities as shown below:

Caroline has a strong sense of belonging to a family. Some of her favourite outings are going to visit her granduncle or her cousins. She has a large extended family all living within the locality or a short distance away, and she sees them regularly. (Extracted from Caroline's portrait, four and a half years, an Early Start setting).

Patrick and Seán know their community well and have lots of connections in the area in which they are living. The boys' paternal grandparents live next door and the boys see them daily. Sometimes Grandad collects Patrick when playschool is over. Grandad is 82 and walks a bit slowly but his Mum said Patrick always walks along with him and never runs away. Some days, Patrick, Seán and Mum go for a walk to the local church. On the way the two boys look in at the cattle in their fields and Patrick climbs their gates as he passes them. As cars drive past, people wave. In this small village everyone knows everyone else and on the day I went for the walk with Mum and the two boys, Patrick was able to tell me exactly who passed in the cars. (Extracted from Patrick and Seán's portrait, (brothers), four years and 19 months respectively, a home setting).

Louise's portrait also showed her developing cultural identity being recognised and supported in her pre-school setting. Louise was a Traveller, and the adults in her pre-school incorporated aspects of Traveller culture into the curriculum, and invited members of the Travelling community into the pre-school:

The emphasis on the Traveller culture within the curriculum allows Louise to

explore and express her cultural identity alongside her peers through art, craft, music and dance. Various festivals and celebrations throughout the year provide accessible and relevant opportunities, particularly when adults from the Travelling community are invited to participate. Adults from the Travelling community occasionally visit the children in the pre-school to tell stories of the days gone-by, to play music and sing songs. (Extracted from Louise's portrait, four years, a pre-school for Travellers).

The benefits of observing and listening to children

The portraiture study highlighted the importance of observing and tuning in to children in order to understand them. Observing and listening helps the adult to extend and enrich children's experiences in the most appropriate way for each child (Carr, 2001, Dunphy 2008). Recording these observations and planning activities and experiences built on what has been learned helps support children's learning and development. The actual portraits themselves demonstrated this process. Through the portraits children were observed and listened to and each child was able to 'tell' the researcher about their positive experiences in the setting. The families and practitioners/childminders were given copies of the portraits and it was hoped that from reading them they would learn more about the children and plan for and extend their learning as a result, as well as observing and listening to the children themselves to develop their own portraits of children's learning.

The implications of the portraiture study for the *Framework for Early Learning*

The messages from the portraiture study are reflected throughout the *Framework for Early Learning*. The Framework comprises two parts. Part One begins with an outline of the underlying principles. These reflect the findings from the literature review, the extensive consultation (NCCA 2004) and the messages from the portraiture study. Part One also sets out the Framework's four interconnected themes of Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Each theme is explored through aims, learning goals and sample learning opportunities. Several of the sample learning opportunities are based on the researchers' observations during the portraiture study.

Part two of the Framework includes guidelines on interacting, on assessment, on play and on developing partnerships between parents and practitioners/childminders. These guidelines have also been influenced by the portraiture study. For example, the assessment

guidelines strongly reflect the importance of observing and listening to children while the guidelines on developing partnerships between parents and practitioners/childminders strongly reflect the crucial role and influence of parents in their children's lives.

Conclusion

Using portraiture gave the researchers an opportunity to share briefly in the lives of twelve children, their families and practitioners/childminders. The study was not intended to be an evaluation of practice or of the setting. It was undertaken to find out about children's experiences in a variety of settings in Ireland and focused on understanding not generalising. Through listening to the children and sharing in their routines and activities, the NCCA gained a greater understanding of what life was like for these children in their particular setting. The portraits highlighted important messages about the children's learning and development. By informing the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*, the portraiture study has helped the NCCA to ensure that the Framework reflects and supports early childhood education in Ireland.

Contact details for authors:

Arlene Forster, Mary Daly

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

24 Merrion Square, Dublin 2.

Email: arlene.forster@ncca.ie or mary.daly@ncca.ie

- ¹ The term *parent* refers to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the child's father and mother and/or guardian(s).
- ² The term *practitioners* refers to all those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings. Practitioners have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to post-graduate level.
- ³ See also Daly *et al.* (2007) for a full description of the use of portraiture as a methodology in this study.
- ⁴ The Early Start Programme is a one-year intervention offered in selected primary schools in Ireland in areas designated disadvantaged. The programme objective is to tackle educational disadvantage by targeting three to four year old children (in the year prior to school entry) who are deemed to be at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. The programme is managed, funded and evaluated by the Department of Education and Science.

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What's SWOT in Attitudes Towards Young Children in Danish After-School Provision: Perceptions From an 'Irish Lens'.

Jennifer Sturley, Mary Immaculate College, UL

Abstract

Based on observations of afterschool provision and interviews with stakeholders in Copenhagen, Denmark, this paper presents a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of the attitudes of adults towards children. Some key strengths are that children are treated as active citizens in a democratic environment and that autonomy and socialisation are considered essential components of the curriculum. This paper reflects on these observations and proceeds to compare Danish and Irish data on health and well-being of older children and voter participation in young adults. In doing so, possible long-term outcomes are hypothesised in order to stimulate reflection and discussion.

Introduction

An increasing number of children from four years of age upwards are spending significant amounts of time in after school facilities in Ireland (Moloney, Sturley and Kane, 2008). The impetus for this paper came whilst on a research trip to explore after school provision in Copenhagen, Denmark. The impressions that form the basis of this paper stem from direct observations of after school settings and interviews with key stakeholders. From the perspective of an Irish researcher in the field of early childhood, the attitudes that adults had towards the children were particularly striking, most notably, the emphasis on promoting responsibility and active citizenship in children.

In order to document and contextualise the observed attitudes in a coherent fashion, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis was conducted. The rationale for using this approach is discussed and the findings addressing the four areas are presented. This paper highlights the difficulties surrounding the process of comparing and interpreting childhoods, acknowledging that when examining policy and practice in other countries, we do so from our own national perspective or 'lens', often clouded by our own history, culture and current social climate. The focus of this paper is a reflection on these attitudes rather than a comprehensive overview of school-aged childcare per se.

The experiences that children have and the attitudes of adults towards them may have long-term personal and societal implications. The potential long-term implications of such attitudes are explored by drawing on comparative data on well-being in older children including indicators such as youth suicide rates and by examining young voter turnout as a proxy measure of civic responsibility. This aspect of the paper is exploratory in nature and should be read as such.

Context

In relation to after school services, the Danish system has been well acknowledged as a sophisticated model of provision, in operation for some time. Since 1975, it has been possible to operate day care facilities in school premises. From 1984, municipalities (or local authorities) have been able to facilitate the use of primary schools outside regular school hours for play and other leisure activities for children enrolled in the school (OECD, 2000). In Copenhagen, the Danes refer to after school provision as 'leisure time' which is significant, therefore, the term after school/leisure time will be used throughout this paper. Of note, approximately 80% of the 6-10 year age group attend a leisure time facility (OECD, 2006).

From an Irish perspective, in order to fully contextualise and interpret the provision and practice of after school care, it was imperative to gather as much information about general policy, social issues, and the Danish welfare and education system as a whole. The following points of information in relation to economic and social aspects are also significant to the discussion:

- According to the OECD (2006) approximately 80% of women in Denmark with children from the ages of 3-7 years participate in the labour force. In recent years, Ireland has seen a significant rise in the rate of women with children actively participating in the labour force although to date, the figure remains lower than in Denmark.
- The rate of taxation is higher in Denmark (approximately 50%) however; the Danes spend 2.1% of GDP on early childhood and after school/leisure time facilities, compared to less than 0.5% in Ireland (OECD, 2006). All childcare provision including after school care is subsidised and parents only contribute towards the cost of provision on a means tested basis.

- All children have the right to a place in an after school programme (although not necessarily in the particular programme/institution of their choice, some settings would have waiting lists).

Data Collection: Gaining insights

Direct observations of after school/leisure time facilities and interviews with key stakeholders were recorded on a research trip to Copenhagen to gain an in-depth insight into after school provision for young children. The settings visits included:

- The Children and Youth Administration of Copenhagen (Meeting with two representatives)
- A Seminarium providing training for social pedagogues (Meeting with College lecturer)
- Establishment A: After School Facility located within an affluent area of Copenhagen (Meeting with staff and direct observation of the setting)
- Establishment B: After School Facility located within a disadvantaged area of Copenhagen (Meeting with staff and direct observation of the setting)

Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to meet with and gain the perspectives of parents. The SWOT analysis presented is from the perspective of the researcher, based on information obtained and interpreted from these interviews and observations.

Rationale for the use of the SWOT analysis

For a researcher from a primarily quantitative background, reporting on attitudes appeared to be an onerous task. There are obvious tensions surrounding the abstract, subjective nature of attitudes and an analytical research process. In preparation for presenting this paper at the OMEP conference (April 2007), much thought and deliberation went into how to present my findings, my impressions and perceptions in a coherent, comprehensive manner. The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis seemed an appropriate tool for this purpose. The SWOT analysis is a commonly used framework for evaluation purposes in business; however it is a useful framework for application outside of the business world and has been adopted in a diverse range of fields to 'assess and guide any organized human endeavour designed to accomplish a mission' (Rizzo and Jounghyum Kim, 2005:119).

SWOT Analysis Findings

Table 1: This table provides an overview of SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>Sense of civic duty, responsibility and participation</p> <p>Leisure time emphasis</p> <p>Training of Staff</p> <p>Staff acting as facilitators</p> <p>Socialisation and freedom of choice (within limits)</p> <p>Curriculum highly influenced by the children themselves</p>	<p>Potential lack of Support for inclusive education</p> <p>Lack of supervision for older children (over ten years)</p> <p>Lack of participation of parents of older children.</p>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>Further sharing of knowledge and pedagogical practice with a wider audience</p>	<p>Cognitive testing of children (PISA studies)</p> <p>Formalisation of the after school/leisure time facilities</p>

Strengths:

Emphasis on active participation

The after school facilities are underpinned by three core principles that aim to:

- Support parents with respect to the development and wellbeing of the child
- Respect the interdependence between the different environments such as the home, institution or local area of interest that impact on the child's development.
- Complement the ethos of the public school system

One of the main aims of the education system is to create Danish citizens with a true understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a citizen.

The school must prepare pupils for participation, shared responsibility and acceptance of rights and obligations in a free and democratic society ... the school's teaching and full daily life must build on intellectual freedom, equality and democracy'. (Quotation from representative 1: Children and Youth Administration).

Based on observations in the after school/leisure time facilities, it would appear that these facilities are indeed complementing the ethos of the Public School system. One of the key strengths observed was the emphasis placed on responsibility and inclusion in a democratic society, beginning with the youngest children. From the observations and interviews conducted, it would appear that the after school/leisure time facilities were run in a democratic way whereby, children had an active voice both at management level, with representation on the boards of management and at ground level by directly influencing their curriculum. Children were active contributors, they could follow their own interests and were given freedom but within flexible limits. There was a sense of freedom whereby children had scope to choose from a range of daily activities, quiet time or engaging in homework. Their choices were also respected and valued. The curriculum in the settings were determined largely by the children's interests and continually monitored and adapted in response to the children's needs and wants.

Emphasis on holistic development

The holistic development of the child was central to the working of the after-school/leisure time facilities visited. The activities provided appealed to the various interests that the children had: *e.g.* music and movement (including a sound engineering studio in Establishment A), outdoor play (although space is at a premium in some city establishments), arts and crafts, woodwork and technical work, drama, role play, fantasy play, computer games, quiet time and homework areas.

The children appeared to be viewed as capable learners and the level of trust in the children and their abilities was obvious. In these settings, children were respected and trusted not to abuse their environment, the tools, the dressing up clothes or the equipment in the music area and so forth. One obvious example was in the workshop area, equipped with an array of actual tools that children had direct access to (*see photo overleaf*). According to the staff in this setting, the children had been exposed to such tools

throughout early childhood and had experienced the correct ways to utilise the equipment. Therefore, they were recognised as competent individuals, trusted to use the tools appropriately.

Emphasis on leisure time

The emphasis of these facilities was leisure time rather than an extension of the school day. The focus was on a natural childhood, a stimulating home-like environment (as physically evidenced by the comfortable sofas indoors – see photo below).

They also referred to the establishments as ‘the house’

and outdoors, activities such as climbing trees, building a tree house and looking after



Photo 1 Workshop-Establishment A



Photo 2. Leisure Time facility!

pets (rabbits in this instance) were obvious traditional home-like features. When queried about safety concerns, the staff in the setting explained that activities such as building tree houses were a part of normal childhood experiences and that these were ideal opportunities for children to work together and problem-solve.

Staff

An integral aspect of after school/leisure time provision in the Danish system is the high level of training and qualifications of the staff in the settings. In establishment B for example, a significant number of staff (six out of the eleven staff in the setting) were qualified social pedagogues that had trained for three and a half years. Their training, which encompasses both a theoretical focus and practicum, equips the staff to be facilitators in the setting working with children, parents and teachers in the local schools. Mac Naughton *et al.*, (2007:161) argue that citizenship can be advanced for all when staff become ‘equitable collaborators’ ‘instead of being experts acting on behalf of children’. A significant proportion of their time involved preparatory work, including a forum in the mornings to discuss the children for example, issues around peer groupings may be shared

and the adults may decide together how best to facilitate socialisation among the children. Based on the accounts of the staff in the settings, it would appear that there are strong relationships with parents, most notably of those with children under ten years of age. Active involvement is required of parents, particularly for example, in issues relating to behaviour management and parents endorse elements of ‘risky play’ such as climbing trees and working with tools.

Weaknesses

From the observations and stakeholder interviews, it would appear that there is a general lack of support for inclusive education in practice. For example, in the area of support for children with special educational needs, two support staff work for only eight hours per week each. In relation to general policy of inclusion, according to the OECD (2006 p.312), ‘mainstreaming is the general objective but there is also a wide variety of specialised institutional settings’.

The level of supervision of children is something that could be viewed as a potential weakness. It would appear that most notably from ten years of age, the children were given tremendous levels of freedom and in one of the settings visited, the attendance (or non-attendance) of the older children was not monitored. Mayall (2002) in her comparative study of Finnish and British children reported similar findings. In the settings observed, it would also appear that participation of parents of children over ten years of age is not viewed as necessary.

In terms of health and safety, based on our current regulated preschool system, the issues around the lack of safety measures, and the ‘laissez-faire approach’ adopted by staff could be viewed as a weakness by some.

Undoubtedly, some Irish practitioners, parents, policy makers and researchers may shudder at the sight of the equipped tool workshop or the encouragement of risky play, climbing trees or the level of freedom given to the children. It is fundamental however, that we recognise that our perceptions of strengths and weaknesses are based on our own experiences, historically and in a contemporary socio-cultural frame. When asked about fears of litigation, the Danish staff smiled and said *“this is not America, nobody sues here and besides, the parents know what the children do here, if they fall, this is a part of*

childhood". Of note, statistically, Danish children are less likely to die from non-intentional injuries (accidents) than Irish children (UNICEF, 2001).

Opportunities

There is an opportunity for the Danes to further share their knowledge and ways of working with young children in after school/leisure time provision. In the Irish context, after school provision is a rapidly expanding area and can benefit from the insights of professionals in other countries. The OECD (2006) has highlighted the need for countries to share findings of qualitative research on pedagogical practice at a wider level. The merits of sharing innovative pedagogical practice within an international community are obvious and this is something that we at Mary Immaculate College are particularly interested in exploring further.

Quantitative research is currently underway such as the national longitudinal study-Danish National Birth Cohort (based on babies born in 1995). Under the auspices of the Danish National Institute of Social Research, some interesting working papers have been produced to date based on these young children. Also, the Copenhagen County Child Cohort is exploring issues around child health and well-being with a focus on child mental health. BUPL (Borne og Ungdomspædagogisk Landsforbund- translated as The National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators) is also very proactive in providing research and discussion papers on key areas such as children's competencies. From a global perspective, it is important that practitioners, academics and researchers from every country engage in the sharing of knowledge on innovative practice with children.

Threats

Throughout the discussions with stakeholders and practitioners, it was evident that the tide may be turning slightly in Denmark. To date, emphasis has been placed on the importance of socialisation of the child; the holistic development of the child has been at the core of service provision, particularly for younger children. However, each of the stakeholders all referred to tensions surrounding a shift in philosophy/ideology around the education of young children. The current practice appears to be standing in the shadow of international comparative work such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment, conducted by the OECD) which primarily involves the

measurement of cognitive abilities (literacy skills, mathematical and scientific skills). It would appear that the fear at grass roots level in Copenhagen is that the policy of learning in an informal manner may be replaced by more of an emphasis on academia, with a focus on formalised learning and that the 'leisure time' may be replaced by an 'after school-school' focus. At present, areas like homework can be done in quiet rooms in the after school/leisure time facility but, it appears that this work is not monitored by the staff in the setting to any great extent and the onus is not on them to ensure that the children complete their homework. Although, some school settings have homework clubs where children can remain at the school and have an opportunity to work on their homework.

The international comparative approach or 'league' can ironically threaten the countries involved and may not be in the best interests of the child. For example, the negative associations with the PISA studies were very evident in the conversations with all of the stakeholders and tensions have been flagged at OECD level:

The PISA 2000 results shook the belief of Danes that theirs was the best education system in the world. Though spending on education in Denmark is high compared to OECD countries, the PISA confirmed that the quality and equity of outcomes are only average. (OECD, 2004)

Bertram and Pascal (2002) highlight the 'enormous scope for demotivation' that involvement with such comparative work can bring, 'given that only one country can 'win''.

Exploring long-term implications

These observations interested me greatly; the sense of active participation, the acknowledgement of the importance of socialisation of young children and the concept of citizenship appeared to be very positive measures. I was interested to see if there were long-term positive consequences although as noted, the benefits did not seem clearly evident in cognitive test scores of older children. I was interested in the broader picture and therefore looked to the comparable data that was available for adolescents that went beyond cognitive testing.

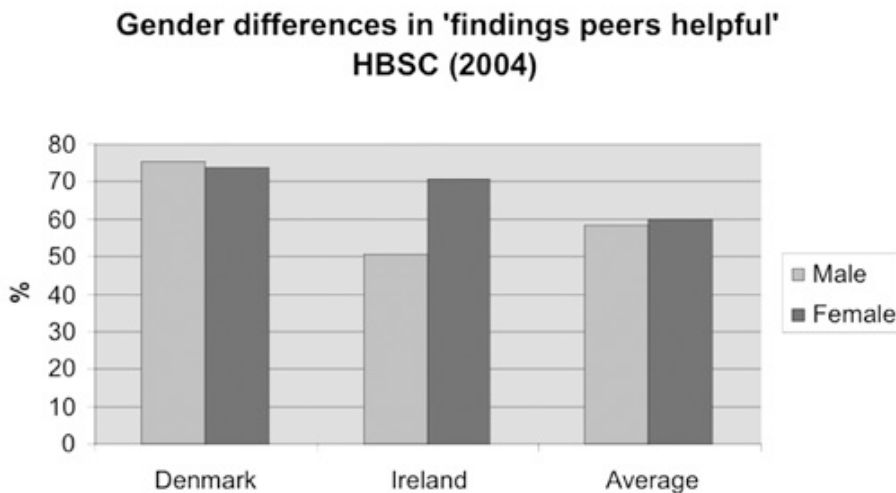
Subjective well-being

The international Health Behaviour in School age Children (HBSC) data seemed highly

appropriate for this purpose. This cross-national research considers health in a broad sense encompassing physical, social and emotional well-being. The most recent comparable data dates from 2002 and is based on responses from adolescents in 35 countries to a broad range of indicators of health and well-being (Currie *et al.*, 2004).

Looking at the data on adolescents, it appears that Denmark scores significantly higher than Ireland in some categories, such as adolescents reporting 'high life satisfaction' (81% vs 70%) and positive peer support (60% vs 53%). Danish children aged 11 are significantly more likely to report liking school a lot (33.7% compared to 25.4% of Irish children) [of note, the average rate is 34%, so Irish children fall significantly below the average]. If we examine the gender differences in these rates, there is a striking pattern with Irish males (aged 11) as only 20% reported liking school a lot compared to 31% of Danish boys (30% is the average rate). Gender differences are also evident in reports by 15 year olds on whether they find their peers helpful and this data is summarised in Figure 1. Significantly however, Irish children aged 11 are less likely to be bullied than their Danish counterparts (30% compared to 34.5%). There are other indicators such as finding it 'easy to talk to their fathers' where no major differences are evident.

Figure 1



Youth Suicide rates

In relation to mental health, in particular, if we take a crude measure such as youth suicide rates, Wasserman, Cheng and Jiang (2005) reported global suicide rates obtained from the WHO (World Health Organisation) Mortality Database for persons aged 15-19.

Based on data from 2000, the Irish rate was 12.3 per 100,000 and the Danish rate (based on data from 1999) was significantly lower at 4.9 per 100,000. The mean suicide rate for the 90 countries included in the analysis was 7.4 per 100,000. The stark difference in figures is immediately striking. Significant gender differences are also apparent. The rate for young Irish males was 19.8 per 100,000 compared to 9 per 100,000 in Denmark (of note, the average male rate is 10.5 per 100,000).

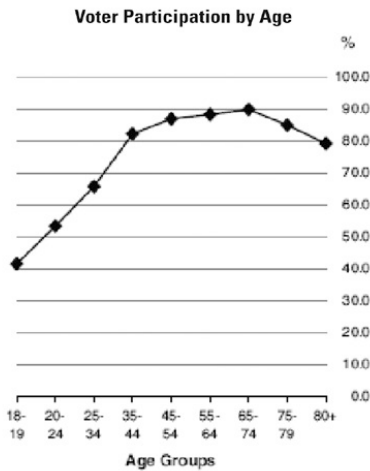
Youth suicide is undoubtedly a complex, multifaceted problem and the purpose of this paper is not to suggest that there are direct correlations between after school provision and suicide. Nonetheless, the high youth suicide rate in Ireland, particularly in males, is not something that we can ignore but something that as a society, we need to reflect deeply on.

Voter turnout

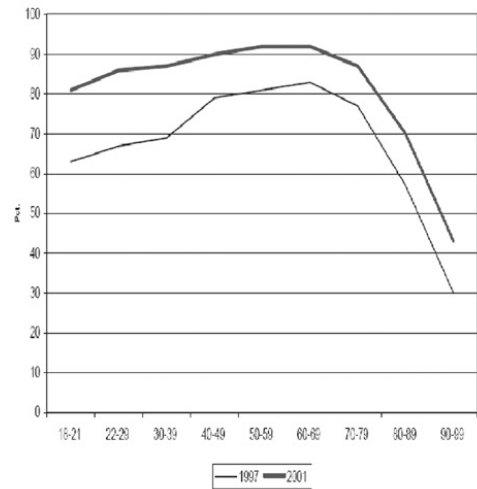
The wider impact of this sense of civic duty emphasised in Denmark also merited further investigation. When this paper was presented at the OMEP conference in April 2007, the Irish General Election was forthcoming and so ‘voter turnout’ seemed a pertinent measure of civic responsibility. If we look at voter turnout by age in the previous General Election in Ireland, (2002 based on data collected from the Quarterly Household Survey Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2003), **figure 3** highlights an obvious curve suggesting that voter turnout increases significantly by age. If we look at voter participation by age in Aarhus, (a region in Denmark) for 2001, (Elklit, 2005) the direct opposite relationship is evident. In a democratic society, proportion of voter turnout is a powerful statement on the sense of civic duty and participation. It would appear that young Danish citizens are significantly more involved than their Irish counterparts are. According to the CSO (2003) figures, when questioned why they did not vote, the main responses were ‘not interested’ (21%) or ‘not registered’ (23%) (which may also be interpreted as voter apathy). Although the comparison is not wholly scientific (and issues around methods of data collection, different data sources and population sizes must be acknowledged) nonetheless, the overarching message is striking. There appears to be a stark contrast in youth (or first time) voter apathy from Ireland compared to Denmark.

There are a whole range of different factors associated with complex issues such as mental health, suicide rates and voter participation. There are also fundamental issues surrounding the comparability of data obtained from different sources and the author is

Figure 2



Ireland (CSO, 2007)



Aarhus, Denmark (Elkit et al 2005)

fully aware of these. The purpose of this paper therefore is not an in-depth discussion on these matters per se, but the aim is merely to draw hypothetical inferences from various data sources, raising points to spark future discussion and debate. There may be possible correlations between adult attitudes towards active participation in childhood and future well-being and engagement in society. The revival of child participation discourse has been noted by Jans (2004, 27-43). Historically, citizenship was viewed as the final destination of childhood however; Jans argues that citizenship should be viewed as a learning process, dynamic and continuous in itself rather than an end product of ‘future citizenship’ or a predefined learning objective. Mac Naughton *et al.*, (2007) highlight that if we see children as active participants, we are advancing citizenship and so participation in civic life grows. They refer to the emergence of a new model that views young children ‘as ‘social actors’ who can shape their identities, who can create and communicate valid views about the social world and who have the right to participate in it, acting with adults to develop new policies and practices’ (*ibid* p.164). In the Irish context, at a policy level, the National Children’s Strategy, *Our Children-Their Lives* (2000) encourages active participation as does *Stolta- The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006). Limerick City Childcare Committee in conjunction with Mary Immaculate College have also recently produced a curriculum framework for after school programmes entitled *Voice and Choice*. The challenge however, is to ensure that policy initiatives permeate into practice.

Conclusions

Based on the observations in after school/leisure time facilities in Copenhagen, it would appear that meeting the needs of the individual child from a holistic perspective is central. This is facilitated through cooperation and coordination of staff working together and with parents, with the common goal of promoting socialisation and instilling a sense of participation and autonomy to encourage active citizenship in their society. There also appears to be a sense of trust and respect for the children, they are treated as capable and important citizens with a high level of responsibility both for themselves, for their curriculum and their environment.

There are a growing number of children attending after school facilities in this country. However, regulation, staffing and curriculum are areas that need further consideration to facilitate participation and ensure that the holistic needs of children are addressed (Moloney, Sturley and Kane, 2008). Looking to other countries to inform policy and practice can 'provide a lens through which to view our own country' (Moss *et al.*, 2003 p.6) however, the limitations of comparative work must also be recognised. Societal and contextual influences pertinent to specific countries and the very understanding of children, the family and the concept of childhood should also be acknowledged.

Nevertheless, there are key aspects to draw from this experience. Within an Irish context, there is a need to reflect on and reconceptualise our attitudes towards young children and to explore apathy and levels of (dis)content in Irish youths (particularly in males). As a society, we must recognise the importance that experiences in childhood have for learning, participating, social, emotional and physical well-being in later life.

