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**Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education and Care:
Proceedings of the Conference held in St. Patrick's College,
Drumcondra, Dublin on Saturday, 23rd. April, 2005.**

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**l'Organisation Mondiale
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*Proceedings of the Conference
held in
St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin
on
Saturday, 23rd April, 2005
entitled*

Contemporary Issues
in Early Childhood Education and Care

Edited by
Nóirín Hayes

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Introduction

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education and Care

Once again the OMEP Ireland Annual Research Conference has provided practitioners, researchers and students with a rich opportunity to share and discuss their work. The idea was first conceived as a way of providing the growing number of postgraduate students in Early Childhood Education in Ireland with a forum for presenting their work in progress. OMEP – an organisation long associated with innovation and support for the early years in Ireland – was quick to see the value and the potential of this idea. Together with UCC and DIT the first conference was hosted in Cork and attracted a sizeable audience. It was a great success and has gone from strength to strength. The conference proceedings afford a valuable record of each conference and an archive reflecting the breadth of practice based research that is being carried out throughout the country. This conference has, in no small way, contributed to the growing recognition of the value of research to informing quality practice and policy. Ireland now has an active research community in Early Childhood Education and a practitioner base that values and participates in research as part of the general drive towards improving the experiences of young children, their families and those who work with them. This is a critical development in a country where, historically, there has been such limited attention to such an important educational sector from the main institutions of the country – both academic and political.

This year’s conference was hosted by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE] in St. Patrick’s College, Dublin in April 2005. The CECDE provides an illustration of how far Ireland has moved in the area of early childhood education over the last decade. Ten years ago in Ireland children did not feature on the political agenda. The first Report of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (1996) had yet to be published. It was this report that led to the production of the National Children’s Strategy (2000). While childcare was emerging as a critical policy issue the recognition of the period of 0-6 as an educational period for children themselves had not yet been acknowledged and early childhood was not on the agenda in any coordinated way. It was 1998 when the National Forum on Early Childhood

Education was hosted and the consequent White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999) recommended establishing an Early Childhood Education Agency. There was no Childcare Strategy or Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme ten years ago and the idea of County and City Childcare Committees was just that – an idea. Less than five years in existence the CECDE – established in response to the White Paper – has risen to the challenge presented by its mission – to develop a National Quality Framework for early education in Ireland. It has become a key location for collaboration and dissemination on a wide range of topics with an active website and an excellent database of Irish research publications. Its support for the OMEP conference is gratefully acknowledged.

The theme of this year's conference was Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education and Care. Such a wide-ranging theme provided a context for a rich seam of presentations on a myriad of topics. The conference was opened with a Keynote Address by Elizabeth Dunphy, St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra. Her paper was titled *The Challenge of Assessing to Support Learning* and is the first paper in Section 1: Supporting Learning in the Early Years Classroom. This presentation set the scene for the conference. It brought the audience, in the space of a few short sentences, into the midst of the infant class. The sounds and movements of the children were made real by the wonderful descriptions drawing on the observational work carried out into children's number sense. For the purpose of the presentation we were introduced to Lara, one of fourteen children in the overall study. Taking a sociocultural perspective Dunphy analysed Lara's reports of number related activity with others and her own observational data. The material was presented and Lara, through her words and the recorded detail of her behaviour, became our guide. We came to know Lara and to understand that for her number '*she served some very specific purposes, related to the dancing and singing that she and close family relations such as her Mam engaged with.*' The paper also gave guidance to practitioners and from Lara '*we learn that purpose is something that children's attention may need to be drawn to. When number is present an explanation of purpose in that context may be crucial in helping children understand the different uses of number.*' The use of direct observation of children in their world also features in Brennan's paper. Currently completing a PhD Brennan is exploring children's participation in sociodramatic play by '*focusing on social activity in context and the development of collaboration and participation among children in pretend play.*' Through

illustrating points with direct reference to play episodes the audience was again privileged to experience this often invisible world of childhood.

The infant classroom features again as the context for the final two papers in Section 1. Brian Murphy draws on his observational work to assess the extent to which the '*child-centred curriculum understandings and aspirations*' of the Revised Primary School Curriculum (1999) '*are actually informing practice*'. Reporting on data from one classroom in his study of 15 infant classrooms he finds that the observed teacher has '*managed to create an active, fun and child-focused classroom learning environment faithfully mirroring the child-centred vision and practice propounded by the Irish Primary School Curriculum*'. Taking a different topic but also including reference to 'fun' Vanessa Murphy considers physical education at primary school and asks '*is it really fun and games?*' Using interviews and video for her observational work Murphy studied two classes in each of ten primary schools, five in Co. Cork and five in Co. Antrim. As a function of design the study allows for comparison across curricula. Her findings show some differences across the two settings but in general there is a disappointingly low level of interactive PE activities and a need to address the issue of teacher training and support in the six strands of PE identified within the curriculum.

Training and general professional development was a theme in a number of papers presented and is the focus of Section 2 of the proceedings. The value of mentoring as an approach to the professional development of early years educators was taken up directly by two papers in this section. Marion Brennan reported on her work in an IPPA training initiative. Over a period of three training cycles and using an Action Research methodology Brennan reflected on the mentoring process. Her findings '*suggest that definitions of mentoring varied between mentors and trainees*'. Trainees found mentors to be supportive but '*experienced very little challenge*'. This finding is in keeping with others who have found mentors reluctant or unwilling to challenge and reinforces the arguments that have been made '*that our understanding of mentoring is critical and that mentoring programmes need to be grounded in a definition that defines the essence of the relationship.*' Brennan's paper considers mentoring in the context of Continuing Professional Development and the difficulties highlighted reflect that. Ridgway considers mentoring in the context of preservice training. She describes the mentoring process for Practice Placement on the BA in Early Childhood Studies at UCC and raises some of the issues that need to be

considered in ensuring maximum quality support and training for students. In his paper Burns asks the question '*Service user as educator? User knowledge and participation in professional education and training*'. The 'service user' in this study was a young parent whose personal testimony of using social work services was part of the training input within a child and welfare family module. The article reports on the theoretical argument for such input and illuminates the ethical, methodological and analysis issues that need to be considered when undertaking such an approach. A detailed presentation on research undertaken into professional development in Waterford was presented by Kavanagh and Healy-Magwa. The authors describe the methods used, the comprehensive questionnaire developed and present the results across a wide range of topics. In a challenge to the *status quo* in Ireland regarding professionalism in early education Dinneen suggests that '*meeting the needs of children in the early years should act as a catalyst in uniting dissenting forces and interests*'. Her paper '*How professionalism defines the effective Educator: A reflection on the theme – Training for a new profession*' suggests that there is evidence in Ireland of '*a chasm separating those who are essentially involved in the rearing process of the next generation, as they are presently constituted*'. Drawing on international literature and experience she argues for the development of a profession of 'educators' and suggests that '*the secret of effectiveness in the task of educating and caring for young children is linked with a professional approach that stems from facilitating leadership qualities to develop during a lengthy training period*'. Following on with the theme of disparate training in the early years sector Pat Murphy, in a wide-ranging paper, considers how best to capture '*the subtle and intangible aspects of quality provision*' in the translation of frameworks of qualification into quality practice.

The topic of quality in early childhood education and care gave rise to a number of inter-related papers which are grouped in Section 3: Researching and Supporting Quality. Setting the scene for the papers in this section Duignan presents a 'Vision for the Future' where she reviews the core principles of the National Quality Framework [NQF], currently in preparation by the CECDE. Through describing the intricate methodology used to develop the NQF Duignan captures both the complexity of the process and the energising nature of the experience and ends with the hope that '*vision becomes reality*'. Duignan's colleagues at the CECDE, Jacqueline Fallon and Tom Walsh presented papers on specific aspects informing the development of the NQF.

Fallon's paper details the four pillars supporting the NQF and described the seven themes which emerged to contribute to the NQF. The paper notes the high level of consensus across the sector informing the Principles and Standards. Taking one of the pillars behind the NQF Walsh discusses the findings reported in *Insights on Quality* [CECDCE:2005]. In a further link with the CECDE research into quality Karen Mahoney and Nóirín Hayes report on the work to date in exploring different perspectives on quality, including the perspective of children. Their paper describes the background and context of the study and introduces the varied methodologies developed for use in the study. In particular the paper considers the issues that arise when researching directly with very young children but argues that '*the inclusion and empowerment of children in defining and evaluating quality assists in balancing the power relations amongst all stakeholders in the process of defining quality early education*'. Methodological and ethical issues also surface for consideration in the paper 'IPPA, Quality Improvement Programme: an action research approach'. In this paper Carmel Brennan and Lilian Joyce report on the ongoing research into supporting services to improve the way they work with children, families and communities. Using a cycle of Action Planning, Implementation, Reflection and Evaluation the researchers overcame a number of challenges and outline how they intend to proceed within this project design. They conclude that '*the programme has made a significant contribution to our understanding of children's learning and of quality care and education within the early childhood sector nationally*'.

The importance of researching directly with services and settings is further exemplified by the papers collected in Section 4: Research on Community Playgroups/Family Centres. Barry presents a thought provoking paper on the reality in practice of the '*inextricable links that govern care/education of young children and the value and necessity of family supports to foster the development of the child*'. The paper begins by locating the Before 5 Nursery and Family Centre in its social and historical context and goes on to reflect on practice and experience over time. It makes a strong plea for policy and research not to lose sight of the importance of family support and the particular intervention needs of children in the age range 0-3 years. Rosaleen Murphy takes up some of the themes mentioned by Barry in her look at the '*Changing Face of Preschool Services*'. By making a case study of one preschool setting Murphy draws out recurring themes on quality, training, support

that have resonance across the whole early years sector. She calls for realistic and sustained funding to support *'this essential service for our youngest citizens, if indeed all children of the nation are to be given equal opportunities to grow and develop to their fullest potential'*. The unique features of the Community Playgroup are considered in the final two papers of this section. Jean Whyte and her colleagues report on a study on the nature of Community Playgroups in Ireland and present some preliminary findings from the study. In their report on the 3-year Community Playgroup Initiative [cpi] Noelle Spring and Geraldine French reflect on lessons learned and recommendations made. Specifically they note that a *'range of formative evaluation strategies point to many improvements in the quality of provision as a result of cpi'* and conclude that *'Community playgroups are child-centred, flexible and adaptable ... [and] extremely well placed to work with families at their most receptive and formative stage.'*

Section 5 of the proceedings brings together a collection of papers loosely linked under the theme 'Contemporary Issues'. In the first of these Maria Cassidy introduces a study of *'The effectiveness of education about risk factors associated with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome on changing attitudes and relevant practices in a group of traveller women.'* Cassidy commences her paper by providing a contextual piece on traveller women in Ireland and introduces the element of the Traveller Women's Primary Health Project dealing with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome [SIDS]. Her paper raises the importance of culture and cultural understandings to the likely success of initiatives such as this and identifies some of the challenges that exist in gaining mutual respect and trust. Tracey Connolly titles her paper *'The Missing Link: Early Childhood in Ireland and Educational Disadvantage'*. In it she contends that, despite the attention to educational disadvantage in general in Ireland authors have given little attention to the important role of early education. Drawing on recent international research and policy material Connolly makes the case for a more considered look at the potential of early education in combating educational disadvantage. The importance of parents in education is discussed by Lorraine Crossan in her review of *'The Role of National Parents Council – Primary'*. Commencing with an outline of the legal basis for the council Crossan goes on to detail the operation and connections of the council and the potential this network of connections affords parents in influencing early educational policy in Ireland.

Parents are also the focus of attention in Maura Gunneen's paper *'Girls and Boys Are Different!'* Reporting on the findings from a survey of parents on the topic of gender in the early years Gunneen shares results and a variety of comments made by parents [the majority mothers] in response to the questionnaire. Her findings indicate that parents of young children hold differing views in relation to the issue of gender in the early years and notes that *'the emotional development of boys was a particular worry to many respondents who decried the emphasis placed on macho behaviour for boys, while others expressed concern at girls' loss of self confidence as they grow older.'* The final paper in this section considers *'The Spirit of the Infant World: Self, Objects and People'*. In this paper Francis Douglas takes *'the findings from psychology and applies them to the human infant with respect to their own being or 'self'. Their relationship to objects in the surrounding environment, their relationship to other human beings and most importantly their need for spiritual sustenance.'* Referencing material from across disciplines, cultures and time Douglas examines the topic and outlines the importance of a positive working model of self over a negative one. The seeds for the model of self are sown early and Douglas outlines the challenges to contemporary parents and early years workers in providing a rich and loving environment in which the very young child can grow and develop a positive working model of self.

In the final section of these proceedings we include papers on the topic of media and children. In her paper 'The First Face of Cultural Hegemony' Ruth Dalton considers the impact of media on the development of imagination in young children. Reviewing a wide range of material from Disney through to Montessori Dalton reminds us of the pervasive influence of the media and challenges us to understand child development and the role of media. Taking up this theme Francis Douglas looks at young children and TV viewing. Having introduced a series of facts relating to children's viewing habits he poses eight questions for consideration. Referring to a wide range of literature Douglas answers these questions and concludes that parents and carers need to recognise the importance of monitoring children's TV viewing so that the potential value of programmes can be maximised. Leading on from this, Sharon O'Brien presents a critical examination of children's animated film as cultural artefacts. Her paper explores the notion of the child as a consumer and discusses some of the paratextual elements connected with children's cinema. She demonstrates that children are constantly trying to

develop a narrative of the self, a story about who they are. The media, she concludes, often give false impressions.

The ideas and challenges addressed in the papers presented in this volume of proceedings remind us of the value of sharing experiences and information across practitioners, researchers and students of early childhood education. The research questions posed and research opportunities identified during this years conference secures the continued relevance of the OMEP (Ireland) Annual Research Conference to early childhood education in Ireland.

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Section One

Supporting Learning in the Early Years Classroom

The Challenge of Assessing to Support Learning

Elizabeth Dunphy

What do we mean by the term *assessment*?

Assessment has been described as the process through which we find out what each child brings to the learning situation (Bowman *et al.*, 2001). While there are different purposes for assessment in early education that of supporting children's learning is central to the concerns of practitioners and it is towards that purpose that I address my observations in this paper. Mary Jane Drummond's definition of assessment incorporates this emphasis on supporting learning: 'The ways in which, in our everyday practice, we observe children's learning, strive to understand it and then put our understanding to good use' (1993: 13). Her definition is endorsed by Carr who identifies what she calls four characteristics arising from Drummond's definition '... it is about everyday practice (in this place), it is observation based (including talking to children), it requires an interpretation, and it points the way to better learning and teaching' (2001: 19). Similarly The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) define assessment as 'the practices of observing and reflecting upon children's learning in order to support and extend this learning appropriately' (2004: 2).

A national framework for early learning

The recent consultation by the NCCA regarding a national framework for early learning showed that the question of assessment in the early years is one that is of great concern to all practitioners who support the learning and development of young children in Ireland. The consultation also showed that the notion of assessment was a source of some anxiety for many. The anxieties as expressed by practitioners responded to the framework revolved around a number of issues. Central to these was confusion with respect to what constitutes assessment, but also in relation to separating out the different purposes of assessment. The aim of this paper is to discuss an approach to the exploration of young children's learning which I have found to meet many of the criteria that we in the early childhood community apply when critiquing approaches to assessing and supporting learning in the early years.

Towards a Framework for Early Learning: A Consultation Document, based as it

is on the most up-to-date research, is strongly influenced by sociocultural theories that seek to clarify the processes that contribute to learning and development in the early years. The family of theories known as sociocultural theories share the view that children's learning is inherently involved with the sociocultural activities in which they engage with others in cultural practices and institutions, in a mutually constituting relationship (Rogoff, 1998: 686). The view that learning and development occur through *participation* in the sociocultural world is inherent in contemporary dominant sociocultural theories (*e.g.* Rogoff 1995, 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1999). Participation in cultural activity is understood to change and develop according to the context and the experience of the learner. Participation is transformed as a result of engagement in activity and individual, interpersonal and cultural contributions to that activity are all equally important in constituting the learning and development that occurs.

Exploring children's learning using experience-based flexible focused interviewing

In my study of young children's number sense, I talked to children about their views and ideas related to number and about their experiences with number. I used an experience-based flexible and focused clinical interviewing methodology to explore aspects of four-year-old children's number sense as they entered primary school (Dunphy, 2004). I believe that this methodology, which is a variant of clinical interviewing, is one that has tremendous potential for those of us whose work is concerned with understanding how children learn. Indeed, clinical interviewing is recognised as an approach 'that can be used to help to dig beneath the surface of overt behaviour and get at thought processes' (Bowman *et al.*, 2001: 242). The clinical method is an approach to interviewing children that is characterised by '... a particular kind of flexibility involving the interviewer as measuring instrument' (Ginsburg, 1997: 39). There is considerable flexibility in the interview design and an anticipation that the questioning will emerge and develop as the interview progresses. In discussing the clinical interview in psychological research and practice, Ginsburg makes the point that '... this phrase refers to a class of flexible interview methods the nature of which is very difficult to capture in a single phrase' (1997: ix). The approach is 'deliberately non-standardised' (p29) and so directly challenges the traditional point of view concerning scientific method in research and practice. The word *clinical* is used to describe an aspect of the methodology. As Ginsburg

explains, it is used ‘... not in the sense of focusing on pathology but in the sense of great sensitivity to and understanding of the *individual*’ (p. 109). The interviewer must act as clinician in judging how to respond to different children by ‘... being sensitive to the nuances of individual needs’ (p. 140).

A sociocultural approach to assessment

Obviously, in order to be coherent, assessment approaches embraced by the early childhood community, in Ireland as well as elsewhere, must be consistent with ideas related to learning. However, in practice such coherence is not easily achieved. Fler (2004) argues that while approaches to teaching in early childhood education have moved towards a sociocultural approach, approaches to assessment have generally stayed within a Piagetian framework, or at best a ‘social influences’ approach (*i.e.* where social interaction is seen as an influence on individual development but not constitutive of it). Those argued for a sociocultural approach to assessment point out that traditional assessments of learning generally focus on the individual and pay scant attention to other aspects of the learning situation or context (Rogoff 1998; Fler, 2004). In this paper I present an account of one child’s number sense from a sociocultural perspective. Constructing such an account necessitated attention to interpersonal and community/cultural aspects of learning and development as well as to the individual or personal aspects. My analysis of the data involved analysis of both the child’s reports of number-related activity with others and analysis of my observations of her participation in the interviews with me. I attended to interpersonal aspects of the development of number sense by considering what she told me about her interactions with others about number and number-related activity. I paid attention to the nature/type of events that she talked about and within which development took place and in that way incorporated the community plane. In essence, my analysis focused on three planes of analysis: personal, interpersonal and community. The focus on the child’s reported interactions with others and on the nature of these events extends the traditional approach to analysis, where the focus is mainly on the personal or individual plane.

Below, I present sections of the profile that I constructed for Lara (4 years and 1 month), one of the fourteen children in the study. Essentially it is an assessment of Lara’s number sense as she begins school. I interviewed her twice during her third week in her new environment of school. Prior to the interviews

I prepared a number of questions and tasks to guide the discussions (See Appendix). I characterise number sense as having several key aspects (Dunphy, 2005) and I consider and comment on three of these here: Lara’s pleasure and interest in number; Lara’s understandings related to the purposes of number; Lara’s awareness/understanding of numerals. In constructing this profile I examined how Lara reported her participation in sociocultural activity that she perceived to be related to number and I examined how she and her co-participants appeared to contribute to those activities. I explored how she appeared to be supported in her participation in the experiences she described. I also looked at how Lara participated in the interview since from a sociocultural perspective this event can be considered as an extension of previous events (Rogoff *et al.*, 1995). In essence, I sought to infer what and how Lara thought about number rather than just focusing on what she could do in relation to number. My interest was in the affective and emotional as much as in the cognitive dimensions of her learning.

Lara’s Number Sense

Lara was eager to participate in our discussions, but from her perspective her participation in a discussion about number implied a discussion that was very much about Irish dancing. Her experiences as a beginning traditional dancer were centrally present whenever Lara spoke about her experiences with number. She had just recently started to learn Irish dancing and such was the impact of this experience on her that her participation in our discussions was mediated through ways of self-expression that she was learning through the dancing experience. For instance, on a number of occasions while demonstrating that she could count (*i.e.* say the number words in sequence), Lara used the particular tempo attached to the way in which the counting words are spoken/sung in relation to Irish dancing. Likewise she used the Irish language version of the counting words which were now associated for her with the dancing. As she recited these counting words she accompanied them with clapping, a practice often used by teachers of Irish dancing, particularly with beginning dancers. Keeping time or tempo in Irish dancing is done through repetitious use of the counting string *One, Two, Three* and *One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven*. Together these two strings indicate the pattern of the steps for the beginning dancer. Very often this traditional form of dancing is closely associated with the Irish language, *An Gaeilge*, and the associated counting strings are *Aon, Do, Tri* and *Aon, Do, Tri, Ceathar, Cuig, Se, Seacht*.

Lara appeared to be very familiar with these strings in both Irish and English. Such was the import and effect on Lara of learning Irish dancing, that twice during our initial discussion she left her chair and announced that she would show me her dancing. On one of these occasions her response to my question about who had taught her dad to count was *'Do you want to see my Irish dancing?'* She then jumped off the chair and stood with her foot out. She danced her steps as I kept time for her ... 1,2,3 ... 1,2,3 ... 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 ... 1,2,3. When I stopped, she stopped. She sat down again and we resumed our conversation.

