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A Summary of the Evaluation of the Community Playgroup Initiative

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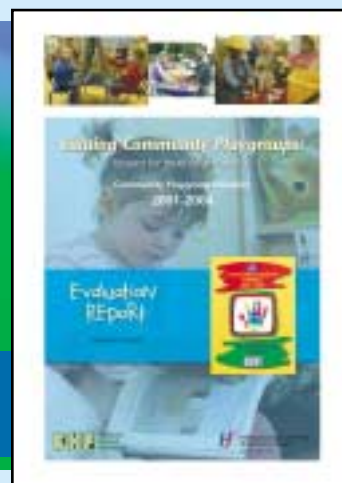


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KHF: Community Matters No. 4

A Summary of the Evaluation Report of the Community Playgroup Initiative 2001-2004 APRIL 2005

**Valuing Community Playgroups: lessons for
practice and policy by Geraldine French**



The Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*) was established and funded by the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) in partnership with the South Eastern Health Board (SEHB*) and with assistance from the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP). This three-year project was developed to assist community playgroups to deliver a high quality sessional service and to identify and evaluate the impact of funding and support on the quality of service provided to children and their families. A further aim of *cpi* was to highlight the value of community playgroups. Among the objectives of *cpi* were that children and families would benefit, that staff and committees would have opportunities to put ideas into operation and that new skills acquired would have a lasting impact.

The need for formative evaluation was recognised from the outset. It was hoped that the evaluation process would result in the dissemination of the information gathered and the lessons learned. This is the summary of the evaluation report which serves to fulfill that objective.

Background to *cpi*

The KHF, through its experience of providing grant aid, recognised the value of community playgroups and their vulnerability in the face of regulatory changes and a lack of sufficient funding and support. Having decided to devise a strategic approach to the development and operation of community playgroups, KHF approached the SEHB with a view to collaborative work. Both the KHF and the SEHB value community playgroups as a means of family support. They recognise that adults often take part in adult

education and personal and community development as a consequence of being involved in community playgroups. A partnership was agreed and a project called the Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*) was established. It was decided that KHF would take the lead role in the employment of a co-ordinator and the overall management and supervision of *cpi*. An inter-agency expert advisory group was then established to assist in the development of *cpi* and the ongoing work.

Description of *cpi*

The *cpi* formally began in 2001 with the appointment of the co-ordinator. A fund was created from which five selected community playgroups could avail of up to €45,700 over a three-year period, from 2002 to 2004. The role of the co-ordinator was to assist the groups in planning and prioritising improvements in their services. The playgroups selected to participate were:

- * **Askea Community Playgroup**, Askea, Carlow (Carlow/Kilkenny Community Care Area)
- * **Slieverue Community Playgroup**, Slieverue, Co. Kilkenny (Waterford Community Care Area)
- * **St Oliver's Community Playgroup**, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary (South Tipperary Community Care Area)
- * **Teach na bPáistí Community Playschool**, Ferns, Co. Wexford (Wexford Community Care Area)
- * **The Rower Inistioge Pre-School**, The Rower, Co. Kilkenny (Carlow/Kilkenny Community Care Area)

The playgroups were not required to spend their funding in any particular way but on what was needed to enhance the quality of their service, and were

*The South Eastern Health Board (SEHB) became the Health Service Executive South Eastern Area, on 1 January 2005. For the purposes of this summary the title SEHB is used.

guided in the prudent use of the funding by the co-ordinator.

Evaluation of *cpi*



In April 2002 an evaluator was appointed to conduct the formative evaluation of *cpi*. It was intended that the evaluation would inform both the development of high quality and professional practice and measure the impact of support and funding on the five selected playgroups. Quality in *cpi* was seen as an ongoing, dynamic process that incorporated criteria specified by, and relevant to, the individual playgroups.

The methodology of the evaluation incorporated:

- ✘ the development of an observation tool and consequent observations of playgroups in practice;
- ✘ focus group meetings;
- ✘ self-reported questionnaires;
- ✘ telephone surveys;
- ✘ documentary mapping actions;
- ✘ the examination of action plans and reports.

The evaluation was conducted in three phases corresponding to the end of each of the three years of *cpi* (2002, 2003, 2004). It involved:

- children and staff of the five playgroups;
- 25 per cent of parents whose children attended the morning sessions;
- members of the management committees;
- the development officer of KHF;
- the co-ordinator of *cpi*;
- members of the advisory group of *cpi*;
- regional co-ordinator of child care services, child care managers, pre-school services officers and a Children First implementation officer of the SEHB;
- trustees of the KHF;
- the monitoring team leader, EOCP(ADM).