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A Case Study of Two Preschools in Cork City and County in Relation to Quality Practice

Denice Cunningham, UCC

Abstract

This paper is drawn from the findings of a doctoral study which explores the various aspects of quality in early years settings in Ireland. The study explored the perspectives of the various stakeholders of pre-school education, namely practitioners, parents, children, the Childcare Committees, Health Board inspectorate teams and national pre-school organisations. Simultaneously it examined the structure and process quality of twenty eight centres, from a variety of pre-school settings in Cork City and County. This paper is an examination of the findings of the qualitative case study in relation to two centres in Cork City and Cork County.

Introduction

This paper presents a qualitative case study of quality in two early childhood centres in the Cork area. It is drawn from a wider study on aspects of quality in early years settings in Ireland which was undertaken as a doctoral research project.

In Ireland, the subject of quality in early childhood education and care has taken priority amongst the various stakeholders over the last decade, especially since the implementation of the *Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations* (Department of Health, 1996) which lay down basic minimum standards. There have been numerous publications and consultations on the topic of quality (CECDE 2006a), culminating in the publication of *Siolta*, the National Framework for Quality (CECDE, 2006b). *Siolta* in its core statement identifies principles¹ such as parental partnership, positive adult/child interactions, equality, respect for diversity; the physical environment; safety and well being, positive learning experiences and the opportunity to play, as all being central to the delivery of quality early years services (CECDE, 2006b). Furthermore, *Siolta* identifies standards such as the rights of the child, a well maintained environment, valuing parents, consultation, interactions, play, curriculum, planning and evaluation, health and welfare, organisation, professional practice, communication, transitions, identity and belonging,

legislation and regulation, and community involvement, as all being key to the delivery of quality early years services (CECDE, 2006b). The concern with the development of standards and good practices in early childhood services has spawned from the discourse of quality in early years provision (Dahlberg 1999). While attempts have been made to establish objective measures of quality, the post-modern perspective acknowledges that early years services have emerged and developed from a historical and cultural context within society and recognises that there are multiple perspectives on quality (Moss & Penn 1996, Dahlberg *et al.* 1999). Where modernity sought simple neat answers, the post-modern perspective recognises that there are no absolute truths nor answers and that nothing is certain, 'Absolute certainty based on universal truths is an illusion' (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, pg. 42). In this respect, we must be aware that in our search for quality in early years provision, there are no neat answers to be found in relation to what constitutes quality services. However, it has been argued that although we must acknowledge that there are no absolute standards, we must retain some standards and some notion of truth for valid argument (Carspecken, 1996; Kinchloe and McLaren, 2003). In this light, a number of issues have been identified in the literature as being closely related to the quality of early childhood services.

Donohue & Gaynor (1999) state that factors which form the basis of high quality in early years services are; the ethos or underpinning values, the adults and the relationships involved, the programme and the environment within which they are offered. The *Siolta* standard on curriculum states that "Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme" (CECDE, 2006b). The NCCA, in its document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* emphasises the importance of the development of a national curriculum framework for early years services for children age 0 to 6 (NCCA 2004). In its final consultation report, it emphasises the importance of supporting practitioners in their roles in early years education (NCCA 2005).

Many advocates of quality point to the importance of a well maintained setting with appropriate materials to facilitate children's learning; an element that is embedded into the policies of various early years models such as High/Scope, Montessori and Reggio Emilia (Ball 1999; French 2000; Malaguzzi 1998; Montessori 1992; Schweinhart *et al.* 1993; Woodhead 1996). Both the High/Scope and Montessori curricula emphasise the

importance of well defined interest areas in relation to providing developmental learning outcomes for young children (Schweinhart & Epstein 1997a; Montessori 1992). Douglas & Horgan (1995) found in their empirical study that a key element in children's cognitive development is the 'structure' of a preschool. The aforementioned structure encompasses a well laid out setting with a wide range of developmentally appropriate materials.

The arrangement of space, furniture and play materials also plays an important part in this relationship between children and adults and their influence on the opportunities and constraints for enabling children's exploration of their own capabilities. (Pugh 1996, p. 159)

It is well acknowledged that children learn through the imitation of those more competent than themselves; thus good adult role models are an especially important part of good pedagogy practice (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002). Theorists such as Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky and Isaacs, all consider the interaction between the adult and the child to be at the heart of child development. Vygotsky's theory of the '*Zone of Proximal Development*' emphasises the importance of the role of the teacher, in supporting children to go beyond their level of self achievement (Vygotsky 1976). This requires the adult to assess the children's learning in order to help them to extend it. A study by Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2004) of pedagogy practice in English pre-schools highlighted assessment of children's performance as an essential component in effective pedagogy.

The EPPE study, the first major European longitudinal study of young children's development from age 3 to 7, showed that quality indicators of centres include warm interactive relationships between staff and children (Sylva *et al.* 2004). According to the NAEYC, positive relationships such as these which are warm, sensitive and responsive, not alone increase children's self esteem, but also enhance their learning experiences (NAEYC 2007). Relationships with parents and families are also crucial; Murphy (2002), posits parental involvement as a characteristic of quality early years provision and Hurst (1997) states that one of the key elements to quality education in the early years lies in the values placed on partnerships between the practitioners and the children.

It has been shown that many of these aspects of quality depend on staff receiving adequate levels of training and development (Ball, 1999; Burchinal, *et al.* 2002; Bowman *et al.*

2001; Howes *et al.* 1992; Kontos *et al.* 1995; Moss 2003; Sylva & Pugh 2005; Walsh 2004). Rhodes *et al.* (2000) showed that after a 120-hour training programme, caregivers displayed higher levels of sensitivity to children, as against caregivers who did not attend the training programme. Furthermore, in the same study, the children who attended settings of caregivers who received training made significant gains in levels of complex social and cognitive play over a six month period, than children whose caregivers did not participate in the training programme. Allied to this, the children who attended the setting in the comparison group showed no cognitive or social improvement over a seven month period, which has profound implications in relation to the correlation between staff training and children's development. Another interesting finding in the same study is that although all the participants had an average of six or more years experience working in early years services, only those who undertook the training course showed improvements in relation to how they interacted with the children and how they managed children's behaviour.

These studies highlight the important role that in-service training plays in improving the quality of early childhood services. Conversely, in the CECDE study of the perspectives of the stakeholders of early childhood education and care, respondents indicated that lack of opportunities for in-service training, poor work conditions and low pay were seen as contributors to poor quality in early years services (CECDE 2006a, p.140).

Research methodology

The doctoral study from which this paper is drawn looked at six key issues identified in the literature as being linked to quality services, specifically: regulation, staff training and pay, curriculum, finance, parental involvement, and children's involvement. Simultaneously, it investigated the 'programme quality' of twenty eight early years centres in a variety of settings in the Cork area. The centres were divided into seven sub-groups namely: four Private Montessori; four Naoinrai; four Early Start; four Junior Infants; four Senior Infant; four Community Playgroups; and four Private Providers. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were used, encompassing interviews, questionnaires and two early years research instruments, namely the ECERS-R (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale- Revised) (Harms *et al.* 1998) and the CIS (Caregivers Interaction Scale) (Arnett 1989). Whilst the ECERS-R and the CIS are 'quantifiable' instruments, they were further contextualized through qualitative on-site

interviews with the practitioners and this author's own observations. A total of 60 children, 182 practitioners, 174 parents, 55 providers of early childhood studies programmes, 21 co-ordinators of the Childcare Committees, 5 managers of preschools organisations and 10 HSE inspectors participated in this study.

The ECERS-R is a widely used measure of programme quality and has been demonstrated to be a reliable and valid measure of programme quality in a wide variety of studies (Bryant *et al.* 1999; Buell *et al.* 2001; Cryer *et al.* 1999; Epstein 1999; Howes *et al.* 2000; Mill *et al.* 1999; Peisner-Feinberg *et al.* 2001; Sheridan *et al.* 2001; Sylva K 1999). The ECERS-R scale consists of 43 items which evaluate the following: physical environment; basic care; curriculum; interaction; programme structure; and the needs of parent and staff. Each item is scored on a scale from one to seven, with one being "inadequate" and seven being "excellent". A high score in the ECERS-R scale would thus be indicative of a high quality programme.

The second instrument used was the Caregivers Interaction Scale (CIS) (devised by Arnttett 1989). This scale measures or assesses the quality of the caregiver's interactions with the children in relation to positive, harshness/punitive, permissiveness and detachment. A high score on the positive subscale and low scores on the punitive, permissive and detached subscales are indicative of superior quality interaction. A pilot study was undertaken in preparation for this project, during which this author, with the cooperation of a colleague, undertook extensive training in the implementation of both the ECERS-R and the CIS, so as to ensure inter-rater reliability. This writer then visited each of the 28 centres twice, so as to help eliminate any stranger anxieties amongst the children. A total of approximately five hours was spent in each centre during the second visit. The ECERS-R was administered over a period of approximately three hours. The interviews generally took two and a half hours. The Caregivers Interaction Scale (CIS) was scored immediately after leaving each centre, given the sensitive nature of the questions on this scale.

This paper presents one aspect of the research, namely the case study of the two centres that had the highest and the lowest scores respectively of the twenty eight centres in the study. It presents the factors that led to these scores being awarded, and sets these in the wider context of the literature on quality in early years settings.

Introduction to the Case Studies

A case study is a unit of analysis that gives an in depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. (Greig & Taylor 1999; Guba & Lincoln 1991). McMillan & Schumacher (1989), defined a case study as, *'the unit of analysis (is) the one phenomenon which the researcher selects to understand in depth regardless of the number of sites, participants, or documents for a study'* (pg. 180). According to Guba & Lincoln (1991), *"other not very rigorous definitions that have been offered in the Case Study include 'a snapshot of reality', 'a slice of life', 'a microcosm', 'an episode', 'an action unit', 'a depth examination of an instance', and 'the intensive examination of a unit',"* (pg. 371). However, the case study can use a variety of methods of data collection in the investigation of the phenomena, including both quantitative and qualitative. Merriam suggests that the combining of the quantitative and qualitative approaches as a form of triangulation will enhance the validity and reliability of the case study (Merriam 1988). According to Stake (1995), *'the qualitative case researcher tries to preserve the multiple realities, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening'* (pg. 12). In this light, a case study was selected not only to triangulate the methods of data collection, but also to capture the essence of particular settings

The first centre selected, Centre A, received the lowest scores of the ECERS-R and the third lowest score for the CIS, whilst the second centre, Centre B, received the highest score for the ECERS-R and the CIS combined. Thus these two centres represent the strongest and weakest examples in this study (See Appendices 1 & 2).

CASE STUDY 1: Centre A

Centre A is a privately owned and operated custom-built crèche which offers full day care facilities, including a three hour morning pre-school session five days a week. The overview of the ECERS-R scores (see Appendix One) shows that Centre A had the lowest scores of all 28 centres in five of the seven ECERS-R subscales, namely 'Space and Furnishing', 'Personal Care Routines', 'Language and Reasoning', 'Activities', and 'Interactions'. The reasons for this low score become apparent when one looks at the both the physical environment and the interactions that took place within the centre.

Centre A scored poorly in relation to the ECERS-R subscale 'Space and Furnishing'. There were only two interest areas defined, namely a library and a block area.

Furthermore there was no space set aside where children could play protected from intrusion from other children (CECDE 2006d). According to the NAEYC an essential element of quality early years programmes include indoor space which provides semi-private areas where children can play or work alone or with a friend (NAEYC 2007).

In relation to the ECERS-R subscale ‘Personal Care Routines’, there was inadequate supervision of the children. This aspect of the setting was most alarming to the observer as the children’s safety was at risk. During the time observing Centre A the following was witnessed: the children standing on the tables; the children jumping from chair to chair; the children running in force around the setting; the adults engrossed in conversation with each other to the exclusion of any observation of the children; and discipline was so lax, that the adults struggled to keep control of the classroom. The issue of protecting the safety of young children is not alone a basic element of the care of children but is found in almost every national and worldwide policy in relation to the care of young children (Department of Health 1991; Department of Health 1996; Department of Education and Science 2000; OFSTED 2001; DfES 2002a; DfES 2003; CECDE 2006c; CECDE 2006d; DFES 2007; Ministry of Education 2001; US Department of Health and Human Services 2002).

In relation to the ECERS-R ‘Language-Reasoning’ subscale, whilst there was a library, the selection of books was limited and no adults were witnessed reading to the children at any time during the day. Furthermore, there were very few activities which openly encouraged the children to communicate and little evidence of staff encouraging children to openly reason when problem solving.

Centre A received a score of “inadequate to minimal” on the ECERS-R subscale ‘Activities’ for the following reasons:

- There were very few developmentally appropriate fine motor materials visible in the setting
- Although there were some art materials, namely play dough, in general there were very few art activities accessible for a substantial portion of the day
- There were no music materials accessible for children’s use throughout the day
- There was a substantial volume of blocks in the setting, however there was no special block area set aside for children to play uninterrupted

- Although there was provision for sand and water play, the children had limited access to these
- There were no ‘dress-up’ materials for drama play
- There were limited nature and science activities and these activities were not accessible throughout the day
- Although the centre had some maths materials, they were in poor condition, with pieces missing from some of the activities.

All of these factors led to a low score in relation to the provision for activities (CECDE 2006c, CECDE 2006d).

In relation to the ECERS-R ‘Interaction’ subscale, the staffs’ interaction with the children was not positive, in that most of their conversations were concerned with controlling the children. Neither did the practitioners of Centre A appear to practice any form of record keeping or assessment of the children.

In relation to ECERS-R subscale ‘Parents and Staff’, although there was much sharing of information between the parents and staff, parental involvement was not encouraged within the setting. Another requirement of high quality provision is effective initial and ongoing training for early years teachers and carers (Ball, 1999). Although there was an orientation programme in place for new staff members, no on-going staff training was undertaken or encouraged in Centre A. The owner of the centre attributed this to a lack of government funding and indicated that this made training of staff impossible for this centre.

In relation to the CIS interactive scale, if a high score in the Positive Interaction and a low score in the remaining Punitive, Detached and Permissive scales indicate good quality interaction, then the CIS scores for Centre A are indicative of ‘poor quality interaction’ (See Appendix 2). It is interesting that both adults observed in this setting scored high in the Punitive, Detached and Permissive scale and low in the Positive Interaction scale, which would indicate that they both had the same teaching styles. Furthermore, the CIS findings support both the findings of the ECERS-R and this writer’s own observations of this centre.

Practitioners in Centre A: qualifications and training

While both of the practitioners in Centre A had relevant qualifications and experience,

there was no evidence of on-going training taking place. Adult 1 had both an N.C.V.A. (National Council for Vocational Awards) in Early Childhood Education and an N.N.E.B. (CACHE) Nursery Nurse Diploma. Furthermore, Adult 1 had twenty five years experience working in the early years. Adult 2 had an N.C.V.A. in Early Childhood Education and had eight years experience working in the early years.

In the interviews carried out with the practitioners in this setting, Adult 1 mentioned the need for more uniformity in the distribution of funding between private and state funded pre-schools. She stated that because there was no government funding for either staffing or the training of staff, she was unable to facilitate the ongoing training of her staff. It is also interesting to note that the second adult in Centre A, did not share the lead teachers feelings in relation to on-going training; this adult 'strongly agreed' that the training of practitioners should be ongoing.

CASE STUDY 2: Centre B

Centre B is situated in an urban area of Cork City and is part of a voluntary, community based Family Centre. The Family Centre provides a double session preschool programme five days a week plus a full day care crèche. The curriculum model used in this pre-school is the High/Scope model of early years' education. The overview of the ECERS-R scores (see Appendix 1) shows that Centre B scored the highest overall score of all the 28 centres. Furthermore, Centre B scored the maximum score of 7 in four of the ECERS-R subscales, namely, 'Personal Care Routines', 'Interactions' 'Program Structure', and 'Parents and staff'. It must also be noted that although some other centres scored higher than Centre B on the remaining three subscales namely 'Space and Furnishing', 'Language and Reasoning', and 'Activities', Centre B scored 6.62, 6.75, and 6.22 respectively, all of which are in the "good to excellent" category.

In order to understand the complexities of how this centre scored the highest rating overall, key findings in relation to the ECERS-R and CIS collectively will now be discussed. It must be noted that only one practitioner agreed to participate in an interview for this study. The manager of the centre was apologetic, stating that a significant number of studies had been carried out recently in this centre, hence she believed this had influenced the staffs' decision not to participate in the study. Because only one member of staff consented to participate, then for ethical reasons the CIS scale was applied to this staff member alone.

Centre B received the top score for the ECERS-R subscale ‘Space and Furnishing’ because the room had ample space, good natural light and was well ventilated. Furthermore, the furniture was sturdy, in good repair and convenient to use. There was soft furnishing in addition to a comfortable area for children’s relaxation. There were at least five different interest centres that were well organised. Lastly, there was space available for privacy which one or two children could use away from the general activities of the group. The room display mostly related to the work of the children. There was sufficient outdoor and indoor space for gross motor play activities. The outdoor space provided some protection from the elements, with both stationary and portable gross motor equipment.

Under the ECERS-R subscale ‘Personal Care Routine’, the centre scored highly because it was observed that all the children were greeted warmly and both staff and children alike adhered to all good health and safety practices (CECDE 2006c, CECDE 2006d).

The score for ‘Language and Reasoning’ was high for several reasons. There was a wide selection of books, in a well organised reading area, used by both the staff and the children for a substantial portion of the day. Furthermore, throughout the day the staff communicated with the children, balancing listening and talking and linking spoken communication with the written word. The staff encouraged the children to reason and children were encouraged to explain their own reasoning when problem solving. Finally, the staff asked questions to encourage the children to give more complex answers and staff held individual conversations with the children throughout the day (CECDE 2006d).

Centre B scored highly for the ECERS-R ‘Activities’ because there were a large number of well organised developmentally appropriate fine motor materials, that were rotated to maintain the children’s interest. Furthermore, the following activities were well maintained and organised and accessible to the children for a substantial portion of the day:

- Various art activities including three-dimensional art
- Various types of musical instruments and activities
- A variety of blocks and accessories
- Sand and water play
- Various types of dramatic play activities including dress-up clothes
- A variety of science and nature activities

- Many developmentally appropriate maths activities
- Many materials that promoted diversity.

On the ECERS-R subscale 'Interaction', this centre got a top score of seven for the following reasons: throughout the day the staff consistently spoke to the children about ideas related to their play; the staff helped the children to develop positive social interactions; the staff worked constantly with the children so as to enhance their play; the staff maintained the balance between the need for the children to explore independently and staff input into learning, and they actively involved the children in solving their conflicts and problems (CECDE 2006d)

Again, the centre got a top score of seven for the ECERS-R subscale 'Programme Structure' for the following reasons:

- There was a clear child user friendly schedule as per the requirements of the High/Scope model
- There were smooth transitions between the daily event
- Supervised free play occurred for a substantial part of the day
- The children were involved in designing the routine for the day
- Different groups provided a change of pace throughout the day
- Children with disabilities were integrated into the classroom setting
- New materials and activities were introduced periodically to maintain the children's interest.

Lastly, a top score of seven was scored for the ECERS-R subscale 'Parents and Staff' for the following reasons:

- The staff consistently shared information between parents in relation to their children's progress and the programme structure
- Parents were invited to evaluate the services
- Parents were involved in decision making in relation to the programme structure
- There was a very comfortable separate lounge area for staff
- There was a well equipped office for programme administration
- Staff communicated child-related information daily
- Staff had daily and weekly planning time

- Staff responsibilities were clearly defined and shared fairly
- Staff received consistent feedback in relation to their work and participated in self-evaluation
- There was ongoing in-service training programmes for the members of staff
- Staff were supported to attend outside courses and conferences
- There was a good professional library containing literature on current early childhood education and care issues

Thus, there was on-going support for the continuing professional development of staff.

In relation to the CIS interaction scale, the staff member observed in Centre B had a high score on the Positive subscale and a low score for the Punitive, Detached and Permissive subscales, which is indicative of good quality interaction. (See Appendix 2).

If one views the scores of the seven subscales of the ECERS-R for Centre B and the CIS combined, Centre B appeared to meet all the criteria identified earlier as crucial to good practice in early childhood education and care, and it appears to be unarguably a centre that delivers quality early years experiences to the children

Practitioner in Centre B; qualifications and training

As mentioned earlier, only one adult in this setting participated in the interview process. Adult 3 had Leaving Certificate, an N.C.V.A. (National Council for Vocational Awards) in Early Childhood Education and an N.N.E.B. CACHE Nursery Nurse Diploma, and five years experience working in early years services.

In response to the interview, Adult 3 ranked 'staff-training' as one of the most important characteristics of 'quality services' in relation to pre-school education. Furthermore, she saw the 'relationship between the adult and the child' as paramount in delivering a 'quality service'. This is in accord with Centre B's score of seven on the ECERS-R subscale 'Interaction', and the high CIS score for 'Positive' interaction between the caregiver and the children of the setting. It is interesting to note that there are ongoing government funded training sessions in Centre B for all staff members.

Discussion

One must ask oneself, how can two government regulated centres score at two opposite ends of the research instrument scales? Firstly, one must take cognisance of the fact that at present, the Irish government has no control over the curriculum content or staff qualifications in early years services. The 1996 Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations focus on the structural aspects of the pre-school setting, to the exclusion of the process variables such as the staff training, curriculum and children's learning outcomes. In this light, once a centre meets all the structural characteristics required by legislation, then the centre can remain open even if it is detrimental to the developmental outcomes of children. A large area of research has called for caution in the sole use of structural measurements in identifying the quality of early years services (Baldock 2001; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Goodfellow 2001; Hayes 2002; Lamb 1998; Mooney *et al.* 2003).

In 2006, the government published the new preschool regulations 'Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006'. These regulations were implemented on the 3rd September 2007 (Department of Health and Children 2006). The new regulations stipulate that a preschool must ensure that *'a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults are working directly with the pre-school children in the pre-school service at all times'* (Department of Health and Children 2006, pg. 38). They further clarify that *'A suitable and competent adult is a person (over 18) who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age and/or who has an appropriate qualification in childcare'* (Department of Health and Children, 2006 pg. 39). It is disappointing however that the new regulations do not require any training or qualification of childcare providers. Although the regulations mention 'appropriate experience or qualification' it does not clarify what appropriate means in the context of qualifications. Likewise it is unsatisfactory that the new regulations allow up to 50% of unqualified staff to work in early years services settings, despite the fact that numerous Irish papers have addressed and rejected such practices as in appropriate (Border Counties Childcare Network Limited 2000, Western Health Board 2000 and French 2003).

It is interesting to note that there was no statistically significant difference between the adults in Centre A and the adults in Centre B in relation to their qualifications or experience. In fact in relation to the ECERS-R, the only significant statistical difference between all twenty eight groups was in relation to Item No 43 'Opportunities for

professional growth'. Within the context of staff development, item 43 of the ECERS-R revealed a significant statistical difference between the state sector and the private sector (Please see Appendix 3). The private Montessori subgroup and private preschool subgroup scored lowest of the twenty eight centres in relation to the on-going training of their staff.

A further criticism of the new 2006 regulations is that, although for the first time children's experiences are acknowledged in relation to their development, there is no mention of developmental outcomes for children. In light of the above, it is this writer's view that the implementation of the new regulations will fail to inform practitioners with regards to child development, play and learning and effective practice. Further, Myers (2000) posits that the government can lose some control over standards in private early years services, which can result in the lowering of the quality of these services.

In this study, many private practitioners mentioned that for economic reasons, they were unable to release staff to attend outside courses: all the state-funded centres had in-service training days in addition to other outside courses. According to a study carried out in New Zealand, the lack of funding brought about a difference between community and privately owned childcare services (Mitchell 2002). According to Mitchell, when centres needed to make financial cutbacks, the private services were more likely to make adverse changes which included less in-service training for staff. In contrast when community services needed to make financial cutbacks they kept in-service training intact, whilst reducing other areas of expenditure. There appears to be no doubt that there is a strong correlation between Centre B's on-going training programmes and the level of quality services it provides.

It is interesting to note that the CIS demonstrated a difference in teaching styles between Centre A and Centre B. In Centre A both of the practitioners were low on 'positive' and high on 'detached', whilst one practitioner was overly 'punitive', the second was overly 'permissive' in allowing misbehaviour to go unchecked. This striking variation in teacher styles impacted on the children's experiences within the different settings. In this study, Adult 1's twenty five years experience working in the early years appears to have been of no apparent significance in relation to her inability to manage the behaviour of the children in the setting.

There was also a variation with regard to curriculum. Centre A is a privately run centre, and they are not required under the existing regulations to have a defined curriculum in place. Although Centre B used the internationally recognised 'High/Scope' curriculum model, Centre A did not use any particular model but based its daily schedule on what the lead teacher decided was an appropriate routine for the children on the given day.

Both of these factors (teacher styles and curriculum model) had consequences in terms of the children's experiences in the settings. Although the majority of children in Centre A appeared to be having fun, there appeared to be very little progress towards educational outcomes for the children. In contrast to this, the children in the Community preschool, Centre B, were having the kind of experiences that have been shown to lead to positive academic outcomes.

It would appear therefore that the educational qualifications of practitioners bore little or no correlation to the quality of the programme within these two centres. The main difference related to in-service training and development, which was much more common in general in the community-based centres. In Centre B, in-service training and staff development programmes were undertaken which related to child-centred practices specifically for children up to six years of age. In contrast, in the private centre, no training of any kind was undertaken.

Conclusion

During the overall interview process of all twenty eight centres, a large number of the private practitioners voiced their concerns in relation to the lack of funding for staffing and ongoing training. In this light, private practitioners correlated their lack of staff development policies with the aforementioned lack of funding. This is in accord with the results of the CECDE consultation with stakeholders of early childhood education and care in Ireland, where respondents indicated that funding was a key contributor to promoting and safeguarding the delivery of quality services (CECDE 2006b). The CECDE posit that services will continue to be variable in 'quality' in Ireland, due to the absence of quality guidelines, support and regulation of the static and process variables in early years services (CECDE 2006a). The findings of this present study would indicate that the lack of funding for the private sector is having a direct effect on consistency levels of quality in these centres. Furthermore, the findings would suggest that government

funding should be paramount in the area of on-going professional development of pre-school practitioners.