Lara's pleasure and interest in number

Initially the impression that I got from discussions with Lara was that she was much more oriented to literacy than she was to numeracy. Her preference appeared to emerge right at the start of the discussion when she asked, with reference to some books on the shelf nearby, *'... are we reading stories ... are they your stories there?'*

In response to my question about the numbers she might see on her way home from school, her reply was *'I ... I see a ... well I see a big L on the shop'* [Londis supermarket has a very prominent position on the Main Street of the town. L is also the first letter of her name]. Immediately after this she went on to question me about the display of children's work on the adjoining classroom wall. She asked *'What's all that writing there?'*

She seemed more inclined to talk about letters, even when asked specifically about numbers. For instance her responses to Task B (See Appendix) indicated that while she could respond appropriately to the initial items related to *one more than* and *one less than* a given numeral, she appeared to lose interest in the task very quickly. Her apparent lack of interest was manifested by her efforts, in relation to this task and others also, to move the discussion away from the task and into the domain of literacy. Consider how she achieved this in relation to Task B:

Liz: Coco had three presents and he lost one. How many now?

Lara: Em ... four

Liz: Let's pretend he had five presents and he lost one. How many now?

Lara: Four [She picked up my pen]. *Let's spell something*

Liz: What do you want to spell?

Lara: Spell Laura

Liz: I'll write it here

Lara: How can you spell Nuala?

Liz: That's Nuala [I wrote the word NUALA for her]

Lara: Can you spell George?

Liz: [I wrote the word GEORGE for her]. There, that's George

Lara: Can you spell girl? [I wrote the word GIRL for her]

Lara indicated here, and on a number of other occasions during our discussions, that she was particularly curious about letters and spelling and the ways in which symbols can convey meaning. She appeared to understand that letters can do this but she did not seem to have the same sense about numbers.

For instance, when asked what information the numerals she had selected as those for her house conveyed, she 'read' the name of the road on which she lived. While she knew the number of her house was seventeen, in her response to my request to show the number on the door she randomly selected two magnetic numerals to represent it and remarked *'You'd put this one on ... and this one.'*

In contrast to her absorption with letters and words she professed to find counting and number as she had experienced it in early learning settings so far as boring:

Liz: Are numbers useful ... what do we use them for?

Lara: Well you have to do a hAon and a Do and I'll be really bored

Liz: It's really boring, is it? [She nodded in agreement]

Lara: They all ... they say ... all the teachers say was a hAon, a Do ... a Se

Liz: In this school?

Lara: My teacher says that and I don't really want to say it

Lara's understandings related to the purposes of number

Counting and number seemed to be synonymous for Lara and she consistently adopted this position. When explicitly asked what numbers were for she said that they were for counting. She thought deeply about the issue of counting, at least on the occasion of the interview, as is evidenced in the following:

Liz: So now you're in big school ... will you learn about numbers here?

[She nodded in agreement] *What will you learn?*

Lara: *I will learn 4,5,6,7,8,9,10.*

Liz: *But you already know that*

Lara: *No, I don't*

Liz: *Yes you do*

Lara: *No*

Liz: *You're good at that*

Lara: *But I can't do the other ones and I can't think about it in my head*

Liz: *You can't think about it in your head ... do you have to think about it in your head?* [She nodded in agreement] *Which ones can you not do ... after what?*

Lara: *After 25*

Lara associated Dads generally with learning to count. She accounted for the bigger girls (twelve-year olds) ability to count ' ... *their Daddies learned them to count ...*

Liz: *And Laura ... is he [her Dad] a good counter?*

Lara: *Yes*

Liz: *How do you know?*

Lara: *Because my Dad said ... A haon, one, a haon, one*

Liz: *Was he joking?*

Lara: *No he wasn't ... it wasn't that...it was an Irish one*

Liz: *He knows the Irish one does he ... right*

Lara: *Well ... I learned him that*

Liz: *Did you? And who learned him one, two, three, four, five?*

Lara: *1,2,5,4.* [She sang this]

We can see here how Lara's two counting languages appear to collide, resulting in a string that does not correspond to any conventional one *i.e.* 'A haon, One, A haon, One'. Durken *et al.*(1986) speculated that such conflict can serve to promote development. It appeared that Lara is attempting to resolve conflict between the two counting strings by imposing order and meaning on them. If we consider the way in which the counting sting is used in Irish dancing *i.e.* to accompany the steps, and the different role it plays in Lara's account of choir practice below, we get some sense of how her experiences would benefit from mediation by an adult:

Liz: *How did your Mammy learn all that counting?*

Lara: *My Mammy just did*

Liz: *Where?*

Lara: *In the choir*

Liz: *In the choir ... she learned to count?*

Lara: *Yes ... and ... because it was a dancing choir ... in that church ...* [She pointed out the window at the church next door] *... 'cause it was ... everyone was dancing ... 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 ... 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10.* [She then moved into direct speech to role-play her mother]. *'Now 'Let's watch ... Sit down' and then she says a hAon One, a hAon One'.*

She recounted this experience in a way that was counting related and consistent with her interpretation that number is about keeping time and tempo. I think this vignette provides an interesting example of collaboration when children and adults are in each other's presence without interaction/teaching as the agenda. As Lara observes the choir she is learning about the role that counting and numbers can play in this particular cultural activity. I believe that her understanding could be greatly enhanced by an explicit discussion of how numbers are used in this particular context.

When questioned about purpose in relation to her Dad and number her comments suggest that her collaboration with him has been about purpose of letters but not about number:

Liz: *Does your Daddy ever write numbers?*

Lara: *No ... he writes all about special people ... and he always writes news and I write ... always do cartoons*

Liz: *He writes news ... and you write cartoons ... is that it?* [She nodded in agreement]

Liz: *And does he ever write numbers?*

Lara: *No*

Liz: *So ... Are numbers any use to him?*

Lara: *No*

Lara appears to be very vague in relation to the purpose of written numbers, and even what 'writing numbers' means:

Liz: *And does she [her Mam] ever write any numbers?*
 Lara: *Yes ... and she does a haon, a do, a tri, a ceathar, a cuig, a se. And then I say 'Can I help Mam' and then ... see ... I do it with her*
 Liz: *You do it with her?*
 Lara: *Yes ... And then I do handprints all over the page and then we send it to somebody'*

In general, number for Lara served some very specific purposes, related to the dancing and singing that she and close family relations such as her Mam engaged with. She seemed relatively unaware of the range of uses of number in everyday life for other people outside of these contexts. From Lara we learn that purpose is something that children's attention may need to be drawn to. When number is present an explanation of purpose in that context may be crucial in helping children understand the different uses of number.

Lara's awareness/understanding of written numerals

Lara didn't have magnetic numerals at home. Her spontaneous interaction with them during the interview was very interesting and entirely in keeping with her declared interest in letters, words and spelling:

Lara: *I had those in my little school*
 Liz: *And what are they?*
 Lara: *They're little numbers ... and they're all different ones ... all different colours*
 Liz: *Will you tidy them up?*
 Lara: *L [for one]*
 Liz: *You're calling that one L, are you?*
 Lara: *That one is L, One. Catherine!*
 Liz: *Catherine? What about Catherine?*
 Lara: *Catherine is my granny*
 Liz: *Yes*
 Lara: *And she died ... because she was a Granny*
 Liz: *Do the numbers remind you of Catherine*
 Lara: *Because all the numbers ... this spells Catherine [At this point she pushed some numbers together randomly]*
 Liz: *Does it?*
 Lara: *How can you spell Catherine?*
 Liz: *Catherine ... Let me show you how you write Catherine. Look this is*

Catherine [I wrote it on some paper and showed it to her]
 Lara: *I can't do that ... because there's no numbers of that*
 Liz: *There's no numbers of that?*
 Lara: *I can't find any numbers*
 Liz: *Oh ... you can't find the right ones*

I noticed that Lara never uses the term 'letters'. My initial interpretation was that she was more inclined to talk about letters even when specifically asked about numbers but I had to revise this in the light of the possibility that she understand the word number to be a generic term for both numbers and letters.

Lara described how she read the calendar with her parents because as she expressed it

'I wanted to learn the numbers every day ... and I learned them'.

While Lara felt supported by the adults around her in her goal to learn the number names, in fact Lara actually displayed very limited knowledge of these. She was unable to name any of the conventional numerals (1-10) when asked to do so, although she correctly identified the numeral 4 as representing her age. Her responses to my questioning in relation to the numerals is illustrated in the following:

Liz: *Which one is that? [I pointed to seven. She counted to eight and then stopped].*
 Lara: *Eight*
 Liz: *Are you sure?*
 Lara: *Yes*
 Liz: *What about this one here? [Eight]*
 Lara: *Oh and Oh. Yes ... I'm sure*

She seemed to be familiar with the names of a number of two-digit numbers although, as with her house numbers earlier she was happy to select digits randomly when attempting to represent such numbers with the plastic shapes. This is illustrated in the following:

Liz: *What does this make? [I show 1 and 0]*
 Lara: *That makes ... She then placed 1110 together and asked . 'What does that make?'*

Liz: *That one there ... You tell me?*

Lara: *It makes ... it makes ... two, twenty-five. That makes two, twenty-five. Yes ... because ... that makes twenty-five, that makes thirty, that makes forty, that makes oh ...*

It is possible that the two she suggested arose from the fact that the first two digits were ones and the phrase 'make' that I used to refer to forming the numeral ten may have been familiar to Lara as referring to the addition process.

Lara's number sense and her participation in socio-cultural activity related to number

Lara exercised a high level of control during the interviews. In the first interview her dancing was an expression of this. Although she signalled her intention on both occasions by asking for permission '*Will I show you my dancing?*' and '*Can I do my Irish dancing again?*', Lara was already up and in position. She just had to dance!

Also, she questioned me on a number of occasions in relation to comments I made or in relation to the immediate environment, for example:

Liz: *Do you know what I was wondering today ... well I was walking across the schoolyard and I had a thought in my head ... do you know what I thought?*

Lara: *No*

Liz: *I said ... I wonder why the girls at school have to learn the numbers ... why do they learn them? Why do they have to learn them?*

Lara: *Why did you went across the yard?*

Lara appeared very comfortable with the type of discussion, or collaboration, that the experience-based flexible focused interview implied. She was very relaxed throughout the first interview and showed no signs of tiring even after about twenty minutes at which point she asked '*Do you want me to sit there and we'll be closer together ...*' Immediately she changed seats and, for the second time during the course of the interview, she asked to hear her voice again.

In relation to some tasks Lara very much saw me as a source of learning. For instance one task required her to match numerals and birthday cards. On each of the three occasions when she had difficulty with doing so she responded with

the demand '*Show me*'. I suggest that this was the type of collaboration she has become accustomed to and therefore expected and demanded from other adults outside her immediate family.

Lara's number sense has been shaped by her experiences. The experiences that she explicitly related to number were ones in which counting dominated and these experiences shaped, but were also shaped by her enthusiasm, interest and engagement in relation to number, her awareness /understandings of written numbers and her awareness of the purposes of number. In this way we can see how her interest in number has developed.

The fact that Lara appears to be very interested in literacy and actively seeks to write in this domain, and to master the related symbols, suggests to me that presenting number as a communicative language *i.e.* as something that can be written and read might capture her interest in a way that merely speaking the language of number doesn't appear to.

It seems to me that participation, for Lara, in previous activities related to number implied a performance. Thus in her collaboration with me she continued in this vein, performing both in terms of her dancing, her counting and sometimes her singing. Irish culture and especially Irish dancing appeared to be an important part of Lara's family culture, as was singing, and these are the means through which she is developing her sense of number.

The strengths of the interviewing methodology for assessing what young children are bringing to the learning situation

This paper demonstrates the potential of clinical interviewing to assess the learning of young children. It is seen to be child-friendly and capable of accommodating children's interests and preoccupations. It is flexible and responsive to children. It can be conducted in settings that are comfortable and familiar to the child. It is holistic since it looks at the whole of children's learning with particular aspects, such as number sense, seen as a part of that whole. It is also holistic in the sense that affective issues are attended to as well as cognitive. It is respectful of children, of their views, ideas, agency and vulnerability. Exploring the learning of young children as described in this paper permits us to observe their learning while taking into account their perspectives on issues of interest. It enables us to strive to understand the

processes of that learning by taking into account the roles of others and of community /cultural aspects. It also points to possible directions for the support of further learning.

Fleer (2004), in researching a way of enabling teachers to change from a developmental approach to assessment to a sociocultural one, concluded that any form of assessment that required lengthy observations were destined to be unsuccessful. Drummond speaks of the frustration that many practitioners feel in endeavouring to observe all of the children that they care for. According to her 'teachers set themselves the grossly unrealistic task of trying to see and understand everything. Inevitably we fall short' (1993: 57). A wealth of information about Lara's number sense, her learning in other domains and indeed about Lara as a learner, was acquired as a result of these explorations which took place over just two sessions totalling approximately 50 minutes. It is entirely possible that practitioners can learn to do this type of assessment and to use it to supplement and complement information about young learners gleaned from other sources.

The richness of the understanding of learning that can be gleaned from this type of exploration is evidenced from the extracts from Lara's profile above. This understanding is the focus and aim of assessment for learning. Through understanding the processes of her learning, Lara's teacher can plan learning experiences that will engage Lara, extend her existing ideas about number and introduce her to aspects of number that she is not yet aware of. In developing her sense of number the affective aspects will be as central as the cognitive. A perspective increasingly taken by early childhood educators is one that emphasises a pedagogy that is forward looking (Drummond, 1993; Carr, 2001; Fleer, 2004). By stating intentions for Lara's learning arising from the assessment of her number sense the inseparability of the assessment and teaching processes becomes clear.

The proposed national framework for early learning will require that all practitioners design a curriculum that is suited to the interests and needs of the children that they care for. The recently published Principles that will underpin the National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education being prepared by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education includes the principle that 'The child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs

are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences' (CECDE, 2004). Central to ascertaining children's interests and needs are the pedagogical skills to assess what children bring to the learning situation and to state intentions for learning that are appropriate for particular children in particular contexts. The experienced-based, flexible focused interview is an essential tool in helping practitioners develop these skills. The use of the approach as outlined in this paper will enable practitioners to work towards this principle. In this way it will also assist them in designing a curriculum that is suited to the needs and interests of the children that they care for.

Appendix: Sample Questions and Tasks

Sample questions

So you know lots of numbers to count with. Tell me anything else you know about numbers? How did you learn this?

What are numbers for? What do people use them for? Are numbers useful?

Is it important to learn about numbers? Is it important for (e.g. Mam, children, you) to learn about numbers? Why?

Sample tasks

Task A Naming numerals

Do you know the names of any of these? Tell me the ones you know.

The purpose of this task was to explore children's ability to name numerals (0-10).

Task B One more than /One less than *No objects present*

Coco had 4 presents and he got 1 more. How many now? (3,7,6,9)

Coco had 7 presents and he lost 1. How many now? (3,5,6,8)

The purpose of this task was to explore children's ability to add and subtract one or two items.

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Partners in Play: A Study of Children's Participation in Sociodramatic Play

Carmel Brennan

How do children negotiate participation in socio-dramatic play? How does this participation develop over time? These are the questions that drive the research study discussed in this paper. This is a qualitative, ethnographic study conducted through (1) close observation and consultation with children in a pre-school setting and (2) detailed analysis of observations of everyday interactions and interpretations within play towards an understanding of how children interpret and reconstruct cultural ways of knowing.

Theory and practice in early childhood education and care in Ireland has been largely influenced by Piagetian theory and developmental psychology that locates all the sources of learning and change inside the individual. There is internationally however, increasing interest in studying learning and development in its sociocultural context. This is reflected in the resurgence of interest in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and in the growing acceptance of ethnographic research as an appropriate method of studying children's engagement with the world of people, objects and activity.

'It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own but he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture' (1986/p127). Children enter social systems and by interacting and negotiating with others, they establish shared understanding that is fundamental to what they know and how they think.

This research draws on observations (with video) of children at play in early childhood services in Ireland to identify how children negotiate their participation in the construction of cultural ways of knowing.

Background

This study follows from two studies in particular, undertaken in Ireland by IPPA. IPPA commissioned a research study 'Child's Play' (Carswell 2002) that demonstrated many conflicts in the understanding and practice of play in Irish

childcare settings. Subsequently the organisation produced 'Power of Play : a play curriculum in action' (IPPA, Brennan 2004). This book, based on photographs and video of children in play, involved detailed analysis of the knowledge and competencies that children develop through play and brought us in contact with the sociocultural theories of Rogoff (1990), Bruner (1996), Lave and Wenger (1991) and others.

The next phase of research will follow the development of play in a playgroup over a year. It will explore the connections between play scripts, relationships and meaning making as they develop in the 'home corner' of a playgroup. The study will be undertaken over a three-year period as a PhD thesis, with the support of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE).

Rationale for the Irish Context

In Ireland, in recent years, we have had a number of policy documents that focus on early childhood services. These include:

- Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Ireland 1999a)
- The Primary School Curriculum (Ireland 1999c)
- The National Childcare Strategy (Ireland 1999c)
- Our Children-Our Lives; The National Children's Strategy (Ireland 2000a)
- Towards a Framework for Early Learning (National Council for Curriculum Awards (NCCA) 2004).
- Principles underpinning a Quality Framework for Early Childhood services (CECDE 2005)
- Quality Standards for Early Childhood services (CECDE 2005)

All of these documents recognise the importance of play in early childhood, using different theoretical frameworks and with varying degrees of emphasis. Of particular interest is the understanding of play as consisting of three types, exploratory, ludic and games with rules, underpinning the latter three documents. This is a theory offered by Hutt (1979) that builds on the Piagetian notion that children learn through exploring an object and then assimilate that learning in play. The concept of learning underpinning this theory is that of the 'lone scientist' interacting with the world of objects and reorganising concepts in the head to accommodate the new learning. Hutt proposes that children neither develop new learning nor adapt existing concepts to accommodate new learning during the ludic play stage, rather play is about practising what they

already know. Sociocultural theory suggests, on the other hand, that in play, children are engaged in a process of shared meaning making (Vygotsky 1987; Corsaro 1985). This concept of learning is key to any evaluation of play as a learning mechanism. 'How we conceptualise play depends on our understanding of learning and related cognitive concepts and on our interpretations of what is educationally and developmentally significant to children about play' (Woods and Attfield 1996/20). If play is to be respected, we need to engage with the social, cultural and collective nature of both play and learning. A study of children engaged in sociodramatic play will expose the process of appropriation (Rogoff 1990) and collective reconstruction (Corsaro 1992; Nicolopoulou and Weintraub 1998) that essentially frame the individual's learning and development.

Further evidence can be found in the above documents of the distinction between care and education that is prevalent in the education sector in Ireland (2001; Hayes 2002). While the compulsory school age is six years in Ireland, ninety five per cent of five year olds and fifty percent of four year olds (approx.) are in school. While this means that we have universal education services in place for four and five year olds (OECD 2004) it also raises concerns about the quality of care and education that children receive in a classroom with a ratio of one teacher to more than thirty children. It would appear that there is reluctance on the part of the Department of Education to accept the integration of care and education. Even as recently as in the White Paper (Ireland 1999a), care is highlighted as important for the under threes while education is important for the older children. In the division, care, it would appear, is about emotional and physical nurturance in the childcare service, education is equivalent to schooling. Hayes (2004) in her study of four year olds in school in Ireland found that school work was largely whole group work, directed by the teacher, with very little play. A play curriculum inherently recognises the inseparability of emotion and cognition, and consequently of care and education and values the bio-ecological context in which both are embedded. (Bronfenbrenner 1979)

Theoretical context

Participation

Key to this research is the concept of participation, combining both active engagement and working in partnership. Participation features in the literature

as the socio-constructivist way of describing learning. References include 'participation in social activity' (Vygotsky 1978); 'participation in communities of practice' and again 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991); 'transformation of participation and 'guided participation' (Rogoff 1990) and 'participation repertoires' (Carr 2001). The term combines both constructivist and sociocultural theory and integrates individual, activity and community in 'triadic interaction' (Carpendale and Lewis 2004) and described as the 'epistemic triangle' by (Chapman 1991; Chapman 1999). Participation as learning proposes that children learn through communication with others while involved in goal oriented social activity. It is through joint focus of attention in shared activity that children negotiate shared meaning. Dunn (1988) and Trevarthen (1979; 1988) show that these moments of joint attention are the key learning moments for the young baby. Language research shows that when the adult follows the child's initiative and names the object of attention, language development is best supported. Through participation, children come to know, not just the body of knowledge and the system of communication that exists within the culture but also the cognitive tools for organising and evaluating their learning experiences. Through participation in activity with others, children also contribute to the collective reconstruction, extension and embellishment of these cultural systems. Participation is both the medium and outcome of learning, within this socio-constructivist frame.

A Collective and Social Process

Piaget (1945/62) identified three stages of play, practice play, symbolic play and play with rules to correspond to the sensori-motor, pre-operational and concrete operational stages of development of intelligence. He proposed that play progresses from the child's mental structure and individual processes to social play and negotiated meaning and symbolism. While Piaget (1945/62; Piaget 1965/32) recognises the social context of the child, for him the social instigates the same cognising process as the world of objects. He consistently foregrounds the individual cognising child.

On the other hand, Vygotsky emphasised that rather than developing as individuals, children develop within a cultural world, interconnecting two key elements (1) a system of social relationships and interactions within a society and (2) the cultural conceptual and symbolic system (Nicolopoulou 1993). Knowledge construction in this view is understood both as a social and

collective process. 'It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own but he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture' (Bruner 1986). Collective negotiation is central to these cultural processes and children need access to these negotiations in order to learn both how to participate and to be party to the collective reconstruction of participation rituals and routines and outcomes.