In this evaluation the findings relating to *cpi* are presented and analysed according to three dimensions:

- **Dimension 1** *Playgroups in operation*
- **Dimension 2** *cpi: model of delivery*
- **Dimension 3** *Community playgroups and family support*

Findings of *cpi*

Dimension 1: Playgroups in operation

Child-centred environment

Regarding the child-centred environment, the evaluation process showed that the key area where *cpi* had influenced the quality of the playgroups was the division of the playgroup rooms into interest areas. This led to greater investment and engagement in play by the children. Equipment and materials were more available and accessible to children through lower shelving systems. The materials were more interesting and varied, and reflected real life. There was increased provision of outdoor experiences. The environments were more welcoming and stimulating.

Activities and routine

There was evidence that children knew what was to happen next and that they learned the routine. The activities were more child-centred and focused on what children were interested in doing. There was much greater choice of activities and an atmosphere of active learning in the playgroups. The playgroups were more enjoyable places to be for adults and children. The following comment from a staff member in the final evaluation best illustrates the learning resulting from *cpi*:

“Children have more engagement with real life experiences, for example, one child was looking for the bar code on the cornflakes packet to ‘scan’ at the ‘shop’ and then did so with all the packets. When it came to cups, he examined them and then put them through one by one. Children are using their observation skills in the world and implementing them in play.”

Adult-child interaction

There have been positive enhancements to the adult-child interactions. In general, adults were less directive and more supportive of children’s initiatives and ideas. They listened more to children and there was much greater emphasis on encouraging children’s independence. There was evidence of child-led play where children did not have to wait for an adult or for the other children to engage in activities. Staff were better organised.

Management committees

The key learning from work with the management committees was that, although committees have been

enhanced through engagement with *cpi*, the commitment required for voluntary groups to manage services, and the burden of dealing with the legal issues regarding employment and salaries, remain a concern.

Development and training

Development and training of staff, parents and committees have greatly contributed to enhancing quality in the services. Practice improved as a result of staff training, and committees worked more effectively as a result of committee skills training.

Parental perception and participation

Parents were very appreciative of the improvements in the services, and the participation and involvement of parents increased. However, some parents were not clear about what a community playgroup was, and what their role should be within it.

Dimension 2: Model of delivery

Role of co-ordinator

Evidence from *cpi* shows that the role of the co-ordinator was primarily one of enabler. This was particularly apparent in the pre-development stage of building relationships with the playgroups, which was critical in the development of the playgroups' confidence and capacity. The co-ordinator role supported the playgroups' ongoing professional development. It was interactive, formative and developmental in approach and part of a dynamic process.

“Quality improvement is basically about relationships. Becoming a ‘mentor’ or ‘critical friend’ and advisor to services requires that we build trusting, empowering relationships. Understanding the complex cultural and resource context of a service requires on-site contact” (advisory group member, final evaluation).

Visits

The regular visits to the playgroups and contact with parents gave the co-ordinator accurate and firsthand knowledge of the operation of the services and an opportunity to identify, with staff and committees, any issues that needed to be addressed.

Action plans

Short-term action plans were developed and reviewed and have contributed to the development of reflective practice. The co-ordinator role allowed for recommendations to be made, while recognising that the playgroups and their committees made the decisions.

Cluster group sessions

Cluster group sessions, where the five playgroups met for training and information, had the effect of forging and strengthening connections between individuals, services and communities.



Funding

Considering the very robust positive responses that have been received through the evaluation, it is clear that relatively small funding can make a substantial impact. This implies that long-term core funding must be provided to ensure these important community playgroups are sustainable and to enhance the quality of the services. While increased funding can enhance quality, experience gained through *cpi* suggests that building capacity and support, guidance, education and affirmation must also be provided. The playgroups in *cpi* found it *“difficult to isolate funding from support”*; *the “success was (the result of) funding combined with advice on how to spend it”*; and *“there was security in knowing that wise investments were being made”* (playgroups, final evaluation). Furthermore, *“these benefits include capital expansions, renovations and staff training but also a long list of other quality improvements that did not have an associated cost but were brought about with the support of the cpi co-ordinator and the development of plans for each service”* (ADM, final evaluation).

Networking and integration

The *cpi* created a forum to facilitate the inclusion and participation of a wide variety of parties all of whom were concerned with community playgroups. This networking and integration process included engaging with the local city and county childcare committees, with other networks and local structures, writing reports and disseminating *cpi* literature. The project acted as an advocate for community playgroups.