An interesting postscript to this case study is that this writer had the opportunity to visit Centre A twelve months after conducting the initial research there. During this brief subsequent visit, this writer noticed a number of changes. Firstly, a young Montessori teacher had been employed to take over the running of the preschool. Secondly, many changes had been made to the setting, including the formation of well defined interest areas and an input of new developmentally appropriate materials. Although the time was too limited on the subsequent visit to make any extensive observations of the programme structure, improvements in the overall programme were evident. This writer's training in the use of the ECERS-R and the CIS, and her own observations of the setting, suggested that it was likely that that this centre would have attained a higher score for both instruments, had the two research instruments been implemented at this later time. Hence, one must note that the use of these scales give a picture that depends on the time of the visit and on which individual staff are observed, a point argued by Douglas (2004) in his critique of the ECERS. Post-modern thinkers would concur with this; a major challenge in research is that conclusions found in relation to the measurement of the elements of quality provide no surety, due to the evolutionary nature of its elements in the first instance (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999).

¹ See the paper by Jacqueline Fallon and Karen Mahony in this volume for further details on the *Siolta* principles and standards.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: ECERS-R
Case Summaries

Type Group	Centre No.	Space & Furnishings	Personal Care Routines	Language & Reasoning	Activities	Interaction	Program Structure	Parents & Staff	Overall Score
Private	1	4.62	5.2	3.50	3.5	6.0	5.00	5.16	4.58
	2	5.25	5.8	7.00	5.0	6.8	6.00	3.16	5.36
	3	5.37	4.4	6.00	5.5	6.0	5.33	2.16	4.95
	4	5.33	5.8	5.25	4.2	6.4	7.00	2.50	4.94
	5	6.00	6.8	6.75	6.1	7.0	7.00	6.16	6.42
CENTRE A	6	3.00	4.2	2.50	2.9	1.4	3.00	3.33	3.00
	7	6.62	5.8	6.50	6.1	7.0	7.00	6.00	6.36
	8	6.62	7.0	6.75	6.8	6.2	7.00	5.16	6.50
Total	N	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
State Funded	1	5.12	5.4	6.75	5.1	6.8	6.25	5.33	5.64
	2	6.00	5.8	6.75	5.2	7.0	7.00	5.83	5.61
	3	5.12	6.0	6.75	5.5	7.0	7.00	5.33	5.87
	4	6.62	5.6	4.75	5.0	6.8	6.25	5.00	5.69
	5	4.37	6.0	4.75	3.6	4.4	3.00	4.66	4.33
	6	4.50	5.8	7.00	4.1	6.7	3.66	4.50	5.00
	7	5.00	4.4	5.00	4.6	6.4	4.66	4.50	4.90
	8	5.00	5.2	7.00	5.4	6.6	5.66	5.83	5.68
	9	3.75	5.6	5.00	3.3	4.6	1.75	3.66	3.88
	10	3.62	4.2	4.75	2.9	3.8	2.00	4.00	3.58
	11	5.00	5.2	6.75	4.8	6.4	2.66	5.16	5.17
	12	4.50	6.4	7.00	4.5	6.8	3.00	5.40	5.27
	13	4.75	5.8	5.00	5.4	6.4	7.00	6.00	5.62
	14	4.62	4.2	5.00	4.7	5.4	4.33	1.33	4.12
	15	5.12	6.8	5.75	5.7	6.8	7.00	4.33	5.75
	16	6.00	5.0	6.25	6.1	7.0	6.66	5.16	5.97
	17	6.83	5.6	4.50	5.3	5.0	6.33	2.33	5.07
	18	5.25	5.2	6.50	5.2	5.8	3.66	7.00	5.56
	19	5.12	5.4	6.75	6.7	7.0	7.00	6.17	6.21
CENTRE B	20	6.62	7.0	6.75	6.2	7.0	7.00	7.00	6.73
Total	N	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20

Scores: 1 = inadequate, 2 = Inadequate to Minimal, 3 = Minimal, 4= Minimal to Good, 5 = Good, 6 = Good to Excellent, and 7 = Excellent.

Table 2: ECERS-R Average Mean Scores for the 28 Centres Against Centre A

ECERS-R Subscales	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Centre A
Space & Furnishings	28	3.00	6.83	5.2043	3.00
Personal Care Routines	28	4.2	7.0	5.557	4.2
Language Reasoning	28	2.50	7.00	5.8214	2.50
Activities	28	2.9	6.8	4.976	2.9
Interaction	28	1.4	7.0	6.088	1.4
Program Structure	28	1.75	7.00	5.3286	3.00
Parents & Staff	28	1.33	7.00	4.7196	3.33
Overall Score	28	3.00	6.73	5.2771	3.00

Scores: 1 = inadequate, 2 = Inadequate to Minimal, 3 = Minimal, 4= Minimal to Good, 5 = Good, 6 = Good to Excellent, and 7 = Excellent.

Table 3: ECERS-R Average Mean Scores for the 28 Centres Against Centre B

ECERS-R Subscales	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Centre B
Space & Furnishings	28	3.00	6.83	5.2043	6.62
Personal Care Routines	28	4.2	7.0	5.557	7.00
Language Reasoning	28	2.50	7.00	5.8214	6.75
Activities	28	2.9	6.8	4.976	6.22
Interaction	28	1.4	7.00	6.088	7.00
Program Structure	28	1.75	7.00	5.3286	7.00
Parents & Staff	28	1.33	7.00	4.7196	7.00
Overall Score	28	3.00	6.73	5.2771	6.73

Scores: 1 = inadequate, 2 = Inadequate to Minimal, 3 = Minimal, 4= Minimal to Good, 5 = Good, 6 = Good to Excellent, and 7 = Excellent.

Table 4:
Average score of subscales grouped by type of school

	Early Start n=4	Junior Infants n=4	Senior Infants n=4	National n=4	Private Montessori n=4	Community PS n=4	Private PS n=4
Space & Furnishings	5.72	4.72	4.22	5.12	5.14	5.96	5.56
Personal Care Routines	5.7	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.3	5.8	5.9
Language Reasoning	6.25	5.94	5.88	5.5	5.44	6.13	5.63
Activities	5.2	4.4	3.9	5.5	4.6	5.9	5.5
Interaction	6.9	6.0	5.4	6.4	6.3	6.2	5.4
Programme Structure	6.63	4.25	2.35	6.25	5.83	6.0	6.0
Parents & Staff	5.37	4.87	4.56	4.21	3.25	5.63	5.16
Overall Score	5.7	4.98	4.47	5.37	4.96	5.89	5.57

Scores: 1 = inadequate, 2 = Inadequate to Minimal, 3 = Minimal, 4= Minimal to Good, 5 = Good, 6 = Good to Excellent, and 7 = Excellent.

Table 5: Total Mean. ANOVA between and within 7 groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.954	6	.992	1.297	.301
Within Groups	16.070	21	.765		
Total	22.024	27			

There was no statistically significant difference between the overall scores for the 7 groups.

Appendix 2

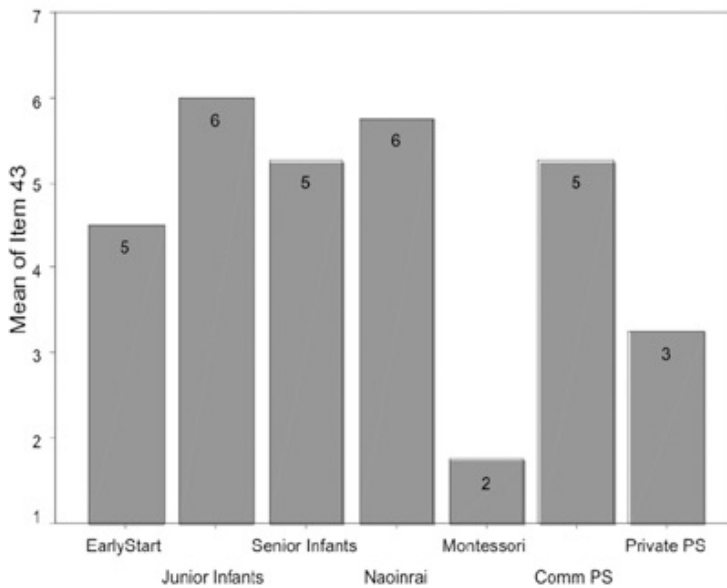
Table 1: CIS Scale Case Summaries

	Centre type	Positive	Punitive	Detached	Permissive
Centre A, Adult 1	Privately owned	1.7	1.88	3.00	2.50
Centre A, Adult 2	Privately owned	1.8	3.00	2.25	1.75
Centre B Adult 3	Community Playgroups	4.0	1.25	1.75	2.00

Scale: 4 = Very much 3 = Quite a bit 2 = Somewhat 1 = Not at all

Appendix 3

ECERS-R Item No. 43 – Opportunities for professional growth



ANOVA – Item No. 43

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	56.214	6	9.369	2.862	.034
Within Groups	68.750	21	3.274		
Total	124.964	27			

The p-value of 0.034 here means that there is a statistically significant difference between the average score on Item 43 for the 7 groups.

Parent Involvement in Early Years Intervention Programmes: Evidence from Early Start

Shirley Martin, Department of Applied Social Studies, UCC

Abstract

This paper is based on a study of the long-term outcomes of an early years intervention programme in Ireland, which attempts to assess whether participation in the programme enhances the life course of children at-risk of educational disadvantage. It focuses on one aspect of the study: the outcomes for a group of parents whose children participated in an Early Start preschool project in 1994/5. It explores whether these parents experienced any benefits associated with their involvement in Early Start, in particular the contribution of the intervention to increasing social capital and strengthening the family's informal support network through parent involvement. In general, Early Start was perceived by all participants in this study as making a positive contribution to parent involvement in education and to strengthening educational capital in the local community. Early Start made a contribution to social capital for parents in the study by facilitating the development of informal networks of parents which have provided continued supports for some parents as their child progressed through the education system.

Introduction

Early years education has increasingly been identified as a mechanism to alleviate educational disadvantage in areas of social exclusion. Early years intervention programmes are now a common government social policy for addressing social problems (Reynolds et al. 1997). In particular, state-provided early years programmes such as Head Start in the United States and Early Start in Ireland have been established to combat educational disadvantage for children experiencing poverty and socio-economic inequality.

The focus of the study on which this paper is based is on the academic achievement and school progress of Early Start participants and to assess whether participation in Early Start enhances the life course of children at-risk of educational disadvantage. Early Start is a one year early years' intervention preschool programme which was first established by the Department of Education and Science in 1994/5. There are Early Start preschool classes

attached to forty primary schools throughout Ireland. This paper will focus on one particular aspect of this study, the outcomes for a group of parents whose children participated in an Early Start programme in one school in 1994/5. It will explore if these parents experienced any benefits associated with their involvement in Early Start.

Parental involvement is central to Early Start and it is encouraged at three distinct levels. Firstly, parents are part of an advisory group at each centre; secondly, parents participate in the everyday running of the centre; and finally, parents participate in activities with their children in the centre (O’Toole, 2000). However, Lewis and Archer (2002) in the second evaluation of Early Start found that while there were a wide number of strategies in place to encourage parental involvement, the level of parental involvement in the advisory groups in each Early Start school was very limited. Lewis and Archer (2006) in an evaluation of the role of the Home-School-Community-Liaison coordinators (HSCLs) in Early Start schools found that the most successful type of parent involvement activity in Early Start was parent-child learning activities. The Lewis and Archer study also found that “there was a good deal of support among (HSCL) coordinators for the view that Early Start had improved the involvement of parents in subsequent years as their child/children progressed through school” (*ibid*, p23). Coordinators perceived Early Start as a contributing factor to parents developing good will towards school initiatives and a positive attitude towards school.

Evidence supporting Parent Involvement in Early Years’ Intervention

There have been a number of studies highlighting the positive outcomes for parents associated with participation in an early years’ intervention programme. Pizzo *et al.* (2004) examine the impact of Head Start on parents by analysing the results of forty-one longitudinal studies involving over 3,000 families and found “a persistent pattern of Head Start parent progress in the skills needed to promote children’s educational success in our school system” (p194). The study found improvements in parent outcomes in two main areas; parents’ ability to promote early learning skills and greater participation by parents in their child’s later school experience. Pizzo *et al.* (2004) suggest that enrolment in Head Start has a considerable impact on parent participation in their child’s education and that this influence persists beyond junior school.

In Ireland, O’Flaherty (1995) highlights Hayes and McCarthy’s (1992) evaluation of St

Audeon's Parent/Child Health Promotion Project, a preschool in Dublin, which found evidence of strong parental involvement and qualitative data suggested that past parents were still involved in the running of the project. The Moyross Intervention Education Pilot Project was launched in 1990 by Mary Immaculate College in Limerick to "bring about 'sustainable improvements in the educational attainment of seventy-five infant children' in an area of high early school leaving and unemployment" (Broderick and Coughlan, 2002, p.65). The project provided educational intervention for the first four years of the children's primary education and included the implementation of specific curriculum support to meet the needs of the children involved. An evaluation of the project reported that parents had established positive relationship with their child's teachers and became more aware of their children's school work and progress. Participation in adult education classes had provided parents with the opportunity to become more assertive and more knowledgeable about the education system.

Evans and Fuller (1999) conducted research on parent involvement in three nurseries attached to primary schools in designated 'Educational Priority Areas' in the UK. Through their research, they assert that parents' clear expression of their views on nursery education challenge the perception that parents from lower-socio-economic groups are inarticulate compared to middle-class parents. They set out to challenge the decontextualised presentation of parent's views of their children's education. Instead they offer an analysis of parents views by exploring "the social contextual nature of parents' perceptions of nursery through the adoption of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory" (*ibid*, p.155).

Using this framework, development of perceptions at the microsystem level (the most proximal *e.g.* in the case of the present study, the nursery class) are considered here, together with acknowledgement of interactions with the mesosystem (home-school), the exosystem (experiences of significant others which have occurred, or are occurring, outside the microsystem) and the macrosystems (the broader social milieu *e.g.* local education authority, government, socio-cultural group). Bronfenbrenner argues for a process-person-context model to be adopted in research designs concerned with human development. (*Ibid*, p.157)

Evans and Fuller (1999) interpret findings of their study within both the social context of the nursery and within the broader social milieu. They argue that it is mainly the voice of the white middle-class parents which is prioritised over the voices of minorities and the working-class parents:

It is perhaps professionals' notions, or expectations, that parents from lower socio-economic groups are inarticulate which prevents such parents' voices from being heard within schools. Alternatively it may be that the power relationships that exist within the context of the school are such that certain parents are rendered 'inarticulate'. (*Ibid*, p156)

Evans and Fuller contend that parents in their study might have been 'renegotiating' their own negative relationships with education through their positive experiences of their children's nursery classes.

Ghate and Hazel (2002) in their study of parenting in poor environments explore the concept of resilience and the types of supports which help parents. They have also adopted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory as the theoretical framework for their research design. The research focused on social supports available to parents in both formal (statutory supports), semi-formal supports (community supports) and informal social supports (family, friends and neighbours). The study consisted of a nationally representative sample of 1,754 parents in the UK and a follow up qualitative study of forty parents. In the context of semi-formal supports the study found that the most common type of support used by parents were services offering care or activities for children and in particular parent/toddler groups and playgroups. In contrast services that offered parent support rather than childcare were less frequently used. Another important issue that emerged was that once parents had made initial contact with a service they tended to utilise more of the facilities in that service. Parents identified the chance to socialise with other adults and therefore provide 'an opportunity to increase their formal social support network' as an indirect benefit of preschool service (Ghate and Hazel, 2002, p.137). It is clear from the work of Evans and Fuller (1999) and Ghate and Hazel (2002) that parents experiencing disadvantage have a unique and important contribution to make to research on early years' intervention programmes and the role of parents.

According to Cullen (2000) many working-class parents are inhibited from meaningful partnerships because they lack the understanding of how important it is for them to engage with their child's school and this is further compounded by "conditions of poverty and exclusion (which) inhibit parental capacities to formulate deeper relationships with schools" (*ibid*, p37). Henry (1996) highlights the role of teachers in projecting the idea that they know best and "parents who are intimidated by schools may buy into the idea of specialisation and fragmentation by upholding the belief it's the school's job to educate" (p95). Parents may then relinquish their children to the school because they believe new opportunities will be open to them through education and the practices within schools. This contributes to distancing parents from the school. Hanafin and Lynch (2002) suggest from their research that parents had shown themselves to be informed and interested in their child's education and that parents failure to participate more fully in their child's education is attributed to "the structures and practices of the school system as it operates, at least in the working-class areas of our community" (*ibid*, p46). The authors claim that their research contradicts the common cultural deficit explanation for limited working-class parental involvement as the parents in their study show a good understanding of the school system but are prohibited from greater involvement because of structural issues and their lack of interest in 'tokenistic' forms of involvement such as parent councils.

The Study

This study aims to add to the understanding of the nature and distribution of the long-term benefits of an early childhood intervention programme in Ireland. It involves an analysis of one Early Start project which was included in the original eight projects established by the Department of Education and Science in 1994. This paper examines the results of in-depth interviews with twenty parents (nineteen mothers and one father) whose children participated in the programme in 1994. Also included are the views of five primary school personnel who were interviewed as part of this study. These primary school staff included the school Principal, the Home-School-Community-Liaison teacher, a Junior Infants teacher, and also the Early Start teacher and Childcare worker who had worked in the Early Start programme in 1994 and who are now employed in alternative teaching posts in the school.

The interview method used in this study was a semi-structured or standardised open-ended interview. Evans and Fuller (1999, p159) discuss the concept of 'creating an

informal, non-threatening environment' when interviewing parents to allow parents express themselves freely and to encourage 'catalytic validity' in their responses. Each parent interview took place in a venue chosen by the parent, normally their home and lasted for between thirty and forty-five minutes. The interviews with school personnel took place within the school and lasted for approximately forty-five minutes. All interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and later transcribed.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory has been drawn on as a theoretical framework for this study. Greaney and Kellaghan (1993) in their follow-up evaluation of the Rutland Street Project affirm the needs for 'new more ecologically valid criteria' to provide for the measurement of outcomes of early years' intervention programmes. The study is also concerned with the contribution of Early Start to developing social capital and cultural capital for families who have participated in the programme. Field (2003) contends that social capital is concerned with membership of networks and a set of shared values and, central to the concept of social capital is the notion that 'relationships matter' (p1). The concept of cultural capital is associated with the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and refers to the primary conditions which foster cognitive and scholastic development and facilitate a child's adjustment to school (Kellaghan, 2001). According to Garbarino and Ganzel (2000) an ecological perspective on development demands a focus on both the interactions between the child and the immediate social environment, and an examination of the interplay of the broader social systems on the child's social environment. Relevant contexts in this study include the impact on the individual child, impacts on the child's family, school and community as well as the influence of the policy context on the individual child.

Some preliminary findings and discussion

This paper focuses on the outcomes for parents whose children participated in Early Start and assesses if the parents experience any benefits associated with their involvement in Early Start. Educational attainment for parents in the study (N=20) is lower than the national average; fourteen parents have attained only primary school qualifications. At the time of the study, six of the twenty families were dependent on unemployment assistance and seven of the twenty families were headed by a lone parent.

Parent participation in their children's education operates at a number of different levels

and the various types of participation cited by parents in this study will now be discussed. Parents were asked about their involvement during Early Start and also their current involvement in their child's education. Parents were very positive about their experiences of parent involvement during Early Start and most felt they were actively involved. The role of the Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL) teacher in encouraging parent involvement was mentioned by six parents in this group. In the context of Epstein's (1990) model of six types of parent involvement, parents were actively involved in the first three types of parent involvement, parenting, communicating and volunteering, and parents were less involved in the last three: learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community.

Parenting courses were the most common type of involvement, with thirteen parents mentioning their participation in a parenting or educational course such as an Irish Preschool Playgroup Association course. While none of the parents mentioned the courses as having a direct impact on their future employment or education, two parents mentioned that it might have indirectly influenced their return to education because it was the first time they had attended adult education classes. Both of these parents are currently working as Special Needs Assistants in primary schools. Classroom volunteering and trips with children were mentioned by eleven parents as something they were actively involved in. The third most common activity mentioned was informal contacts with other parents which was mentioned by eight parents. This was cited as especially beneficial for young parents who were new to the area. One mother who had been recently widowed stated that the programme allowed her to interact with other parents from the community. Modelling was mentioned by one parent as something she found beneficial. As a continuation of active involvement after Early Start, three parents became involved in the primary school Board of Management. None of the parents interviewed were involved in curriculum design or planning for Early Start. This is similar to the findings of the previous Educational Research Centre (1998) evaluation of Early Start which indicated limited parent involvement in these latter activities.

In relation to the views of the teaching staff in the study, primary school personnel mentioned the positive nature of parent involvement in Early Start. The Early Start Childcare Worker identified a number of ways in which Early Start supported families.

These included the early identification of childrens' special learning needs, and the development of a positive relationship between the home and the school at the beginning of the child's education. In relation to home-school relations the Childcare Worker identified the role of the HSCL coordinator as a key aspect of this. The types of courses that parents were attending appeared to be dictated by the school personnel rather than the parents. The school personnel were viewed as the experts in terms of parents needs by both the parents in this study and the teachers.

The HSCL coordinator discussed the role of Early Start in providing positive contacts between the school and parents. This concurs with Lewis and Archer (2006) who also found in their research that Early Start allowed parents to develop a rapport with the HSCL coordinator, particularly, if they had a number of children attending the programme over a number of years. Also in their study they found that HSCL coordinators tended to perceive their role in Early Start as more positive than their work with older pupils. Reasons given for this included parents of Early Start children being more enthusiastic than parents of older children, and parents needing more support because their children were younger.

Community involvement in the Early Start project in this study was very limited and there were no links between the project and local organisations or early years structures such as the County Childcare Committee. This concurs with the OCED (2004) report which found that the original objective of the Early Start programme to be part of the wider community response to education disadvantage has never come to fruition and it is currently operating in isolation from other statutory and community supports. Early years interventions according to the OECD are more successful in breaking the poverty cycle when part of a more general anti-poverty and community development strategy including links to job training, housing policy, substance misuse programmes and other social and community supports.

Some of the other key findings which emerged in this study are the role of Early Start in providing formal and informal supports, the role of Early Start in breaking boundaries, parents' lack of confidence in their role as primary educator and continued parent involvement in primary school after Early Start. These issues will now be discussed in more detail.

Formal and informal supports

Two parents mentioned receiving formal support for their child through their involvement with Early Start. In both cases Early Start teachers had recommended that the children should attend Speech Therapy and the children attended the local Health Board Service. Both of these parents then became involved in a local language support programme for parents and children. There was no other mention of contact with formal support services through Early Start.

Building social networks with other parents was the most frequent informal support mentioned by parents. Parents identified “getting to know other parents” as a significant benefit of participation in Early Start.

I used to sit in the parent room before I collected him. All the parents used to be in there and that's how I got to know all the parents in the area and it got me out of the house. I thought it was brilliant for the parents. *Joan (mother)*

I was just mingling with people in the area, what would you say, meeting friends, moving out into the area. So it was a good way to meet people. We sort of mingled with the HSCL. *Mandy (mother)*

Early Start operated as an informal support group for mothers and allowed them access to support from other parents in the area. Rowen and Gosine (2006) describe social capital as a sense of connectedness to the larger community based on networks and social trusts. In this way, Early Start played a role in increasing parents' informal contacts and networking opportunities and therefore contributing to social capital for parents. The results are also similar to Ghate and Hazel's (2002) study which found preschools offer parents an opportunity to increase their social support network.

Early Start then would seem to offer opportunities for both formal and informal forms of family support to parents in the study and was cited as being especially important for parents new to the area. Crawford and Walker (2007) discuss the potential of protective environments to protect children from adversities and highlight the role of community support networks “particularly those that offer emotional support and practical help and advice” as being beneficial for parents and children (p48). In Lewis and Archer's (2006)

study of the role of HSCL coordinators in Early Start they found that parent-to-parent contact was facilitated by only five of the thirty-three HSCL coordinators in their study. Parent-to-parent contact was highlighted by parents in this current study as very important, and this would suggest that such contact should be central to any parent involvement strategies for Early Start.

The role of Early Start in breaking boundaries

Parents frequently cited the role of Early Start in allowing them to become more familiar with the school setting and the school personnel including the teachers and other school staff.

Because of sitting in the parent-room every morning with the teachers and bringing them down to your level you didn't feel as conscious going forward, you would jump in head first because it was all the women from the coffee morning. *Nora (mother)*

The year they are in Early Start they familiarise themselves with the school, they know who the Principal is, they familiarise themselves with the school and teachers. By getting parents involved at that early age they do not feel so isolated. It is a key asset to getting parents involved. *Biddy (mother)*

Two-way communication between parents and staff is a crucial element of a positive working relationship and is also important for the child's relationship with peers and adults (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Powell, 1989; Hughes and MacNaughton, 2000). Early Start played a role for parents in overcoming the perceived boundaries between parents and teachers and increasing communication.

I was a student in that school so even when I brought my child in it was still my school, the HSCL taught me (when I was at school) and it was really like she is the Teacher and I am still her past student but when they (teachers) came in drinking tea with you and having donuts and yapping on telling you their business it brought them all down to your level because they were able to speak to you the way they speak to anyone else, broke all the boundaries kind-of. *Mairead (mother)*

These quotes demonstrate how Early Start gave parents the opportunity to develop a more informal relationship with the school and contributed to breaking down boundaries between parents and teachers. The relationships between schools and families in disadvantaged areas can be rife with cultural or economic conflict that cannot be solved by simply enhancing communication (Lareau, 2000). In this study, parents were very conscious of the teachers' role as a professional educator. While attending Early Start many of the parents developed personal relationships with the HSCL teacher which greatly contributed to the parents' sense of ease within the primary school. Lewis and Archer's (2006) research with HSCL teachers also found that parental involvement during Early Start contributed to breaking down barriers between parents and teachers and contributed to "genuine partnership between parents and teacher" (p21). However, teachers in that study also expressed doubts about the long-term impact of these benefits. They also expressed some concern about the ability of Early Start to engage with the most marginalised parents.

The process of starting school was identified as being less stressful and more enjoyable because of participation in Early Start. One mother felt it was a positive beginning for the child and contributed to the child's overall school experience in a positive way. Three parents mentioned that their children still had the same friends that they made in Early Start and that this has helped them on their journey through school. Interestingly, while most of the parents mentioned the importance of getting to know the school for the parent and the child, none of them mentioned the role of teachers in getting to know the parent and the child. The focus of responsibility was always on the parents and children becoming familiar with how school operates rather than the school becoming familiar with the families.

Parents' confidence in their role as primary educator

Some parents felt that the child should attend Early Start because they lacked confidence in their own role as a primary educator.