Corsaro describes this reconstruction process as 'interpretive reproduction' (Corsaro 1992). The term 'interpretive' captures innovative and creative aspects of children's knowledge construction. Children participate by 'creatively appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns' (Corsaro 2001/p92). They are reproducing culture in an ongoing process and in that way are 'actively contributing to cultural production and change' (*Ibid.*:92). Children construct and create innovation but within a cultural paradigm. The cultural paradigm is both constraining and affording (Greeno 1998).

This research will identify the basic interactional strategies that give children access to social activity and track their collaborative contributions to the reconstruction of routines, rituals and identities that become part of their play participation rites.

Rituals and Routines

Hoggstedder, Maier *et al* (1998/p180) tell us 'that every culture provides children and adults with a repertoire of interaction formats or patterns'. This is true, in the same way, of roles and contexts within cultures (Bateson 1956). Each has patterns of behaviour that belong to the context and to the 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) within the context. These patterns borrow their meanings from the wider sociocultural context and in the process of implementation are also in the process of reconstruction and re-interpretation. It is a dynamic. In the process of constructing rites of participation children construct responses, some of which become stable and predictable, others which are creative, idiosyncratic and a dynamic of a given moment. Routines according to Corsaro (1992 :163) are 'recurrent and predictable activities that are basic to everyday social life'. Following (Giddens 1984) he says that they 'provide actors with the security and shared understanding of belonging to a cultural group'. Routines contribute to emotional, social and cognitive structuring because they provide predictability, guidance and a shared meaning frame. We learn how to behave in playgroup, in church, at the

table, at the doctor's surgery. These routines are both constraining and affording (Greeno 1998). We can be creative and innovative within their established frame. Nicolopoulou (1993:15) tells us that 'Regulatory rituals and routines serve not only to regulate participants but to bind them emotionally by reinforcing the identity, unity and cohesion of the group'.

Identity

Within this participation frame, children are also in the process of constructing identity, both social and personal. They are collectively defining what it means to be male or female, to be a friend, to be big, to be four or five, to be good or bad, to be a mammy or a daddy, a Power Ranger or a Superwoman and collectively constructing individual identities both within the group and within the play scripts. Danby and Baker (1998) talk about how older boys taught younger boys how to be masculine in the block area. Thorne (1993/p96) points out that maleness is often created by the strong boy in the playgroup – 'not everyone has an equal hand in painting the picture of what boys and girls are like'. Participation is the medium to contributing to the collective construction of identity.

Play

Corsaro (2003/p95) describes sociodramatic or role play as play '*in which children collaboratively produce pretend activities that are related to experiences from their real life (e.g. family and occupational routines) as opposed to fantasy play based on fictional narratives*'. In the production of this play children simultaneously use and reconstruct '*a wide range of communicative skills, collectively participate in and extend peer culture and appropriate features of and develop an orientation to the wider adult culture*'. Sawyer (1997) sees sociodramatic play, role play and fantasy play as equivalent. This research will focus on play in the home corner and defines sociodramatic play as both family and occupational routines and fantasy characters because sometimes it is difficult to differentiate clearly between them. Gussin Paley (1986/p79) describes the integration; 'She's Supergirl and Emily is the mother and Mollie is the big sister and Wonderwoman'. Children use their experiences and their meaning as tools to create imaginary scenarios and renegotiate meaning.

Children negotiate participation outside and inside the play frame to become both players and pretend characters. They are both contributors to the

emerging script and actors. In sociodramatic play, children construct identities and the associated rituals and routines and meanings within that identity and in the process they both come to know them and renegotiate them. In sociodramatic play, children demonstrate their understanding that rituals, routines, artefacts, behaviours and language are part of a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991). Bateson (1956) suggests that it is not important that the child learns 'how to be an archbishop from playing the role; but rather that there is such a role' and that particular behaviours, rituals and routines are embedded in that role. This involves an implicit understanding that 'knowing' belongs in a community of practice, that it is situated in the social activities of that community. The child is learning that repertoires of behaviour are related to the frame and context of behaviour and in Bateson's terms, more specifically again, they are learning what the 'not' objects and the 'not' behaviours are.

This Research

In particular this research wishes to contribute to the field by focusing on social activity in context and the development of collaboration and participation among children in pretend play. If, in line with sociocultural theory, we accept that contextual relational dynamics play an equally important role, if not a primary role in the learning of the individual, then the role of the adult must be to support the creation of contexts in which children can implement and develop their participation and co-operation skills towards joint negotiation of knowing. This involves a number of shifts (1) from an emphasis on the individual child learning to be independent to an understanding of the child as involved in a collective process of construction and therefore interdependent and (2) from the image of the 'needy' child to the image of the 'competent' child (James, Jenks *et al.* 2001; Mayall 2003). This is a view that sees children as competent social actors who participate in their own social activities, not disconnected from the adult world but in a reciprocal, responsive relationship. The primary role of the adult is then to support connection and participation among children and to guide the construction of rituals and routines towards maximum inclusion and positive self identity.

Episodes from Pilot Study

The research will focus on: (1) the interactional structures that support collaboration in activity and (2) the meaning and identity formation embedded

in the activity. Interactional strategies include the skills to self registration, to take initiative, to follow initiative, to use co-operative tones etc as described by Aarts (2000) in the Marte Meo programme. The following observations from a pilot study give you some idea of what is involved.

Episode 1

When I arrived:

Jane was dressed in bridal outfit, including veil, and was lolling around, displaying the attire.

Sofie arrives, collects two dolls and leaves.

Anna arrives with doll.

Jane (preparing breakfast) 'I'll get her a spoon'

Sofie comes back, asks Emma (Adult) to bring the other dolls and she puts them all to bed.

Sofie 'I'm going to make dinner'

She picks up a doll, cradles her in one arm and shows her to Pat and then

Emma (both adults)

Sofie 'This is Sofie'

Jane asks Emma's help to put on a black sparkling dress over her bridal dress.

Emma 'Where would you wear a dress like this?'

Jane 'It's for the party. I'm going to the wedding.'

Jane to Sofie 'Come on'

Jane puts her doll in the pram while Sofie carries 'Sofie' in her arms and they go for a walk.

In this episode, we can see Jane's attempts to initiate a shared script. She is dressed in bridal outfit but quickly connects with Anna's mothering role and offers to make breakfast for the doll. She names what she is doing, 'I'll get her a spoon' she says. Anne doesn't respond and Sofie enters the scene. Both Sofie and Jane seem to pursue separate themes and use Emma as a companion. Then Jane abandons her party plan and Sofie abandons her cooking task and they take their babies for a walk. In this case, there was no open invitation or statement of intent to play. In both cases, Jane made the link by tuning into the other's play script and accessing appropriate play equipment. Sofie responds and connects. Collaboration requires that children demonstrate a disposition to play and then register and link their initiatives. Participation in this episode involved artefacts, shared activity and communication.

Episode 2

The previous day at large group time, Emma (adult) had introduced the children to the Halloween characters so that they would be familiar with them and less scared by them during the festival. They included little plastic finger puppets, a pumpkin, a devil, a ghost, a spider, a bat and two skeletons, John and Denis. As she produced John, his head fell off. She responded by saying 'Oh! my head fell off. My name is John, where's my head gone' and finding John's head became the game. In the 'sitting room', they are telling and retelling the story. Adam has joined the group and he does not have a character. Conal has two and Susan (adult) asks him to give one to John. He is reluctant.

Susan 'Adam needs one Conal. You have to share'

Kris 'You have to share. He's your friend.'

Conal gives the spider. Susan commends him

Susan 'That's very good, Conal. Now Adam can play'

We can see in this exchange that the mention of friend and being fair to your friend connected with Kris and Conal and generated good feeling. An understanding of friendship involving sharing is being renegotiated within the context of the activity. Sharing seems to be a key element of friendship in playgroup. This theme of friendship becomes powerfully emotive as the year progresses.

Episode 3

Later

Kris has hidden John's head. She is trying to negotiate a role in two play scenarios.

Kris 'Baby's getting a nappy'

Conal to Susan (Adult) 'Have a Mr. Bat'

Susan 'Thanks Conal. We have to find John'

Kris 'I can't find John. - I'll find him later'

Kris (Holds skeleton) 'What's his friend's name?'

Conal 'Denis'

Kris (moved by mention of friend) 'I'll find him soon'

Susan 'Kris, can you find John for us please'

Kris 'Later, when I get back from the party'

Sofie 'Sit down, I'll get the party ready'

Susan (informing group) 'I'm going to the toilet'

Kris 'You're going to the toilet 'cos you're the big sister.'

Here we see Kris as she tries to register her play script with the group. She names her actions. 'Baby's getting a nappy' doesn't connect. 'When I get back from the party' does. Sofie takes up the theme. Kris is anxious to involve Susan so she names Susan's action and connects her to the script. 'You're going to the toilet, 'cos you're the big sister'. Naming one's own and other's initiatives are 'interactional structures' that serve to connect people (Aarts 2000). The episode shows the complexity of interaction as she tries to negotiate with two groups and the possibilities within sociodramatic play for developing social understanding.

This research will focus on the interactional strategies that children use, embedded in artefacts, activity and community, and the identities they collectively construct as they develop and support shared participation in sociodramatic play. The insight emerging will inform the way we understand children's learning and organise and support play in early childhood care and education centres.

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Child-Centeredness in Action: Exemplary Practice from One Irish Infant Classroom

Brian Murphy

The Revised Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999)

The current Irish Primary School Curriculum (Ireland & National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 1999) embraces the process, progressivist philosophical thrust of its 1971 predecessor. Thus the programme content and methodologies are explicitly child-centred, clearly recognising the importance of developing the full potential of each child. The focus is once again on the child as active learner, with each subject area encouraging active learning processes, which are enjoyable and captivating. It therefore aspires that the child is directly engaged in the learning process, cognitively, physically, emotionally and creatively and consequently he/she is enabled to gain ownership of and internalise what is learned.

While encompassing the broad philosophical thrust of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (An Roinn Oideachais 1971), the Primary School Curriculum (1999) is, however, a revised curriculum. It constitutes a detailed interpretation of the recommendations of the Review Body on the Primary School Curriculum (Ireland 1990). Moreover, it reflects the thinking and aspirations of the significant educational policy documents, which preceded its publication including the Report on the National Education Convention (Coolahan 1994) and the White Paper on Education (Ireland 1995). It thus claims to incorporate '*current educational thinking and the most innovative and effective pedagogical practice*' (Primary School Curriculum Introduction 1999, p2).

The curriculum begins by endorsing but redefining the aims of primary education with respect to the child. The principles of the *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) to promote the full and harmonious development of the child and to make due allowance for individual difference, are redefined in the broader concepts of '*celebrating the uniqueness of each child and ensuring the development of the child's full potential*' (Primary School Curriculum Introduction 1999, p8). The pedagogical principles of the 1971 curriculum dealing with the importance of activity and discovery methods, the integrated

nature of the curriculum and the importance of environment-based learning are also expanded and developed. These pedagogical principles are subsumed into a wider range of learning principles, which are deemed '*to characterise more fully the learning processes that the revised curriculum envisages*' (Primary School Curriculum Introduction 1999, p8). Such principles range from a recognition of the importance of the immediate environment as a context for learning, to an acknowledgement of the centrality of linguistic, social, emotional and aesthetic factors to a child's learning.

Early Childhood Education – A Key Issue

Specific identification of and engagement with issues pertaining to early childhood/Infant education and the resultant labelling of the area as a 'key issue' of primary education marks a significant change between the 1971 and 1999 curricula. The overall thrust of the curriculum as well as the Infant education programme itself, is however deemed to be as equally appropriate to the developmental and learning needs of young children, as was its predecessor. This is evident in its outline of the curriculum for Infant classes as:

... based on the uniqueness of the child and the particular needs of children at this stage of development. The informality of the learning experience inherent in it, and the emphasis it gives to the element of play, are particularly suited to the learning needs of young children. It stresses, too, the centrality of language in early childhood learning and the importance of activity and the manipulation of a variety of materials in promoting motor and sensory development.

(Primary School Curriculum Introduction 1999, p30)

The 1999 curriculum does incorporate discretionary curriculum time into the overall scheme of weekly time allocation for its implementation. This discretionary curriculum time is particularly significant for Infant classes. The programme acknowledges the reality that children at Infant level perceive and experience learning in an integrated way and consequently it affords teachers at this level a more flexible time frame to implement the requisite approaches to teaching and learning. The 1999 Primary School Curriculum also incorporates new content and embraces new approaches and methodologies. In terms of content and subject areas, it responds to changing societal needs and

circumstances through new programmes in science, and social, personal and health education. Arts education in the form of visual art, music and drama receives a renewed emphasis, stemming from an acknowledgement that it *'contributes uniquely to the child's conceptual development and to the expansion and refinement of their view of the world'* (Primary School Curriculum Introduction 1999, p52).

Literacy & Numeracy Development

From the outset, it is evident that the particular educational goals associated with the literacy and numeracy areas are accorded priority in the 1999 curriculum. From the Chairperson's Foreword (Primary School Curriculum Introduction 1999, p vii) to the inclusion of the literacy and numeracy domains as one of the 'key issues' of the curriculum, it is clear that the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills is a central focus of the curriculum. The curriculum also includes a justification for this added emphasis on the literacy and numeracy domains in outlining why such skills are essential to *'effective learning in every area of the curriculum and to the child's social and community life outside of school'* (Primary School Curriculum Introduction 1999, p26). Particular changes are outlined in both content and methodology with respect to the literacy and numeracy domains, especially in the context of the overall child-centred nature of the programme.

The approach to the teaching of beginning reading, which is outlined in the Primary School Curriculum 1999, envisages that the early stages of reading will be grounded firmly on the child's general language experience. Oral language activities will thus form the basis for the child's preparation for reading with the child *'progressively involved in the creation of oral-based texts and in the collaborative reading of large format books'* (Primary School Curriculum 1999, Teacher Guidelines for English, p50). It is envisaged that a child's language competence, attention span, concentration and perceptual abilities will be adequately developed through oral language and informal reading activities and through the creation of a print-rich environment in the classroom, prior to the introduction of a formal reading scheme. A further element of this more gradual introduction of formal reading comprises an emphasis on the development of phonological and phonemic awareness through the use of rhymes, riddles and games. In fostering such skills, the child will thus be encouraged to use a range of word identification strategies to extract meaning

from a text. These changes are envisaged to have considerable implications for practice at Senior Infant level in that the child will only *'begin a structured reading programme some time during the Senior Infant class'* (Primary School Curriculum 1999, Teacher Guidelines for English, p54), in contrast to the previously almost universal practice of introducing a formal reading scheme early in the initial Junior Infant year of schooling.

The 1999 curriculum also proposes a change in practice with respect to the development of the writing skills element of the literacy programme. Emphasis is clearly focused on the process rather than the product of the writing experience – on a *'gradual development of the children's ability to write through the actual process of writing'* (Primary School Curriculum 1999, Teacher Guidelines for English, p14). It is thus envisaged that children will have consistent experience of drafting, editing and redrafting of writing pieces in recognition of the reality that one *'cannot normally be expected to produce a finished piece of writing in a single attempt'* (Primary School Curriculum 1999, Teacher Guidelines for English, p76). This approach marks a considerable change in role for the teacher, who now assumes the role of mentor in an interactive writing process, gradually developing the ability in the pupils to self-correct their writing and become independent writers. Moreover, as the approach highlights the child's freedom of choice in dealing with a variety of topics, audiences and genres, it consequently also *'presupposes flexibility in the materials and formats in which writing is recorded'* on behalf of the teacher (Primary School Curriculum 1999, Teacher Guidelines for English, p78).

The changes from Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971) with respect to numeracy are explicitly stated in the 1999 Teacher Guidelines for Mathematics. Such changes span both content and methodology. The guidelines highlight that a reduction in overall content has occurred to allow for more extensive treatment of the mathematical programme. In terms of numeracy this translates that *'a ceiling has been placed on number work ... to allow more time for concept development'* (Primary School Curriculum 1999, Teacher Guidelines for Mathematics, p9). In line with the overall progressivist nature of the curriculum, it reiterates that all number work be based as much as possible on the children's own experience and that real life examples be used wherever possible. In a similar vein, the curriculum advocates that pupils be afforded the freedom to record number work content not merely in the traditionally written form, but in a variety of

different ways including concretely, orally, pictorially, diagrammatically or through model-making.

Two particular changes are outlined with respect to the methodology of teaching mathematics. It is envisaged that work in numeracy will feature more emphasis on guided discussion, where *'discussion rather than questioning should be the basis of the interactions between teacher and child'* (Primary School Curriculum 1999, Teacher Guidelines for Mathematics, p30). Secondly, this active, constructivist approach to the teaching of numeracy and mathematics in general, incorporates the use of a 'hands-on' methodology involving pupils working with mathematical equipment individually, in pairs or in small groups. This methodology assumes that the pupils will thus have *'access to a considerable amount of equipment'* (Primary School Curriculum 1999, Teacher Guidelines for Mathematics, p30).

In light of the continuously evolving nature of the curriculum process, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Ireland & Department of Education & Science 1999) does highlight the reality that further evaluation and development of the curriculum and methodologies for Infant classes will need to continue on an ongoing basis. It is only through this process that *'provision will continue to take account of developing knowledge and practice'* (Ireland & Department of Education & Science 1999, p76) and will respond to requisite child, educational and societal needs.

Study Methodology

The degree to which the aforementioned child-centred curriculum understandings and aspirations are actually informing practice in one infant classroom will now be discussed in light of data gathered as part of an overall study of fifteen infant classrooms. The overall 'fidelity' type study of curriculum implementation (Snyder, Bolin & Zumwalt 1996) sought to measure the degree to which the previously outlined curriculum pedagogical approaches had generally impacted on classroom practice and to rationalise why or why not this had been the case. The case study to be presented involved a total of over five hours of observation of ten Senior Infant pupils in one randomly selected Senior Infant classroom (Senior Infants is the second year of formal schooling in Ireland with the average age of the pupils between five and six years old). Overall social interaction settings, language and general activity of the observed

pupils in the classroom were coded and measured by a modified Target Child Observation Schedule, adapted from the original version as devised by Sylva *et al.* (1980). Data was also gathered through the use of Brown's Interaction Analysis System (Brown 1975), which measured the types and frequency of interaction generally occurring in the Senior Infant classroom. Both data collection instruments thus involved the use of coding schemes, popular in answering research questions concerning curriculum and pedagogy, where the observer assigns *'the interactions observed to take place to one of a set of previously defined categories'* as previously typified in the work of Flanders (1970) and the ORACLE study of British primary classrooms (Galton, Simon & Croll 1980).

The case study classroom was visited on two separate occasions in order to complete detailed observations of five randomly selected pupils on each occasion. As per the methodology of the Target Child Observation Schedule, each of the ten selected pupils was individually observed at thirty-second intervals for a period of thirty minutes and the social interaction category, as well as the pupil language and pupil activity for each thirty-second interval was noted. The overall results for the case study classroom were thus gleaned from over six hundred half minutes of observation of pupil activity, across all curriculum subjects and provide an overview of general pupil activity, as well as how frequently, in what particular social setting the ten observed Senior Infant target children generally interacted.

Since the use of the Target Child Observation Schedule required an observational focus and detailed analysis of only one child's behaviour at any one time, a broader overall sense of lesson content, structure and implementation was not possible. In order to obtain this sense of curriculum implementation and practice and to give a further indication and picture of typical patterns of social interaction in the Infant classroom, the second data collection instrument was used. Brown's Interaction Analysis System (B.I.A.S.) provided a means of studying the verbal interaction of the teacher and the children as it occurred during an observation period lesson. B.I.A.S. consists of seven categories, which are grouped into the main headings of teacher talk, pupil talk, silence and unclassifiable interaction. Using a time-line display sheet, categories of classroom speech were recorded at five-second intervals for a random period of twenty minutes of classroom interaction. A brief description of the type and content of the observed lesson was also recorded. Calculations of the percentage frequencies

of each category were calculated for the selected classroom. In light of the limitations of coding approaches to measuring classroom reality, especially in providing limited information explaining, '*why teachers did one thing rather than another*' (Edwards & Mercer 1987, p25), the teacher of the case study classroom was also informally interviewed, post-observation.

The remainder of this paper presents a detailed discussion of practice from the case study classroom utilising data gleaned from the pupil and classroom observations and the teacher interview. It was selected due to its general illustration and exemplification of the type of child-centred practice propounded in the literature and envisaged in the Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999). However, since the case study approach merely '*allows for the meanings and perspectives of individual cases to be portrayed ...*' (Aubrey *et al.* 2000, p40), no claim is made for the case study classroom to be representative of other Senior Infant classes in the country.

Case Study of Practice in One Irish Infant Classroom

The Classroom Setting

The Senior Infant case study classroom was a medium-sized traditional rectangular classroom bounded on two sides by windows. Under both walls of windows were shelves and tables where toys and many other types of equipment, books and textbooks abounded. One had the immediate impression of being in a well-resourced classroom. The back wall of the classroom was also lined with shelves of toys and resources, with one corner designated as a reading corner resourced with a wealth of all kinds of books, including big-books. It was in this corner that all reading was done by the teacher with the pupils. The area was further resourced with a large computer and a library of computer software related to literacy and numeracy development. A blackboard and a whiteboard adorned the top of the classroom, as well as a teacher's desk, chair and resource materials area. The walls of the room were bright and colourful with charts depicting various basic literacy and numeracy concepts including the alphabet, reading flashcards, the days of the week, the colours, the weather and the numbers from one to twenty. It appeared that the pupils had more than adequate space in this particular classroom, a reality clearly helped by the relatively low pupil-teacher ratio of twenty pupils. Understandably, things had not been so pleasant during the previous school

year according to the teacher, when she had taught thirty-four children in the same room.