Policy development

The *cpi* contributed to policy development by responding to public invitations for submissions, presenting information at conferences, highlighting issues of concern for community playgroups, and by hosting a regional conference.

Dimension 3: Community playgroups and family support

Family support measure

The experience of *cpi* showed that community playgroups operate as a family support measure. One of the key findings was that parents had social

networking opportunities through their children attending a local community playgroup. Participants in the evaluation said that community playgroups provided accessible, flexible, child-centred childcare that could meet changing needs. They had an open-door policy to all children, irrespective of ability, additional needs, socio-economic status or ethnic background.

Community playgroups provide opportunities for parental participation and training. Parents and children can gain, when learning is shared about the important benefits of having stimulating early experiences through play, and when professional practice with children can be observed.

Community benefit

Communities benefited from *cpi* by having access to high quality early childhood services. Community effort and spirit were fostered through joint activities with families.

Early intervention

The community playgroups were conduits for language support and other appropriate services for families with young children and created opportunities for essential early intervention.

Affordability

Because they are not run for profit, community playgroups create a particular ethos that is absent from commercially run pre-school provision and make it affordable for families on low incomes. The affordability of a community playgroup was fundamental to some parents' ability to use the service. The community playgroups were often the only service that offered children opportunities for play, social interactions and valuable pre-school experience in their communities.

“A community playgroup where things ‘are going well’ offers an accessible, inviting, friendly, non-threatening and aesthetically pleasing environment to families. Parents can hand over their children to playgroup leaders in the knowledge that their children are safe, being well cared for, and are thriving. This matters enormously to all families”

(advisory group member, final evaluation).

Key recommendations for playgroups in operation

Early childhood practitioners

- The child-centred environment indoors and outdoors should be carefully planned to meet the needs of children by providing them with the optimum opportunities to work independently, to make choices, decisions and solve problems. Children should have access to the outdoors on a daily basis.
- Attention to healthy eating, including a healthy eating policy, is recommended.

- It is recommended that cultural diversity be reflected in the playgroups. Books, materials, and experiences should be provided that positively reflect diverse cultures that children may not likely see, as well as those that represent their own family life and cultural group.
- Adults should engage with children as partners in their play, silently observing and listening to what children are doing before entering their play, assuming roles suggested by them and following children's cues.
- The quality of interactions between the adults and children in a service is enhanced by a greater adult to child ratio. A recommended ratio for professional practice is one adult to eight pre-school children. For optimum child development, a limit of 20 children per room is further recommended.
- It is recommended that early childhood practitioners incorporate planning in their daily routines, building on children's strengths and interests and putting the child at the centre of the planning process.
- A structure for holding meetings within the service where reflective practice, evaluation and action planning can happen should be established. Professional practice requires observation, assessment, sharing and planning.
- Through the experience of *cpi*, training has had a very positive impact. It is recommended that all staff should have continual access to training: both accredited and in-service professional development.

Management committees

The structure of community playgroups requires a management committee. It is recommended that committees:

- encourage parental participation as well as participation by the wider community;
- allocate tasks to encourage a more equal ownership and distribution of work;
- minute every decision;



- be aware of employment and financial responsibilities;
- include a social and fun element;
- have regular meetings approximately every six weeks;
- include the play leader and support open, transparent and two-way communication;
- identify sources of support when a problem arises and deal with problems that arise;
- ensure policies and procedures are implemented and up to date;
- establish a three-year rather than a one-year committee structure; new members need to be informed; an induction period is needed; and training should be provided on committee skills on an ongoing basis.

Parental participation

Parental participation in the services is closely linked to the issue of management committees. From the experience of *cpi* it is recommended that:

- the importance of parental participation in the development of community playgroups be made clear to parents from the beginning;
- services adopt a variety of ways of delivering information: having a notice board, giving notes, asking parents verbally to notify others and, as is the practice in one *cpi* playgroup, group texting;
- booklets for parents should be provided for each family; this could include an explanation of the philosophy and ethos of community playgroups in addition to opening times, activities, daily routines and any policies and procedures developed;
- policies and procedures should be available to parents, at a minimum, on admissions, child protection, behaviour management, parental involvement, health and safety, record keeping and confidentiality;
- parents should be regularly asked for their views on how they feel their child is getting on in the service;
- training and social outings for parents combined with fundraising ideas such as a sponsored 'toddle' could be provided.