I put her into Early Start because I couldn't occupy her and I didn't want to teach her how to do anything in-case I taught her wrong and different people have different ways of teaching and I didn't want to teach her the alphabet and how to count in case I knocked her for six. Lucky I did cause the

preschool taught her phonics and I would never have been able to do that.

Anne (mother)

According to Lareau (2000) some parents from working-class backgrounds are intimidated by the professional authority of teachers and these parents fear teaching their children the wrong things or instructing them in the wrong way and “they see home and school as separate spheres” (p8). This leads to a strong reliance on information from teachers when asked about their child’s performance in school or behaviour. Lareau (2000) also found in her research that many working-class parents felt they should leave academic matters to the teachers.

This was also apparent in this study with parents relying strongly on information from the teachers for reassurance on their child’s school performance. In the interviews, parents were asked about their child’s academic performance and behaviour in school. All of the parents relied almost completely on information they had received from the school when answering this question. This is also evident when examining some parents’ views on teachers’ approval of their child’s transition to primary school. Some parents spoke about the importance of the child settling into school from the teachers’ perspective. School-readiness was described as something which was laid down by the teachers and achievement of school-readiness was necessary to gain the teachers’ approval.

Early Start prepared her really well, they know their words and pencils. It is a great help to teachers so they can give attention to the ones that don’t have that. Pauline (mother)

Interestingly, Pauline does not seek individual attention for her child from the teacher but is more concerned about the teacher’s availability to other children. The language of school-readiness offered by the parents in the study seemed to focus very often on discipline.

He was learning how to behave properly. He knew what time was sports time and what time was eating and what time was sitting with other children or quietness time. He knew the rules, it was control really and what to say and when to say it. *Maud (mother)*

I found it very good discipline and learning because they are in a routine and they weren't shy starting off. I found it great because it wasn't just play, it was play in a disciplined way. *Ally (mother)*

Piotrkowski (2004) describes school readiness in terms of resources such as political, social, organisational, educational, financial and individual which prepare the child for school and describes it as a non-static concept which incorporates the multi-dimensional nature of the child's development. Piotrkowski (2000) proposes that in a low-income community parents elevated readiness beliefs "regarding the resources children need for kindergarten may be a function not of developmentally inappropriate expectations but are due to realistic concerns that their child may not succeed in resource-poor local schools" (p554). Piotrkowski refers to this as the resource model of school-readiness. In this model, parents tend to de-emphasise interests and curiosity and instead emphasise concrete skills to help students adjust quickly and successfully to the classroom.

Similarly, in this study, parents tended to focus on the importance of discipline for their child and the role of Early Start in helping their child fit into the school routine and gaining the teacher's approval for their child. School readiness was identified as the central aim of the programme by all the primary school respondents in the study. Parents and teachers views did concur on the practical preparation of children for school and the importance of routine, but teachers tended to put more emphasis on children developing a positive attitude to learning and language development during Early Start.

Parental involvement after Early Start

The evidence from this study supports the theory that participation in Early Start appears to enhance parents' level of involvement at primary school level. However, this did not seem to persist into second level. Most parents in the study mentioned the positive relationship they had developed with the primary school teachers and the frequency of positive communication between the home and the primary school. More than half of the parents also mentioned being actively involved in the primary school such as involvement in the Parent Committee or volunteering in the classroom. The types of parent involvement parents experienced in primary school may not be relevant in secondary as the school curriculum is more sophisticated so this affects parents' ability to support their child in second level and be actively involved. Parents had limited knowledge of the

second level school system and were reliant on teachers for educational decision-making because they had no other access to educational information. There was very limited contact with the HSCL coordinators in second level, particularly compared to the level of contacts with the primary school personnel. Parents tended to disengage from active parent involvement at the same stage that they themselves had left formal education.

The primary school personnel interviewed indicated that in the primary school, the teachers perceive themselves as responsible for parent involvement, while at secondary school, there is a shift in responsibility from the teachers onto the parents to initiate contacts with the school. Many parents found the change in parent-teacher relations when their child transferred to second level problematic and some primary school teachers were concerned that the ‘hand-holding pedagogy’ (Davis, 1994), which was perceived as operating in primary school did not prepare parents and children for the realities of the second level system. Downes *et al* (2007) contend that the current open atmosphere within Irish primary schools “may create expectations in pupils of an emotionally communicative and supportive environment at second level that could lead to a heightened sense of disillusionment if the atmosphere is not sustained across the transition to second level” (p414). However, some of the primary school personnel felt that second level schools were not doing enough to encourage parent involvement and provide parents with adequate educational information. In particular, there was a concern that there was a lack of ownership of education within the community and there was a need for a Parent Forum to support parents’ participation within the education system.

As previously discussed, research by Cullen (2000) and Henry (1996) highlight the difficulties that working class parents can experience when engaging with their child’s school. However, similar to the findings of Hanafin and Lynch (2002), all of the parents in this study emphasised the importance of education for their children and many parents were renegotiating their own negative experiences of education through their children’s positive experiences.

Conclusion

In general, Early Start was perceived by all the study participants as making a positive contribution to parent involvement in education and strengthening educational capital in the area. Early Start was identified as supporting families in a number of ways including the

development of positive relationships between home and school and the early detection of learning difficulties and language difficulties. Early Start made a contribution to social capital for parent in the study by facilitating the development of informal networks of parents which have provided continued supports for some parents as their child progressed through the education system. Participation in parent education classes had provided the parents with the opportunity to become more knowledgeable about the primary school system. Parents in this study were very satisfied with their experiences of Early Start and felt that it impacted positively on their on-going relationship with their child's primary school. The results are also similar to Ghate and Hazel's (2002) study which found that preschools offer parents an opportunity to increase their social support network.

There is evidence of continued parent involvement in their child's education in primary school but the impact of parent involvement at second level appears limited. Fallon (2003) discusses the assertion that current intervention programmes are not up to the challenge of real change and contends that 'dropping into' a child's life for a year is not the answer to the complex situation which many families experience' (Fallon, p6, 2003). Similarly Greaney and Kellaghan (1993) point out that a single intervention into a child's life is of limited value particularly if the child is living in an area with a high level of socio-economic disadvantage. However, the positive impact of Early Start in developing parents social support networks and increasing parents' social capital can be seen as a positive long-term outcome of participation in the programme. The impact of the increasing number of working parents in the area had led to difficulties for parents in accessing the current half-day sessions in Early Start and was widely perceived by the study participants as having a negative impact on parent involvement in the area. Their views concurred with the OECD (2004) in their recent review of Irish early childhood care and education policy and practice which recommend that Early Start should be extended with a number of changes including provision of full day sessions rather than the current half day sessions and in particular the expansion of the service in partnership with local community and voluntary agencies.

Contact details for author:

Shirley Martin, Dept. of Applied Social Studies, UCC. Email: s.martin@ucc.ie

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“How does gender work?” Fathers’ reflections on their understanding of gender

Maura Cunneen, Department of Education, UCC

Abstract

The role of fathers has been the subject of much research interest in recent years. In the Irish context, this role is being assessed due to rapid changes in society and family structures, in the past decade in particular. In this paper, the opinions of fathers with at least one child aged six or under were sought, in relation to their understanding of gender in the context of their own family lives. These reflections are interwoven with research findings garnered from studies conducted in the area of the paternal role in childrearing in Ireland and abroad.

Introduction

Do parents’ beliefs about gender influence their treatment of infant boys and girls? ... It is virtually automatic to present one’s child, like oneself, as male or female, signalling to the world what the newcomer’s gender role will be, and how she or he is to be treated. Thus is the dance of gender begun.

(Fagot, Rodgers and Leinbach, 2000, pp. 72-73)

Since time immemorial, parents have nurtured and instructed their young in the ways of the society into which they have been born. It was taken as a given that Mothers introduced their daughters to domestic duties, while Fathers emphasised the role of provider to their sons. However, times have changed, and such explicit role designation is no longer acceptable in many societies. In the case of Ireland, social, family and demographic change has been extremely swift, particularly since the early 1990s and the arrival of the Celtic Tiger economy. With greater wealth, the arrival of the internet and cheaper travel, the world *has* become a “global village”. Influences from other countries, and a more open society, have resulted in the questioning of many long held beliefs, no more so than in the role of parents, particularly fathers.

Over the last decade, the role of fathers has begun to be investigated in the light of the

changes which have occurred in this country and elsewhere. However, research findings alone do not always allow for the expression of fathers' personal experiences and reflections on their parenting role. This is particularly so in relation to the issue of gender, and fathers' perceptions of their children's acquisition of sex stereotypical attitudes and behaviours. In an attempt to ascertain fathers own attitudes and beliefs in relation to gender, and such influence as these may have on their childrearing practices, it was decided to seek the views of fathers with at least one child aged six or under. This investigation was conducted as part of research funded by the Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Education and Science and University College, Cork which also included observation of children aged three to five years in early years settings and a questionnaire survey of parents and educators of children aged six or under. Informal interviews were also conducted among parents, and the discussions with fathers are the basis of the present article.

Research methodology

In order to illuminate fathers' attitudes and behaviours in relation to gender, informal interviews were considered to be a suitable research methodology tool. Informal interviews provide an opportunity for the understanding of the meaning of fathers' behaviours and interactions. Goodwin and Goodwin (1996, p134) state that "Interviewing allows the researcher to gain insights into others' perspectives about the phenomena under study; it is particularly useful for ascertaining respondents' thoughts, perceptions, feelings and retrospective account of events". This point is also emphasised by Patton (1980, cited in Merriam, 1988, p72) who notes that "The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective".

Fetterman (1989) categorised four general types of interview – structured, semi-structured, informal and retrospective. Informal or unstructured interviews are similar to informal conversations and are open-ended. Informal, open-ended, interviews were included in this study. It was hoped that interviewing fathers with at least one child aged six or under would illuminate any aspirations, attitudes and expectations held by them in relation to gender. It must be said that it took quite some time to locate fathers willing to engage in this process, but eventually a group of thirty (subsequently twenty) fathers agreed to become involved. Discussions took place at times which suited their schedules.

Ethical Considerations

The fundamental issues concerning all types of research are access and acceptability/informed consent/anonymity and confidentiality/the right to privacy/the subsequent use of information. A guiding principle of all research is that of informed consent, wherein participants are given information concerning the proposed research and their participation is freely undertaken (Diener and Crandall, 1978). The participants have a right to anonymity, unless an agreement to the contrary has been reached. They should also understand the consequences of not remaining anonymous, in so far as such consequences are predictable. Such a situation highlights a conflict which may occur between two “rights”, *i.e.* the right to research and acquire knowledge and the right of individuals to privacy. These two rights require the researcher to ensure that, respectively, individuals cannot be identified in the completed study and that the sense of the information is conveyed whilst respecting the individuals’ right to privacy. Anonymity and confidentiality can be guaranteed by the deletion of identifying information, *e.g.* names and addresses, and by utilising crude report categories, *i.e.* the year of birth is given but not the specific date (Frankfort- Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992).

The informed consent of the fathers who participated in the informal interviews was obtained when information relating to the research study was given to them. Furthermore, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to them. Consequently, the fathers were willing to allow their own ages, the number and age of their children and general background information to be mentioned. Therefore, it can be stated that the fathers range in age from twenty-one to fifty- four years, live in various types of family structure and come from differing socio-economic groups. Their reflections on gender began with the quote at the head of this article, “How *does* gender work?” which was uttered by one of the fathers.

Analysis of findings

During informal interviews, fathers expressed an interest in discussing research relating to the paternal role in childrearing, particularly that of gender. Topics for discussion arose from a review of literature in that area. The fathers found the following topics of extreme interest and importance: parental involvement, parental treatment of girls and boys, attitudes to play, socialisation of girls and boys and the paternal role. They offered many opinions and insights on these topics which they discussed quite openly. For the purposes

of this article, they wished their comments to be recorded and any inferences drawn by the reader himself/herself. This being so, the following sections contain the fathers' reflections interwoven with research findings which are open to personal interpretation by the reader.

Parental involvement

In research conducted on parental involvement with their children, Lamb (1987) identified the following three main dimensions of this relationship:

Engagement – the amount of time spent interacting on a one-to-one basis with a child, *e.g.* reading a story, doing a jigsaw together

Accessibility – the parent, though occupied (*e.g.* while reading a newspaper), is available to respond to a child if necessary

Responsibility – amount of responsibility a parent has for the everyday care of the child, *e.g.* feeding and bathing

The results of Lamb's research indicate that, with regard to **engaging** with their children, fathers appear to spend about 20% of the time that mothers do so involved, fathers' **accessibility** to their children accounts for 30% of the time mothers are so available and fathers' **responsibility** for child care amounts to only 10%. According to Lamb (2004, p.11)

... there is consensus that father involvement is affected by multiple interacting systems operating at different levels over the life course, including psychological factors (*e.g.*, motivation, skills, self-confidence), the children's individual characteristics (*e.g.*, temperament, gender), social support (*e.g.*, relationships with partners and extended family members), community and cultural influences (*e.g.*, socio-economic opportunity, cultural ideologies) and institutional practices and public policies (*e.g.*, welfare support, child support enforcement). These reciprocally inter-acting levels can be viewed as a hierarchy of factors influencing paternal behaviour.

Longitudinal studies of fathering from the 1960s to the 1990s showed little or no change in the amount of fathers' participation in domestic tasks or child care (Lewis, 1993). However, in the Irish context, research undertaken by Kiely (1996), on mothers' accounts of paternal participation in child care, found that almost seventy per cent of the mothers stated

that their partners did participate to the level the mother chose (McKeown *et al*, 1998).

In the context of the abovementioned research, and in response to queries about the extent of their engagement, accessibility and responsibility for their children, the fathers in this study proffered the following opinions:

Engagement

I take the kids to the park, on the swings and so on, when I have time.
(Father [32] of two children aged three and six)

I take my boy to his matches, but mostly my wife takes the others to their music lessons. (Father [40] of three children aged six to twelve)

I don't read stories as good as their Mam. They prefer her to read to them.
(Father [37] of three children aged three to eleven)

We go for walks at the weekend. I like being on my own with the kids.
(Father [40] of three children aged four to eleven)

I'd like to spend more time with the kids. But I work shifts, so the time is never there. (Father [42] of five children aged two to sixteen).

Accessibility

I don't like it when they interrupt during the matches. The wife gets very annoyed if I don't answer the kids then. (Father [33] of three children aged three to seven years)

My girl always came to games with me. Now she doesn't anymore and she doesn't seem to want me around her. (Father [37] of three children aged three to eleven)

It's hard to know what to do with a girl when she's getting bigger. You can't do the things like going to the park, feeding the ducks and so on. Now she only wants her friends. (Father [40] of three children aged four to eleven)

My boys and I do things all the time. They know I'm there anytime they want. (Father [38] of three children aged four to ten)

My boy only has to look at me and I'm there. I spend all my free time with him. (Father [21] of child aged almost three).

Responsibility

I don't like the night feeds, I have to get up for work in the morning. I take her for walks at the weekend. (Father [26] of child aged five months)

We have twins, I take one and she takes the other. We couldn't survive otherwise. During the day, she's on her own, unless the Grannies call. (Father [30] of twins aged sixteen months)

I hated changing nappies! I'm delighted mine are past that stage. They're a lot easier to mind when they're older. * (Father [33] of three children aged three to seven years)

I don't like it when they're sick, I can't hack it. I panic, I suppose. She's better at all that Comes natural, I suppose. I go to the chemist and collect the prescriptions though. (Father [38] of three children aged three to ten)

It's great when they're older and can tell you what's wrong. The wife just looks at them and knows what's up, I don't know how she does that. (Father [42] of five children aged two to sixteen).

* [Note: There was unanimous agreement among all the fathers on this point.]

Parental treatment of girls and boys

Studies have also shown that there are differences in parental treatment of boys and girls (Power, 2000; Leaper, 2002). Parents (fathers in particular) play rough-and-tumble games and physically stimulate their sons more so than their daughters (Jacklin, DiPietro and Maccoby, 1984; Shields and Sparing, 1993).

With regard to the above, some of the fathers' responses were as follows:

Boys are great, you can do all sorts of things with them, go to matches and so on. With girls, it's different. They do things with their mother, especially as they get bigger. (Father [40] of three children four to eleven)

My girl and me were always a team, right from when she was born. Now she's nine and only wants her Mam and I'm outside. I miss all that. (Father [37] of three children aged three to eleven)

My daughter is only a baby so I don't do much with her. But when she's bigger, I'll try to get her into sport, but my wife will take her to dance classes. (Father [26] of child aged five months)

My second son was always a worry to me. He preferred to be with his mother, and was into music and art. As he grew older, I pushed him into sports which he hated. But I wanted a boy boy, like myself. I couldn't make him out at all. As he grew up, we had nothing in common. Now he's a father, and I regret the past, because we have no relationship and I don't know where to begin to fix things. (Father [54] of five children aged six to thirty two)

I feel that girls are after becoming very independent and although this is a good thing, they may have a bit too much. I feel it is very important that boys become involved in sport at a young age. (Father [37] of two children aged four and seven).

Attitudes to play

In 1991, Lytton and Romney conducted a meta-analysis of 172 studies into aspects of parental behaviour, including attitudes towards play. It was found that parents did encourage gender stereotypical play in their children, namely doll play for girls and truck play for boys.

Furthermore, other reviews have noted that fathers, more so than mothers, strongly encourage such play (Siegal, 1987; Russell and Saebel, 1997; Ruble and Martin, 1998). In research conducted by Raag and Rackliff (1998), it was found that many preschool

boys reported that playing with girls' toys was considered bad by their fathers. Subsequently, these boys engaged in more masculine play. Other studies have found that the gender appropriateness of their children's play is a cause of greater concern to fathers than to mothers. (Jacklin, DiPietro and Maccoby, 1984; Bradley and Gobbart, 1989).

Fathers' responses:

I only have girls, so it doesn't bother me what they play with, or who they play with. (Father [40] of two children aged four and eight)

I don't like seeing my boy in girls' dresses. He does that in the playschool with the girls, and I'm very worried about it. I don't want him becoming a sissy or worse when he grows up. Father [21] of child aged almost three)

My girl is a lot tougher than my boys. She'll try almost anything, climb trees, play football, dig up the garden. My boys are not as tough, they scare more easily than her. They might change as they grow up; I hope so for their sakes. (Father [38] of three children aged four to ten)

I have five children, four boys and a girl. I always wanted my boys to be tough and strong, not bullies. But my second son was never like I wanted him to be. He played with his sister and loved her toys. I couldn't make him out, he hated sports, never came to matches with me, though my daughter did. He preferred girls things like music, art, cooking. If I was honest, I was terrified that he was gay. My pushing him to be what he wasn't, ruined our relationship. Now he's 30, married with a child and I realise my wife was right all along. She said to leave him alone, that he'd be what he'd be. Too late I've realised my mistakes. But I've learned, I won't make the same mistakes with my youngest son. Maybe in the future, I might find a way back into my second son's life. (Father [54] of five children aged six to thirty two)

I do worry that my son plays with girls so much, he says they're great fun and he likes their toys. I don't know where he got those ideas from, but I hope they change before he's very much older. (Father [28] of child aged four)

It has been noted by Lippa (2005, p.163) that

In short, parents engage in gender policing when their children engage in cross-sex activities. Fathers tend to police more than mothers, and everyone polices boys more than girls.

Socialisation of girls and boys

Parental socialisation may produce varying outcomes for girls and boys, because children may react differently to similar parental practices. Research conducted by Pomerantz, Ng and Wang (2004) has found that while a girl who is misbehaving may respond to a parental frown, such a look may have no effect on her brother.

Fathers' responses:

My daughter is very easy to get around, to do what you want her to do. My son is very different, he'll argue until you're almost worn out! (Father [37] of two children aged four and seven)

My wife can get my boy to do what she wants, but not me. It's as though I'm invisible. Sometimes I feel he doesn't listen to me at all. (Father [28] of child aged four)

Of my five children, my daughter would be the only one who would question why she was being asked to do something. She would keep on and on about why she was being told (her word) to do what her brothers did without question. I don't understand it to this day. Boys are definitely easier to reason with. (Father [54] of five children aged six to thirty two)

Girls initially need a lot more TLC. They also tend to be much quicker in learning and mastering language and it becomes a lot easier to guide them through communication. They listen and pay attention. Boys need a lot of care and rely on their Mum for this, they tend to solve problems physically, it is important for younger boys to mix with girls and learn the gentle side of life. (Father [46] of three children aged three to nine)

You could talk to my daughter til the cows come home and she will still ask Why? Why do I have to go to bed now I'm not tired? Why can't I stay out playing, it's not dark? By this time her brothers are in bed and fast asleep! I do admire her spunk and tenacity, but I don't give in, at least not all the time, though my wife would disagree. (Father [38] of three children aged four to ten).

The paternal role

With regard to the effect of father involvement in child rearing, Flouri and Buchanan (2003) have studied the longitudinal data provided by the National Child Development Study in the U.K. This study has found that a strong father figure improves children's mental health in later years, reduces the likelihood of antisocial behaviour (particularly for boys); increases the possibility of children gaining A levels or higher qualifications and having satisfactory partnerships in later life. The four key criteria used for analysing father involvement were as follows:

- Reading to the child
- Going on outings with the child
- Having an interest in the child's education
- Taking an equal role in the care of the child

However, it is important to note that, according to this research, it is the continued presence of a father figure which is significant and that the family structure, whether or not he is the biological father, did not matter.

The absence of a father from a child's life is likely to have a major impact. According to Wallerstein and Kelly (1996), there is some evidence to show that I.Q. scores are lower and achievement at school is poorer. Research has also shown that the quality of fathers' social and physical play correlates significantly with the cognitive development of boys, whereas female cognitive development is enhanced by fathers' verbal interactions. Also, further research posits that father absence is particularly difficult for boys and may result in psychiatric problems, lack of self control and violent behaviour. (Levy-Shiff, 1982; Davidson, 1990).

Conclusion

The fathers who shared some of their insights into gender were concerned about all aspects of the paternal role, and some felt very vulnerable, particularly those in non-marital families. It has been noted by Clements *et al*, (2002) that mothers' relationships with their children develop whether or not the father is present, while the father/child relationship primarily develops when mothers are present.

Some wondered if the day would soon dawn when fathers, as a "species", would be "redundant". This caused them great concern, for as one father put it, "I'm only now beginning to understand how much more a father can be in a child's life". Many fathers reminisced about their own childhoods, and how different they had been. The older fathers commented that the only role they had been prepared for was that of breadwinner. Many confessed that they were ill prepared for the emotional demands of parenthood, unlike their wives and partners whom they assumed "took it in their stride". According to Cowan *et al* (1993), for fathers, parenthood may be less well defined and a smaller part of their identity than it is for mothers.

Finally, many of the fathers who took part in this research felt they were inadequately prepared for fatherhood which was a great source of worry to them. One of the most important implications for practice for those involved in the early years, is the provision of more information to fathers about the crucial role they play in their children's development.

With regard to gender, the concerns of the younger fathers related to their children's acquisition and development of "correct" gender roles and behaviour. This was in stark contrast to some of the older fathers who had come to realise that children "will be what they will be". Whilst discussing gender issues and their role in child rearing, the fathers realised the extent of their influence on their children's acquisition of gender specific identities and behaviours and on their own, often unconscious, gender biases. The closing quote is one which the fathers considered gave "some kind of answer" to the question "How *does* gender work?" from a paternal point of view.

One of the areas thought to be very important in relation to fathers is that of sex-role development. First, fathers appear to prefer boys, and from birth

onwards actually treat boys and girls differently. They encourage boys to be more “masculine”, and consistently pay more attention and give more stimulation to boys than to their daughters (although they cuddle their daughters more than their sons). They also appear to discriminate more than mothers in the treatment of male and female children, and seem to have somewhat rigid views about what constitutes appropriate sex-role behaviour, which they communicate to boys by providing masculine role models. (Taylor & Woods, 2005, p. 89)

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Children's experience of shared parenting

Claire Nolan, Waterford Institute of Technology

Abstract

This paper presents child-centred findings from the author's research on children's experiences of living in shared parenting arrangements post parental separation. Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child endorses a child's right to maintain contact with both parents if separated from one or both, (UNCRC, 1989) as yet Ireland has not created a social container that adequately holds and supports families in such situations. This paper presents a child-centred view of parenting post-separation, where children themselves report wanting to be involved in decisions, wanting time split fairly between parents, wanting parents to communicate in a positive manner with each other.

Introduction

The research masters study on which this paper is based explored how parents and children move from being one family unit to living life as two separate family units while sharing the care of their children. This project also generated original data, reflecting professionals' attitudes to parenting arrangements post-separation. The following outlines the main research questions, aims and objectives, the methodological approach and sample profile of participants in this research study. This paper specifically focuses on and shares the children's stories of family life post parental separation. All names have been changed to respect and protect the identity of all of the participants in this study.

Main Research Question(s):

1. What is the experience of a child living in a shared parenting / joint custody arrangement post separation?
2. How are some couples supported / encouraged to remain joint parents to their children post separation / divorce?

Objectives:

The objectives of the study were:

- To explore professionals' attitudes to the possibility of shared parenting / joint custody arrangements in post-nuclear Irish families.
- To examine with separating / separated parents the developmental life path that led them to maintain the parenting of their children post-separation.
- To expose the types of professional or lay supports that facilitated the successful implementation of such parenting arrangements.
- To listen to the voices of the children in order to offer an analysis as to the appropriateness of such parenting arrangements.

Sample Profile:

In total twenty five qualitative interviews were carried out with 6 professionals, 8 mothers, 6 fathers, and 5 children. The five children interviewed (3 boys, 2 girls) were aged between 7 and 16 years of age. They were all attending school and lived in the main with their mother and spent various amounts of time with their fathers including overnights at mid week, weekends, holidays and special occasions.

Methodology:

The research study adopted a qualitative methodology which drew on the experiences of a strategically designed sample. It was necessary to use in-depth and semi-structured interviews as the data collection tool to maximise the collection of quality data on the topic of 'shared parenting'. As outlined by Morrow and Richards (1996) ethical issues were considered at all stages of the research, "they are not simply a preliminary stage or hurdle to be got out of the way at the beginning" (Morrow and Richards, in Greene and Hogan, 2005, p. 65). In this study, parents, children and professionals were informed that they could agree or refuse to take part in the research study; they could decide to 'opt out' at any stage, and talk only of issues of which they felt comfortable with (Greene and Hogan, 2005). Although adult participation in the interview context is guided by ethical considerations, it was especially necessary to empower children "to choose to become active participants in the research process", maximising opportunities for them to put forward their views "and re-negotiating power relations between researcher and child" (Davis, 1998, p. 329). When issues of consent, choice, confidentiality and anonymity had been addressed the interviews proceeded (Hogan and O'Reilly, 2007, Green, and Hill, 2005).