The Teacher

The teacher of the particular group – Teacher A – was in her early thirties and had over ten years teaching experience in a number of different schools. Most of her experience to date she had elected to have in the infant classroom. She had also spent a period of time teaching infants in a specialist language class unit within her school, evidence of which became apparent throughout her practice. The spontaneity of the particular age group, coupled with her strong affinity to and conviction of the importance of the implementation of a play methodology attracted her to teaching this particular age group. The affinity was immediately evident on entering her classroom when one was instantly struck by a very tangible air of calm, happiness and fun. The warmth of her relationship with the children and the respect she accorded to each of them when interacting at a group or individual basis was clearly evident from the outset. Mild disciplinary exhortations were sung to different children on various occasions *e.g.* '*Kevin, Kevin don't do that*' to the tune of Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. The rationale for the prevention and correction of minor misdemeanours was at all times fully explained to the pupils *e.g.* '*We wouldn't do that because ... That couldn't have happened in our class ...*'. Classroom practices and routines were clearly and genuinely explained to the children where possible, with children's contributions being valued and their questions answered openly and honestly *e.g.* when asked when was it time for lunch, the teacher replied '*it is now twenty past twelve (pointing to the large clock), lunch is at one o'clock, that means we have forty minutes left or four of our jobs. Those four jobs are ...*'

Some Views of the Teacher

Teacher A professed a strong belief in the methodology of play, as advocated by the curriculum, during her post-observation interview. Play methodologies did indeed form an integral part of her practice throughout both visits to her classroom. Free play incorporating freedom and choice of activity, as recorded by activity codes 1-12 of the Target Child Observation Schedule, comprised 18% of the recorded time in this classroom, which exactly matched the average figure for the overall study for categories 1-12. Pupils in this classroom were thus engaged in the activities of manipulation of structured, unstructured materials and scale version toys, as well as in free expression,

creative and social play. They were accorded freedom of movement around the classroom during the play sessions.

Curriculum Planning

Curricular planning embraced a thematic integrated approach, complemented at all times by widespread use of the arts. During one of the visits to the classroom Halloween was approaching and all that day's particular activities were organised around the Halloween theme. Language development lessons and games in Irish and English language comprised the consolidation of Halloween-related vocabulary. Many of the teacher's questions during the discussion were sung to the pupils, who often responded in a similar manner e.g. Teacher 'Cad é sin?' (*What is that?*), pupil responded singing 'Sin é an taibhse' (*That is the ghost*). The language-experience approach embodied in 'The News' session further exploited the theme of Halloween with the added fun dimension of the pupils reading the composed piece from the blackboard pretending to be ghosts, witches and ghouls. Thematic spontaneous dramatic activity and action rhymes and songs were interspersed during and between activities to maintain pupil interest and attention. Art activity consisted of making a simple ghost figure from a white tissue and other basic materials. During Mathematics, concrete counting material consisted of the use of Halloween nuts. At one stage during the morning's work children were rotating between five different classroom activities facilitated by the teacher, from painting witch figures, to making ghost figures, to working on literacy activities on the computer, to the tasting of Halloween food and free play with Halloween props. At no stage during this tremendous feat of child-centred classroom organisation and activity did the teacher have to intervene to correct or discipline any child. The pupils were actively engaged, occupied and clearly learning. Moreover, it was significant to note that although textbooks were used at different stages during some of the above work, their use was not central to any of this productive classroom activity.

Central Role of Language and Interaction

Teacher A afforded a central place to oral language in her classroom as evidenced from comments made during the interview conversation. This particular conviction, she outlined was based on her view that language was the foundation on which all learning was built and thus the key to future educational success. Moreover, she felt an even greater onus to emphasise

language in her particular classroom because of the language impoverishment and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds of many of her pupils. As previously outlined, her views were also influenced considerably by her experience of teaching a class of infant pupils with varying language disorders and her consequent first hand experience of the barrier that language impoverishment poses for all learning. Thus, oral language development she saw to be a core element of her overall programme for the development of literacy. In so doing she clearly showed herself to be very much au fait with the 1999 curriculum recommendations and current international thinking on literacy development at this particular level.

Over the two visits to Classroom A, there was no doubt but that language permeated much of the classroom activity as envisaged in the curriculum. The language-experience approach played a central role in this language development programme. It was interesting that each pupil got an opportunity to be interviewed by another pupil in order to tell his/her 'news'. To ensure further exploitation of language, another pupil in turn had to report the news just heard to the rest of the pupils and to ask further clarifying questions on behalf of the class. I was also fortunate enough to experience further evidence of the language-rich discussion environment during two sessions of Circle Time. These sessions were clearly indicative of how very capable these pupils had become in expressing themselves in the large group setting. The pupils in Class A were also afforded many vital opportunities to genuinely interact with each other at the level of pupil to pupil as evidenced by the above average number of opportunities for such interaction from the Social Category Results of the Target Child Observation Schedule. The small group seating arrangements in the classroom contributed in no small part to facilitate this level of interaction.

Table 1 Percentage of Observed Time Spent in Certain Social Interaction Categories as Measured by the Target Child Observation Schedule in Classroom A

Target Child Social Category	Classroom A	Study Average
Small Group (3-6 pupils) Parallel Interaction	4.5%	4.12%
Pupil/Pupil Pair Interaction	17%	12.03%
Total	21.5%	16.15%

A similar pattern of opportunity for language interaction and language use in Classroom A is also evidenced when the results of Brown's Interaction Analysis System are compared with the results of the overall findings of the study. Classroom A indicates a pattern of less teacher talk with a corresponding increase in the opportunity and occasion of pupil use of language as envisaged by the 1999 child-centred curriculum.

Table 2 *Percentage of Observation Time Spent in the Categories of Brown's Interaction Analysis Schedule in Classroom A*

Brown's Categories	Classroom A	Study Average
Teacher lectures, questions, responds	57%	64%
Pupil responds, volunteers	33%	25%
Other behaviour	10%	11%

These results are further illuminated and validated by the specific Language Use Results yielded by the Target Child Observation Schedule. Once again pupils in Classroom A show a clear pattern of above average language use in all categories (excluding the category of Group Speech) when compared to the mean language use results of the overall study. This data is presented in the table below.

Table 3 *Percentage of Pupil Use of Language as Measured by the Target Child Observation Schedule in Classroom A*

Target Child Language Category	Classroom A	Study Average
Initiations to Other Children	10.75%	7.48%
Initiations to the Teacher	7.25%	6.33%
Response to Teacher's Questions	4.5%	3.73%
Ego-Centric Speech	4%	2.33%
Dialogue	2%	1.65%
Total	28.5%	21.52%

Curriculum Activity – 'high cognitive challenge'

As well as being active users of language, the nature of the activity in which pupils in Classroom A engaged, rates very highly in terms of cognitive challenge as measured by the Target Child Observation Schedule Activity Codes 13-28.

Such cognitive challenge would be deemed very significant in terms of a child-centred progressivist curriculum. Some 40% of the time in Classroom A was spent by these Senior Infant pupils engaged in this 'High Challenge by Definition Activities', which compares very favourably with an overall study average of 33% for these particular codes. The specific results and percentages for each of these activities is outlined in the table below.

Table 4 *'High Challenge by Definition' Cognitive Challenge Results as Measured by the Target Child Observation Schedule in Classroom A*

Target Child Activity Category		Total
13	Looking at Books	3.00%
14	Looking at Exercise Books	2.75%
15	Looking at Worksheet	0.25%
16(a)	Reading from the bb	1.75%
16(b)	Copying/Writing from bb	2.75%
17(a)	Reading/being listened to – Big Books	3.00%
17(f)	Reading/being listened to – other books	0.75%
18(a)	Look & Say Word Recognition	3.00%
18(b)	Decontextualised Phonics Activity	0.50%
18(c)	Contextualised Phonics Activity	2.25%
18(e)	Silent Reading	0.75%
19(a)	Copying workcards-teacher	3.75%
20(b)	Self-initiated writing- captioning	0.50%
20(c)	Self-initiated writing-free composition	0.50%
21	Tracing	0.50%
23(a)	Oral Number Work-arithmetic	0.75%
24(b)	Written number work-iconic	2.50%
27(a)	Exploration of an arithmetical problem	2.00%
28	Art Skills	9.25%
Total for Activity Categories 13 – 28		40.00%

In conjunction with the aforementioned emphasis of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum on literacy and numeracy activity, it is also possible to glean from

the above statistics the amount of time, which the Senior Infant pupils in Classroom A spent specifically engaged in such literacy and numeracy activities. During the observation time in Classroom A, 25.5% of the activity time coded by the Target Child Observation Schedule was specifically spent on literacy and numeracy activities, a figure which once again compares very favourably and even slightly better than the study average of 25.06%. Furthermore within these particular statistics it is clearly evident that Teacher A had, as outlined during her interview, embraced and implemented many of the aspects of the Interactive Model of literacy development as envisaged in the Primary School Curriculum (1999). The bedrock of this model, that literacy incorporates the explicit development of oral language as well as reading and writing skills has already been outlined as a fundamental and consistent feature of Practitioner A's practice. Further elements of the curriculum-endorsed interactive model were particularly apparent in the methodologies applied to reading development within this classroom.

Implementation of the 'Interactive Model' of Reading Development

Teacher A accorded much importance to the development of reading skills and her pupils spent over 12% of the observed time engaged in reading activities. This focus on reading the teacher attributed to her conviction regarding the importance of reading for survival in today's world. It could also be traced to the references, which she made to her completion of a specialist pedagogical option in reading development during her training, her brief experience in learning support literacy and to her involvement in the preparation and the delivery of an in-service reading development course on behalf of her teaching union. It was also clearly obvious that the teacher implemented an individual reading development programme for each child based on individual needs. During my visits to her classroom, Teacher A worked with each of the pupils in her class on varying aspects of reading development, from phonics to rhyme to sight vocabulary on an individual basis at different points during the day. She remarked of her satisfaction with the interactive reading development programme as outlined in the Primary School Curriculum (1999). This satisfaction clearly also resulted in her implementation of many aspects of the aforementioned interactive model, as evidenced from the following table of the reading activities observed.

Table 5 Reading Activities Observed in Classroom A as Measured by the Target Child Observation Schedule

Target Child Activity Category		Total
16(a)	Reading from the bb	1.75%
17(a)	Reading/being listened to-Big Books	3.00%
17(f)	Reading/being listened to-from other books	0.75%
18(a)	Look & Say	3.00%
18(b)	Decontextualised Phonics Activity	0.50%
18(c)	Contextualised Phonics Activity	2.25%
18(e)	Silent Reading	0.75%
Total Reading Activity		12.00%

It is clear that Teacher A's practice incorporated elements of both the top-down language-based (process) and bottom-up skills-based (product) approaches to reading development. Bottom-up approaches included the use of look-and-say and decontextualised phonics activities. Look-and-say techniques were characterised by the use of flashcards with many of the words from the core sight vocabulary. It was interesting to note that a higher percentage of time was accorded to contextualised phonic activity, which is clearly indicative of the newly favoured top-down and interactive approaches. Sources of this contextualised phonics activity included the effective use of the shared reading of 'big books' and 'real' books as suggested in the new primary curriculum. There was no evidence of the use of a basal/reading scheme reader, as traditionally used at this level in Irish primary schools. This, she outlined, would be introduced late in the school year in line with the revised curriculum guidelines. Further evidence of the implementation of a process-based interactive model of literacy development, was clearly evidenced in this classroom in Teacher A's judicious use of rhyme and alliteration activities throughout the school day as previously outlined. This emphasis placed on rhyme and alliteration activities clearly mirrored the aspirations of the new curriculum with respect to the pivotal role of phonological awareness in reading development. All of this reading work was very effectively integrated through a most successful use of the language-experience approach in the form of the shared interactive 'news' session, as previously outlined. The children's news, which was elicited, discussed and composed at length and written on the

blackboard by the teacher and by the children, was exploited for word recognition, reading practice, phonics, rhyme and language development in an incidental and enjoyable manner through the use of dramatic techniques including the use of a magic wand to place the pupils under a 'reading spell'. Further evidence of the broad reading development programme being implemented in Classroom A also emerged. Significantly, Classroom A was one of the few classrooms in the overall study where the pupils were encouraged to engage in silent reading of their reading texts. Furthermore, although I did not observe paired reading at first-hand, I did hear the pupils talking about their paired reading books and witnessed their positive reaction to the exchange of books for a proposed afternoon paired reading session, as well as their excitement on receiving new library reading books for homework.

Implementation of the 'Process Model' of Writing Development

With respect to writing, the other main facet of literacy development, pupils in Classroom A spent some 8% of the observed activity time engaged in writing activities as measured by activity codes 16b, 19, 20, 21 and 22 of the adapted Target Child Observation Schedule. This represents a figure above the overall study average of 5.77% of time spent on writing activity. Furthermore, more of this writing activity time consisted of exercises, which emphasised the vital free and self-initiated writing dimensions of early process writing as envisaged in the revised Primary School Curriculum (1999). Pupils were actively encouraged to compose their own sentences of news, from their own linguistic and writing resources following completion of the recording of the class news from the blackboard. Pupils were also encouraged to caption pictures, which they had drawn during art class with basic text, which was edited and redrafted by the pupils in consultation with the teacher. These simple writing practices were introduced in context, informally promoted writing development and at all times emphasised the communication of meaning, a concept at the heart of the interactive process model of writing development espoused by the 1999 Irish Primary School Curriculum.

Implementation of the 'Constructivist Model' of Numeracy Development

The 5.25% of time the pupils in Classroom A were observed engaging in numeracy activities was, in contrast, lower than the average 8.16% recorded for the overall study. Perhaps this could be attributed to the fact, acknowledged by

the teacher herself, that she had not managed to complete any Mathematical activity during the initial visit to her classroom. The numeracy activity, which was observed, was arithmetical, based on furthering the pupils' understanding of the conservation of the number five. However, this concept was dealt with in a very child-centred concrete way in line with Practitioner A's overall play methodology. The 'story of number 5' was effectively illustrated, extended and consolidated through the use of story itself and through the use of the pupils themselves and many different concrete objects from shells to bricks to dry pasta shells to Halloween nuts as props to concretely illustrate the concept of the different ways in which five could be made up. Effective use of a discussion complemented by attention to the language of mathematics and to the concrete application of the concept to the pupils' lives and everyday situations represented very effective practice. These features, in conjunction with a judicious blend of use of concrete materials and teacher direction, served to illustrate the practical embodiment and thorough application of the composite Piagetian/progressivist model of numeracy development as envisaged by the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and as previously outlined. A summary of the Target Child Observation Schedule results, outlining the relevant percentages of observed time allocated to the literacy and numeracy activity, as previously discussed, is presented in the table below.

Table 6 Percentage of Observed Time Allocated to Literacy and Numeracy Activities in Classroom A

Target Child Activity Categories	Classroom A	Study Average
Reading Activity (Categories 16a, 17a-g, 18a-e)	12%	11.13%
Writing Activity (Categories 16b, 19, 20, 21, 22)	8%	5.77%
Numeracy Activity (Categories 23, 24, 25, 27)	5.25%	8.16%
Total Time for Literacy/Numeracy Activities	25.25%	25.06%

Conclusion

Overall, it is clearly apparent that Teacher A managed to create an active, fun and child-focused classroom learning environment faithfully mirroring the child-centred vision and practice propounded by the Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999). Her classroom practice illustrated her understanding and ownership of previously discussed process/progressivist curriculum theory and practice. Her genuine interest in the children and enthusiasm for their efforts

coupled with her concern for their individual progress was consistently evident. She displayed other attributes of the effective child-centred classroom practitioner including thoughtfulness and thoroughness of preparation and organisation, spontaneity, creativity and flexibility in the execution of her role. It was thus the richness of the child-centred learning practice that characterised this particular setting, coupled with the degree of faithful application of the curriculum, which made it worthy of special recognition and laudation.

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Physical Education in Irish Primary Schools: Is It Really Fun and Games?

Vanessa J. Murphy

This paper 'Physical Education in Irish Primary Schools: is it really fun and Games?' is based on my thesis 'An Investigation of the Current Level of Physical Activity in the Primary School System, in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland with Specific Reference to its Importance in Relation to the Holistic Development of Children Aged Between 5 and 8 years.' The fundamental aim of this research, as indicated by the title, was to investigate the important role physical activity plays in a child's physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual development, in addition to establishing the current level of physical activity in primary schools both in the Republic and Northern Ireland.

In order to establish the current level, as well as the intensity, duration and frequency of activity experienced in P.E. classes, ten schools were randomly selected, five in Co. Cork, and five in Co. Antrim. Two P.E. classes, in each school (therefore twenty classes in total), were observed. Each class was recorded on video using a handheld camcorder; this allowed the specific movements of each of the two hundred target children to be individually monitored. In excess of sixty-six hours of observations were transcribed using the Target Child Observation System, which was modified so that all manner of physical activity could be recorded. The level, intensity, duration and frequency of activity for each child was calculated and a detailed comparison made between the findings North and South.

These results were related to the information obtained from the findings of the nationwide survey. This survey involved the distribution of 3,500 questionnaires, (circa 15,000 pages), to a random selection of boys, girls, and mixed schools in city, town and rural locations, in each of the thirty-two counties. There were three types of questionnaire, which were targeted at children, parents and practitioners. Of the 3,500 questionnaires circulated throughout the Republic and Northern Ireland, there was an overall return rate of [71%] enabling a generalised representation of practices and attitudes regarding physical activity to be created.

The fusion of information, elicited from interviews conducted with professionals, parents and practitioners, over the course of the study, completed the triangulation of data. The majority of interviewees believed strongly that for instance, the apparent lack of playgrounds was undoubtedly connected to the rising cost of insurance owing to the increasing number of compensation claims being made. Likewise, the interviewees were unanimous in their agreement that the inadequate facilities for physical activity for young children contributed to both the decline in activity and also to the growing number of children with recognised weight problems. The opinions and recommendations of these professionals, when combined with the information gleaned from the nationwide survey, are highly beneficial to this research.

The collation of this data has provided ample information to allow me to draw up a profile of a day in the life of a 'typical' child aged between 5 and 8 years. Whilst I am the first to admit that there is no such thing as a 'typical' child, and that each child is resplendently unique, the following representation depicts a number of common trends that have emerged from the target child research, as well as from interviews with professionals, parents, practitioners and children regarding typical experiences in a child's life. This account is interspersed with the typical child, 'Jack's', private thoughts, as a sort of internal monologue ...

'I am Jack's mind.'

In a newly built housing estate, just outside of town, in a household of five, two parents and three children, a cat and two dogs, lives Jack. Jack Black is six years old and is a pupil at the local boys school, situated three quarters of a mile from the estate where he lives. He has two older sisters, who attend an all girls' school at the opposite end of town. Both of Jack's parents work full time, which means that mornings are a bit hectic at the Black household. Having eaten his usual breakfast of chocolate pop tarts, Jack is ushered into the car with his sisters. Today he is dressed in his school tracksuit since it is the policy of his school that on 'P.E. days' children wear their P.E. gear to school. *'I love doing P.E.'*

Jack particularly enjoys playing games and running around, but he is not too keen on gymnastics. However his teacher, a young woman with two years teaching experience under her belt, does not relish the prospect of facing into another 'P.E. day'. In fact, it is her least favourite part of the job because she is not certain of what it is she is meant to do with a class of thirty, five-to-six year

olds 'running amok'. The school has a moderate store of P.E. equipment but again, Jack's teacher is unsure of how to use some of it since she claims not to know the 'rules' of many sports. When it comes to P.E. time, she feels safer instructing traditional controlled activities with beanbags and footballs and so it is again today.

Similarly, her teaching style is traditional, although she may see the merits of children's active participation in their learning, she does not think it is practical. The moment Jack and his classmates energetically bundle into the school hall, they are told in no uncertain terms, to remain quiet and to calm down. '*She's in a bad mood again.*' The room is wonderfully bright and boasts a recently fitted parquet floor with standard court markings. The hall is bare with the exception of a single basketball hoop and backboard attached to the rear wall and two rows of fluorescent strip lighting on the ceiling. The store cupboard is nestled beneath the hoop and is filled with a hotchpotch of equipment, most of it a lot older than Jack. Among the miscellaneous items is a stack of wooden tennis rackets, a bucket of tennis balls, medium sized plastic marker cones, four wooden relay batons, hurleys (in a variety of sizes), indoor and outdoor footballs, a tattered rugby ball, a standing jump mat and a basket of beanbags (in mixed sizes).

As an ineffective chef blames the utensils, an ineffective physical educator blames the equipment. With adequate training, Jack's teacher could successfully instruct five out of the six P.E. strands with the equipment available, with the exception of aquatics. '*I wonder if we'll do something different today.*' However, the teacher opts once more for a combination of beanbags and imaginary play, with very little social interaction allowed. The P.E. lesson consisted mainly of lining up in one place in large groups waiting for 'turns', with intermittent bursts of mild intensity activity and more lining up, and very little else. Having gone through the motions of P.E., Jack and his classmates were marched militantly back to 'class'. '*Why can't it be more fun, I thought you were meant to have fun when you play?*'

Jack's teacher does not place a significant value on P.E. and therefore never implements curricular integration regarding the experiences the children have in P.E. with those they have in class. '*I was jumping like a frog today in P.E., I wonder what frogs eat and where they live.*' With simple planning, Jack's teacher could create an abundance of opportunities for curricular integration, which

would generate a sense of balance and continuity in his education. Instead, once back in the classroom, Jack sits impassively while the group recite addition tables after the teacher's lead.