Key recommendations for *cpi*: model of delivery

Co-ordinator or development worker

- Any co-ordinator or development worker should have a special interest and motivation to work in the early childhood sector; have expertise on early childhood care and education; know where and how to access information and keep abreast of changes in legislation that would affect community playgroups;
- Direct ongoing contact through visits between a co-ordinator or development worker and the site

is recommended and is essential for initial building of trust;

- It is recommended that visits should be at a minimum twice a term;
- Reflective practice should be encouraged through establishing a structure for meetings within the service where evaluation and action planning can happen;
- Creating opportunities for community playgroups to get together in cluster groups is recommended;
- The general support needs of community playgroups should not be underestimated; the role of co-ordinator or development worker needs to be flexible enough to respond to situations as the need arises.

Funding

- The fact that most funding went on current as opposed to capital expenditure implies that, in order to provide sustainable high quality sessional services, funding will have to be ongoing, long-term and directed towards salaries (as opposed to once-off capital grants for building and equipment).

Key recommendations for community playgroups and family support

- Community playgroups are a valuable family support service and should be aided with modest finances and developmental support;
- The Health Service Executive's (HSE) role as a family support mechanism or measure, in supporting community playgroups, should be recognised and valued;
- Affordable childcare should be seen as an essential element of a family support policy which should be child-centred. It is recommended that fees be maintained as low as possible to allow all families to access places. A sliding scale could be introduced for those parents who are unemployed or who are on low incomes;
- Secure premises should be made available cheaply by communities to playgroups; awareness within communities of the value of the playgroups is needed.

Key recommendations for policymakers and programme developers

- Community playgroups should be freely accessible to all children in every community and a guaranteed basic allowance or capitation fee per child should be given to the playgroup by government to provide pre-school places for children (as in the *Department of Education Northern Ireland Pre-School Expansion Programme*).
- Management committees need support on a national, regional and local level to alleviate their

onerous employment and accounting responsibilities. A 'national community playgroup programme', which identifies appropriate lead organisations in an area, should be established as a technical unit to take on an advisory role regarding employment and accounting issues. At a regional level supports should be made available locally for assistance with legal, financial and human resource issues. The playgroup committee is freed up then to concentrate on quality and parental participation.

- It was not intended that *cpi* be replicated. Instead, it is recommended that the support and funding of community playgroups at a local level should fit into the structures already in place such as the city and county childcare committees (cccs). The cccs should enhance the role of their development workers. The role of the cccs should also be

expanded to include a small grants scheme for child or community groups, to provide a quick response to community needs regarding pre-school provision.

- The complexity of the existing EOCP funding system is very demanding in terms of submissions, reporting and auditing, particularly for community playgroups. A more efficient and fair system that would allow services to know what they are entitled to and to plan on that basis should be developed.
- Early childhood care and education should be recognised and funded in the same way as primary education but should be delivered by early childhood practitioners through a range of services including community playgroups.

CONCLUSION

The evidence provided by the range of formative evaluation strategies point to many enhancements in the quality of provision as a result of *cpi*. It is clear that the immediate aims and objectives of *cpi* have been met. The benefits to the five participating playgroups, the playgroup committees, the communities and, most importantly, to the children and their parents have been extensive. One playgroup described the change as:

“a complete transformation of the group, which would never have been achieved without the money and support; a much higher quality service is now offered”

(staff and committees, final evaluation).

Community playgroups are child-centred, flexible, and adaptable. They have an open-door policy to all children, irrespective of ability, socio-economic status or ethnic background; and they involve parents and other volunteers. They are extremely well placed to work with families at their most receptive and formative stage. It is acknowledged that, for many parents, participation in their local community playgroup has been a first step towards further training and education, and the beginning of their community involvement role. Being not-for-profit creates a particular ethos that is absent from the commercially-run pre-school provision. This project

has highlighted the extent to which community playgroups are unsupported and vulnerable despite being such a positive force particularly in areas characterised by social and economic disadvantage and in rural communities. The onerous responsibilities of voluntary management committees, dealing with premises, and changing staff were all persistent challenges in *cpi*. Aspiring towards a high quality early childhood care and education service is an ongoing, dynamic process. However, *cpi* has demonstrated that, with developmental support and modest funding, community playgroups can support families and deliver high quality services that give children positive social interactions and opportunities for active pre-school learning.



Full copies of the Evaluation Report "Valuing Community Playgroups: lessons for practice and policy" or further information is available from

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