Researching Children's Subjective Experiences:

A central aim of this study was to explore with children themselves their experiences of their parents' separation and consequent shared parenting arrangements. Research literature governing the inclusion of children in non-medical research has received very little attention until recently (Davis, 1998, Greene and Hogan, 2005). Given the nature of this study sound ethical and methodological issues were always of paramount concern during all phases of this project and never more so than where the children themselves were being interviewed. All children in this study were accessed through a rather cumbersome and time consuming process. In the first instance professionals were approached for introductions to parents who were using or had previously used their services. Then, having gained access and trust, these parents were in turn asked for their permission to meet and interview their children. However, even at this stage children themselves were also asked to give informed consent to being interviewed and having their interview tape recorded and transcribed. When obtaining informed consent "special care must be taken to ensure that all children participating have been asked and they understand the implications of the research" (Greene and Hogan, 2005, p. 78).

Alderson (1995) also highlights that a child's agreement to be involved in research must be open to review at all stages of the process and argues that informed consent is central to ethical research with children. The children in this study were given the opportunity "to make informed decisions" and provided with "all the relevant information" about this project before interviewing began (Alderson, 1995, cited in Lewis, and Lindsay, 2000, p. 155). Throughout these interviews a form of 'process consent', was practised, whereby the children were reminded (and mothers and fathers too) of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. While acknowledging that there are long standing debates and discussions about children's rights in decision making processes (Lewis, and Lindsay, 2000), it is suggested in the literature that, "the safest course, though it can also be repressive is to ask parental consent and also ask for children's" (Alderson, 1995, p.22). Thus involving children in this research project provided them with an opportunity to explore their understanding of living in a shared parenting arrangement post parental separation.

Children's grounded definitions of shared parenting

The children's narrative and discussions in the interviews regarding their experience of parent-child contact after separation defined 'shared parenting' in this study. The

parenting arrangements did not fit into any one specific definition of ‘shared parenting’. Rather all of the children gave their own description of how they experienced ‘shared parenting’ post parental separation. These individual narratives highlighted that the quality of the relationship between the parent and the child rather than allocated time spent together was an important factor in sustaining and defining the ‘shared parenting’ arrangement. Studies in the US by Amato and Gilbreth (1999) and in the UK by Pryor, and Rodgers, (2001) have also supported the fact that it is the quality of the relationships between parents, parents and children which is of critical influence on a child’s well being. Studies of parent-child contact arrangements in Australia have also concluded that a close relationship with both parents post separation is of benefit to the child (Bauserman 2002). The important factor for parents and children in this research study was that they wanted to continue the development of a positive relationship between each other. Thus, the following Table 1 outlines the varying parent-child contact arrangements found in this research study.

Table 1.

Types of parent-child contact arrangements:	
Stephen, (7 yrs): Time with father: Time with mother:	1 yr when parents separated – father always involved Every Sunday and Bank Holidays Monday to Saturday.
Noel, (9 yrs): Time with mother: Time with father:	6 yrs when parents separated – father always involved Monday to Wednesday morning. Each Wednesday- 2.30 and sleeps overnight. Every 2nd weekend Friday 2.30 to Sunday 6.00 Every other weekend: Saturday 9.30 to 4.30
Susan, (13 yrs): Time with father: Time with mother:	5 mths when parents separated - father always involved Every Friday until Sunday also during the week and holiday time Monday to Friday.
Chris, (16 yrs): Currently: Time with mother: Time with father:	6 yrs when parents separated – father always involved Monday, Wednesday, Saturday to Sunday. Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. This arrangement alternates each week.

Sharon, (16 yrs):	6 yrs when parents separated – father always involved
Currently:	
Time with father:	Lives with her dad - No consistent contact from mum in 2 yrs – arguments/tension. Brother (13) lives with the mother and irregular visits to his father for some sleepovers.
Previously:	
Time with father:	Every Wednesday overnight and every weekend Fri/Sat/Sun

The complexities of the arrangements in which the children lived their day to day lives is highlighted in Table 1 and outlines that no two children in this study experienced the same type of ‘shared parenting’ arrangement. The only factor which was common to all five children was that in all five arrangements they lived most of their time with their mother. While for Chris, (16) Susan (13) and Stephen (7) it was their father’s work schedule which influenced the structure of the parent-child contact. And subsequently, post-separation, for Chris, (16) and Susan (13) the frequency of contact between the child and the father increased.

Interviews with all five children revealed considerable insight about their lives post-separation and their lived experience of shared parenting. For Chris, (16) ‘shared parenting’ meant that he was able to spend equal time with both of his parents and that he had a ‘fair’ amount of time with both of them. As outlined in Table 1 above he was the only child in this research study to have such an arrangement. However, this is not to say that other children were not ‘shared’ by their parents post separation.

Although Noel (9) had previously spent his time with his mother one week and his father the next, he currently lives his life in a shared parenting arrangement in a rather different way as outlined in Table 1. For Noel (9) he believed that it would be better if he saw his father one week and his mother the following week but did accept the current arrangement as his parents ‘sharing’ the care of him. However, he suggested that he would like a more ‘equal’ amount of time with both of his parents. For Noel (9) what was important to him was that he got to play his football matches with his father.

Table 1 also outlines the parenting arrangement in which Stephen (7) experiences his

family life. Although he only saw his father at the week-ends and on Bank Holidays he 'looked forward' to spending this time with his father. Stephen also outlined that he would like to see more of his father but enjoyed the time that they spent together. The time they spent together for Stephen and his father was spent cycling together, making 'a tree house' or going to the movies.

Susan (13) outlined that living her life in a shared parenting arrangement meant that she spent her week days with her mother and the weekends/holiday times with her father of which she felt 'lucky' that both of her parents were involved in her life. Her time with her father consisted of going shopping with him, cooking and spending time watching television or 'just chatting'. Although she spent most of her time with her mother, she looked forward to spending time with her father and she also looked forward to returning home to her mother.

In contrast although Sharon (16) lived her early years in a shared parenting arrangement as outlined in Table 1. Her past experience of having both parents involved in her life post separation was overshadowed by the fact that her parents did not get on. Due to the fact that her parents argued, Sharon's experience of time with her father was very difficult. Subsequently, Sharon became increasingly upset when leaving her father, while always arguing with her mother and finally moving on from the shared parenting arrangement to live with her father on a continuous basis within the last two years.

The children outlined a number of key issues which they believed to be important factors in sustaining a 'shared parenting' arrangement which include:

- Fair/equal time with both parents
- No arguments between parents
- To be involved in discussions
- Flexible arrangements

For each of the five children they believed that having 'fair' or 'equal' time with both parents where possible was their main concern. The children also suggested that the arrangements work better if the parents have a relationship that is based on positive communication and mutual respect for each other, as well as towards the children. For

the older children, Chris (16), Sharon (16) Susan (13) and Noel (9) they had varying views on being involved in decisions which affected them. Overall they did not think it was appropriate to ask children who they wanted to live with. However, they wanted to be involved in the discussions about when they would be going to see the other parent. While Stephen's (7) parents arranged and organised the time with his father between them they also provided Stephen with opportunities to make decisions about where to go or what to do. Finally, flexibility of arrangements was also highlighted by the children in relation to being able to bring toys, clothes or personal items from one house to the other. The older children also wanted flexibility in terms of organising their time with the other parent around their hobbies, or social life.

The children's narratives outlined a variety of experiences they encountered as they lived their lives in post-separation parent-child contact arrangements. For Stephen (7), Noel (9), Susan (13) and Chris (16) it was a positive experience moving between the two houses. However, in contrast for Sharon (16) her experience of moving between two houses was overshadowed by her mother's negative attitude towards Sharon spending time with her father. Overall the young children in this study, (Stephen 7, Noel 9 and Susan 13) enjoyed the time spent with their father but Stephen and Noel would like more contact with their father. For Chris (16) his contact with his parents is now influenced by his involvement in social activities or hobbies and therefore he feels that his parent's work around his schedule now. While for Sharon (16) she currently lives with her father and does not have any contact from her mother.

Children's narratives of shared parenting post separation

In this study an opportunity was given to each of child to share their most intimate feelings about their family life. Their understanding and experience of living life in a parent-child contact arrangement post separation was explored in depth in each interview. For Stephen, (7) his understanding of the shared parenting arrangement was experienced by being 'happy' before his dad arrived to being 'sad' when he left. His ability to connect with his dad, even though he sees him only once or maybe twice a week, is recognition of the quality of the relationship between father and son. For Noel, (9) according to his dad he had been through a tough time while he was moving between the houses due to his mother's interrogation of him, but was now a happy confident boy. Home for Noel was in his dad's because he had friends there, could play football or go cycling with his dad. While the recurring thought for

both of them was that their time with each parent should be divided more 'fairly', the children looked forward to and enjoyed the time they had with their fathers.

For the older children, Susan (13), Chris (16) and Sharon (16) their ideas of life after their parent's separation and living in a shared parenting arrangement were explored in a very honest and open way. They shared their stories of how it worked or did not work for them. They discussed what they felt about their living arrangements and what they thought of the future. For Susan (13) she was happy that she had time with her father. Susan's friends were in a similar situation to her and she could talk openly with them. She outlined that by being allowed to talk with her mother and father about what she does when away from either of them has helped her adjust to her living arrangement. Susan also outlined that she was happy with the time she spent with her mother and father. Like Chris (16) and Sharon (16) she stated that it is really important that the parents do not involve the child in their arguments and that parent's should allow children be involved in decisions that affect them.

Chris (16) discussed the story of his life acknowledging that it took time to adjust to living in two houses, because "you are always coming and going." Chris talked of the importance of having a 'fair' amount of time with each parent. He has a good relationship with both of his parents, was happy that they get on well and thinks this is down to the fact that they talk together and that they are both in another relationship. He believed that it is necessary for parent's to listen to the child. He also stated that it is important that the child is included in discussions about what is happening to their family, but cautioned that parents should not expect a child to choose between parents. Chris also suggested that parents should not argue when the children are around as this can make the child 'worry'. Chris believed that in relationships the most important thing is that you understand each other.

For Sharon (16), her living arrangements post separation were organised by her parents going to court to arrange access (time with her father). Her initial memories of her parents' separation was that her mother told her and Sharon acknowledged that it took a while to realise what this meant. According to Sharon her mother did not support or encourage her to spend time with her father. Sharon moved in with her father two years ago after numerous ongoing arguments with her mother.. It was interesting that both

Sharon and Chris commented that they did not see themselves married in the future because they did not want to make the same mistakes as their parents. This finding is also echoed in studies by Cherlin (1998) where it is highlighted that after the experience of separation of one's parents, children are more aware of the fact that their own marriage could end in this way.

For the older children, Sharon (16), Chris (16) and Susan (13), although they had experiences of their parents arguing during the separation they outlined that it was important to them that their parents communicated in a positive way. They were against parents passing messages or 'using' the children as a means of communicating between each other. All but one of the children, had made friends with or confided with children whose parents were also separated. Overall the impact for the child of living life in a parent-child contact arrangement post separation depends on the relationship between the parents and the relationship between the child and the parent. It has to be a flexible arrangement in order to cater for changes which may occur over time as the child grows.

In this study, moving between houses for the children was made easier if the other parent lived near them, and if the children could bring their clothes, toys or games with them from one house to the other. Initially it was difficult for the children to adjust to bringing everything with them from one house to the next but over time three of the five children succeeded in creating 'their space' in each house.

In contrast, Sharon's (16) experience of moving between two houses was very upsetting for her. It was a time of sadness, anger and isolation for her. According to Sharon the process of moving between two houses was made very difficult as her mother did not allow her and her brother to talk about their father, listed what they brought them and interrogated them if they had forgotten anything when they returned. These findings are similar to Ricci (1997), who outlined that positive communication between parents and parents and children is essential and close proximity to the other parent is also an advantage when organising parenting arrangements post separation. Seltzer (1991) also highlighted that having clothes in both houses and flexibility around bringing things from one house to another are the stepping stones to making shared parenting work. Thus, the children's stories highlight the pain and sadness which they have had to cope with after their parent's separation while moving on to live their lives in two separate

houses. Hogan *et al*, (2002) acknowledging this struggle states that the reality of parenting after separation is that the transitions are complex and difficult.

The stories told by these children, are of happy times once they re-connect with the non-resident parent and develop new and trusting relationships with them. Once the children adjust to the routine of seeing the other parent on a regular basis and build up a second home for some of them, with things that belong to them, they seem to have accepted moving from one house to another as part of their life. The children's social lives or friendships are affected by moving between two houses. For Chris (16) he had the same set of friends as did Sharon (16). For Noel (9) and Susan (13) they had friends in both places, and they are happy with the amount of time they spend with friends and family.

The children's contact with other relatives varied. For Stephen (7) he spent time mainly with his dad and did not have frequent contact with his grandparents or cousins in his dad's family. However he did live with his great grandmother and had regular contact with his grandparents and cousins in his mother's family. Noel (9) spent time with both of his parents and had regular contact with grandparents and other relatives in both his mothers and dads family. For Susan (13) she had not yet met any relatives from her father's family apart from his aunt, and her half-brother. Sharon's (16) experience of contact with other relatives after her parent's separation was different. When her mother and father separated she lost contact with most of her mother's family. At the time of interview Sharon had not seen her grandmother for two years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these five children's stories of parental separation and parent-child parenting arrangements show that initially parent child contact is organised around work schedule with the children remaining with the mother and the father visiting. This was similar to Fawcett (1998) in Northern Ireland, who found that 89% of children interviewed in relation to their parents' separation were found to live with their mother with the non-resident parent either visiting or taking the child as per the parenting arrangement.

The children's narratives highlighted that as the child gets older, the parent-child contact is influenced by extra curricular activities and the time the child wants to be with friends.

However, children's acceptance of their parent's separation and adjustment to living in two homes was highlighted as dependant on parent's ability to communicate in a positive manner. This suggests that relations between parents and between parents and children should involve listening to and involving the child in decisions affecting them. Although the children outlined that the routine of going to their father one day and mother's the next is 'tough,' they have adjusted to their new family form. The children spoke clearly of appreciating when their parents were able to consider them during the separation and decisions to share parenting. The children in this study asked that parents would refrain from arguing in front of them and they specifically wanted a fair, though not necessarily equal, amount of time with each parent.

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Working directly and indirectly to enable each child's individual developmental needs to be met and their potentials realised.

Edel Daly

Abstract

Emerging from a children's rights perspective, this paper advocates that when we work with children, we can positively impact on a child's life experience in three key ways: indirectly in the support we give to their carers, by our direct contact with the child, and where the child is receiving inadequate care and protection or is being abused, by liaising with the appropriate agency to advocate on a child's behalf. To do this, we need to be consistently aware of each child as an individual and to remember that when each child's fundamental need to be valued and accepted is met, the child is free to grow and develop in ways that are limitless and wondrous.

Key words: Child, individual, Baby, Developmental needs and potentials, rights, mothers, fathers, family support.

Introduction

This paper advocates that when we come in contact with children in our work, we can make a difference to them in three key ways. Firstly, and most significantly for the child, we can positively impact on the relationship and care they receive from their "primary carers". We do this by promoting good connections and relationships between the children we work with and their caregivers (Weatherston, 2001). Where the bond or attachment is tenuous, we can through showing our appreciation and positive regard for the child, help the adult carer to 'see' and appreciate each individual child, "focusing the parent's attention to observations of the child in the here-and-now" (Bakermans-Kranenburg *et al*, 2005 p. 210; Weatherston, 2001). Secondly, we can bring positive changes for children through our direct contact with each child (Davies, 2004). And thirdly, where we become aware that the child's needs are not being met adequately, or that a child is being subjected to abuse, we can liaise with the appropriate agency to advocate on their behalf.

The paper challenges us all to stop and consider how significant we may be to many

children and to examine our work; to ask ourselves how are we working to value each child directly, and where necessary, how do we help each child's carers to see and value and love each child. Tall order it may be and undoubtedly, we will have days where we don't always manage it but there is, I believe, within the striving toward it, value and benefits for the children we meet and for their carers. I write this paper from the perspective of a social worker who works with children and families, as a mother and as a grown up version of a child. The latter sounds strange, looks strange written down, and yet that is what I am. I remember being a child. I was the youngest child of 6 and I was lucky to have been loved, nurtured and valued for myself. From my experiences of childhood and family life, I emerged with a profound sense of justice and a strong belief in the value and gift of each individual. As you begin to read this paper, perhaps it might be useful to recall your individual experience of childhood and to support yourself in that remembering. Many sources (Bettelheim, 1987; Oaklander, 1988) suggest that in our work with children it is helpful to recall our own experience of being a child. That remembering will be different for all of us and will bring with it different feelings as well as various beliefs and biases about children, parenting and childhood itself. We need to make use of reflective supervision to regularly examine how our own childhood experience can consciously and unconsciously affect our work. This paper advocates on behalf of the child, hoping to encourage us all to examine our work with children to see if we can do more to promote positive life experiences for the children we meet

Children's rights

In Irish legislation, a child is defined as 'a person under the age of 18 years other than a person who is or has been married' (The Child Care Act, 1991 (s.2 (1)). Latest census statistics reveal there are now 1,154,706 citizens under 19 in Ireland (C.S.O. 2006). Children are a vulnerable, though sizeable group in Irish society, accounting for quarter of the 4,239,848 total Irish population (C.S.O. 2006) yet, "possessing few political or legal powers" (Martin, 2000 p.75). Both Martin (2000) and Thompson (1997) advocate that children's dependence does not justify treating them as less than full citizens. Thompson maintains that children have the right to their childhood and at the same time, the right to be treated as full citizens, respected and treated as people in their own right (Thompson, 1997 p.60). Williams (2004 p.10) further advocates that children have the right to have their needs understood and met "because it is important to them in the present, not because of the benefit that will have for society in the future".

Though traditionally “a relatively powerless group ... subject to a kind of ageism that results in their being treated as less than full citizens” (Thompson, 1997 p.64) in recent years in Ireland, as elsewhere, there has been a major policy shift towards acknowledging children’s rights. Article 3 of the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified in Ireland on the 2nd of September, 1990 states: “In all actions concerning children, the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration”.

The National Children’s Strategy (2000). Section 4.1 states as a National goal (2000 p.38) that:

Children’s lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services. Gaps in services will be more easily identified and resources targeted at those with the greatest need.

This represents for the first time a state commitment to find out more about children’s needs, to develop policy and provide resources to meet these specific needs. Rights without resources are not much good, and so on children’s behalf, we can agitate within our own areas of work to ensure that the goals of the National Children’s Strategy become a reality and that the necessary changes are made to the Irish Constitution to safeguard children’s rights.

Children and their needs

Children’s needs are the same universal human needs as adults: food, shelter, warmth and security, but they also have specific needs. These include “love, new experiences, praise, recognition and responsibility” (Kellmer Pringle, 1986 p. 34) and the need to be treated as an individual (Richardson, 1999). This paper advocates that each child has a fundamental need to be ‘seen’, what Howe (2001, 2005) refers to as the child’s need to be accepted and approved of for themselves. This involves the acknowledgement that as well as differences existing “in the physical field... there are (also) marked individual differences in the extent and pace of children’s intellectual, educational, emotional and social development” (Kellmer- Pringle, 1986 p. 25) and of course differences in each child’s hopes and dreams. The Task Force on Child Care Services (1980 p. 34) states: “children are special in two respects. Firstly, they are persons in the process of formation;

secondly they are not independent”. These two special qualities mean that policies and practices in relation to children need to safeguard the rights and needs of these dependent children in their formative years.

Early care-giving and receiving

In early childhood, babies are completely dependent on adults for their survival and for how their basic needs are met. They are however actively involved in seeking to prompt their carers into meeting their basic needs (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Weatherston, 2001). The baby cries, the adult responds in various ways; the baby cries again, the adult responds and through this circular dance, mainly with their parents or primary carers, children survive and also learn a great deal (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Weatherston, 2001). Through the process of the baby expressing basic needs for food, warmth, love and security and the responses the baby receives from his/her carers, the parent/baby relationships and attachments develop, and the baby “develop(s) mental representations, or internal working models, of the self, other people, and how relationships seem to work” (Howe, 2005 p. xv; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Weatherston, 2001). Our ability to support children directly and indirectly depends on our role with them and their family, the context we meet the child in, the relationship we have with the child and their age. In early childhood work, the fundamental purpose is to foster with the child’s parents the development of warm, responsive, consistent parenting that is attuned to the infant’s basic needs (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Weatherston, 2001].

Supporting the child through our interventions with the carers

The early weeks and months of caring for a young baby can be difficult for everyone. First time parents can be overwhelmed and lacking in confidence in their own caring abilities. Those of us who come into contact with babies and their carers in these crucial early months can be influential in the care afforded to the baby which in turn impacts on the baby’s developing understanding of the world (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Fraiberg, 1980; Weatherston, 2000). Maternity unit nurses, public health nurses, crèche workers, psychologists, G.P.s, child care workers, family support workers and social workers are best placed to keep a watching brief on the development of those crucial early attachments and relationships. They can foster healthy bonding and can see when carers may be experiencing difficulty in their care-giving and support appropriately (Bowlby, 1969; Erickson *et al*, 1992).

Public health nurses “have a unique knowledge and understanding of the developmental milestones which a child would be expected to reach” (Fowler, 2003p.14) and are uniquely placed within their early visiting role to observe and tutor the early care-giving. They can work preventatively by fostering sensitive connections between the adult and child in the early formative days and months helping to avoid difficulties later in the child’s life (Fraiberg, 1980; Erickson *et al*, 1992; Weatherston, 2000, 2001). Iwaniec (2000, p.221), who has written extensively on children who have experienced poor bonding or attachment and those who display evidence of failure to thrive, speaks of the “importance of early intervention to prevent the escalation of negative parent and child interaction and relationship and to prevent poor growth and development”.

Parents who have had difficult childhood experiences themselves may need extra help and support to manage to build strong, attuned bonds with their young children (Weatherston, 2000, 2001) and it is important that those carers who need assistance are identified as early as possible (Iwaniec, 2000). Selma Fraiberg and her colleagues assert that “in every nursery there are ghosts...uninvited guests... from the unremembered past of the parents” (Fraiberg *et al*, 1975 p.164). Infant mental health specialists such as Fraiberg contend that how these “ghosts” are dealt with by the parent will affect the quality of care afforded to the child. Fraiberg’s belief is that where adults remember the pain of their difficult childhood, they can be of themselves determined to do their parenting differently than their parents. On the other hand, those who have repressed their painful memories may need clinical intervention and psychotherapeutic intervention to enable them remember the pain of their own childhood experience in order to be “saved from the blind repetition of that morbid past” (*ibid*, 1975 195).

In recent times, the development of professional practice in what is known as “infant mental health” (Fraiberg, 1980; Erickson *et al*, 1992; Weatherston, 2000, 2001) is bringing these significant early days and months into sharper focus. “Infant Mental Health is a field dedicated to understanding and treating children from birth to three years of age within the context of family, care-giving and community relationships” with the purpose of reducing “serious developmental failure and relationship disturbance” (Weatherston, 2000 p. 3/10). Infant mental health “strategies include emotional support, concrete service support, developmental guidance, advocacy and infant-parent psychotherapy” (*ibid*, 2001 p.50). Within professionals working with children and

families, there is more and more awareness that “successful therapeutic intervention can change a parent’s maladaptive working model, with the results seen in improved parent-child relationships” (Erickson *et al*, 1992 p. 499). This author believes in due course, over the next decade, these infant mental health concepts will move from the professional arena into everyday parlance. Being fundamentally baby/child-centred, the advance of the concepts of this important information about early childhood will greatly enhance our understanding of what constitutes a healthy childhood experience. In the short term, this will benefit babies and their carers and in the longer term, will benefit these children as they grow into adults and parents themselves.

Indirectly supporting the child: Family Support

“It takes a village to raise a child” (anonymous)

Bettelheim (1987 p. 332) says “no social organism requires more cohesion than the family if it is to ensure the well-being of all its members”. This author believes that we all have a part to play in supporting families because support to the parents and the family in general improves the parenting to the children (Yoshikawa, 1994 cited by Gilligan, 1995 p.68; Bettelheim, 1987). Many sources (Bettelheim; 1987; Gilligan, 1995; Howe, 1999; Dominelli, 2004) concur that supported parents and families are more able to consistently and sensitively carry out their child rearing function with each child’s best interests at heart. Helping to improve the psychological security of the care-giver also helps to increase the felt security of the child, particularly the young child (Brandon *et al*, 1999 p.284).

Family support can happen in three key areas “home, school and neighbourhood” (Gilligan, 1995 p.75). Whatever the type or the source, the purpose of family support is to seek “to strengthen” and “stress proof” the functioning of family members in relation to childrearing” with activities that “seek to enhance the morale, supports and coping skills of all, but especially vulnerable children and parents” (Gilligan, 1995 p.61). Locally based early childhood care services, preschool facilities as well as community playgroups, parenting and support groups with crèche facilities, summer projects, after school clubs all constitute invaluable family support, as does the invaluable Home School Liaison service within our primary and post-primary schools. The advantages for the child are numerous. Howe *et al* (1999 p.268) remind us that “Parents become more available and sensitive to their children when their levels of stress are reduced and they experience an

increase in their own felt security, confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and social understanding”.

The opportunity for the child and the adult to be linked to a child-focused setting, many of which operate with a definite partnership ethos can be an invaluable resource in the demanding early child-rearing years. With families in many cases living at a distance from their own extended families, these early child care resources assume even more significance. When working with older children and young people, we can model healthy appreciation of the child and thus help the carer to ‘see’ and appreciate the young person (Gilligan, 1995; Davies, 2004).

In all settings, it is particularly important that we work to encourage fathers’ participation in child-rearing and also to ensure that mothers are aware of the importance of the father’s role. This requires us to be creative, for example, in the way we run groups so that they are interesting and comfortable for both men and women. Where we are working with reconstituted families,

working with the child’s biological or otherwise parents to improve their sensitivity and responsiveness has the capacity to improve children’s security of attachment and the social benefits of improving parents’ emotional competence and availability can be tangibly witnessed in children’s increased ability to self-regulate (Erickson *et al*, 1992, cited by Brandon *et al*, 1999, p.284).