The morning passes and before long, it is time for lunch. '*Yes! I have my favourite bar and crisps today!*' Jack leaves his sandwich, as he is already full from his treats. Then it is out to the yard to play, but the children are not allowed to run around. '*Because I could hurt myself or someone else.*' The school has strict policies regarding what they term 'boisterous play'. It is not allowed and children are swiftly corrected if they become too enthusiastic in the schoolyard. Likewise, the school does not allow any P.E. equipment to be used at break times. '*I wish we had played football in P.E. today, now I have to wait until Saturday when dad drives me to the park.*'

Jack isn't allowed to play outside after school because his parents feel it is unsafe without supervision and though they would like to, they do not have the time. They also know that Jack is overweight and feel that he does not get enough exercise at school. In an effort to compensate for this, Jack is taken each week for an hour or two to a local park for a 'kick-around'. Jack also takes swimming lessons once a week, after which he is taken to MacDonald's for his favourite 'Happy Meal'. '*It's good to know that my parents and teachers know what's best for me.*'

Here is this happy six-year-old boy, eating his 'Happy Meal', blissfully unaware that his increasing weight will result in him having to deal with an array of related health disorders in a short time to come. After Jack's interest in sport has waned due to lack of motivation at school and limited time to be active outside of school, his indolent way of life will see his metabolism begin to slow. After years of overindulgence, where Jack's dietary habits have worsened, his arteries will begin to clog. Jack is a time bomb waiting to go off, and we, as a society are lighting the fuse.

A number of significant issues have emerged from the research, namely, the substandard level of activity experienced by children in P.E. lessons, the sense of incompetence experienced by an alarming number of primary school teachers, with regard to P.E. instruction, in addition to concerns regarding the availability of adequate P.E. equipment and facilities. Related topics ranged from the nature

of obesity to exercise physiology and gender issues, in addition to the importance of social and curricular integration.

The results showed that during close to half the P.E. class time [46%] the target children were stationary and therefore inactive. This is a disconcerting figure as it means that during an average twenty-minute P.E. lesson, the target children were not active for over nine minutes. The degree of inactivity in Northern Ireland and in the Republic is similar, with inactivity levels in the Republic higher by [3.5%]. The findings also revealed that, the average intensity of active time (54% of total time) rated as [50%] 'Mild', [32%] 'Moderate' and [18%] 'Intense'. This means that overall the target children was on average either not active or engaged in minimum intensity activities for more than sixteen out of twenty minutes. Though separate data for North and South illustrated a significant difference, with figures from Northern Ireland comparing favourably regarding 'Intense' activities at [30%], in contrast to a mere [4%] in the Republic. In order to increase intensity of activity in P.E., awareness of the current average level of intensity is essential. A higher intensity may not only be achieved by increasing the speed or tempo of an activity, but also by basically increasing the duration, or bout, of the activity. The level of inactivity and low intensity was often attributable to time wasting due to long-drawn-out instructions being given and lack of organisation. The latter specifically reinforces the dual reality that P.E. is not held particularly high in the curriculum and also highlights the prevalent misconception that structuring a P.E. class does not necessitate a great deal of time or consideration.

This flawed perspective is at variance with the conclusions drawn by researchers in this area as to the importance of curricular integration. Plato, together with a number of leading educational theorists, including Comenius, Montessori, Piaget, and Vygotsky, advocated physical activity as being indispensable to children's learning and to cultivating their inherent potential. Nevertheless, the contemporary status of physical activity in primary schools remains comparatively low in relation to subjects that are designed to comply with a child's academic development. P.E. lessons are sometimes viewed as opportunities for children to merely expend 'distracting' energy and thereby aid concentration on 'class work', when quite the reverse is true. Physical activity is crucial to development in other areas.

Studies suggest a 50-75% reduction in levels of physical activity between the ages of six and eighteen years (Rowland-Cachera, 1998), therefore it is imperative that an interest and enjoyment of physical activity is instilled in a child at an early age. Moreover, the subdued ambiance observed in several P.E. lessons was not conducive to social interaction, however this did vary from school to school. The main findings in connection with social grouping in the observed P.E. lessons showed that the target children spent equivalent amounts of time in 'non-interactive' and 'interactive' categories.

Separate data for the Republic and Northern Ireland illustrated that in the North, the target children spent an analogous amount of time in each of the two categories, whereas in the Republic the target children were observed to be engaged in 'non-interactive' (or parallel) activities more so by approximately ten percent. Piaget (1969) saw the social contribution of a child as a concomitant of cerebral development. Plato ascribed physical activity as a means of communication, whilst Reisman (1953) elaborated, describing the capacity of physical activity to not only maintain but to shape our society. The objective of P.E. therefore ought to be to improve balance, flexibility, muscular strength, and endurance whilst building confidence and encouraging co-operation in a secure environment. As a consequence of creating a safe non-judgemental environment, P.E. can be of immense benefit to a child's social development. Such an environment encourages children to feel free to express themselves. The extent of expressiveness however may be determined by cultural convention, social class, gender roles, family norms, and principally by the individual's personality (Halberstadt 1991; Manstead 1991). Correspondingly, a child's expressiveness may be inhibited by restriction of social interaction and movement. The overall result, consequently, is an inadequate provision for the child.

It seems that in order to rectify the current situation it is not enough to simply highlight the principal issues, they ought to be actively addressed. The three foremost issues highlighted by this research are as follows: the issue of teacher training and support in relation to the instruction of the six PE strands, (Athletics, Gymnastics, Games, Dance, Outdoor and Adventure Activities and Aquatics) the issue of the sedentary lifestyle of children in this country, with reference to the negative repercussions on their health and overall development, and the issue regarding funding for PE facilities and equipment. Obviously, the

availability of adequate equipment would be advantageous, as children would not spend so much time waiting for their turn.

The fundamental fault appears to be the dismissive mindset that surrounds physical activity in general. Considering the significance of physical activity on a child's, overall development and health, this erroneous perception regarding the level and intensity of activity needs to be clarified. Similarly, with the exception of a number of researchers and professional in the field of child development, our society seems to be turning a blind eye to the incidence of childhood obesity and its contributing factors. 'Everyone of us could do something.' (Joyce J., 1994, p94). We should, therefore, take a more proactive stance, shaking off the mantles of apathy, and recognise that we are in fact the decision makers of our reality ...

We are the music makers,
We are the dreamers of dreams.
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet, we are the movers and shakers
Of the world forever, it seems.

(O'Shaughnessy A.W.E., 1875, p173)

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Section Two
Training and Professional
Development

Mentoring as a Framework for Professional Development

Marion Brennan

Introduction

IPPA the Early Childhood Organisation has a long history of training and educating adults, which has been consistently underpinned by models and principles of how adults learn Knowles (1984), Brookfield (1986), Freire (1972) and Rogers (2000). Training for tutors is in two phases; initial tutor training that has been a traditional organic way of growing and developing tutors for the sector. On completion of initial tutor training, tutors can move to the next phase, which leads to a qualification in teaching adult learners. Traditionally trainee tutors work alongside a more experienced tutor/mentor while training. Lack of an overall policy framework for mentoring, with specific training for mentors, has been a major gap in the training cycle. This paper describes an action research study carried out in IPPA the Early Childhood Organisation, with a view to improving the support given to trainee tutors and their support tutors while on teaching practice. Mentoring as a framework for providing this support is the focus of the study. A more detailed account of the study is to be found in Brennan (2005).

Context and Background to Study

A myriad of reports and policy initiatives have impacted on the childcare sector in recent years in relation to training. These include *The Model Framework for Education and Training and Professional Development in Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002), National Council for Curriculum and Assessments (NCCA) *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2003), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2004) *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland*, The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education's (CECDE), *Insights on Quality* (2004), and *Making Connections* (2004).

These initiatives have had an impact on training provision, to the extent that a wide range of courses exist offering flexible options so that those interested could participate. Improving the delivery of quality childcare is a key objective.

Within this context the need for tutors with a teaching and vocational qualification to deliver training, for the sector is seen as paramount to the overall childcare initiatives.

The Green Paper on Adult Education (1998) set out the parameters for policy in this area within a framework for lifelong learning. A key proposal in relation to teacher training was the development of a system of tutor training with recognition of qualifications for the teaching and practice of Adult Education. The White Paper, *Learning for Life* develops this topic further, recognizing that there are large numbers of teachers who have considerable experience and expertise, but lack formal qualifications. To this end they propose the 'widening of existing mechanisms for recognition of qualifications in education and training to embrace a variety of new qualifications in this field', (2000, p150) and to find mechanisms to accredit those with extensive prior learning and experience.

However there is no generic teacher training for this sector despite the acknowledgement of the government that 'expanded provision for training of trainers' is fundamental to the building of a comprehensive system of adult education (White Paper, *Learning for Life* 2000, p200). Under teacher qualifications in the McIver Report (2003, p60) a primary degree is seen as a basic qualification or alternatively a professional qualification in a subject area where no degree is available. In addition mentoring is recommended as an approach to inducting new teachers, in particular those coming from industry with no teaching background in Further Education. Within this backdrop IPPA have over the past thirty years trained and provided in-service for their tutors.

Source of the Idea for Research

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the experience of all involved in teaching practice for trainee tutors was fraught with difficulties due to lack of clarity of the roles and responsibilities. In reflecting on practice I identified the need to formalise the support given to trainee and existing tutors. Mentoring offers a framework to manage these relationships in a more formal context. Alred and Garvey (2000, p268) suggest that 'mentoring is a robust, powerful resource for facilitating 'learning to learn' through focusing on reflective, metacognitive and regulative aspects of learning and being at work.'

A review of McNiff's (2002) *Principles and Practice of action research* and the

question posed by Whitehead (1993) ‘what is my concern?’ enabled the identification of key issues in initial tutor training teaching practice. It was evident that the values espoused by the training department as to how teaching practice should happen were in conflict with reality (Schon, 1983). Hence I was a living contradiction in my practice and thereby provided a focus for this study. In addition it provided an opportunity to explore the values held by colleagues and engage in a ‘living theory’ approach (Whitehead, 1993). Lomax (1996) would argue that we should constantly review our values, so that they are congruent with our practice. In an effort to link theory with practice the aim of this study emerged:

‘How can I improve the support given to trainee tutors and their support tutors while on teaching practice?’

From participating in discussions with all in the training department it was clearly identified that the culture of the training department within IPPA was both collegial and collaborative in nature sharing an explicit set of values and open to change. Within this context, there was recognition that a problem area existed and a need for change to occur. McNamara (2002) and Higgins (2002) would contend that support structures, genuine interest, enthusiasm, rigour and vigour in (self) evaluation, and collaboration are pre-requisites to successful practitioner research. With a sense of a shared meaning of our values and a commitment of collaboration and participation by all involved, this study could move forward with the aspiration of improving practice and creating knowledge in the process.

Literature Review

The historical origins of the word mentor are attributed to Homer’s epic The Odyssey while this view is still a contested issue (Roberts 1999) its origins today lie in the concept of apprenticeship. The master who is the ‘expert’ or mentor provides direction for the apprentice or ‘learner’. Mentoring occurs in many settings, in business, nursing, medicine and education. While mentoring is firmly established in initial teacher training in the UK at primary and secondary level, (Brooks, Sikes, 1997) in Ireland it is an emerging field with a current national primary level pilot project on inducting newly qualified teachers has just been completed by St. Patrick’s Teacher Training College in conjunction with the Department of Education and University College Dublin. The report

on this national pilot project is due for publication in the autumn, however a draft report (unpublished) in February 2005 highlights the benefits of the mentoring programme for the whole school. In addition the challenges of implementing such a programme are also acknowledged, including time-tabling, accreditation and mentor training issues.

Other research is emerging on models of mentoring for adults returning to education (Fennel *et al* 2003). However there is a dearth of research in tutor/teacher training and mentoring within Further Education both in the UK and Ireland as tutors/teachers tended to deliver subjects that they had a particular interest in without the requirement of formal teaching qualifications. In the current environment of accreditation and quality assurance across the education sector it is inevitable, that all tutors/ trainers will be required to have formal qualifications to teach in this sector.

Definition of Mentoring

In his seminal book *Effective Teaching and Mentoring*, Daloz (1986, p17) describes mentors as guides ‘who lead us along the journey of our lives ... They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way.’ From the perspective of education Brooks and Sikes (1997) refer to the mentor as a ‘reflective coach’. These definitions suggest that mentoring can foster learning and development in one’s career and one’s personal life. Overall mentors are perceived as influential people who usually are older than their trainees who may protect, teach support coach and promote.

A broad definition of mentoring proposed by Anderson and Shannon (1988, p40) indicates the depth and breath of this type of support of one person by another:

A nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter’s/professional and/or personal development. Mentoring functions are carried out within the context of an ongoing, caring relationship between mentor and trainee.

The idea of a role model who in a caring and supportive relationship nurtures the trainee on a professional and personal level to promote that persons learning is congruent with how we see our role in training adults. What becomes apparent from reviewing the literature is that no one definition provides absolute clarity on mentoring as a concept.

Models of Mentoring

The Apprenticeship model is one of the better-known models. This is used mainly in industrial settings for those who work in skilled trades. However it was also used as an approach to learning to teach (O'Hear 1998; Hillgate Group 1998). Within this approach trainees receive advice on classroom technique derived from teachers' 'craft knowledge'. There are number of deficiencies to this model. The learner observes the teacher at work and attempts to emulate them, gaining little knowledge or understanding of what actually underpins their actions. However within the literature there is agreement that the apprenticeship model is one of many strategies, which may be used in supporting trainee teachers (Maynard and Furlong 1994; Tomlinson 1995).

The above authors contend that trainees need real experiences of teaching situations in order to develop scripts of teaching. In addition they need to be able to interpret what they see and therefore need to work alongside a mentor who can support the interpretation of the teaching episode. Similar to the Apprenticeship model is the competency-based model, which identifies the mentor as the trainer. However in this model there is a responsibility on the mentor for providing a programme of instruction, which results in the trainee achieving pre-identified competences. There is ongoing debate whether this approach to teaching is effective, and whether teaching can be reduced to set of skills, which can be ticked off.

Brooks and Sikes (1997) argue that the remaining mentoring models are rooted in the reflective practitioner tradition. Much of the research in this area is attributed to Schon (1983), who studied working practices of professionals. From this research the idea that the professional who was an infallible expert who just applied their expertise and skills gained in training was seriously challenged. Within this model the mentor acts as a reflective coach encouraging trainees to reflect in action and on action. Tomlinson (1995) argues that trainees need to work alongside mentors who can model this approach.

Ghaye & Ghaye (1998) drawing on Schon's ideas posit the value of 'deconstruction' whereby mentors through the process of skillful questioning enable trainees to 'become more aware of what they are doing and why they're teaching is the way it is' (1998, p27). All of the above models are based on a particular view of teaching, which in turn may influence the model chosen. On the other hand, Furlong and Maynard assert that like any form of teaching, mentoring must be built on a clear understanding of the learning process, it is intended to support. Mentoring strategies cannot be built in a vacuum; they must be built on an informed understanding of how trainees develop (1995, pviii and 195). To this end they put forward a staged model of how learning to teach develops, with the proviso that mentoring strategies need to be linked carefully to the developing needs of the trainee.

There is no absolute right way of learning to teach, some adults need a period of observing before they feel ready to take on more. In adopting a particular stance, consideration of each learner's learning style, and level of confidence should inform which model is appropriate and at what stage they are used. Within IPPA we want our trainees to have good role models, who reflect deeply and support trainees in becoming part of our community of practice.

Why Choose Action Research?

The aim of this study is to explore: 'How can I improve the support given to trainee tutors and their support tutors while on teaching practice?' Action research provides a systematic method of observe, describe, plan, act, reflect, evaluate, and modify in light of experience. However this is not envisaged as a linear process. McNiff (2002, p56) provides a 'visual metaphor to describe how one can start at one place and end up somewhere entirely unexpected'. She explains it as an 'iterative spiral of spirals, which is constantly unfolding into new versions of itself.' This model facilitates the possibility of addressing many issues while at the same time focusing on one. Action research as espoused by McNiff, (2002) offers an approach to address the issues in this study.

A further reason for choosing action research is the role played by the practitioner. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p191) propose that only practitioners have 'access to the understandings and commitments which inform action in praxis, therefore only the practitioner can study praxis. McNiff (2002, p4) develops this idea when she states 'the importance of presenting accounts of

practice and that these accounts should come from practitioners. This process must be rigorous, systematic, and open to public scrutiny to assess its validity. Methods of data collection include focused group discussion, interviews, and reflective diaries.

Action Research Cycles

This study took place over a period of three years and involved three cycles of action research. In the first action cycle in 2003 a review of my current role in the support of trainees and their support tutors while on teaching practice was investigated. In addition the trainees and support tutors were interviewed. The second action cycle in 2004 involved a new group of trainees and support tutors on teaching practice. This cycle involved, providing specific training for trainees with limited training for mentors. The third cycle in 2005 involved a further group of trainees and mentors. Gathering the learning from previous cycles, this final cycle concentrated on mentor training as key to the development of an effective mentoring framework.

Working through each cycle enabled the identification of key issues of support, which in turn facilitated the implementation of changes in the next cycle. This process allowed time for reflection in action and on action furthering a deeper understanding of the mentoring process and the possibilities for change.

Key Themes Emerging from the Research

Findings from the research suggest that definitions of mentoring varied between mentors and trainees. This highlights the difficulties that can unfold in a mentoring programme and cause confusion. It further re-enforces the argument made by Brooks and Sikes (1997) earlier, that our understanding of mentoring is critical and that mentoring programmes need to be grounded in a definition that defines the essence of the relationship. Other emerging themes were the importance of preparation for establishing the mentoring relationship. In the past the notion of mentoring was more concerned with passing on knowledge and know-how rather than connected knowing as described by Belenkey *et al.* (1996). The issue of support and challenge was a key theme. Overall trainees felt supported by their mentor but experienced very little challenge. This concurs with other studies Jacques (1995) Maynard (2000) and Butcher (2002) who reported mentors reluctant to challenge or address difficulties with trainees. The planning of teaching sessions emerged as an area of concern for trainees in

particular. The lack of time to meet with their mentors to plan was a major factor plus they felt that more input on planning was required. Evaluation posed a further challenge to both trainees and their mentors in terms of time and classes finishing late at night. The findings highlight the range of issues to be addressed to further develop the programme to meet the needs of all involved.

Implications for the Policy and Practice

From the perspective of IPPA there are many implications for implementing a mentoring programme as a policy document. In the first instance there are issues of resources in a climate of competing programmes. However if we are saying we value our tutors and see them as key to driving quality in the sector, then it is time to resource this mentoring programme to provide competent tutors in the field.

As coordinator of the programme with responsibility for the training of tutors, further improvement in preparing mentors for their role is essential. The training provided should equip mentors to carry out their role effectively. Mentors need relevant training to prepare them for the initial phase of mentoring this would include:

- Defining mentoring
- Models of Mentoring
- How to establish a mentoring relationship
- Describing roles and responsibilities

The development of mentoring networks; as an informal peer-to-peer support would provide a forum for sharing ideas and addressing issues that arise. The provision of an online mentoring discussion forum on the IPPA website would provide a further mechanism of support and in particular for mentors and trainees who are geographically located at a distance from colleagues. It is envisaged that further cycles of action and reflection will evolve as the project develops over the coming years. As McNiff (2002, p55) argues

‘A theory, which is interesting and has potential for developing new forms of understanding cannot be static; it has to be developmental, capable of turning into new forms which are already latent within the present form.’

Conclusion

This paper outlined an overview of a study carried out in IPPA the Early Childhood Organisation. The research focussed on developing a mentoring programme for supporting trainee tutors and their mentors while on teaching practice. Through three cycles of action research key themes emerged providing evidence to inform practice. The implications for policy and practice were identified with recommendations for the future development of the mentoring programme.

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Practice Placement: A Mentoring Approach

Anna Ridgway

Introduction

This is the second paper that sets out to look at the experiences of students while on practice placement during their B.A. Degree in Early Childhood Studies at University College Cork. The first paper (Ridgway & Corbett 2004) explored students experiences through interviews and questionnaires and referred to students who had been in the programme before the appointment of Placement Supervisors at UCC. The Supervisors have now been in place for two years and this paper synthesises my experiences in this role, the perceptions of students and Mentors and the aspirations for the programme in the coming years.

Aims and Principles of Practice Placement

The supervision of practice placement is seen to be a fundamental core principle of the B.A. Degree in Early Childhood Studies. The placement provides opportunities for progressive, professional development where the student can reflect on, analyse and evaluate professional practice. It also offers the student opportunities for putting theories, ideas and activities, generated in the taught elements of the course, into practice. The importance of supervised work practice is represented by the following principles that underpin this element of the course:

- All Placements are selected and monitored by UCC Placement Supervisors;
- UCC Placement Supervisors, in partnership with agency staff, supervise all students on placement;
- Students will only graduate if they are deemed to be satisfactory in both the academic and professional practice areas of the course.