Social workers and family support

As social workers, when we work with children and their families, with or without statutory responsibilities, this author contends, we have a duty to provide family support and to advocate for children. We do this by guiding carers on children’s developmental needs, on the importance of warm, accepting relationships and by motivating them to become more consistent and nurturing toward their children, no matter what age the children are. Howe (1999 p. 268). advocates we “may work *indirectly* on children’s psycho-social development” through the provision of emotional, material and community support to parents as well as improving parents’ problem solving skills, and their capacity to reflect on their parenting, by providing “advice, advocacy and couple counselling”.

Family support can emerge organically, in a natural way from extended family members, interested neighbours, and can be symbiotic with families supporting each other. It also, at times, requires professionals to become involved, both to foster informal support for the family, for example, through family welfare conferencing and also by the provision of more formal family support as in family resource centres, crèche and day care provision and through the work of statutory family support workers. With many parents, we may be working to ameliorate the effects of their own poor nurturing experiences. Through our sensitive, empathic interventions; by listening to and acknowledging their experience, we can positively impact on the care-giving they are currently providing their own children (Fraiberg, 1980; Erickson *et al*, 1992; Weatherston, 2000, 2001). Within this lies the hope of breaking the inter-generational cycle of poor parenting, neglect and abuse.

Affirmation of the child through our direct contact with him/her

We can as parents, relatives, neighbours and as professionals promote each child's right to healthy development through our direct contact with them. As crèche and preschool staff, teachers, family support workers, youth workers, General Practitioners, Public Health Nurses, social workers, we can support the child and help build resilience by really 'seeing' each child as an individual, by listening and encouraging them and by being interested and enthusiastic about their interests. This author contends that the process of being 'seen' by an adult, whether that be on the playing field or in the classroom can engender in the child a sense of belief in their ability to do marvellous things and can acknowledge that it is from their individuality that their contribution to the world will come.

If we think about our own childhood, we may remember significant people in our own lives. We may recall a teacher, a coach or a member of our own family or locality who seemed to believe in what we could achieve, a person who was interested and willing to listen to us talk about our hobby or our dreams and a person who shared our joy and our happiness when we felt we did well and our disappointment when we did not. We can through our interactions have that positive impact on a child's perception of themselves and their belief in their own power to achieve and grow. As Lindenfield tells us (1995 p. 164), "It is our everyday relationships and roles that can have *most* impact on the growth of other people's self esteem". In relation to children who are mistreated, Howe (2005 p.275) tells us: "Encounters with minds that are stronger and wiser often act as a turning point for maltreated children", whether they be planned or unplanned, with a therapist

or with a teacher who “recognizes and takes an encouraging interest in a girl’s talent for drama or sport”.

Howe (2001 p.204) gives us hope when he says “change remains possible at any time in the lifespan. New experiences always have the capacity to alter people’s representations and expectations of the worthiness and effectiveness of the self and the availability of others”. Where a child or young person has had an experience of early parenting that has led to insecurity or wariness about self and about the safety or consistency of others, as adults who meet those children, we can bring a different experience to the child. By being available and trustworthy for the young person, we can demonstrate reliability and we can show they have the right to loving care and that they are valued. Davies (2004 p. 65) citing Werner (2000) spells it out very clearly when he says:

“Although quality of parenting is the most important mediator of risk for children, other relationships can be protective. An ongoing positive relationship with a nonparental adult such as a grandparent, teacher, or friend’s parent promotes resilience even when parenting ability is impaired”.

This paper does not intend to suggest that poor early experiences can be completely compensated. This would be too simplistic, would constitute dangerous practice and would fail to account for the significance and timeliness of the early years’ care and the damaging effects of abuse and neglect. Nonetheless, the author does advocate that even with a poorer than ideal start, through considered interactions with their parents/carers we can aim to positively influence the parenting provided and thus may improve the level of care-giving. Children can be valued for themselves and their carers can be motivated to attend carefully and consistently, with love, to the child’s developmental and relationship needs. This may provide them with the experience of being seen, valued and loved for themselves. While this cannot erase poor early childhood experiences, nor should it excuse non-intervention at the early stage, improved care-giving at a later stage can still help the child’s emerging self-esteem, and feelings of self efficacy (Howe, 2005).

A special word to teachers

For most children, school is an “important part of the child’s life, (often) a secure second family” (Holland, 1993 p.290). The literature on teaching tells us that the essence of

effective teaching is the relationship between the teacher and the child (Dawney, 1977). Children are affected by what happens in their interactions with their teachers, which is expressed differently depending on the age of the child. Young children often pay homage to everything that “Teacher says ...”. Older children’s experience of the teacher-pupil relationship is voiced differently or may show itself in non-verbal ways. However, the effect of the teacher on the older pupil is just as significant.

Sources (Dawney, 1977; Primary School Curriculum, 1999; Rowling, 2005) maintain that teachers have a “duty to care” role because if the child is to be available to learn, they need to feel supported and cared for within the classroom setting and ultimately, within the teacher/pupil relationship. The teacher can create a classroom environment where every individual matters and an accepting, fun climate within which the child can relax and learn. Where a child is at risk of being isolated or bullied, a teacher can foster more inclusive, respectful relationships. In the case of primary level education in Ireland, each child’s individuality and the teacher’s role with this is enshrined within the Primary School Curriculum (1999).

“The teacher ... has a complex role as a caring facilitator and guide who interprets the child’s learning needs and responds to them. This role is informed by a concern for the uniqueness of the child, a respect for the integrity of the child as a learner and by a sense of enthusiasm and a commitment to teaching. The teacher’s concern for the well-being and the successful development of the child is the basis for the creation of a supportive environment that can facilitate the child’s learning” (Primary Curriculum, 1999 p. 20).

Teachers are ideally placed in their daily contact with children to provide each child with a positive sense of him/her self. They can also advocate on behalf of children who are receiving inadequate care.

Career Guidance teachers and Home School Liaison Teachers can play a key role in bringing each child’s individual life experience to the understanding of fellow teachers to the child’s benefit. Where a child is experiencing a difficult time at home or elsewhere, the informed Career Guidance teacher and Home School Liaison Teacher can advocate

for the child within the school and in the child's home. In this way, child's experience can be acknowledged, thus fostering informed understanding and support.

Mitch Albom (1997 p. 192) in his book, *Tuesdays with Morrie* writes powerfully of the gift of an interested, committed teacher when he asks:

“Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back.”

These words have a resonance for all of us who work with children, not just teachers. We can all provide a relationship with approval and respect and as such provide a child with support and backing for their efforts to accomplish their hopes and dreams.

Advocating on behalf of the child when concerned about possible neglect or abuse

The family has primary responsibility for the care of any child, where the child's basic and emotional needs are expected to be met and the child's experience of a secure, caring, and effective home lays the foundation for the child's future “psychological, physical and cognitive development” (Richardson, 1999 p. 171). In reality, families differ in how they manage this. Families can be the source of great joy and caring. They can, unfortunately, also be a place where children and young people can be treated poorly, can be mistreated and abused. Many sources (Kellmer-Pringle, 1986; Ferguson, 1996; Gilligan, 1995; Hothersall, 2006) advise us to remember that the family can be a very dangerous place for children. Gilligan (1995 p.63) counsels that “professionals and policy makers must be realistic about the qualities of the family. It can be a force for great good- and for great hurt”.

In the different contexts where we work with children, we have different roles and responsibilities, but this author contends that we all have a duty to promote children's welfare. We need to listen to children and to act in their best interests and where we are concerned about possible abuse or neglect, a referral should be made to the relevant Health Service Executive Social Work Department for assessment and appropriate follow-up.

In conclusion

This paper sets out to advocate that as workers with children and young people, we can promote positive childhood experiences in three ways.

1. We can support the child through our interventions with the carers
2. We can affirm the child through our direct contact with him/her and
3. Where we become aware of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection, we can advocate with the appropriate services on the child's behalf.

Our work needs to be guided by certain principles. We need to believe in each child as an individual, with inalienable needs, potentialities and rights. We need to find ways to see each child's unique experiences of parenting, individual hopes and dreams and to approve and accept each child as they are. We also need a good grounding in normal childhood development and at the same time a respect for the differing pace at which we all achieved these developmental milestones.

Professor Aynsley Green, Chairman of the Children's Taskforce in the UK states (2004 p.134):

“The way to improve service delivery to children and young people and their carers is by adhering to three key principles:

- Making the child the centre of our services
- Always considering the ‘whole child’ (the interweaving of health, social care and education in the child's life)
- A needs-based approach”.

This paper advocates that we never underestimate our capacity to make a difference to the children we meet and to remember that in our contact with the child and his/her carers, we can advocate for his/her rights. We can strive to provide each child with positive experiences of themselves in our direct contact with them. Indirectly, in the context of support to the family, we can attempt to positively impact on the care the child receives. And where we become aware of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection, we can liaise with the appropriate services to advocate on the child's behalf. In these ways, we can contribute to bringing about a situation whereby children's rights are safeguarded and children have a better chance to have their individual needs met and their potential realised. To be inspired to achieve these goals, it is appropriate to end with the

somewhat romantic, but true words of Violet Oaklander (1988 p.324):

“Children are our finest teachers. They already know how to grow, how to learn, how to expand and discover, how to feel, laugh and cry and get mad, what is right for them and what is not right for them, what they need. They already know how to love and be joyful, and to live life to its fullest, to work and be strong and full of energy. All they (and the children within us) need is the space to do it”.

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The Health of Traveller Children.

Maria Cassidy, Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, UCC.

Abstract

Irish Travellers are the longest-standing minority group in Ireland. The Travelling community has a very young demographic profile, with 41% under the age of fifteen. A systematic review of the literature relevant to the health of Traveller children was conducted. Literature was accessed from books, journals, government publications, academic works and documentation made available by Traveller groups. This paper aims to identify some issues relevant to the health of Travellers and, in particular, Traveller children, highlighting some of the persistent inequalities in health experienced by Traveller children.

Introduction

In the absence of real knowledge, we tend to rely on given images of minorities within our society which do not reflect life as experienced by that minority. In the case of Travellers, images accumulate around impressions of poverty, dereliction, or of a romantic, colourful existence. After a while these impressions begin to be thought of as reality and resemble ideas, but they remain illusions and tend to obliterate more accurate perceptions. (Laing 1992, p. 12)

The Travelling community is the longest standing minority group in Ireland and Travellers are among those who experience the greatest social exclusion in Irish society (Department of Health and Children, 2000). This paper aims to explore the health status of Traveller children. As Traveller children do not exist in isolation, but are part of a family, which in turn is part of a wider community, there are many factors and facets of Traveller lifestyle and culture, as well as aspects and attitudes of the 'settled' community that are so closely intertwined with the health of Traveller children that to attempt to separate them would be futile. Therefore, this paper will explore the health status of Traveller children as one strand of an intricate web, whereby all of the components are connected to, affected by, and impacting on each other.

Demographics

The Irish census of 2006 enumerated 22,435 Travellers, accounting for 0.5% of the Irish population (CSO, 2007). The Irish Travelling community has a very young demographic profile. Forty one percent of Travellers are under the age of fifteen, compared to 20% in the general population, with children under four years accounting for almost 15% of the Traveller population (CSO, 2007). Possible reasons for such a young age profile include the fact that Travellers tend to marry young, have a higher fertility rate, larger families and a shorter life expectancy than settled people (Travelling People Review Body, 1983). The health status of Travellers, and in particular Traveller children, is worse than that of the general population (Department of Health and Children, 2002).

Accommodation and Living Conditions

Mac Laughlin (1995), states that the accommodation pattern of Travellers altered dramatically in the years between 1960 and 1980. During this period, the number of Travellers living in houses increased from 4% in 1960 to almost 40% in 1980. By 1986 almost half of Traveller families were living in caravans (Barry *et al*, 1989). Twenty-two percent of Traveller families were living on unofficial halting sites (Department of Health & Children, 2002). Rottman *et al* (1986) found that almost half of the Traveller families enumerated in the 1981 Census had no access to a piped water supply and around 50% had no toilet facilities. Conditions for Travellers living on the roadside were extremely poor, with 96% of families having no access to a piped water supply and 97.5% without toilet facilities. More recently, it was noted that a quarter of Irish Travellers still live without such basic necessities as running water, flushing toilets, bathing facilities, mains power or rubbish collection (Department of Health & Children, 2002).

Barry (1996) notes that the overcrowded living conditions of many Travellers, and the general environmental hazards experienced by unhoused Travellers are fertile grounds for accidents. Research conducted in the U.K concluded that Gypsy/Traveller children under sixteen years of age, living on local authority halting sites were more likely to attend local Accident and Emergency departments than children of the same age who lived in the areas where the sites were located, and the occurrence of burns and scalds was also higher in Traveller children (Beach, 1999). Beach found that the highest injury and accident rates were in children living on temporary halting sites and on the roadside. The findings of this survey also supported anecdotal evidence that Travellers tend to use Accident and

Emergency Departments to access primary healthcare, concluding that the Gypsy/Traveller children had a significantly higher rate of attendance for diagnoses which were not injury related. Apart from accidents, research conducted in Ireland suggests that the most common causes of hospital admission for Traveller children are respiratory tract infections and gastro-intestinal infections, often occurring within the first two years of life (Gordon *et al.*, 1991, O' Nuallain & Forde, 1992).

In the UK, Pahl & Vaile (1986) noted that more than half of the 263 Traveller mothers surveyed reported that they had difficulty in caring for their children as they would like to. The reasons given for this included dirt, rats, dogs, fast traffic, lack of safe play areas, cuts from broken glass, overcrowding, lack of education, problems with sewage and noise pollution. Often halting sites are located in highly unsuitable locations, for example on top of, or beside former refuse dumps, next to busy roads, or in close proximity to unfenced waterways and electricity pylons (Pahl & Vaile, 1986; Hawes, 1997; TSA Consultancy, 2004).

Hawes (1997) noted two cases that illustrate the complete unsuitability of some official sites in the U.K. In one instance Traveller families were moved from a site that had been in existence for 30 years and was considered to be both well-established and well-built, to a site that was adjacent to a busy railway line with the only access via an unmanned level crossing. Flooding was also a major problem on this site during the winter months. Another site was situated under a flyover of what was, essentially, one of Europe's busiest motorways. At the time, a public health official argued that this site represented the most highly toxic, fume-laden environment recorded in terms of airborne pollutants from diesel fuels (*ibid*).

Even when Travellers live on 'authorised' sites, many problems are reported which either directly or indirectly impact on the health status of their children. One report, compiled for the Traveller Health Unit in the Eastern region (TSA Consultancy, 2004), noted problems with drainage, blocked toilets and poor construction and design of sites. Where facilities were provided on-site, these were often found to be inadequate or dangerous. One example of such danger was the case of heavy steel doors on service units which allegedly led to the loss of a finger by a child. Further safety hazards included the dangers to the safety of children caused by proximity to busy roads and the erection of locked height-restriction barriers designed to prevent Travellers who are not resident on the sites from entering with caravans. However, these barriers may prevent or severely restrict

access for emergency vehicles. Other problems included contaminated water supplies, rat infestation and recurrent flooding due to the location of a halting site on a flood plain. The issue of inadequate access to a clean water supply was believed to be of particular concern in relation to the health of infants and children. It was also acknowledged that conditions on halting sites created difficulties in the protection of Traveller children from infectious diseases and in treating those children who contracted such diseases (*ibid*). The Department of Health and Children (2002, p.28) stresses that:

There is little doubt that the living conditions of Travellers are probably the single greatest influence on health status. Stress, infectious disease including respiratory disease and accidents are all closely related to the Traveller living environment.

Eviction and enforced settlement

The implementation of the Roads Act and the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (2002) in Ireland has essentially criminalised the nomadic Traveller lifestyle, making trespass a criminal rather than a civil offence. Travellers camping illegally currently face the possibility of a one-month jail sentence, a 3,000 Euro fine and the confiscation of property, which, in the case of Travellers means their caravans, thus rendering the family homeless until the cost of having the caravan released from the pound is paid. Furthermore, Ireland does not have a system of transient halting sites in place, nor is there adequate provision of places in official halting sites and other Traveller friendly accommodation, so no alternative to illegal camping is available to nomadic Travellers. The eviction of Travellers living on the roadside and on unauthorised halting sites is now commonplace.

Enforced mobility is a significant problem for Travellers living on the roadside and on unofficial halting sites, particularly in terms of accessing healthcare or follow-up care for children. A typical example of this is the case of one family in Cork in 2003 who lived in six different suburbs of Cork city in a twelve month period due to enforced mobility (Brennan & O Ceallachain, 2004). Similarly, enforced mobility resulted in a Travelling family in the U.K being unable to access healthcare for their daughter who had Spina Bifida:

We were being evicted the same morning that (Name) had an appointment in the hospital. We could not bring her; if we had gone our caravan would have been towed away. So she never attended the hospital. While we were

being moved all the time she never went to the hospital ... (Mc Donagh, 1992, p.29).

A further health risk is the eviction of women during pregnancy. Bee (2000) argues that there are links between stressful life events, physical and emotional distress, and an increase in problems during pregnancy, including high blood pressure, babies born of low birth weight, and an increase in congenital anomalies such as cleft palate or respiratory problems. While no data is available pertaining to the extent of this situation in Ireland, a survey was conducted in the UK by the Association of Metropolitan Authorities in 1988. Information was collected on its members' policies on the eviction of pregnant Traveller women and those with newborn babies. Of the 67 authorities who responded to the survey, 16 had policies whereby pregnant women would be evicted, 13 had policies whereby pregnant women would be evicted even if it was close to the arrival of the baby and 15 of the authorities would evict families who had a newborn baby (Durward, 1990). Similarly, a Scottish study revealed that 48% of the Traveller women interviewed had been evicted while pregnant (Bancroft, Lloyd and Moran, 1996). In this climate, increasingly, some Travellers are feeling pressurised into settling in a house, even though that might otherwise not have been an option they would have wished to consider.

One U.K. study of Irish Travellers in London revealed that the move into housing, which as previously mentioned is often involuntary, can result in mental health problems and a breakdown of childrearing mechanisms, closely linked with separation from support systems and close family networks (Morris & Clements, 2001). Although some Travellers willingly choose the option of living in a house, others are increasingly feeling pressurised into making this move. It is not easy for those from the 'settled' community to understand the physical and emotional difficulties experienced by Travellers as a consequence of enforced settlement. Traveller's perceptions of accommodation differ greatly from those of the settled community. In general, Travellers view accommodation as a temporary rather than a permanent measure. McCann *et al* (1994) argue that many Travellers are terrified by the realisation, on moving into a house, that the authorities expect them to remain there permanently. One Traveller eloquently compared the housing of a Traveller to putting a bird in a cage (Daniel, 1999). A study of English, Welsh and Scottish Gypsies as well as Irish Travellers living in Britain found that the health status of those living in houses was poorer than those living in caravans or mobile homes (Parry *et al*, 2004). The authors note that for Travellers, long term illness,

poor health and anxiety are associated with living in a house, with those who rarely travel having the poorest health. It was unclear from the study whether those whose health was poor tended to settle as a result, or whether poorer health was as a consequence of settling.

Enforced settlement also has a detrimental effect on the health and well-being of the children involved. Research has shown that the mothers of Traveller families who settle can become isolated from the social supports and childrearing mechanisms available to them within the Travelling community, and this can have a detrimental effect on the psychological well-being of the mother (Heron, 2000). Heron found that those mothers with poor social support tended to experience more psychological distress, and, in turn, their children had more peer problems, emotional and conduct disorder problems and hyperactivity.

Health

There has been no nationwide study of Travellers health since 1987 (Barry and Daly, 1988; Barry *et al*, 1989; Barry, 1996). Since that time, research on the health status of Irish Travellers has consisted of more localised research projects. A new all- Ireland Traveller Health study is currently underway and results are expected to be available in 2010 (Department of Health and Children, 2007). According to the report of the Commission on Itinerancy (1963) there was very little difference between the overall health of Traveller children and children from similar income groups in the settled population. The Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community Review Body (1995) noted that the Commission felt that Travellers were healthier than would be expected of people who generally experienced much hardship in their lives. However, there is now little doubt that the health status of Travellers is significantly poorer than that of the general population (Jackson and O' Donovan, 2001) and this is particularly true of Traveller children. Murray (1997) identifies Traveller children as a minority within a minority, who experience the negative repercussions of discrimination, poor accommodation and unsatisfactory living conditions.

Many Travellers experience discrimination and prejudice on a regular basis and negative societal attitudes are often exacerbated by a lack of understanding of Traveller culture (McGreil, 1979; Murray, 1997; Jackson & O'Donovan, 2001; Pavee Point, 2002; Hodgins *et al*, 2005). Furthermore, the criminalisation of the nomadic Traveller lifestyle brought about by the introduction of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (2002)

has served to further exacerbate the difficulties experienced by Travellers in Ireland. These factors, coupled with the physical, emotional and psychological effects of the extremely poor living conditions of many Travellers have ensured that the health status of Travellers, and in particular Traveller children, is worse than that of the general population.

Mortality

The manifestation of existing inequalities in the health of Traveller children is evident from birth. Ryan *et al* (2000, p.205) argue that, “Social disadvantage continues to be associated with above average IMR within countries, with lack of equity ... partly accounting for variations in health status between populations”. The infant mortality rate (IMR) in 1987 was 18.1 per 1000 live births for Travellers while the national figure was 7.4 per 1000. Perinatal mortality rates in the same year were 28.3 per 1000 live births for Travellers, and 9.9 per 1000 for the general population. Similarly, the stillbirth rate for Travellers was much higher, at 19.5 per 1000 live births compared to 6.9 per 1000 in the general population (Department of Health & Children, 2002; Barry *et al*, 1989). Evidence also suggests that Irish Traveller women have more miscarriages and stillbirths and shorter birth intervals than women from the ‘settled’ community (O’ Nuallain & Forde, 1992; Barry, 1996).

Low Birth Weight

Research conducted in Ireland and the U.K indicates that a higher proportion of babies of low birthweight (LBW) are born to Traveller parents than to parents from the ‘settled’ population (O’Nuallain & Forde, 1992; Barry, 1996; Van Cleemput & Parry 2001). Babies born of low birth weight have a greater risk of neonatal death and long term difficulties such as neurological impairment, smaller stature and lower intelligence quotient (IQ) (Bee, 2000).

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Traveller babies have a higher risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) than babies from the ‘settled’ community. SIDS has been defined as “the applicable diagnosis when no other identifiable sufficient cause is found in an infant who dies suddenly” (Dwyer & Ponsonby, 1996, p.79). The occurrence of SIDS in Traveller babies in 1999 was twelve times the national figure (Department of Health and Children, 2002). According to the National Traveller Health Strategy (2002), the SIDS rate for Traveller babies is 8.8 per 1,000 live births, compared to a rate of 0.7 per thousand for the general population.

One small-scale study revealed that some existing information on SIDS prevention was perceived to be irrelevant by the Traveller participants (Cassidy, 2005). It was argued that, in particular, guidelines on ideal room temperature, layers of light blankets and adequate light clothing had no relevance to Travellers living in trailers. Participants highlighted the fact that it was necessary for Traveller mothers to apply extra layers of clothing and warm quilts when putting babies down to sleep for the night in a caravan despite evidence identifying overheating as a major risk factor for SIDS. They argued that it gets exceptionally cold in a trailer at night and while SIDS was a *possibility*, the cold was a *certainty*. O’Riain (2000) illustrates the severity of nocturnal temperatures for Traveller families living in trailers by describing an incident whereby a Traveller woman showed him how clothing stored in a cupboard in the caravan in which she lived had frozen into a solid block overnight. Other issues to arise from this qualitative study included participants’ poor uptake of antenatal care and the perceived irrelevance to Travellers of some existing information on Sudden Infant Death, as it resulted from research conducted by ‘settled’ people, was about ‘settled’ babies and some participants felt that Travellers were different (Cassidy, 2005).

Immunisation

Immunisation levels among Traveller children are lower than in the general population. Overall, the immunization levels for Traveller children are around 50% (Department of Health and Children, 2002). According to the Health Promotion Surveillance Centre (2006) immunization rates in the general population are 86% for MMR and between 86% (vaccination at twelve months) and 91% (vaccination at twenty four months) for the five in one vaccination. The authors of one U.K study of Travellers’ health also found evidence of poor uptake of immunization among Travellers, and stated that it was surprising that there had been no reports of epidemics of these diseases within the Travelling community (Pahl & Vaile, 1986). They speculated that cases of disease may not have been reported, being perceived as a normal part of childhood, or that the fact that Travellers had been relatively isolated from the settled population may have had a protective effect. However, Pahl & Vaile (*ibid*) argued that due to more Traveller children attending mainstream schools and thus accessing wider germ pools, epidemics could yet occur.

Tragically, in March of 2006, the first fatality in fourteen years as a result of measles occurred in the U.K. (Deer, 2006). The individual in question was a thirteen-year-old boy who was a member of the Travelling community in the Manchester area. He had

not been vaccinated. The Health Protection Agency in the U.K revealed that in the wake of this tragedy, there had been a large local increase in immunisation uptake by Traveller families (*ibid*).

Congenital anomalies

Marriage between cousins is widely practiced among Travellers. Some aspects of consanguineous marriage have social benefits for the Travelling community, contributing to the long-term stability of the family as a social group, and it has been noted that consanguineous marriage, in itself is not harmful (Bittles, 2003). However, in the absence of genetic screening, consanguineous unions can be problematic. Several studies have noted higher incidence of congenital anomalies and metabolic disorders including phenylketonuria (PKU), galactosaemia, hypothyroidism and Hurler's syndrome (Linthwaite, 1983; Gordon *et al*, 1991; Barry, 1996; Barry & Kirke, 1997).

Some of these conditions are very rare in the settled community. Galactosaemia, for example, affects 1 in 30,000 babies in the non-Traveller community compared to 1 in 480 Traveller babies (Murphy *et al*, 1999). Galactosaemia is an inability of the body to metabolise galactose, a milk sugar that occurs naturally in both breast milk and cow's milk. Consequently, galactose accumulates in the body causing lethargy, vomiting, jaundice and sepsis. Undiagnosed babies can die of liver failure or infection. Treatment involves exclusion of lactose from the diet (Walter *et al*, 1999). However, there are still lifelong complications which include cataracts, speech problems, developmental delay and learning difficulties (Schweitzer-Krantz, 2003). Screening for galactosaemia was originally introduced in Ireland in 1972. A high risk, 1 day screening called the Beutler Test, was introduced in 1996 for siblings of known cases and for Traveller babies (Mohammed *et al*, 2004). Hence, Traveller mothers should identify themselves as Travellers on arrival at maternity hospitals to give birth, and as a result of the high risk of galactosaemia, Traveller babies should only be fed soya based milks until the results of the Beutler test are received. While this is a necessary precaution, it has negative repercussions for breastfeeding in this community where uptake of breastfeeding is already very low (Ginnetty, 1993; Barry, 1996).

Breastfeeding

Breastmilk is considered to be the optimal food for infants. Research has suggested that breastfeeding offers increased immunity in infancy, and protection against certain

conditions into adulthood (National Committee to Promote Breastfeeding, 1994). Barry (1996) found that only 3% of those babies born to Traveller mothers in 1987 were being breastfed on discharge from hospital compared to 30% for the general population. Reasons for such a poor uptake included lack of interest, time or privacy and the fact that either mother or baby was too ill to breastfeed. A health survey of Travellers living in the Clondalkin area of Dublin revealed that only 10% of the women surveyed had breastfed their babies for any period of time (National Traveller Women's Forum, 2000).

Similarly, an earlier study of Travellers' health in Belfast noted that breastfeeding was quite rare in the Travelling community (Ginnetty, 1993). None of the Traveller women participants who were of childbearing age had breastfed their children although several of the older women had done so. Lack of privacy, modesty and embarrassment were cited as the main reasons for choosing not to breastfeed. It has been suggested that in Traveller culture, privacy is of great importance, particularly in matters concerning sexuality, and therefore, breastfeeding is generally perceived as an unsuitable activity for men to witness (Pahl & Vaile, 1986).

Nutrition

There is some evidence to suggest that maintaining a healthy diet can be quite difficult due to some elements of the Traveller lifestyle. Daniel, (1999) argues that enforced movement may contribute to an unhealthy diet for Travellers, causing difficulty in the preparation of food that is fresh and low in fat. There are also obvious difficulties with the storage and preparation of fresh food in small, confined spaces for Travellers living in Trailers (*ibid*).

In a survey of Travellers in Galway, Haughey (2000) found that less than one-fifth of the Travellers surveyed ate the recommended amounts of carbohydrates and around one-quarter were eating the recommended servings of fruit and vegetables per day. The Traveller participants were also eating more fried food than the general population. A healthy diet in childhood is necessary for optimal child health and development. Furthermore, unhealthy dietary patterns in childhood are linked to poor diet in later life (Holden & Mac Donald, 2000). Interestingly, Finnegan (1995) noted that Traveller women do not always follow the recommended diet suggested by doctors for pregnant women as it is simply too expensive.

Inadequate nutrition during pregnancy can have a detrimental effect on the developing foetus. Research has also identified links between adult conditions such as stroke, bronchitis

and ischaemic heart disease, and nutrition in-utero and in early childhood (Holden & Mac Donald, 2000). Kiely (1983) hypothesised that poor diet may have been a causal factor in the presence of neural tube defects in four babies of the 234 births to Traveller mothers in Dublin in 1980 & 1981. The link between the occurrence of neural tube defects and maternal intake of folic acid has long been recognized. Folic acid is the synthetic form of a naturally occurring, water soluble B vitamin called folate which is found in liver, kidneys, wholegrain cereals, nuts and legumes. It is necessary for the replication of DNA, and therefore, vital for cell differentiation and growth in the pre-embryonic stages of pregnancy. Although some foodstuffs are now fortified with folic acid, intake is still lower than the recommended 400 microgrammes per day in many women of childbearing age (Sayers *et al*, 1997). Supplementation after discovering one is pregnant is generally a futile exercise in terms of prevention of neural tube defects as the neural tube closes by the fourth week, before most women are aware of the pregnancy (Langley-Evans, 2004)

Healthcare Provision

When Traveller children suffer ill-health, the problems are often compounded by difficulties experienced by Traveller families in accessing healthcare. Mc Carthy (1994) found that many Travellers living on halting sites in the Coolock area of Dublin had experienced difficulties with doctors who did not want to come out to the sites. In some cases, this led to Travellers being removed from the doctor's books, sometimes for several months. Reinstatement was on condition that the Travellers would not call the doctor out to the site. Hence many Travellers used hospital services or travelled to doctors who were not in their area, but who had looked after them well on previous occasions.

Davis (1999) also identified major barriers to accessing healthcare encountered by Travellers. These included reluctance on the part of General Practitioners to register or see Travellers leading to criticism of Travellers for inappropriate use of services and inconsistency of care. Further barriers included problems with postal addresses (or lack thereof), the practical problems of enforced mobility and a system that relies heavily on written information, such as patient histories, form filling and appointment letters when many Travellers are not literate (*ibid*). It has been suggested that illiteracy levels may be as high as 80% among the Irish adult Traveller population (Murphy, 2005). An Irish study also identified problems with literacy such as form-filling (Jackson & O' Donovan, 2001). Other issues identified by this study included a lack of availability of information or information that was not Traveller friendly, negative attitudes from some health service

providers, discrimination, lack of understanding of the effects of poor accommodation on the health of Travellers and of Traveller ways and culture (*ibid*).

Play and Development

The opportunity to explore children's own cultural identity as well as that of others is afforded through the medium of play (National Children's Office, 2004). Unfortunately, it would appear that accessing a safe place to play is problematic for Traveller children and unsafe play areas pose a very real health risk. Research conducted in Dublin recognized the link between unsuitable play areas or sites with no open play areas and frequent accidents for Traveller children (TSA Consultancy, 2004). This report also noted that even for Traveller children who were housed, freedom to play was restricted due to hostility expressed by people from the settled community. Similarly, a Scottish study (Lomax, Lancaster and Gray, 2000) found problems of hostility from neighbours towards Traveller families who settled in houses. Those living in caravans expressed concern about the safety of children due to on-site conditions and many of the respondents raised the issue of a lack of play facilities for children on halting sites.

The benefits of play to the holistic development of the child are manifold. Far from being a frivolous, useless activity, West (1992, p. 11) argues that "play is a child's natural medium for self expression, experimentation and learning" and furthermore, it "allows opportunities for physical, emotional, cognitive and social growth" (*ibid*). In terms of health, play positively impacts on the physical and mental health of the child, on self esteem and on helping to establish attitudes to and patterns of physical activity that will continue to be of benefit into adulthood. Considering the current fears of an obesity epidemic among our nation's children and the health problems associated with obesity, such as diabetes and heart disease, the importance of providing safe play areas to encourage energetic, physical play cannot be overstated. The National Children's Office (2004) recognizes that Traveller children are particularly restricted in terms of the opportunity to play safely, noting that these restrictions include the effects of poor living conditions and accommodation, a lack of safe play areas and hostility from the 'settled' community. However, it appears that little, if anything is being done to rectify this situation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it would be fair to say that the picture of the health status of Traveller

children painted by the existing literature is not a very pretty one. Travellers have higher perinatal and infant mortality rates, and also more stillbirths and miscarriages. Traveller children have an increased risk of being born with congenital anomalies and metabolic disorders, are less likely to have been breastfed, have an increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, are less likely to have been immunised, have a higher risk of injuries and accidents and are less likely to have access to safe areas in which to play. It would appear that poor living conditions, lack of adequate provision and punitive legislation combine to perpetuate rather than address negative health outcomes for Traveller children. Although this appears bleak, perhaps it will not always be so. A group of Traveller children in Cork remind us that there is always hope:

Within our own families there is a great pride in our traveller identity. That family pride, combined with our continuing education, gives us great hope of a bright future for ourselves, our siblings and future generations of travellers. (O'Reilly *et al*, 2001, p.6)

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Television Food Advertising to Children: The Impact on Children's Health

Patricia Radley, UCC

Abstract

This paper looks at the types of food advertising aimed at children. The literature review includes key advertising concepts, children's cognitive development, obesity and nutrition. Focus groups were conducted with young children aged 6 – 7 years to ascertain their food preferences and choices together with their knowledge of healthy versus unhealthy foods. The children were also asked about their television viewing and their understanding of the advertisements. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with class teachers and principals.

Key words: advertising to children; healthy eating; school lunches; nutrition; obesity; focus groups; semi-structured interviews

Introduction

This paper deals with the subject of television food advertising to young children. It explores children's cognitive development in relation to their ability to assess and understand the content of advertisements and their ability to make informed decisions about food nutrition and food choices. Children, for the purpose of this paper are defined as being between birth and eight years. This age range was chosen because research has shown that at about eight years of age, children have begun to understand the meaning of advertisements, albeit at a very elementary level. Advertising, through various different media has always been an important tool for companies to promote their products. The development and increased availability of the Internet, together with digital and interactive television, have provided powerful promotional tools for companies. As a result, advertising has become more attractive, enticing, competitive and widespread. Advertising food products in an ethical and responsible way is a key issue, particularly when dealing with children. Various codes of practice have been drawn up with regard to advertising ethics, at national and European level; however, concerns have only recently

been raised pertaining to the ethics of food advertising to young children. Particular attention has been paid to the marketing of 'junk food' or high calorie, high salt or high sugar foods to children and adolescents.

Literature Review

Advertising Issues and Principles

Advertising costs companies billions of euros/dollars annually. Since the mid 1990s marketers and advertisers realised that children were a very fruitful but under-utilised market. It has been noted that children in the USA, aged 2-14 years directly influenced US \$188 billion of parental expenditure in 1998 and this number grew to US \$248 billion in 1999 (Angrisani, 2001).

Different studies show that children begin to understand and respond to advertising between the ages of three and five years. From the age of five at the latest they begin to express their brand and product preferences increasingly strongly. The advertiser, therefore, must make its brands and products attractive to these different age groups. However, advertisers are aware that very few products, and then only inexpensive products, are bought by children themselves. Until they are well into their teens, children have minimal buying power. This means that the advertisements must be acceptable to the gatekeepers of the children's buying power. Advertisements must simultaneously excite and appeal to children, while being reassuring and engaging to adults (Hetcher, 2004).

It has been noted that children over the age of seven appear to be equipped to deal with advertising, are not naive about advertising and are actually quite cynical about its truthfulness. Clarke and Michael (2003) asserted that children under the age of eight are exploited by advertising and Young (2003) proposed that younger children are not as capable of protecting themselves from the pressure it exerts upon their emotional and rational drives. Preston (2005) warned that if younger children's behaviour is being influenced by advertising, yet they are not entirely clear on what advertising is, then advertisers should be concerned with the ethics of social responsibility, as a vulnerable section of society is targeted when it can be strongly argued that they should not be. He continued to state that it is difficult to conceive

of an argument in favour of advertising directly to very young children.

Children's Television Viewing

In the USA, children between the ages of six and fourteen years watch about 25 hours of television every week and see, according to Moore and Lutz (2000) approximately 20,000 advertisements every year. Television is a powerful and persuasive teacher that socialises children and teaches them knowledge about a variety of subjects including nutrition and health (Dan, 1992; American Dietetic Association, 1997; Bandura, 1977; Prabhu *et al.*, 1996). Byrd-Bredbenner (2002:382) stated that *in some homes television is a steady backdrop, morning till night*. Television watching interferes with healthy activity levels and is correlated with the consumption of highly advertised low nutrient-density foods, persuasion of parents to purchase such foods, development of poor eating habits, obesity, eating disorders and elevated cholesterol levels (Anderson *et al.*, 2001; Dietz, 1998; Dietz and Strasburger, 1991).

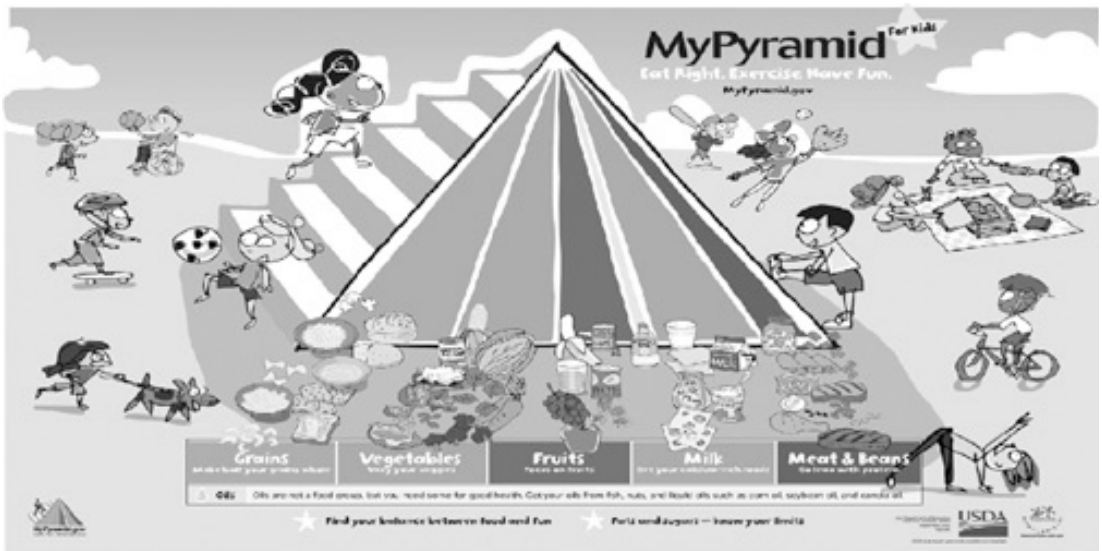
The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (2003) urged that with respect to the definition of a children's programme, the broadest possible definition should be given, in the understanding that a children's programme is a programme that children actually see. The broadcasters' traditional reliance on classifying programmes shown during a certain period in the day time as a children's programme is no longer valid. Their research findings confirmed that children aged from four to seventeen years make up a significant portion of the audience for both fringe and prime time programming none of which is primarily targeted at children.

Fischer *et al.* (1991) commented that children younger than six can sing commercial jingles and correctly identify corporate trademarks such as logos and trade characters. The frequency with which young children make requests for products advertised on television may serve as an indicator of message influence. Based on a 28 day diary study, researchers found that three to four year old children made an average of 24.9 requests, mainly for chocolate, toys and snack foods (Isler *et al.*, 1987). In a similar study conducted by Borzekowski and Robinson (2001), 49% of parents interviewed stated that their children had requested a food item advertised on television and 57% had requested to go to a shop or restaurant advertised on television.

Children and Nutrition

During the 20th century the nutritional health of children worldwide dramatically changed. Many societies moved from a state of under nutrition to over nutrition. As a result of the overabundance of food in the US and the consequences of this for the food industry, the diets of most American children do not come close to meeting the nutritional recommendations (Nestle, 2002). In 1997, American children obtained 50% of their calories from added fat and sugar and only 1% of them ate diets that resemble the proportions of the Children's Food Pyramid. The diets of 45% of all US children failed to meet any of the servicing numbers recommended in the Pyramid (Marquis, 2000). Children whose dietary patterns least resemble the Pyramid are most lacking in intake of essential nutrients, in part because they consume more soft drinks and other high calorie, low nutrient foods.

Figure 1: The Children's Food Pyramid



United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2004)

The Irish diet has changed dramatically since the last decades of the 20th century in terms of the variety of food available, food preference and food technology. Compliance with the Irish Food Pyramid recommendations has changed in the last few years. The cereals, breads and potatoes shelf was the only shelf which, according to the National Nutritional Surveillance Centre (2003), showed a decrease in compliance with the food pyramid recommendations over the previous four years.

Obesity

It is clear that poor nutrition and diet is now leading to serious health concerns. The growing obesity epidemic is one consequence of the lifestyle change experienced, particularly in the Western world where the emphasis is placed on fast foods which are high in salt, sugar and fats but low in nutritional value. Several generations have now been subjected to poor nutrition. Childhood obesity is already an epidemic in some areas and on the rise in others. Research from 79 developing countries and a number of industrialised countries, suggested that 22 million children under five years are overweight worldwide (World Health Organisation, 1998:14). Excess body weight is now the most prevalent childhood disease in Europe, affecting one in six children. However, in some countries, one in three children is overweight or obese (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 1997).

Paediatricians, child development experts and media researchers have theorised that media may contribute to childhood obesity in one or more of the following ways:

- The time children spend using media displaces time they could spend on physical activities
- The food advertisements children are exposed to on television influences them to make unhealthy food choices
- The cross promotions between food products and popular television and movies characters are encouraging children to buy and eat more high calorie foods
- Children snack excessively while using media, and they eat less healthy meals when eating in front of the television
- Watching television and video lowers children's metabolic rates below what they would be even if they were sleeping
- Depiction of nutrition and body weight in entertainment media encourages children to develop less healthy diets

(Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004)

Banning/Restricting Advertisements

For many decades policymakers, child advocates and paediatricians have advocated for policy measures to protect children from advertising and in particular advertisements for unhealthy foods. In light of the rapid increase in childhood obesity, food advertisements have come under increased scrutiny. Several industrialised democracies, especially those

in the Scandinavian countries, do not permit commercial sponsorship of children's programmes. Sweden also does not permit any television advertising directed to children under the age of 12. Belgium imposes restrictions on advertisements five minutes before and after as well as during children's programming. Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium prohibits any advertising within five minutes of a Dutch Language television programme broadcast from within the country and in 2001, Denmark convinced domestic broadcasters to voluntarily abide by a five minute rule (Mitchener, 2001). Broadcasters argue that the revenue generated in the EU every year by television advertisements for children's products is essential for the creation of quality children's television programming (Mitchener, 2001). The BBC decided to prohibit use of its cartoon characters in fast food advertisements, and the UK is pushing for stricter guidelines for advertising aimed at children (Critser, 2004).

Research Design/Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers of junior infants, senior infants and First Class and with school principals. . In total there were ten participants in these interviews. The interview schedule comprised of four main subject areas: food advertising to children, children's television viewing, children's knowledge of food and healthy eating. Focus groups were conducted with twenty children from First Class (aged 7 to 8). Four focus groups were held, with five children in each focus group. The participating schools were designated as disadvantaged according to the Department of Education and Science's DEIS Scheme and were located in Cork City.

Findings and Analysis

The participants of both the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were asked a series of questions covering the areas of food advertising, television viewing and knowledge, healthy eating and food recognition and choice. The term 'teachers' will be used in this paper to highlight the comments made by both teachers and principals.

Semi-Structured Interviews:

Television Viewing and Knowledge of Advertisements

All of those interviewed agreed that there was too much food advertising on television overall and in particular during children's television programming. One teacher commented

on the 'power' of adverts directed at children and how these advertisements are at variance with what teachers are trying to teach children in relation to food and food choices.

They are very powerful as it's usually very cleverly done, knows where to hit them on the spot and just morally, I think it's wrong to do that.

Another commented that the majority of food advertisements are for unhealthy foods.

You never see an ad for healthy foods, except ads for yoghurts, the majority of which don't really appeal to children anyway ... the most appealing adverts are for foods that are unhealthy.

All teachers were in agreement that for the given age group (4-8 years) television was the most effective media to target children and it is the most widely used amongst the children. However, some did acknowledge that children are now using online media at a younger age and one can not discount the fact that children of seven or eight may now be actually using the Internet, albeit in a limited capacity.

It was startling to realise that, all the teachers believed that food advertising claims are inaccurate.

They fail to mention additives and e-numbers in their advertising. Of course the focus is on the good stuff and the bad stuff is conveniently forgotten about.

There was a great deal of uncertainty amongst respondents as to what the future of advertising should be. The majority, however, commented that they believed that the responsibility was threefold – parents, advertisers and government officials all had an important role to play in determining policy.

It is going to be very hard to make changes – parents, teachers and activists can't do it alone – it's too big. A campaign to eliminate all food advertising to children would need to be led by the Government or a major organisation. However, the Government aren't going to get involved and the food companies are not going to change their opinions ... it's a vicious circle and I really don't know what can be done.

There was a lot of variation in teacher's opinion of the age at which children understand the content of advertisements.

I think even very young children understand advertising at a basic level – that advertisements are a gap in programming. I think by about six or seven they will understand that advertisements tell us about a product, but I do think they would need to be slightly older to understand the true meaning of advertising – selling and persuasiveness.

Another teacher focusing on the complex nature of children's understanding stated

That's a tough question – after all 'understanding' is relative. I do think though that young children know what ads are. They like the colours, jingles and music and can tell you about ads and can sing the tunes. However, I do believe that it's probably the older children who understand more about what the idea behind an ad is, in relation to selling and convincing someone to buy a product.

All the teachers were aware that children watched not just child specific but other programming as well, including soap operas and many post watershed programmes (*i.e.* programmes which may have adult content and are shown after 9 p.m.). One teacher found it rather frightening that the young children that she taught were so aware of the details of adult television programmes, particularly soap operas

They definitely watch a lot more than just child specific programmes and to be honest, I think they probably watch more of the other programming than they do child specific. I know in my own class [senior infants], the soap operas are a big deal – they are able to name all the characters and tell you about the programme. I think that is frightening.

The respondents here were unanimous in expressing their concern about this topic. Their pupils spend a large portion of their television viewing time, watching programmes not specifically created for their age group.

All of those interviewed believed that television influenced children in practically every facet of their lives, including their choices of food and clothes, their behaviour and their attitudes

I think television influences children greatly in what they wear, what they eat and in what they think. Pop stars, and film stars seem to have the most influence. Whatever they are doing, the children will want to do to ... it's frightening really.

The above comment is very significant in that she attributes more influence to television than to parents and teachers over children's lives

Oh, I think television influences children a great deal and in some cases it probably has more influence than their peers or parents. A lot of children try to emulate their favourite pop stars or soap stars.

Another teacher mentioned 'pester power' of children, in relation to the purchase of new products

In relation to food, television influences children because the advertisements are so attractive – the children want the products immediately. You can guarantee in my class that if there is a new chocolate bar or drink on the market, within a week a large proportion of the class will be talking about how they want it or how it was bought for them.

One teacher highlighted the difficulty that she has in getting children to concentrate on their school work, as many of them are tired before the school day even begins

I think children watch far too much television. I know for certain that some children in my class are watching television in the morning before they come to school – and could be doing this for an hour or two. It means that they are already tired when they get to school. Then they are watching it for several hours again in the evening.

Another expressed concern about the time spent watching television, especially at the weekends. Children she felt, were lacking sufficient rest and or physical exercise

Children definitely watch too much television and especially at weekends. I know from talking to the children in my class that they get up early on weekend mornings to watch cartoons. They aren't even getting a rest in the

morning. The same can be said for holiday periods – the television will be on all day long.

As the children in the sample were under eight years of age, it was believed that one hour, per day, should be the maximum any child of eight should watch television. Younger children, it was believed, should watch even less.

I think that by saying an hour maximum in the evenings when the children get home from school is generous. You have to factor in time for dinner, getting ready for bed and spending time with their family into the equation too – it can't all be about television.

Healthy Eating Policies

The teachers were asked a range of questions with regard to the Healthy Eating Policies in their schools. Each school had a written Healthy Eating Policy and all teachers regarded the promotion of healthy food and lifestyle choices as part of their role as teachers and mentors to their pupils. Each school receives funding from a Department of Education and Science initiative and purchases the food locally. The food is delivered each day to the school and children can choose what they would like that day within a range of options. All respondents were in agreement that the Healthy Eating Programme models a healthier lifestyle for children and provides them with a nourishing meal in the middle of the day. It is hoped that this positive reinforcement would ensure that children would begin to make healthier choices outside of school and that the time spent in school would counteract the effects of consumerism.

However, despite the evident satisfaction expressed by all teachers, this researcher was surprised to find that when asked in focus groups about their favourite foods, all of the children choose the unhealthy options, specifically, French Fries and chocolate. This point was reinforced by the majority of teachers who state that on the rare school days when children are allowed to bring in their own lunch, they invariably bring in junk food.

All interviewees were in agreement that there are many benefits to the children as a result of this programme. Teachers commented that they noticed that children have better levels of concentration when they do not eat junk food:

The children's concentration greatly improves when they have a healthy meal at lunch time and junk food is not consumed during the day. On days when children are allowed to bring in their own food and unhealthy food is consumed a lot of the children are restless and are unable to concentrate, so it's easy to see the benefits.

Several teachers referred to the lengthy summer holidays. During this break from the school routine, children lose the good habits they had developed during term time. The majority of teachers felt that when the children returned in September they had to begin to educate them all over again.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were conducted in classroom settings over a two day period. The focus group schedule was divided into three main areas: food recognition; food choices and television viewing and advertisements.

Television Viewing and Opinions on Advertisements

This was the section of the focus groups in which all children were the most vocal. It became apparent from the outset that the children were very media aware and watched a lot of television. Surprisingly, the participants watched a substantial amount of non child specific programmes and this outweighed the amount of child specific programmes viewed. The children, when asked to highlight their favourite programmes were able to list many programmes that they liked to watch and it soon became clear that all of the children watched television for several hours each evening and for extended periods at the weekend and during summer holidays. The respondents were able to list a whole host of programmes that are shown post watershed and were able to discuss the shows in depth. Many children expressed a preference for soap operas and they commented that they liked these shows because their mothers and older sisters watched them.

This finding proves that, in order to get a true picture of the advertisements that affect and influence children, advertising to children needs to be viewed in a broader context and should encompass all programmes that children watch and not just those designed specifically for them. Another issue is the sponsorship of programmes post watershed. A programme such as 'Desperate Housewives', a clear favourite with the children, is

sponsored by a wine company, 'Lindemans'. The children are, therefore, receiving brand messages about this product during several advertising breaks. Programme content is another aspect which needs to be considered as the children have shown a preference for post watershed and adult specific programme which deal with adult issues and themes. The children are exposed to these years before they are actually able to understand them fully.

Some of the children were unsure as to what advertisements were when they were asked initially. The researcher needed to prompt some of the children by telling them that advertisements were *'the gaps between the programmes on television'*. Others were able to identify what advertisements were when their friends began discussing the advertisements that they liked. Interestingly, the three main advertisements that the children identified, were for products not specifically designed for children. In the case of this research, the children were able to sing the jingles or songs associated with two advertisements. The first advertisement was for Lynx deodorant and the second was the McDonald's advertisement featuring Johnny Logan. Although the children were able to sing the jingle or song, they were unclear as to the item being advertised (Lynx) or the meaning of the advertisement (McDonalds). With respect to the latter, the children stated that they liked the advertisement because it was funny and they liked the song. Although this was an advertisement for McDonald's, it was clearly targeted at an older audience. The McDonald's advertisement featuring Johnny Logan was another advertisement which was the most widely recognised.

I love the McDonald's ad where the man is singing that song.

The McDonald's ad is great – I like it when he sings that song.

The children liked the song most in this advertisement, but were unable to identify who the person singing the song was when they were asked. A third advertisement that the children loved was the advert for the mobile phone company, 'Vodafone'. When asked what they liked about this advertisement the children said *'I love the cat ... he's so cute'. 'I like it because there is a cat in it and I love cats'*. However, when the children were asked if they knew what product the advertisement promoted, most of them did not know. Other children were not able to identify the product which the advertisement promoted, however they were able to point out specific features of the advertisement and they discussed it in general terms.