Organisation and Support

Students undertake their placements in a wide range of settings including: Crèches, Playgroups, Health Board nurseries, National Schools, Hospitals, Voluntary Organisation Services, Special Needs Services and Community Projects. The students of the B.A. Degree in Early Childhood Studies

undertake 800 hours of unpaid practice placement. This is made up of two placements, each of 400 hours, during their second and third years as undergraduates. The placements are done in blocks of ten to twelve weeks, beginning in February of second year when students begin a Social Studies/Child Health placement. This is followed by an Education placement the following September, as they begin their final year of the degree.

Students are encouraged to do both placements with a thirty-mile radius of UCC, however, students may choose to do one placement outside of this radius. In the latter event the Placement Supervisors cannot make on-site visits and supervision is limited to email or telephone contact between the Agency Mentor, the student and the UCC Placement Supervisor. Assessment forms are completed for-and-by students both inside and outside of this thirty-mile zone.

Assessment Issues

Part of the Assessment of Placement practice involves a minimum of two on-site visits to the student in the agency. These three-way visits are pre-arranged by the Placement Supervisor. It is interesting to note the different perceptions that Mentors and Students have of these visits. It has been my experience that some Mentors do not tell the students that the Placement Supervisor is due to visit, therefore, the visit comes as a complete surprise on the day. This comes from a perception of the Placement Supervisor as an Inspector rather than a coach, Mentor or pastoral support. The purpose of the visits is outlined in the Placement Handbook and other documentation, which is sent out to Mentors regularly. It is clear that we must explore other means to reinforce this point.

Students view the visits with mixed feelings. Some also believe the role is inspectorial, while others see the visit as an opportunity to ask questions about their practice, their diary or portfolio or sometimes, about other college assignments. On visits I have also been asked for advice about career plans, travel or other life choices. In general, most students are very happy to see a 'friendly face' from College as the Placement may initially be a lonely experience for them; separated as they are from their peers and friends. The discursive nature of the three-way visits ensures that students are given sufficient time to talk about any area of their practice. The initial visit often involves affirming the student in his/her role. This sometimes means passing on the very positive comments of the Mentor who may not have stated these

directly to the student. This comes back to the point of developing an appropriate language of feedback to use with students (Ridgway 2002, 2003, 2004), in order that students and Mentors feel comfortable discussing all aspects of the student's practice together.

Each Mentor is asked to complete three Assessment forms for each student throughout the course of the placement. We have now introduced a system of self-assessment for students and we ask them to complete the same forms themselves, at the same intervals as their Mentors. This has been an interesting exercise, in that many students do not feel comfortable self-assessing their practice and often just copy the form the Mentor has completed. I hope to work on developing self-assessment skills with students during the preparatory Skills Labs classes and I would see this as a priority for the forthcoming year. It is important that students understand the value of their own work, are comfortable articulating this and see the assessment forms as a form of professional development.

It is clear that some Mentors also have difficulties in assessing students. In some cases Mentors do not wish to assess the students at all during placement and prefer to furnish a reference at the end of the placement period. A very small number of Mentors state that their responsibility is to the children in their care rather than the student on placement, therefore, they do not see the completion of assessment forms as part of their role. This is inadequate as it does not support the student's learning throughout the placement. The assessment procedure we have developed is designed to identify areas of the student's work that is unsatisfactory as early as possible so that the student may work on them. It is important that the criteria for assessment are clear, unambiguous, open and public so that students know what is expected of them. This helps to support their work and also makes it possible for them to begin the process of self-assessment.

The assessment forms list a large range of skills and competencies, together with attitudinal characteristics, and offer the Mentor and student a choice of indicating either *satisfactory* or *unsatisfactory*. We have deliberately chosen this model as it is keeping with models of professional practice placement. It also frees up the Mentor from having to assign a grade to a student on placement. If the assessment indicates a number of unsatisfactory areas of work, the

Placement Supervisor, Mentor and Student sit down together to discuss this and to plan a schedule of work to redress the difficulties. In some cases it emerged that the work was deemed unsatisfactory due to the expectations of Mentor and/or student not being met. This sometimes arose due to difficulties in communication in busy agencies, where the role of the student was not clearly defined and both student and Mentor were unclear and sometimes ill at ease. Role clarification has become an essential part of the placement and this has presented some challenges. It is important that Mentors develop an appropriate language of feedback for students. It has become clear from the on-site visits that some Mentors find it very difficult to discuss unsatisfactory work with students. This happens from a genuine concern for the student's wellbeing and a desire not to upset him/her. It has happened that Mentors are concerned that any such discussion would have a negative effect on the atmosphere in the classroom. It sometimes falls to the Placement Supervisor to mediate between the two people concerned and to voice the concerns of each to the other. I believe that Mentors should receive more support in dealing with students, particularly in discussing areas of difficulty or conflict. This is one area that I wish to develop in the coming year. In general, these issues work out well due to the enormous goodwill of the Mentors and their genuine desire to support young students; the practitioners of tomorrow.

Different agencies require different things from students on placement and it is necessary to work out an individual schedule of work for some students. In some cases the student is viewed as an extra staff member, however, an undergraduate, unqualified student should never be allowed to work unsupervised. The role of the Mentor is crucial here, both in identifying the role of the student within his/her agency and in working out a plan to fully support the student's learning during the placement. The role of Mentor is a very responsible one and the agency should support this extra workload taken on by its staff.

Developing the Role of the Mentor and the Student

We are working on ways to develop the role of the student on placement, moving from a passive observer to an active participant in the classroom. It will also be important to support Mentors to develop their role in nurturing the student. This will involve providing feedback to students on their work on a regular basis, either through scheduled meetings or in the more informal

settings of working together. This will include negotiating through areas of conflict, setting out goals and making expectations clear. Students should be involved in preparing activities to do with the young children in the placement setting, be given an opportunity to do these activities with a group of children and then reflect on the learning that has taken place. Mentors should, from the benefit of their own experience as students and novice practitioners, be in a position to anticipate difficulties that may arise for students and try to alleviate them. One student recalled that she worked between three different classes. Each morning she waited until one of the teachers called her to do some work. She never knew in advance which class she would begin to work in or what the schedule for the day would involve. She did not have a sense of belonging in this agency and she found it increasingly difficult to engage with the work as the placement progressed.

This is a rare occurrence, at one end of the spectrum of students' experiences, but a number of students each year state that they did not feel they had enough responsibility while on placement. This is understandable from the Mentor's point of view; by the time he/she really come to understand a student's strengths the placement is well advanced, or if the student works between several classes, the placement period may be over before Mentors get together to discuss the work. However, it does not help to maximise the student's experience of placement if his/her skills are not utilised. It is important to state here that the student is a *guest* in the agency and must work under direction at all times. However, the student needs opportunities to transform theoretical constructs into practice, to learn by doing, therefore, rich dialogue between Mentor and Student is essential. Students must be open to advice from their Mentors and be willing to reflect on this and to identify ways to improve their practice.

Placement documentation

Students and Mentors are given a copy of the Placement Handbook before placement begins. This handbook includes details of the documentation required from students and their Mentors, together with details of the assignments students must undertake throughout the Placement. Students, together with their Mentors and Placement Supervisors, sign a Contract of Learning at the beginning of the placement period, which confirms their commitment to support each other and identifies the hours of work for each student. Students also complete a Declaration of suitability to work with young

children, which is submitted in lieu of Garda clearance at the moment. Some agencies apply for Garda clearance for students on work placement but UCC requires *all* students to complete the Declaration before beginning the Placement. All students submit weekly time sheets to their Placement Supervisor, which must be signed by both student and Mentor.

Assignments

In each of the two Placements, students complete a daily diary, which describes experiences during the day. They also develop a portfolio of practice, which must be submitted with the diary to be marked at the end of placement. This portfolio is an essential part of the placement and it is particularly difficult for students to do. Becoming a reflective practitioner takes time and the development of the portfolio should be coached and scaffolded over the period of the placement. Students sometimes succumb to the temptation to choose three interesting areas of work in the agency and to write an essay about these. These are not reflective portfolio entries because they do not focus directly on the student's work or show what the student has learned both from *engaging in* the work and from *reflecting on* the work. It is necessary to provide further support for students to develop their portfolios. This should take the form of regular tutorials with a designated tutor where each student could present a draft portfolio entry to a group of his/her peers. The student would receive feedback from both peers and tutor and in the light of the new perspective achieved s/he would then have an opportunity to *re-draft* the entry. All students in the group would benefit from this work, particularly as each student should take a part in the conversation about each entry by either making a comment on the entry or asking a question. It may be difficult for students initially to think of appropriate questions and even more difficult to think of a question to ask of the presenter. It is important that the tutor provides a safe environment for these conversations where both presenter and questioner feel comfortable in discussing the work. The presenter must feel supported by the tutor and his/her peers who must all act as critical friends.

Plans for the future

The Placement Supervisor's role will continue to develop in the near future. It is planned to increase the numbers of staff in line with the increased numbers of students reading for the B.A. in Early Childhood Studies. The Placement Management Team will continue to model the Mentoring process to both

students and Mentors. We will also identify research literature on Mentoring and assessment, which highlights the centrality of rich feedback in ongoing, meaningful and authentic assessment. We will identify the literature on reflective practice which focuses on the importance of self-and-peer assessment. Primarily we will continue to build up a community of Mentors and agencies who will work with us to ensure that the Placement experience is rich, varied, enjoyable and fun for our students. We will continue to work to prepare our students to meet the needs of Placement, as identified by our very caring and hard working Mentors, so that they will continue to grow and develop as professionals. UCC has also developed a range of evening modules under the evening Arts Programme which may be taken either individually as part of practitioners professional development, or as part of the B.A. Degree in Early Childhood Studies. This is a very exciting development, which will be of great interest to practitioners who wish to improve their qualifications in the area.

I see a rich future for the degree and for the placement component. We are fortunate to have such a wealth of expertise to call on in the agencies in which our students are placed and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their considerable dedication and help.

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Service User as Educator? User Knowledges and Participation in Professional Education and Training

Kenneth Burns

*'What did you learn at school, Hans Thomas?' Dad asked.
'To sit still,' I replied. 'It's so difficult that we spend years learning
to do it.'* (Gaarder, 1996, p46)

Introduction

In *The Solitaire Mystery* by Jostein Gaarder, Hans Thomas and his father are discussing what Hans Thomas has (or has not) learned at school. In this quote, Hans Thomas and his father echoed some of my thoughts regarding *what* and *how* students learn at educational institutions. I hope that professional education and training is not about sitting still, staying quiet, and listening passively to the lecturer/teacher. Professional education and training should aim to facilitate the development of critically reflective students that can locate knowledge within and outside their physical learning context.

This article seeks to examine whom can best contribute to our understanding and identification of contemporary issues in professional training and education. The article examines a piece of teaching research undertaken with a group of students that examined the process and learning outcomes following the introduction of *personal testimonies* from users of social work services on a child and family welfare module. The central contention of this piece is that users can make a significant contribution to the training, education and development of professionals. I will also argue that some pedagogical models 'privilege' professional knowledge and users may not be viewed as a valued source of knowledge within these models. The article also examines some of the limitations of the *personal testimony* approach and the author contends that there are ethical and resource considerations that need to be reconciled for there to be some reciprocity in the process and to avoid harm to users.

Rationale for the Inclusion of User Inputs

Following some debate and reflection upon my experiences in social work practice and an analysis of student feedback on teaching modules, a colleague

and I began to think about the extent to which users of social work services could contribute to the professional education of those interested in working with children and families. While our family and child welfare modules actively promoted practitioner inputs and the validation of practitioner and student knowledges, the experiences and knowledges of users (Beresford, 2000) were mediated & interpreted through our teaching. Beresford and Croft (2001) contend that this approach is problematic as they questioned the objectivity of professional perspectives. They argue for the right of service users and organisations to represent themselves and through the use of standpoint theory and anti-oppressive practice (a key discourse in social work education), to argue that service users at the receiving end of a service or practice '... are better placed to generate critical questions and knowledge claims about AOP [anti oppressive practice]'. We believed that user inputs could improve the quality of professional education and training in the following ways:

- Modelling ethical engagement with service users by demonstrating skills, knowledge and values for practice;
- A belief that users' experiences of social work practice were valuable and should be 'heard';
- A belief that users have a unique perspective and knowledge developed from their life experiences and contact with social services;
- The absence of user inputs undermined some of the core messages of the course, which include participation, inclusion, partnership, and the valuing of and engagement with users' narratives;
- To rectify an identified need to 'balance' inputs on the modules (academic, research, practitioner, users).

We were also influenced by recent social policy, legislative and practice developments that recommended greater participation of families and children in decisions affecting their lives. The *National Children's Strategy – Our Children Their Lives* (Government of Ireland, 2000,) recommends that we listen to, understand and act in the best interest of children. Most contemporary good practice guidance reflects the importance of operationalising children rights, the promotion of meaningful participation and consultation with children and families, and shared decision making with service users (Department of Health *et al.*, 2000; Department of Health and Children, 1999). One such example can be found in the Family Welfare Conference provision in the *Children Act 2001* that

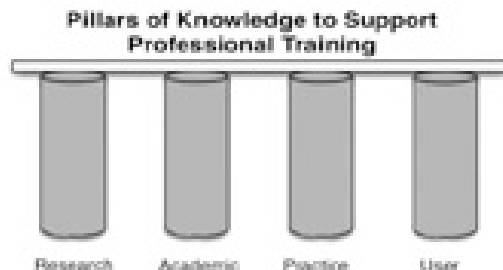
actively encourages the meaningful participation of children, families, extended kin and the wider community in care planning and child welfare decision making, hitherto, the almost exclusive concern of professionals.

Pedagogical Model and Professional Training

A reflective model of teaching and learning underpinned the teaching of these modules, which acknowledges and values course participants own knowledge, experiences and skills (Dempsey *et al.*, 2001). Some recent criticism of this model (White, 2004) has suggested that this approach to social work education excludes users and only professional narratives are 'heard'. This analysis is framed by the conclusions of Harlow (2004) and Harris (2003) that social work is increasingly constructed and framed according to consumerist and managerialist imperatives, where participation is more limited and users are constructed as 'passive'. Ife (2001, p198) writing from a human rights perspective, argues that it is important for the 'voices of the less powerful' to be heard and that users should be involved in all aspects of social work education, including the appointment and evaluation of academic staff.

The dominance of the 'evidence based practice discourse' in education reflects the primacy and dominance of academic and research knowledges. The prevalence of practitioners inputs on training courses is consistent with the professional model of training. These are 'experts' who we have trained and their validity is their professional knowledge and practice 'wisdom' (*knowledge in practice*). It is my contention that there is a fourth 'pillar' of knowledge (figure 1), which represents the *Knowledge of, and Knowledge in,* practice held by service users, which I believe is underrepresented and underutilised in professional education and training. The next section examines the outcome of a piece of teaching research that examines this contention.

Figure 1



Teaching Research

A number of user personal testimonies (Manthorpe, 2000) were facilitated on our courses and an associated conference¹. The sessions covered users experiences of – Foster care, residential care and prison systems;

- Statutory child and family welfare social work services in a Health Service Executive;
- Adoption services;
- Institutional care by religious orders;
- Conference contributions from separated children seeking asylum and asylum seekers.

This article will reflect upon the facilitation of one personal testimony input from a young parent called 'Ann'², which I facilitated on a child and family welfare course. While the case study applies to social work students, the learning is transferable to most locations and educational contexts. In this course, it is necessary to examine assessment models, intervention and engagement skills, notions of partnership, working and listening to children/young adults, a consideration of children's rights, prevention, working with children in care and a consideration of ecological factors on parenting. How could I examine these ideas, engage students in the gravitas of these tasks and not just intellectualise these issues? Why not ask someone who has personal knowledge of these issues? 'Ann's' testimony contributed to a session that dealt with these issues.

While the literature suggests that user involvement in education is valuable (Beresford, 2000; Manthorpe, 2000) there is limited information on how to do it! A small-scale research study was undertaken during the six months after my session with 'Ann' to capture the service user, social work students and practitioners experiences of the session and to establish to what extent learning goals had been met. Before we look at the results of the study, it is necessary to examine the process and thinking underpinning the session.

Process

The experience of facilitating a young parent with extensive knowledge of social work and residential care services proved to be a demanding, labour-intensive, but worthwhile experience. As an educator, questions immediately arose regarding how to facilitate a process that met the pedagogical objectives of the

modules, yet was ethical and supportive of the user. This was also reflected in the student feedback: *'it is important that they are doing it for the right reasons. It's a very vulnerable position to put someone in.'* The question at this point was how does one locate someone to undertake a session such as this and where does one begin? Table 1 outlines the building blocks of these sessions:

Table 1

Identification of User/Group	Informed Consent	Relationship Building	Resources & Supports
Preparation (User and Class)	Delivery of Session	Debrief	Research

Contact was made with a child protection and welfare representative in an Irish Health Service Executive³ (HSE) to discuss the feasibility of the idea. Although I had many professional relationships with users and staff in Irish HSE's, it was ethically appropriate to first seek institutional consent and support. To ensure professional ethical standards were upheld and client confidentiality was not compromised, the HSE agreed to approach a mother who had had extensive experience of social services in Ireland on my behalf. Institutional consent was granted for me to make contact with staff members in this HSE who were presently working with this mother. HSE staff approached 'Ann' on my behalf to discuss the proposal and a meeting was arranged between 'Ann', the HSE and University College Cork to elaborate upon the proposal.

For full-time educators, the facilitation and planning of a session can be a challenging process. The function of this meeting was to ensure 'Ann' had as much information as possible to enable her to make an informed decision on her participation in the teaching sessions. Practical issues such as classroom location and layout, childcare, supports and remuneration, were planned for and agreed. Permissions and supports from 'Ann', her family, students, HSE management and staff, were sought and obtained. Permission was also received to develop the findings for the use in publications and presentations.

It was agreed that 'Ann' should have full control over the process, extent of participation, format for the session, choice of content, degree of self-disclosure and it was agreed that 'Ann' could withdraw from the process at anytime. The objective of the teaching session was to make public in an ethical and consensual manner the personal/private based knowledges and understandings held by 'Ann' about Irish social services.

The facilitation of user testimonies can be problematic ethically, as one needs to be sure that users consent to partake is fully informed, the session can result in a user reliving painful experiences (Ramon, 2005) and the user is placed in a vulnerable position as a discussions are set within the life context of the user. To increase the likelihood that the session was mutually beneficial for both 'Ann' and students, it was felt that students needed to be prepared for the process and topics such as confidentiality, ethics and relationships needed to be negotiated. A limitation in the preparation process for students was the availability of free spaces in our regular planned sessions for a more organic student led discussion on these topics. For expediency, a more didactic style was adopted and this was a drawback in meeting the identified learning objectives for students.

The outcome of the informed consent process and preparation work led to a selection by 'Ann' of a structured interview format with questions developed from the preparation process. 'Ann' had full control over the selection and wording of questions and her responses to these questions. 'Ann' requested that the interview be recorded on a camcorder and this videotape would remain the property of 'Ann' who would have exclusive ownership and use of the tape. Following the interview in-class with 'Ann', she had pre-agreed to a Q&A session with students. In the debrief session with 'Ann' and the HSE following the delivery of the sessions, we discussed how to evaluate the sessions. The undertaking of a piece of research was agreed upon.

Research Results

57 social work students (47 postgraduate and 12 undergraduate) completed a questionnaire a number of weeks after the sessions. Table 2 provides some further details on the number of students, their profile, number of semi-structured interviews and questionnaire completion rates.

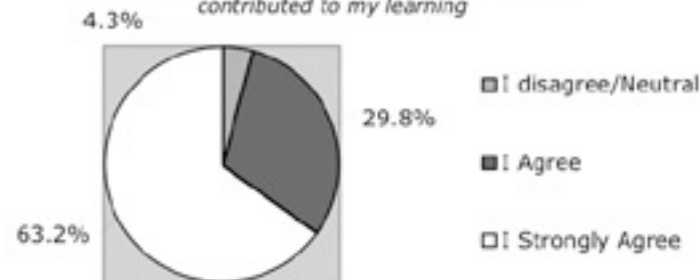
Table 2

	Profile	Number of Students Available for Survey	Questionnaires Completed
1. Undergraduate Bachelor of Social Work (BSW3)	Mature Age Students	13	12
2. Postgraduate Master of Social Work 1 (MSW 1 Annexe)	Mixed group with at least a primary degree	25	25
3. Postgraduate Master of Social Work 1 (MSW 1 Enterprise)	Mixed group with at least a primary degree ⁴	25	22 (93.65% return rate)
4. Semi-structured Interviews (6)	'Ann' Child Care Worker Social Worker Social Work Student A Social Work Student B Social Work Student C		

The questionnaire sought to examine student perspectives on the validity and value of the session to their learning, to ascertain the learning gained, the impact on their professional development, to seek feedback on the session format and process, and to establish whether there had been a change in students attitude towards service user involvement in their education before and after the session. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 'Ann', 'Ann's' child care worker and social worker and 3 social work students. The purpose of the interviews was to establish their views and reflections on the process and to evaluate the impact of the session on their personal/professional life. 'Ann' was interviewed to explore her experience and reflections on the process and to share student feedback with her. The three social work students were interviewed upon their return from their social work practice placement, which took place after the session, to capture the impact (if any) of the learning upon their practice.

An important theme arose concerning the perceived validity of 'Ann's' knowledge. 100% of student's agreed or strongly agreed that 'service users can make a valuable contribution to students learning' and 93% felt after the session that 'Ann's' 'input contributed positively to my learning' (Chart 1).