Food Recognition

The majority of participants in the focus groups were able to identify the foods shown on the flashcards. However, some confusion and ambiguity arose when the children were asked to decide if the foods were a healthy or unhealthy option. Many children had misconceptions about the nutritional properties of certain foods

Jaffa cakes are very healthy for you, because there is orange in them and my Mam told me that oranges are good for me.

Some children also believed that orange juice was a healthier option than fresh oranges.

Orange Juice is better than oranges – it tastes nicer.

The children could not give a reason for this when questioned. However, it may be due to the very attractive advertisements that appear on television for fruit juices. These advertisements would certainly appeal to parents as they promote the addition of certain minerals and vitamins in the juice. The bright and attractive colours used in the advertisements would appeal to the children and the depiction of happy, healthy children would entice parents to purchase the product.

What was interesting to note was that when children were shown a picture of a plate of French Fries they became very animated and excited. This did not occur when the children were shown pictures of other foods such as fruit or vegetables. All of the children knew what the French Fries were and, they were also aware that they were an unhealthy food option. One child stated that *they aren't good for you, but I love them* or another respondent commented that *they are bad for you, but if you eat them only a few times in a week, then it's okay*. The majority of the children consumed French Fries twice a week. For some respondents a trip to McDonald's on a Friday was seen as a treat, after the long school week. The children identified the French Fries in the flash card as *'chipper chips'* and were adamant that they were not *'McDonald's chips'* and therefore would not taste as nice. This demonstrates an acute awareness of that specific type of food.

The children responded in exactly the same animated way when they were shown the flash cards relating to chocolate. The children inspected the picture closely and pointed out which ones that they liked best. As the research was carried out by Easter, the children

were very vocal in pointing out which kind of Easter egg they would be receiving. As with the French Fries, the children knew that it was bad for you but they liked it too much not to eat it. Another participant commented on the taste of chocolate.

I know chocolate is bad for you, but I just love the taste of it so much

It is clear that most children in this research are aware of what constitutes a healthy diet, but the foods that they choose to consume do not always reflect this.

Lunches and Food Choices

As all the schools were participants in the school lunch programme, all the children had a roll with a variety of meats each day as well as pieces of fruit, yoghurts and either a carton of milk or juice. Overall, the children liked the food that they received as part of the Lunch Programme.

I like what we get for our lunch ... we can pick different kinds of fruit each day and we get different yoghurts as well which taste really nice.

It was startling to discover that some of the children did not eat breakfast before they left home in the mornings and this finding stresses the importance of the school lunch programme in ensuring that the children get a solid meal in the middle of the day. The children that did eat breakfast in the morning mostly ate breakfast cereal with sugar, toast and only three out of twenty participants had a juice drink in the morning.

I have cereal for my breakfast in the morning, with lots of sugar and milk.
Then I've some toast and cheese and a cup of tea.

The majority of participants ate breakfast at the weekend. Of the eighteen children who ate breakfast at the weekend, 15 said that they had a fried breakfast on either a Saturday or Sunday morning. Five participants commented that they had a fried breakfast on both Saturday and Sunday morning

Breakfast at the weekend is great. My dad cooks a fry for us on Saturday and Sunday. I love the weekends because of it.

Conclusions

This study showed some interesting findings which may be used as a basis for further study into the effects of advertising to children. The focus group participants were able to identify many of the advertisements on television, particularly when prompted by their peers. However, their favourite advertisements were generally advertisements designed for adults. They are also engaging in far more sedentary activities such as surfing the Internet and video gaming. Therefore, the total amount of time spent on these activities represents a large portion of their week.

It is clearly evident that this is having an effect on children's health and well-being. Teachers stated that children come to school tired and unable to concentrate, due to either watching early morning television before school begins or, from lack of sleep the previous night, due to watching television past a reasonable bed time hour. The children confirmed this in the focus group discussions. Whilst the percentage of child specific programmes that they watch is high, they are also watching other non child specific programmes and more importantly they are watching lots of programmes that are shown post watershed and are clearly intended for an adult audience. The children watched some of these programmes with their parents or older siblings. Several issues arise from this, particularly the suitability of the programme content together with the increase of the number of advertisements to which children are exposed. This emphasises the point that when one considers advertising to children, one must take into account that children are viewing advertisements aimed primarily at adults. The participants varied greatly in their opinions of the age of advertisement understanding. Initially, all respondents were in agreement about children's preference for foods with poor nutritional content. However, without exception they all believed that the Healthy Eating Programme has been very successful in schools, despite initial teething problems. It has been fully embraced by teachers, pupils and parents. The children are benefiting from it; teachers have confirmed that their concentration and behaviour are better when they eat healthier foods. All participants were very strong in their emphasis on the need for good quality food, high in nutritional value, which is also tasty and appealing to children.

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The Performing Arts: Instruments of Social Inclusion during Early Childhood Learning

Sharon Phelan, *Institute of Technology, Tralee*

Abstract

OMEP early childhood professionals aim to create an all-inclusive society from which ‘no one is excluded on account of colour, creed, nationality or political conviction’, (Allen 1952, 4) This paper supports this aim, when it advocates the use of performing arts, especially dance, as a tool of social inclusion during early childhood learning. It addresses the notion from differing perspectives. Initially, it explores attempts made by Irish educators to create an all-inclusive society. Then the study examines ways through which the performing arts can facilitate children to explore and become part of their own indigenous culture. The paper also highlights the potential of the performing arts to educate young children about other cultures existent within the Irish culture today.

Introduction: Cultural Initiatives in Irish Education Today

Intercultural education, promoting the diversity of cultures within learning environments, is central policy at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). As the NCCA plays a central part in education in Ireland today, it follows that intercultural education is promoted at all levels, pre-school, primary level and second level, primary level. The NCCA launched *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School* in October 2006. It ‘enabled students to respect and celebrate diversity, to promote equality and to challenge unfair discrimination’ (NCCA, 2006a). *Intercultural Education Opportunities across the Curriculum*, a complementary document, was launched the same month; it suggested ways through which intercultural education could be realized (NCCA, 2006b)

Specific NCCA syllabi also promoted intercultural education at second level. The CSPE Programme (Civic, Social and Political Education Programme), ‘encourage(d) the pupil to apply positive attitudes, imagination and empathy in learning about, and encountering other people and cultures’, whereas Social Studies modules in the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, encouraged a ‘greater understanding’ of people from other cultural

backgrounds. At Primary level, an ‘Intercultural Education Curriculum...sensitizes the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of positive ways of life, customs and world views and that this breath of human life enriches all’. Exemplars, contained within the curriculum, aim to aid teachers. They focus on Performing Arts, (music, visual art, singing and storytelling) as valuable educational tools through which intercultural education can be realized. Other course content, at primary level within the NCCA, promotes cultural integration. The SPHE, (Social, Personal and Health Education Curriculum), supports the notion that primary school children acquire ‘understanding of their own culture and traditions’ as well as ‘respect for and an appreciation of human and cultural diversity’ (NCCA *Curriculum On-line*, at www.curriculum.ie, Civic, Social and Political Education at www.cspe.ie and *Social, Personal and Health Education* at www.sphe.ie).

This paper examines the capacity of Performing Arts to function as a tool to promote children’s sense of identity and belonging within differing cultural contexts. When the NCCA published *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* in 2004, the document was considered a milestone. It was the ‘first consultative document (which) focused primarily on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six years’ (NCCA, 2004). *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* re-echoed Second Level and Primary School principles surrounding cultural integration, as the rationale aimed to ‘recognize the diversity of ability, culture, language, faith, social group and ethnicity which influences children’s learning and development.’ (*ibid.*)

Towards a Framework for Early Learning documented four underlying principles. They included well being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking. The third principle, identity and belonging, is pertinent to this paper as it stated:

‘It is important that children develop a healthy and positive sense of their own identity and their place in society. Positive messages about their family, culture, faith and language help them to feel valued and respected in society. Children who come from a home where the language, culture and faith are not those of the wider society, should be supported in the developing of their identity and belonging within their own language, culture and faith, as well as within the language, culture and faith of the wider Irish society.’ (NCCA, 2004).

This paper will examine the capacity of the Performing Arts to function as a tool, to promote children's sense of identity and belonging within differing cultural contexts. The approach will be twofold. The paper will advocate the exploration of native performing arts. It will also suggest ways through which performing arts can become an intercultural tool, crossing cultural boundaries and promoting relationships between children from different cultures.

Performing Arts: Tools of Social Inclusion

This section explores the merits of teaching Irish dance. As an indigenous part of the Irish culture, it is desirable that all young children are given the opportunity to learn it, irrespective of their cultural background. The dance form will unite and immerse them within the Irish culture.

This study examines the system of teaching practiced by *Siamsa Tíre*, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, as case in point. *Siamsa Tíre*, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, was established by Fr. Pat Ahern, a local priest from North Kerry, in early 1974.

Siamsa aimed 'to continue creating new folk theatre presentations, drawing on our traditions and a rich cultural reservoir' (*Siamsa Tíre* website) The theatre operated training centres for young children at the *tithe Siamsa*, (*Siamsa* houses) at Carraig, in the west Kerry Gaeltacht, and at Finuge near Listowel. The *tithe* were built in the style of the traditional Irish cottage. They had thatched roofs, stone floors and an open hearth. It was a way of 'capturing the traditional way of life to give a sense of that to the children'. (Ahern, 2005)

Buckland states when dancers identify with a 'particular geographical area, (they) discover the various types of traditional dancing practised there within a given span of time.' (Buckland, 1983, p.49) 'Within a given span of time', usually three years in duration, the traditional dance style of North Kerry became meaningful for the children in the *tithe Siamsa*. The style was that of Jerry Molyneux, a dance master who practised in North Kerry during the first part of the 20C.

The children explored local folk traditions using dance and other art forms as tools of expression. At Carraig, in the west Kerry Gaeltacht, children used movement to tell the

story of 'The Wren Boys'. This was a local custom practised on December 26th, St. Stephen's Day. 'Wren Boys' travelled from house to house playing instruments, dancing and singing 'The Wren':

'The wren, the wren the king of all birds,
St. Stephen's Day he got caught in the furze,
Although he is small his family is grey
Cheer up old woman and give us a cake
Up with the kettle and down with the pan
And give us some money to bury the wren'
(Anon)

In Finuge, the children presented the life of Jerry Molyneaux, the local dance master who danced in the early 20thC. During the show, lights dimmed and a young child stepped onto a half-door laid on the ground; he represented Molyneaux as a young man. As the child danced the 'Blackbird', (a step danced by Molyneaux as a young man), the children momentarily re-entered the life and time of the ancestral dance master, Molyneaux.

In her 'Midway Model' Jacqueline Smith-Autard advocates the inclusion of the 'imagination and public artistic' (Smith-Autard, 2002, p. 27) The children in the *tithe* composed their own performance piece using creative movement and Irish dance, but their annual summer performance provided an end-goal. It motivated them to provide a qualitative work of art. The children at each *teach Siamsa* aimed to become accepted into Siamsa's performing company.

In 1980, I was invited to learn at the *teach Siamsa* at Finuge. There, I developed an innate respect for traditional art forms and my local heritage. I attribute this to the all-inclusive method within which I learned Irish dance. Today, I lecture in Irish dance at the IT Tralee in Kerry and I am currently completing a PhD in traditional Irish Dance. My focus is to fulfil Ahern's vision of maintaining the Kerry dance tradition using research and theory, and practical dance sessions. My students relay Irish traditions using Irish dance as a means of expression.

Performing Arts: Intercultural Tools

The preceding section of this paper examined the value of children exploring the Irish

culture using dance types and styles native to the Irish culture. This section explores the merits of immersing children into other cultural dance forms. Approximately 10% of children in Ireland were not born here. *Stolta – the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* states:

Quality early childhood environments should demonstrate respect for diversity through promoting a sense of belonging for all children within the cultural heritage of Ireland. They should also provide rich and varied experiences which will support children’s ability to value social and cultural diversity. (CECDE, 2006).

Because dance, visual art and music are non-verbal, they are accessible to all children, irrespective of their native tongue. Thus, children can interact, using their bodies. *The Framework for Early Learning* supports this notion, when it states ‘while most children will eventually master oral language as their main form of communication, others may need to use a range of non-verbal means of communication, including picture, symbols or gestures.’ (NCCA, 2004)

The *Framework for Early Learning* also advocates bilingualism (*ibid*). This notion can be explored through the language of dance. Valerie Preston-Dunlop, dance-in-educationalist at the Laban Centre in London, considers dance to be ‘a language exclusive to itself’. She states:

‘It has meaning ... semantic content
It is structured ... syntactic organization
It is danced ... utterance
Each of the three
totally dependent on the other.’
(Preston-Dunlop, 1979, p. 5)

She considers visual art and music other languages. To accept this theory implies potential for bilingualism within the performing arts. The children will learn dance and other art forms in congruence, gaining technical expertise as well as contextualizing them into their respective cultures. They will respect each other’s folk dance cultures.

There are many ways through which children can explore the cultural backgrounds of their friends. In early childhood learning, Ethnochoreology¹ and Ethnomusicology²

occur as children from differing cultural backgrounds swap songs, music or dances. Whilst Michael Flatley and Maria Pages combined complex Irish and Spanish dance technique in Riverdance, two young children can intertwine simpler folk dance forms.

Common dance features will also unite children from differing cultural backgrounds. International dance stimuli include 'tree worship dances, animal dances, work dances, war dances, courtship dances and recreational dances' (Whelan, 2000 p.8) These common stimuli will motivate all children irrespective of their own indigenous cultures.

All children have a 'natural urge' to dance and the Laban Dance-in-Education model is accessible to all young children, irrespective of their social background. The *Elementary Movement Themes*, based on fundamental movement principles of space, relationships, time and flow, motivate them to improvise and compose original pieces of work. (Laban, 1964, p.20) Using Laban's creative movement and cultural themes children can explore other cultures; they can travel from county to country as birds or fish, or on airplanes.

'Behaviour & attitudes are not fixed but are affected by cultural practices & social contexts' (Adair, 1992, p.38) The teaching of Irish dance or music alone is a suspect concept. Exposed to only one dance form, children can assume its importance over other folk dance forms. It does not reflect the multi cultural society which surrounds them.

Thus, early childhood educators must gain a repertoire of simple songs, tunes and dance steps from other societies. In reality, the situation proves difficult. Primary teachers need national in-service, resources and visits, but there are few dance in-services provided. If early childhood educators are to realize the aims of Siolta and the National Framework for Early Learning documents, they require similar support.

Conclusion

In Ireland, educators aim to create an all-inclusive society. Whilst this paper concentrated on dance as a tool of social inclusion, all performing arts can facilitate the same purpose. Teaching methodologies, which involve the swapping and fusing of art forms, integrate children of differing social backgrounds; on the other hand, when Irish dance is employed as a tool of expression, it immerses all children into the native lifestyle and its customs.

- ¹ Ethnochoreology is the study of folk dance. The ethnochoreologist views dance as an influencing force within a society.
- ² Ethnomusicology is the study of folk music. The ethnomusicologist views music as an influencing force within a society

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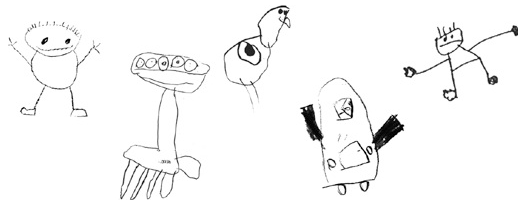
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- NCCA *Curriculum On-line*, at: www.curriculum.ie
- Civic, Social and Political Education, (Online),available at: [http:// www.cspe.ie/](http://www.cspe.ie/)
- Leaving Certificate Applied, (Online),available at: [http:// www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)
- Intercultural Education Curriculum, (Online),available at: [http:// www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)
- Social, Personal and Health Education Curriculum, (Online), available at: [http:// www.sphe.ie](http://www.sphe.ie)

From the Field: Perspectives on Practice



Childminding Ireland 2006 Survey of Members

Introduction

Childminding Ireland, the National Association for Childminders, is an organisation dedicated to working for Childminding, providing information, advice and support to Childminders and parents. Childminding is the largest sub-sector within childcare in Ireland, and is generally undertaken by self-employed people who look after children in the child's home or in the childminder's home. There are almost 120,000 children minded by 37,000 Childminders in Ireland. 70% of parents of pre-school children who use childcare use a Childminder and 83% of parents with school aged children who use childcare use a Childminder (CSO Quarterly National Household Survey Special Module 2006).

The Survey

Childminding Ireland conducts an annual survey of its members, which is the only method we have of giving an annual snapshot of what is happening with Childminders in Ireland. The results of the 2005 Survey appeared in the first issue of *An Leanbh Óg*. In this article, *Childminding Ireland* presents some of the main findings from the 2006 Survey.

There was a 34% response rate from our members and the survey was completely confidential. Replies came from Childminders from 24 counties. The respondents were evenly spread between rural and urban locations.

The age spread of the respondents was as follows:

34 years and under	32%
35 – 44 years	47%
45 – 54 years	15%
Aged 55 or over	6%

It was always assumed that Childminding was something that people did while their own children were young, and this would seem to confirm this.

Like the 2005 survey, the gender of respondents was over 99% female. 77% had childcare responsibilities of their own, 39% of respondents had pre-school children, 54% had school going children. 23% either had no children or their children were adults.

The majority of respondents have been childminding for between 2-5 years (32%). There has been a shift from last year, where the majority of respondents were Childminding for longer than 5 years.

Support and Training

Childminding Ireland were very pleased with the finding that all respondents are trained, and have some level of qualification.

- Nationally accredited childcare qualification *e.g.* FETAC. (47% of the respondents)
- the Quality Awareness Programme (59% of the respondents, representing a significant increase on 2006, where 46% of respondents had completed this course)
- First Aid training (43% of the respondents)
- Other courses and training held included NNEB; Child Protection course, Diploma in Montessori, Diploma in Special Needs, Childminding Ireland's Registered Childminders' course, School of Practical Childcare, teaching and nursing qualifications *etc.*

There was a large take up of the Childminder Development Grant amongst respondents. This grant is designed to assist Childminders to enhance the quality and/or safety of what they offer by helping them to purchase toys, equipment or to make minor adaptations to their home. The grant is linked to quality awareness training.

Respondents use multiple sources of support, including their local County Childcare Committee, Childminder Advisory Officer, Pre-School Inspector, Public Health Nurse, Local Partnership, Childminding Networks *etc.* In relation to inspections, almost 50% of respondents have been inspected, and over 50% of this group found it be to a satisfactory, even positive experience. Certain categories of childminder are legally obliged under the *Childcare (Pre-school Services) (Amendment) Regulations 2006* to notify the Health Service Executive that they are carrying on a childminding service, while others may opt for voluntary notification and inspection. See the *National Guidelines for Childminders* (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006).

Some figures from the Survey:

- The average number of children minded by respondents was 4.
- 28% of respondents provided after-school care
- 45% of respondents provided care for a baby (under 1 year old)
- 91% of respondents minded children aged between 2-5 years.
- 84% of respondents were not related to any of the children they minded. (71% in 2005)
- 16% of respondents were related to at least one minded child.
- 11% of respondents are minding a child with special needs

Rates for childminding:

Since *Childminding Ireland* were advised from the Competitions Authority that we can no longer provide recommended rates for Childminding, one of the most useful items from our survey is the average rate for Childminding.

Survey results revealed significant variances in fees for Childminding throughout the country (full breakdown available on our website). The overall national average rate for a full-time place is €138.65. There has been a 7.5% increase on this average rate since the survey last year. Prices range from €60 to €280, with a mean rate of €135.

Most respondents (88%) had a Contract or Agreement in place with parents.

Around 2/3 of Childminders are paid when the child is sick even if the child does not attend, but do not get paid anything when they themselves are sick. Over 60% of Childminders are not paid for any holidays. Of the 38% who get paid for holidays, on average they received holiday pay for 15 days (3 weeks).

34% of respondents do not work alone, with 28% working with an assistant, and 6% with a spouse.

There has been an increase in tax compliance amongst members.

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Childminders' Concerns

Childminders were asked what were their issues and concerns as a Childminder. The primary concerns were regulations and good practice. They were also concerned about keeping accounts, meeting standards for inspection, filling vacancies, making a profit and keeping child records.

It is perhaps not surprising that Childminders found it challenging to stay up to date with legislation, as 2006 saw the introduction of the revised Pre-School Regulations and guidelines on Voluntary Notification.

Childminders were also asked what were the most challenging aspects of managing the childcare element of their job. The following emerged (in rank order):

1. Behaviour Management
2. Isolation
3. Caring for and stimulating a group of mixed age children
4. Bringing children out and about whilst complying with new car safety legislation;
Managing children's behaviour

Childminders also gave us valuable information on our services, and what they would like to see *Childminding Ireland* doing to forward the cause of Childminding and what services they would like to see on offer.

Childminding Ireland want to thank all the Childminders who took the time to

respond to this survey. We first did a survey in 2005, and it was so useful in directing our work, that we are making it an annual event which will be very useful in identifying trends and patterns.

The full findings are available on our website, at www.childminding.ie or on request from our office.

Contact details

Childminding Ireland, 9 Bulford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow.

Tel 01 287 8466 email info@childminding.ie

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About OMEP

OMEP (Ireland) is a registered charity (charity no. CHY 14213), dedicated to working for children's needs in Early Education and Care. The Patrons of OMEP (Ireland) are Prof. Francis Douglas and Dr. Mary Horgan, Dept. of Education, UCC, and Dr. Nóirín Hayes, Dublin Institute of Technology.

Mission Statement

OMEP (Ireland)'s objective is to use every possible means to promote the optimum conditions for the well-being of all children, their development and happiness within their families, institutions, and society. To this end, OMEP assists any undertaking to improve early childhood education, and supports scientific research that can influence these conditions.

About OMEP

OMEP (Ireland) is affiliated to OMEP – the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education. This is an international, non-governmental organisation, founded in 1948 to benefit children under the age of 8 years throughout the world. OMEP is currently established in over 70 countries and has a consultative status with UNESCO, UNICEF, the Council of Europe and other international organisations. The aim of OMEP is to promote for all children the optimum conditions that will ensure their well-being, development and happiness in their families, institutions and communities.

OMEP supports scientific research that positively influences the conditions in which children live, grow and develop. To this end, OMEP

- champions children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- supports research which may influence the conditions in which children live, develop and play.
- helps in any undertaking, which will improve early childhood education
- carries out projects which contribute to an understanding between peoples and to peace in the world.
- includes all those who wish to make the world a better place for children, whether as

a parent, carer, researcher or policy maker. This includes all those who are interested in health, social policy, early education, psychology, sociology, the law as it relates to children, special education, disadvantage *etc.*

OMEP assists in undertakings that have the objective of improving early childhood education and care in its broadest interpretation.

To this end, OMEP (Ireland) holds an annual research conference at which a variety of papers are presented on a variety of topics relating to early childhood in general. The annual conference provides a forum at which the most recent developments in early childhood research and practice in Ireland can be presented and shared with practitioners, policy makers and administrators. OMEP (Ireland) also publishes *An Leanbh Óg* (the young child) a peer-reviewed journal of papers relating to early childhood studies in general.

Membership of OMEP (Ireland) is open to any person or organisation that supports its aims, including professionals from any discipline with an interest in the well-being of children and their families, administrators, parents or politicians. Many OMEP members also belong to other early years organisations. Members are involved in early childhood education and care at many levels including direct work with children, the training of early years educators, policy making and implementation.

The benefits of full membership include the twice-yearly International Journal of Early Childhood, a regular OMEP Ireland newsletter, a copy of the OMEP Ireland journal, *An Leanbh Óg*, and a reduced rate for attendance at OMEP conferences.

CONTACT OMEP: Membership forms are available by contacting OMEP by emailing the secretary at omepireland@eircom.net or by contacting Anna Ridgway at the address below:

Dr. Anna Ridgway,
Dept. of Education,
University College Cork.
Tel: 353-21-490 2259/353-86-872 1168
Fax: 353-21-427 0291
Email: aridgway@education.ucc.ie

Notes for Intending Contributors

An Leanbh Óg – The OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies is a peer-reviewed journal presenting research on topics relating to young children. *An Leanbh Óg* welcomes articles relating to the field of early childhood studies in the broadest sense, including those relating to early years education and care, social studies, child health, child development, policy issues and issues relating to practice.

Submission of Papers:

Papers submitted should meet the following criteria in terms of presentation and content: Papers should be original; they should not be under consideration by another journal and they should not have been published elsewhere. Papers should be written in a clear straightforward style, avoiding technical jargon as far as possible. Papers should not exceed 3,000 to 5,000 words in length; shorter papers are acceptable. The name, address, institution or affiliation if applicable, and contact details (phone, e-mail) of the author(s) should not appear on the paper itself, but should be given on a separate sheet, along with an abstract of 100 words.

It is the responsibility of authors to show that they have addressed any ethical issues that may arise in connection with their research and that they have obtained the necessary consent from children, parents and settings if they wish to include photographs, examples of children's work and so on. A statement to this effect should accompany papers submitted.

Papers should be submitted in Word format. They should be double or 1.5 spaced, in Times New Roman 12 point. The use of sub-headings is recommended to enhance readability. Diagrams, tables etc should be clear and legible. Any photographs or other illustrations should not be incorporated into the text, but should be sent separately, with the place where they are to be inserted clearly indicated in the text, e.g. Photo 2 here.

The author, date system should be used for citations in the text, e.g. Murphy, (2006). All works referred to in the text should be included in the list of references at the end of the paper. The required style for references and citing works in the text along with the other

academic conventions in papers is to be found in *Exploring Children's Lives: A Handbook of Early Childhood Research* (2006), available from OMEP Ireland, c/o Dept of Education, University College Cork.

Papers should be submitted to the Editor, Dr. Rosaleen Murphy, by e-mail to: omepireland@eircom.net, with a copy also to: aridgway@education.ucc.ie



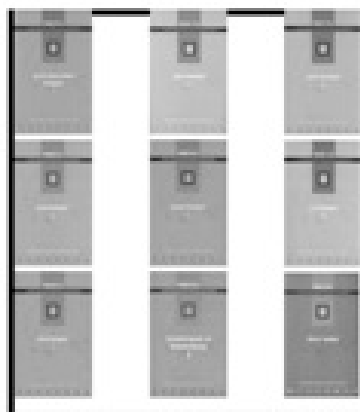
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