Chart 1: I believe the input from 'Ann' positively contributed to my learning



The overwhelming affirmation from students that 'Ann' contributed to their learning contrasted with 'Ann's' continual expression of doubt about the value of her experience and she questioned its usefulness, relevance and significance to student learning. Despite extensive positive student feedback and support from the team, 'Ann' said '[I] couldn't understand it like, how a small thing to me could be such new and big to them'. As an educator, I was especially concerned that there should be some reciprocity in the process. In my interview with 'Ann' we discussed the results of the students questionnaires and she noted that '[I was] proud of myself... best thing I got out of it, because I didn't feel proud of myself in years'.

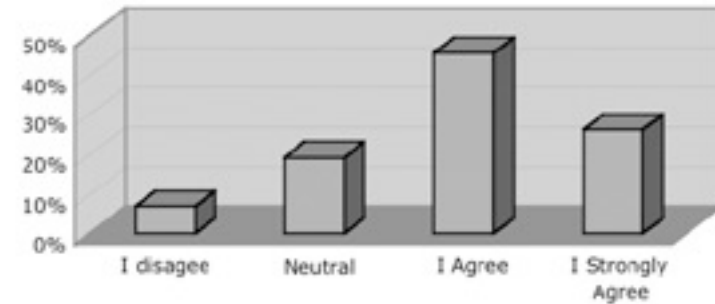
Students initial reaction to the idea of a service user participating in their education met with a warm response; 'surprised, great to see' and students repeatedly noted that it would be a 'privilege' and they were 'intrigued' about the process and the session. One student noted that 'it is very important to see and hear opinions and experiences of a service user – to get information directly rather than on paper or written by someone else'. This immediacy and personal contact was particularly valued by students. In the follow up interviews with three student social workers, I wondered about the impact of using video to increase the range of possible inputs on the course. The students believed that video would not have the same impact upon their learning. This finding is also reflected in Manthorpe's (2000) observation that the power of the personal and visible presence accounts for students' preference for the users presence in the class. The mainly positive initial reactions were tempered with some salient commentaries that hoped 'it would not be a voyeuristic exercise' and a general concern and apprehension for the user.

Students who attend the session said that they had achieved significant learning from the session. One student noted that users *'are the experts on their needs ...'*, *'they know, we don't'* and another said *'we constantly see learning from the viewpoint of authorities and educators. Surely, if our work is to be truly client centred, they [sic. users] should have a more active part in our learning?'*. These comments suggest that students agree that student knowledges are valuable – *'service users provide information that is not found in text books'* and *'it gave me insight into working with children and children in care particularly, and gave some 'substance' to the theory we are learning'*. The session also reinforced the power dimension in professional practice, challenged models of social work practice and the impact of service delivery on the lives of those with whom we work.

Social work values and best practice were put into a clearer focus as a result of the session. Students commented on 'Ann's' outlook on social work methods – *'challenge you to look more closely at your own methods and beliefs'*. Some students reflected upon their own growth and prejudices – *'challenge ways I would try to include service users – never realised sharing a 'thought' could have such an effect'* and *'made me look at my own prejudices in relation to service users outer image'*. The questionnaires demonstrated that 'Ann', without prompting from the course team, covered many of the significant themes of the course in her session. This was reflected in one student's comment that they were surprised *'at the amount of knowledge ... that [Ann] had about the (internal) working of social work ...'*.

Students felt that there was some room for development in their preparation for the session. Although 95% agreed or strongly agreed that 'Ann' was adequately prepared for the session, some students felt that their preparation required some additional attention and thought (chart 2). These figures reflect the didactic nature of their preparation and some students noted that they were disappointed that they themselves had not taken the preparation seriously enough and as a result, had lost out upon a better quality of learning opportunity.

Chart 2: *'I felt adequately prepared for the session'*



A question arose regarding the representativeness of one user's experience and how generalizable this experience is to the broader sample. Some students felt that a 'panel' of users might give a greater balance. There were mixed views on whether it is better to receive an input from a user presently engaged in service delivery from a HSE or whether the input should come from someone no longer in receipt of a service. Some felt that the contemporaneous nature of the experience made it valuable, whereas, others felt that a period of reflection would be better before a user is invited to partake in a session.

Analysis

As a result of facilitating this and other user inputs, I have learned that the investment made in a good, well thought out, ethical, resourced and safe process to introduce personal testimony inputs can be a rewarding process for all concerned. I learned that making the preparation and planning process transparent to students and their observation of my engagement with 'Ann' in class, served to 'model' a good practice approach to social work and engagement with service users. Facilitating user testimonies, from this experience, suggests that it is also a powerful way to educate prospective professionals about skills, values, knowledge and approaches to working with children and families. Reflecting upon the process further, questions arose for me regarding the limitations of the personal testimony model and the need to examine other models of participation that might be more meaningful. The literature suggests a number of models and degrees of participation (Edwards, 2003; Fook, 2002; Ife, 2001; Manthorpe, 2000; Ramon, 2005). These include:

- The involvement of service users in the assessment of students on practice placements;
- Curriculum planning;

- Participation in the selection of students for professional training courses;
- Selection of academic staff;
- Promotion of positive measures to facilitate users to become students, professionals and/or full-time educators;
- Programme participants, many of whom are mature age students', have first hand knowledge as carers', parents' and users of services. With the creation of a safe learning community, students sometimes share their knowledge and experiences, which enriches the classes learning;
- Users as researcher's and research partners.

I was conscious of Humphries (2003, p89) observation that '... there is a tendency in some of the social work literature both to homogenise and to idealise service users knowledge (Beresford & Croft, 2001), risking reversing the hierarchy, so that 'lay knowledge' may come to be viewed as superior to scientific knowledge'. What I learned from this session was that there was a high level of congruence between the themes and critical messages for practice identified by the user in the session and current literature and research on best practice (Department of Health *et al.*, 2000; Department of Health and Children, 1999; 2001c; a; b; Ferguson, 2004; Ferguson & O'Reilly, 2001; Fook, 2002; Horwath, 2001; Macdonald, 2001; Munro, 2002).

These sessions also have the potential for significant harm. The sessions expose classes and users to very emotional and powerful experiences that can have negatives affects. The sessions could be a negative experience through the undermining of user's account, excessive challenging, and the sessions could feel 'unsafe' for classes and users without adequate preparation. There is also the potential that the session could reflect the educator's narrative if they are too 'controlling'. The educator may unwittingly shape the contribution as they are concerned about handing a session over to an 'untried', 'unknown' or 'uncontrollable' person. A final significant consideration is the considerable (worthwhile) investment of time and resources necessary to facilitate a safe, ethical and well prepared session. The importance of building relationships and trust with the user in the preparation process and the availability of a concerned supportive 'other', goes some way to ameliorating these concerns.

Conclusion

Service users can make a valuable contribution to the quality of professional

education and teaching by contributing to our knowledge base for practice. Users can contribute through their *knowledge in practice* (knowledge in action, knowledge acquired through experience) and *knowledge of practice* (knowledge is problematic and contested). I believe that user knowledges are underrepresented in professional education and training and some of the reasons for this underutilisation include:

Users can present a challenge to the professional model of training and education;
 Perceived threat to professional roles and knowledge;
 Concern regarding what users might say! Will users slate us?;
 Users fall outside our paradigm of knowledge construction;
 Resources, access, consent and ethical considerations.

I am not suggesting that that the ideas presented in this paper are not problematic and they require careful further consideration. My experience with 'Ann' and other users, has led me to an increased commitment to enhancing user participation in professional education and training and further consideration on widening this participation beyond the confines of the classroom.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express his gratitude to 'Ann' whose hard work, courage and intelligence made this a rewarding learning experience for everyone involved. The author acknowledges the contribution and support of the HSE, 'Ann's' child care worker and social worker, and the students of the BSW & MSW programmes.

¹ *Guests of the Nation: Community and Social Services Responses to Asylum Seekers*, Department of Applied Social Studies and the Health Service Executive Southern Area, University College Cork, 15th April 2005.

² 'Ann' = pseudonym. The name of the HSE and its staff does not appear on this text, to reduce the possibility that 'Ann's' identity might be unwittingly compromised.

³ In January 2005, the 11 Health Boards in the Republic of Ireland were abolished and replaced by 4 Health Service Executives. Further details on the reorganisation can be found at <http://www.healthreform.ie>

⁴ All three classes were primarily female

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Professional Development in the Childcare Sector in Waterford City and County: A Discussion Paper

Rose Kavanagh & Noirin Healy-Magwa

Section 1 – Introduction

In 2004, Waterford City and County Childcare Committees (WCCCs) jointly undertook research into the professional development of the childcare sector in the city and county. The research examined the levels of experience, training, networking, employment practice, pay and working conditions, membership of trade unions etc. of both community based and self-employed childcare service providers and practitioners. The objective of the research was to explore the factors affecting the professional development of childcare practitioners in Waterford City and County with the aim of stimulating discussion and debate on this important topic in a rapidly evolving sector.

Through their day-to-day involvement, both the City and County Childcare Committees had noted there had never been a systematic collection of baseline data on aspects of professional development in the Childcare Sector of Waterford City and County. Anecdotal reports had indicated that there were inconsistencies in employment terms and conditions and in levels of training and experience. While some research has been conducted by a number of the Childcare Committees (CCCs), National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) and Border Counties Childcare Network in relation to specific aspects of professional development (*e.g.* training, pay & conditions, salaries), the current research conducted by WCCCs is unique in that it explores multiple aspects of professional development.

At the consultation stage in the development of the Strategic Plans for the City and County Committees, the low status of childcare and the variable conditions of employment were mentioned as issues for the sector. It was suggested that Committees should network with each other to support the professionalism of the sector. Thus, both Committees have a vision¹ and stated objectives² in their respective Strategic Plans with regard to the development and promotion of childcare as a profession. The core values of

‘child centred’ and ‘quality’³ underpin and are particularly relevant to this current work of the WCCCs.

This piece of research, therefore is underpinned by the values, vision and objectives outlined in the Strategic Plans and by the specific actions in the Action Plans in relation to remuneration of childcare personnel and improved working conditions, development of a career path, promoting professional development and recognition and value for the contribution of childcare workers in society.

This paper presents some of the findings from the full report. It, and the report itself, should be viewed as a ‘discussion paper’ as its purpose lies more in identifying issues, raising questions and suggesting avenues for future enquiry than in providing answers *per se*.

Section 2 of this discussion paper describes the methodology adopted in conducting the research. Section 3 provides the contextual setting and findings from secondary research undertaken. Section 4 presents the primary research findings from the questionnaire survey conducted with the self-employed and community based childcare service providers and practitioners who voluntarily agreed to participate. Section 5 presents the discussion points arising from the secondary and primary research findings and concluding remarks.

Section 2 – Methodology

This research is descriptive in nature and therefore uses a quantitative research design. Secondary data used includes information provided by FAS⁴ with regard to the Community Employment (CE) Scheme and from the Childcare Census 2004⁵. All childcare providers, owners/managers and management committees in the city and county were afforded the opportunity to participate in the research. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. There are 44 notified⁶ services in the city and 48 in the county, each with different numbers of staff.

The stages involved in the research were:

- Data Collection Instrument;
- Pilot and revision of questionnaires;
- Distribution of questionnaires;

Response rates;
 Data analysis;
 Presentation of findings;
 Secondary research – Childcare Census, FAS Community Employment Scheme, Literary Review.

(i) Data collection instrument

The method of data collection in this research was a self-completion questionnaire delivered and returned through the postal service.

Three questionnaires were designed, one for practitioners, one for owner/managers of private childcare facilities and one for management committees of community based childcare facilities.

Each of the questionnaires had two main sections, Part A was made up of questions related to Training, Networking and Professional Development and Part B was on the Experience, Pay and Conditions.

(ii) Pilot and revision of questionnaires

Before the survey could be carried out it was believed essential to pre-test the survey instrument for validity and reliability. The pilot test was carried out in two childcare centres and distributed to four professionals who have experience in the childcare area.

(iii) Distribution of questionnaires

Prior to distribution of the questionnaires a letter was sent to all notified childcare centres informing them of the aims and objectives of the research and inviting them to participate in the research. This letter detailed the requirements for participation and the fact that confidentiality and anonymity would be guaranteed. All questionnaires were sent with stamped addressed envelopes enclosed for ease of return.

(iv) Response rates

The survey population consisted of 92 childcare services in both the County and City of Waterford. This includes 47 private and 45 community based childcare facilities. Within these facilities there were a total of 327 childcare practitioners; see Table One below.

Table One

Childcare Census 2004						
	Waterford City			Waterford County		
	Community Based 2004	Private 2004	Total	Community Based 2004	Private 2004	Total
Total No. of Services	20	24	44	25	23	48
Total No. of Childcare Practitioners	101	131	233	44	51	95
Total No. Community Employment (CE) Scheme	27	N/A ⁷	27	15	N/A	15

Through the management of the centres all 327 childcare practitioners and all 92 childcare facilities were invited to participate in the research. The childcare practitioner survey yielded a response rate of 38% (n=125). However this masks a very low response rate among childcare practitioners within the private sector (8% n= 26), while the response rate for practitioners within the community based sector was higher (30% n= 99). As can be seen from table 1 below childcare practitioners in the private sector represent 56% of all practitioners in the Waterford region.

Table Two

Childcare Practitioners Response Rates				
	County & City n	As % of Co. & City	Sample N	Sample as % of Co. & City
Overall	327	100%	125	38%
Private	182	56%	26	8%
Community	145	44%	99	30%

This means that the data is somewhat skewed towards community based practitioners and services. In relation to the final response rate for childcare practitioners 79% (n=99) were community based while 21% (n=26) were private.

This is also the case in relation to manager/ owners of private facilities and

management committees of community based facilities, with the owner/manager sample being only 21% (n=19) of the total sample, a figure in contrast to the 51% they represent overall in the county, and the management committees representing 32% (n=29) of the overall sample.

Table Three

Owner/Managers and Management Committees Response Rates				
	County & City n	As % of Co. & City	Sample n	Sample as % of Co. & City
Overall	92	100%	48	52%
Private	47	51%	19	21%
Community	45	49%	29	32%

(v) Data analysis

Data entry and analysis was carried out using SPSS⁸ software. A cut off date for questionnaire return was set, after which no further responses would be included in the data sets.

Data was entered into SPSS and analysed according to Community/Private facilities, Training, Professional Development, Experience, Pay and Conditions among other areas. There were some discrepancies noted in the question on rates of pay for fulltime and part-time staff and those on Community Employment (CE) Schemes⁹. Thus it was not possible to provide figures on the number of employment scheme staff included in the total number of staff. Valid responses for each question have been used (missing values are excluded) as there were varying response rates to certain questions. Where respondents have been asked to select all applicable responses percentages do not necessarily sum to 100% as responses in these variables are not mutually exclusive.

(vi) Presentation of Results

In presenting the findings it was decided to omit any responses which gave rise to ambiguity or were unclear. Due to the wide range of variables in some questions and the low level of responses to some questions the value of cross tabulating some results was questionable. Thus, the level of analysis was somewhat limited. However, the data captured is sufficient to provide scope for relevant questions on professionalism in the sector and the questions raised are a mere beginning to a long debate on the future deletion professionalism in the childcare sector.

It was agreed to present the findings without distinguishing between County and City as the main purpose was to highlight issues that would raise questions for discussion and debate and not to compare the City & County.

Section 3 – Secondary Research

Childcare Census 2004 – Both Childcare Committees carried out a census in 2004 from which numbers of practitioners and services were made available; see Table One.

FAS – Information on the CE scheme and placement of CE participants in Childcare Centres was provided by FAS – see Table Four below. Under the FAS Community Employment Scheme Childcare places are at present ring fenced and will be replaced as participants leave subject to availability.

Table Four

Terms & Conditions of Employment for CE Participants ²⁷					
Employer	No of CE	Hours of Work	Holidays	Training ²⁸ Allowance	Wages
Sponsoring organisation e.g. Management Committee of Childcare Facility who receives a grant from FAS.	City – 27 County – 15	39 hours per fortnight	81 hours per year	381 euro per year	Single: 173.20 euro with Adult Dependent: 271.90 euro Child Dep: 16.80 euro ²⁹ Half Child rate: 8.40 euro

Literature Review

A review of a number of recent policy, review and research documents was undertaken to provide the academic backdrop and the context from which the professionalism of the childcare sector is currently being informed and evolving. The documents reviewed include:

- *Quality childcare and lifelong learning: Model Framework for Education Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform September 2002)
- *Talking About Quality: Report of a Consultation Process on Quality in Early*

- *Childhood Care and Education* (Duignan M. & Walsh T., CECDE 2004)
- *Insights on Quality: A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004* (Duignan M. & Walsh T., CECDE 2004)
- *Making Connections: A Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education* (Edited by Heino Schonfeld, Dr. Gemma Kiernan and Thomas Walsh CECDE 2004)
- *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* (OECD Directorate for Education 2004)

These documents are reviewed under the following sub-sections, namely professional development from the historical context and professional development from the quality, legislative and international contexts.

Professional Development – The Historical Context

Historically, childcare has been the remit of the voluntary/community and the private business sector. The Childcare Act 1991 Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations 1996/7, the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report (1999) and the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 can be viewed as having provided influential legislative, policy and financial impetus in the development of the childcare sector in recent years. Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 provided initiative and grounding for the developments experienced in the early childhood care and education sector in the past fifteen years. A series of influential reports and documents were researched, developed and published following Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and these have informed the development and implementation of policy in the childcare sector since the late 1990s. These are listed below and additional to the documents reviewed in greater detail in this section:

- *Strengthening Families for Life*. Report on the Commission on the Family Department of Social & Family Affairs 1998
- Report of National Forum for Early Childhood Education Department of Education & Science 1998
- *National Childcare Strategy* Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare, Department of Justice Equality & Law Reform 1999

- *Ready to Learn – White Paper on Early Childhood Education* Department of Education & Science 1999
- *Our Children Their Lives: National Children's Strategy* Department of Health & Children 2000
- *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA 2004)

In 1995 dialogue and a consultative process between the statutory and the historically voluntary early childhood care and education sector began to develop a framework for the education, training and professional development of childcare workers in the sector. The National Coordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC) established the Certifying Bodies subgroup in February 2000. The aim of the subgroup was to develop a set of values, occupational profiles and standards that would provide the framework for the education, training and professional development of childcare personnel, working with children aged 0-8 years.

The rationale behind the development of a framework for the education, training and professional development of childcare workers is cited as twofold in the document *Quality childcare & lifelong learning: Model Framework for Education Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector*¹⁰, referred to hereafter as the Model Framework (2002).

Firstly, the 'growing demand for childcare', estimated to increase by 25%-50% by 2011¹¹. Secondly, research indicates that high-quality early education leads to lasting 'cognitive and social benefits in children'¹², through adolescence and adulthood and that 'professional education for practitioners is a major factor in achieving the provision of high quality early childhood care and education services'¹³

While the recent OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland¹⁴ acknowledges the progress made through the introduction of the Model Framework (2002), it is critical of the present situation in relation to staffing and training in the childcare sector and the report states that:

*'While strong efforts are being made to train and professionalize, the sector is still characterised by high staff turnover (with negative effects on young children), low pay, weak professional profiling, limited access to in-service training and limited career mobility'*¹⁵.

The non-attractiveness of the profession is identified as a key concern, and the Report puts forward a number of questions to address this concern. These and other questions will be presented in Section 5.

The OECD Report also notes the cross-national trend towards at least a three-year tertiary degree for early childhood education and care staff with group or centre responsibility. The European Commission Network on Childcare Action Programme *Quality Targets in Services of Young Children* sets a target of a minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children to have training of at least three years duration at post 18 level. The European Network proposes that such training would be grant eligible and all staff untrained to this level should have access to such training and to in-service training on an ongoing basis.

Professional Development – The Quality Context

A definition of quality is put forward in the Model Framework (2002) as *‘The pursuit of excellence which has the capacity to transform’*¹⁶

The right of every child to quality provision and the crucial role of education, training and professional development of practitioners in assuring the provision of quality childcare are highlighted in the document;

*‘The assurance of quality provision of ECCE services should be the right of all children in Ireland. The education, training and professional development of ECCE practitioners will play a key role in making such an assurance a real and practical possibility.’*¹⁷

In recent research conducted by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education¹⁸ (CECDE) 46% of the childcare practitioner respondents cited professional development as a support in the provision of quality childcare services. Access to ongoing training and development for practitioners that is compatible with their work and personal commitments and that provides *‘release time from work as well as the provision of modular or part-time courses’*¹⁹ was also identified by respondents. Closely linked to professional development, staff training and qualifications with *‘access to training opportunities for staff at pre-service level and the provision of courses leading to accredited and standardised qualifications’*²⁰ was cited by 45% of respondents. It is suggested in the research document that *‘such a training*

*infrastructure would permit a career path to be created, attracting and retaining young practitioners and strengthening the emerging identity of the sector.’*²¹

In the CECDE research 43% of respondents cited networking and mentoring *‘as an important element in supporting quality and this involved the sharing and dissemination of information among organisations at a local and national level’*, it was also proposed that networking would *‘cross the traditional professional and sectoral divides to include all the stakeholders in Early Childhood Care and Education.’*²²

One of the conclusions from a second piece of research conducted by the CECDE²³ is that

*‘the availability of a qualified workforce with clearly defined career structures, good terms and conditions of employment and regular opportunities for continuing professional development is fundamental to the development of quality in ECCE.’*²⁴

Furthermore the Review recommends that

*‘Professional practice in ECCE must be recognised, rewarded and supported. Clear career pathways, opportunities for education and training and a national code of ethics should be developed and implemented. This should support reflective practice and respectful decision-making in all aspects of ECCE service provision.’*²⁵

Professional Development – The Legislative Context

The Qualifications (Education & Training) Act 1999 provides the legislative framework in which education, training and lifelong learning that incorporates access, transfer & progression and within which a national framework of qualifications and the involvement of stakeholders are set. The Act also provides for the establishment of three statutory bodies: The Further Education & Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). The establishment of policies and criteria for the making and validation of further/higher education and training awards and programmes and the determination of standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners are the responsibility of both FETAC & HETAC.

The role of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) is to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications, establish and promote the maintenance of standards of awards of FETAC, HETAC & DIT and to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression.

The Childcare Act 1991 Part VII provides the legislative framework for the Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations 1996 and Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations (Amendment) 1997. The Regulations outline requirements with regard largely to the static variables (*e.g.* notification, record keeping, health & safety, fire safety, space and adult child ratios etc.) within the childcare environment. Requirements regarding the training and qualifications of childcare personnel are not covered under the current Regulations. The Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations are currently being revised.

Ireland has in the recent past introduced employment legislation that places legal obligations on employers to ensure that reasonable conditions of employment entitlements are adhered to. In compliance with the best standards as set out in the legislation and applying principles of best practice employers take on board their responsibilities to their employees. By doing so it is expected that a level of trust and understanding will develop which in turn will lead to higher levels of productivity and satisfaction on both sides. Employers are advised to check with the relevant Government Department to get full details of current employment legislation.

Professional Development – The International Context

*Making Connections A Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education*²⁶ examined the issue of quality amongst six international models of childcare including Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Germany, New Zealand and Northern Ireland. Professional development is identified in most of the models examined as having a key role to play in supporting quality in childcare services and most countries have clear policies, structures and resources in place to support the professional development of early childhood care and education practitioners on an ongoing basis. The Review provides some valuable insights and learning for all stakeholders in the ECCE sector in Ireland in supporting and promoting professional development.

For example, in Sweden networks are seen as a quality system promoting the exchange of ideas and facilitating the ongoing professional development of practitioners in the ECCE sector.

In Portugal, a political measure was taken to provide systematic and where possible centre based, in-service training for all public and private early childhood teachers to support and promote the professional development of practitioners in the sector.

In New Zealand, a code of ethics was developed concurrently with the ‘Te Whariki’ *i.e.* the national curriculum for all children from birth to school entry. The code of ethics consists of sixty values that underpin professional practice and provides a public statement from the ECCE sector of its commitment to high quality standards. Professional development programmes are based on a participatory learning model in New Zealand.

Section 4 – Primary Research Findings

In this section, findings from the questionnaire survey are presented. Each of the questionnaires had two main sections, Part A was made up of questions related to training, networking and professional development. The courses referred to were available locally to providers through the Childcare Committees and other local organisations. The accredited courses are those most commonly available through the various Colleges. Part B dealt with Experience, Pay and Conditions. In Part B, the salary scales and rates of pay referred to were those available from BCCN and recommended by the DJELR. The contract components were those as suggested in the ADM recommended contract.

Part A: Training, Networking & Professional Development

A total of 173 responses were received to this section of the questionnaire: 125 from practitioners, 29 from management committees of community groups, and 19 from owner/managers of privately run groups.

Nationally Accredited Qualifications

66 (54%) of the 122 practitioners who responded held a nationally accredited qualification in childcare. Almost three quarters of these had FETAC Level 2 or higher. 71.5% of the respondents who had qualifications have FETAC Level 2 or higher. 17% had other accredited qualifications which were not in the list

provided. The list of accredited qualifications noted were FETAC level's 1, 2 and 3, CACHE Diploma in Childcare and Education, National Diploma in Humanities and Montessori Education, National Diploma in Applied Social Studies, BA in Childcare/Early Childhood, First Line Management.

At the time of the survey, 36 practitioners were participating in accredited training, broken down as follows:

Table 5

FETAC Level 2	23
FETAC Level 3	8
CACHE Dip in Childcare and Ed.	1
Nat.Dip. in Humanities in Montessori Ed.	1
Nat.Dip. in Applied Social Studies	3
Total	36

This means that overall, 102 (82%) of 125 practitioner respondents have either completed a Nationally Accredited Childcare Qualification (NACQ) or were currently undertaking a NACQ.

18 (64%) of the 28 community management committee members held a nationally accredited qualification. 17 (90%) of the 19 owner/managers who responded had nationally accredited qualifications. The list of qualifications noted were FETAC Levels 2, 3, National Diploma in Humanities and Montessori Education.

Business Training

Managers were also asked if they had participated in any business training. There were 18 owner/manager respondents of which 6 had business training. Some examples given were ADM business workshop, employment legislation seminar, human resource day course, certificate in managing a day nursery.

There were 28 community respondents to this question, of which 21 had business training. Some examples given were: BA in Management & Personnel, Certificate in Commerce, Employment & Management, Finance Officer, Business and Human Resources, Arts Development officer, Bank Official, Purchasing Manager

Local quality training courses

There was a high level of participation in locally provided quality training courses. 122 practitioners responded to this question of which 116 (95%) had participated in such courses. 16 of the 19 private owner/managers who responded to this question had participated in local quality training. 28 community based service providers responded to this question, 20 of whom had participated in local quality training.

The graphs below show the courses which the highest number of respondents in each category had attended.

Graph 1



Graph 2



Graph 3



Childcare conferences or seminars

There were 115 responses from childcare practitioners, of which 52 (45%) said that they had attended childcare conferences or seminars, and 63 (55%) said no. 19 private managers/owners responded, of which 15 (79%) answered yes and 4 answered no.

29 of the community group committee members responded to this question, of which 17 (59%) answered yes.

Current participation in a Local Provider Network (LPN)

56 (48%) practitioners answered yes, they were currently participating in a Local Provider Network. There were 19 Private Manager/Owner respondents of which 15 (79%) answered yes. There were 28 Community based respondents of which 12 (43%) answered yes. 100% of practitioners, managers and committees who attended LPN meetings found them either useful or very useful.

Membership of National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs)

75 practitioners (60%) responded to this question and were members of an NVCO. 79% (15) of the 19 owner/manager respondents were members of an NVCO. 71% (20) of the 28 community based respondents were members of an NVCO. The organisations included IPPA, NCNA, Forbairt Naíonraí Teo, Childminding Ireland, Barnardos, St. Nicholas Montessori and Children in Hospital Ireland.

Do you think that a professional body should be established for the support and development of people self-employed /employed in the childcare sector? 95 – 100% of respondents (Practitioners, Private and Community based SP) agreed or agreed strongly that a professional body for the development of workers in childcare should be established.

What factors are important for the professional development of workers in the childcare sector?

When asked which factors were, in their opinion, important for the professional development of workers in the childcare sector, there were some differences in the priority given to the different factors between practitioners, owner/managers and community based management committees. For practitioners, the most important factors were:

1. Code of Practice
2. Pay and working conditions
3. Local Quality/In-service training
4. Nationally accredited childcare qualifications
5. Number of years of experience working in childcare.

Owner/managers in private groups placed the factors in the following order:

1. Pay and working conditions
2. Local Quality/In-service training
3. Code of Practice
4. Nationally accredited childcare qualifications
5. Number of years of experience working in childcare

The top factors selected by community based management committee members were the same as for the owner/managers, except that they placed Training Information/Conferences and Seminars in joint fifth place.

Part B: Experience, Pay and Conditions

Do you work in the Childcare Centre full time or part time?

In both Waterford City (F/T – 19 and P/T – 51) and County (F/T – 6 and P/T – 46) there were many more part-time than full-time staff. This may be attributed to the fact that there are more sessional than full time services in both the city and county.

What is the title of your position?

The greatest number of respondents (59%) held a position as a Playgroup/Crèche Assistant, followed by Supervisor/Playleader, Childcare Manager and finally, 6% had a role not defined by the three categories provided and specified 'other'.

Gross Annual Salary Scales: Full-Time

There were 25 responses to this question. 13 (52%) earned between 18,000 euro and 24,000 euro annually, but 8 (32%) fell below the 18,000 euro starting point on the salary scale for a Playgroup/Crèche Assistant recommended by the Border Counties Childcare Network. Three people (12%) earned between 24,000 euro and 30,000 euro per annum, while one person earned over 30,000 euro p.a.

Gross Hourly rates of pay: Part-time workers

There were 75 responses to this question. The majority, 59 (78%) earned between 8 euro and 13 euro per hour, while six (8%) people earned between 13 euro and 18 euro per hour.

10 (13%) fell below 8 euro per hour.

Note: As of May 2005 the statutory minimum wage is 7.65 euro per hour.

Table Six

Years experience working in childcare

Less than one year	7
1 to 4 years	50
5 to 9 years	33
10 to 14 years	12
15 or more years	20

There were 122 responses to this question., of which 50 (41%) had between one and four years experience of working in childcare.

Owner/Managers: Salary and Experience

26% of private providers did not take a salary from the service.

79% of manager/owners had a salary are below 18,000 euro.

The maximum hours worked by manager /owners are 60 hours per week.

Owner/managers in private childcare provision had a minimum of three and a maximum of 33 years of experience working in childcare, with a mean of 12.4 years.

Employment Policies

63 % of the 19 Private Owners/Managers respondents said that they had a written employment policy in place, while 59% of 27 Community respondents answered that they had a written employment policy in place. The areas included in such policies are listed in Table 7 below. This table shows a comparison between the responses from the private and community based facilities.

Table Seven

Areas Included in Employment Policy				
	Private		Community	
	N	%	n	%
Annual Leave	10	53%	12	44%
Bullying/ Harassment	7	37%	9	33%
Child Protection	12	63%	14	52%
Compassionate Leave	8	42%	8	30%
Customs & Practice (Childcare policies & procedures)	11	58%	12	44%
Discipline	12	63%	13	48%
Dress Code	11	53%	6	22%
Employee Records	10	53%	9	33%
Family Friendly Policies	7	37%	11	41%
Grievance	9	47%	13	48%
Health & Safety	11	58%	15	56%
Lieu Time	4	21%	8	30%
Maternity Leave	7	37%	7	26%
Mobile Phone/ Email & Internet use	7	37%	4	15%
Overtime	5	26%	4	15%
Parental Leave	7	37%	6	22%
Probationary Period	10	53%	9	33%
Public Holidays	10	53%	13	48%
Recruitment & Selection	9	47%	13	48%
Sick Leave	10	53%	12	44%
Staff Performance & Appraisal	8	42%	6	22%
Staff Training & Development	9	47%	11	41%
Time Keeping	11	58%	10	37%
Trade Union Membership	2	10%	2	7%
Travel & Subsistence	2	10%	3	11%
Working Week Hours	10	53%	12	44%

Contracts of employment

63% of 105 practitioner respondents had written contracts.

53% of 19 private service provider respondents provided a written contract.

71% of 28 community based respondents provided written contracts.

Practitioners who said that they had a contract were asked which of the following areas were included:

Table Eight

Areas Included in Practitioners' Contracts of Employment		
	%	n
Annual Leave	68%	46
Duties	72%	49
Educational Support (Training)	43%	29
Expenses	10%	7
Procedures on Grievance/Discipline/Harassment/Bullying	52%	35
Headquarters/Workbase	57%	39
Hours of Work	91%	62
Maternity leave	47%	32
Pension	27%	18
Position	85%	58
Probation	46%	31
Safety Statement	52%	35
Salary	72%	49
Sick Leave	69%	47
Staff Handbook	46%	31
Termination Provisions	59%	40
Variation	29%	20
Voluntary Resignation	35%	25
Total Valid Responses		68

Are you contributing towards a pension scheme?

19 practitioners responded to this question, of which only 10 contributed towards a pension.

Do you (private owner manager) or your management committee facilitate your staff to contribute towards a pension scheme?

Of 27 community based respondents 19 (70%) facilitated staff to contribute towards a pension. Of 19 Private Service provider respondents 10 (53%) facilitated staff to contribute towards a pension.

Trade Union Membership

Trade union membership was very low: of 104 practitioner respondents only 12 were members of a trade union. Of the 19 private provider respondents only 1 member of staff was a member of a trade union. Of the 28 community groups who responded, only 2 staff were members of a trade union.

Conclusions

The research has revealed a number of important findings in relation to professional development in the childcare sector, both positive and negative. Many observations and discussion points have emerged from the primary and secondary data and these are presented in the next section.

There were some limitations in the level of analysis due to some missing values and some discrepancies as pointed out in the methodology section. It is recommended that the questionnaires should be further refined if this research is to be duplicated in other areas.

Section 5 – Key Discussion Points

This section presents some key observations and discussion points arising from Sections 3 and 4 – Secondary and Primary Research Results.

Nationally Accredited Childcare Qualifications

Primary research results show a high number of respondents either hold or are undertaking NACQ mainly FETAC Level 2. Secondary research results state that there is a cross-national trend towards at least a 3-year tertiary degree for ECCE staff with group or centre responsibility. How can the training institutions improve & better promote & facilitate access, transfer & progression routes for those working in the ECCE sector?

What measures can be taken by key stakeholders to redress the barriers to training for all workers in the sector? (e.g. release time from work, modular/part-time courses)

What measures are in place to ensure that universal standards of knowledge, skill & competence are being achieved and maintained in both FETAC & HETAC education & training awards & programmes county wide?

Local Quality Training (LQT)

Primary research results show a high level of participation in LQT. Secondary research results illustrate the importance of in-service training in terms of achieving quality childcare and continuing professional development of ECCE practitioners. The Portuguese model provides a useful example. How can the key stakeholders continue to support & promote affordable & accessible LQT for all ECCE practitioners?

Local Provider Network (LPN)

Primary research results show a high level of participation and satisfaction in LPN. Secondary research results illustrate the importance of networking in supporting & promoting the professional development of ECCE practitioners. How can key stakeholders continue to support & promote networking opportunities for ECCE practitioners to maximise their professional development?

Professional Body

Primary research results show strong support for the development of a professional body. The OECD Report asks if the professional associations can come together in one body to represent & advocate more effectively for staff across the sector. What response has the NVCOs & other key stakeholders to this question?

A code of practice is indicated in primary research results as an important factor in professional development. Secondary research results show that a code of ethics was developed concurrently with the early year's curriculum in New Zealand. As the early years curriculum is currently being developed in Ireland, is it an opportune time for the sector to agree a code of ethics & how can this be achieved?

Experience, Salary, Employment Conditions & Trade Union Membership

Primary research results show that the highest % practitioner respondents are working in services between 1-4 years and the % drops off thereafter. This result may be interpreted as an issue in relation to retention, an issue identified

also in the secondary research findings. How can the profession be made more attractive to retain valuable ECCE practitioners in the sector?

Results from primary research in relation to salary are less than satisfactory. Secondary research findings support this trend & are critical of the situation. How can the key stakeholders begin to address this very unsatisfactory situation with regard to levels of pay for ECCE practitioners & private service providers?

Primary research results show some weaknesses in terms of employment policies, written contracts, pensions etc. Secondary research results support some of these findings and illustrate also the importance of employment best practice and the legal obligations of employers. How can the key stakeholders begin to address the serious shortcomings in employment terms & conditions to support & promote the professional development of the ECCE sector?

Primary research results show a very low level of trade union membership. What role has the trade unions to play in supporting the professional development of workers in the ECCE sector?

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The full version of the report may be obtained from Waterford County Childcare Committee, 9 Emmett St, Dungarvan, Co Waterford.

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Glossary of Terms

ADM	Area Development Management
BCCN	Border Counties Childcare Network
CB	Community Based
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
DJELR	Dept of Justice, Equality & Law Reform
ECCE	Early Childhood Care & Education
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
FAS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair (National Training Authority)
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NCCC	National Coordinating Childcare Committee
NCNA	National Children's Nurseries Association
NVCO	National Voluntary Childcare Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic & Cultural Development
SP	Service Provider
UN	United Nations
WCCC	Waterford City & County Childcare Committee

¹ To have a structured and co-ordinated approach to service provision, that benefits service providers through improved quality, positive outcomes for children and parents, better qualified staff, better remuneration and conditions for staff and more profitable enterprises. Waterford County Childcare Strategy 2002-2006:62

Waterford City Childcare Committee aims to be a promoter of good practice and procedures at local, regional and national level, to develop and promote appropriate training in the childcare sector and to promote childcare as a profession. Waterford City Childcare Committee Strategic Plan 2002.

² To assist service providers (SP's) to develop local, regional, national & international networks; support the development of structured training system; to promote and support the development of agreed quality standards amongst service providers and key stakeholders, ... to work in cooperation with training and research agencies towards developing clearly defined career paths which will encourage an increase in numbers of both males and females choosing childcare as a career. Waterford County Childcare Committee Strategic Plan 2002-2006:62

The City Committee recognises that different individuals will want and need different levels of training but it will be important to keep focused on achieving an overall standard of accreditation in the long term and has a responsibility in respect of supporting improvements in employment conditions for childcare workers. It also recognises that this needs the support of both public and private partners and will support initiatives which promote their involvement and commitment to improving conditions. Waterford City Childcare Committee Strategic Plan 2002.

³ Child Centred – All programme development and delivery must have a measurable outcome that benefits children and must recognise that the child's perspective is paramount. Quality – Quality Childcare is recognised by the benefits it provides to children, families and communities. Among childcare researchers, the established view is that childcare quality contributes to children's developmental outcomes ... in this respect all strategies and the implementation of actions must focus on the delivery of a quality childcare environment. Waterford County Childcare Committee Strategic Plan 2002-2006:iii

⁴ FAS Regional Office, Waterford 2005

⁵ ADM and Waterford City & County Childcare Committees 2004

⁶ Health Service Executive

⁷ Note: The FAS Community Employment Scheme is not available to private

self-employed service providers

- ⁸ SPSS = Statistical Package for Social Sciences
- ⁹ Details & total numbers employed in childcare services under the FAS CE Scheme are presented in the Section 3 – Secondary Research Findings
- ²⁷ CE participants also adopt the terms and conditions of employment of the Sponsor (Employer)
- ²⁸ Training time is partly Project time and partly own time which has an impact on hours of work.
- ²⁹ Half child rate means if a spouse is in receipt of a Social Welfare payment or in employment both spouses may qualify for half the child rate depending on circumstances.
- ¹⁰ Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform September 2002
- ¹¹ The Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report (1999) cited *ibid*:8
- ¹² Kellaghan & Greaney 1993; Woodhead 1996; Schweinhart & Weikart 1997 cited *ibid*:8
- ¹³ Blenkin *et al* 1996; Pascal 1996; Abbot & Pugh 1998; Feeney & Freeman 1999; Moss 2000 cited *ibid*:8
- ¹⁴ OECD Directorate for Education 2004
- ¹⁵ OECD Directorate for Education 2004:83
- ¹⁶ Model Framework for Education Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector 2002:31)
- ¹⁷ *Ibid* 2002:33
- ¹⁸ Talking About Quality Report of a Consultative Process on Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (Duignan M. & Walsh T., CECDE 2004)
- ¹⁹ *ibid*: 15
- ²⁰ *ibid*: 15
- ²¹ *ibid*:16
- ²² *ibid*: 16
- ²³ Insights on Quality A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004 (Duignan M. & Walsh T., CECDE 2004)
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How Professionalism Defines the Effective Educarer: A Reflection on the Theme – Training for a New Profession

Florence Dineen

Abstract

The issue of professionalism in the Early Years sector is both contemporary and contentious. The recently published *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* (2004), focused on co-ordination, access and quality, areas that could well be at the heart of professionalism. However, within the Irish context contemporaneously, these areas may cause discomfort, discontent, disharmony and even disagreement due to the interplay of forces and interests that transforms contemporary issues into something that becomes contentious. This paper attempts to analyze how a focus on professionalism at every stage of the training process assists in defining the effective Educarer. It also proposes that meeting the needs of children in the early years should act as a catalyst in uniting dissenting forces and interests.

Preamble

Professionalism has been the hallmark of the Irish educational system for decades. This system however, while taking responsibility for the education of young children from the age of four, has been slow to incorporate, universally, children who are younger. Admittedly, the Early Start programme introduced in the early nineties has made significant headway in offering an educational programme to children between three and four years of age. While this programme bears all the hallmarks of professionalism in its delivery and administration, it is offered as a compensatory measure of education to a limited number of children within the Irish system. This is a pity since education begins at birth for all children and indeed many would contend, like myself, that education of the young child begins prior to birth through proper parenting programmes. However, the concept of educating very young children is gradually becoming an inherent part of how we view what used to be called the ‘rearing’ of the next generation. Undoubtedly there is a problem with this since education is still considered by some to have its foundation within a tried and tested, and indeed in many ways, within a traditional system of education.

Consequently, it could be argued that the care of very young children is the predominant need until it is time to set off for school with satchel and books. Not so! The volume of literature and research articles flooding the early years scene for the past number of decades, both international as well as of late, nationally based, indicates otherwise – House of Commons (1989); David (1990: 1994); Hayes (1993); Bruce (1997); Goldstein (1997); White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999); National Children’s Strategy (2000); Dinneen (2002); Brannen & Moss (2003); Whitebread (2003); Anning *et al.*, (2004); Daly (2004); NCCA (2004); OECD (2004).

Introduction

Let me introduce the concept of *Educare* at this juncture where education and care are viewed as an inseparable rearing pattern for the human child from birth. This inseparable rearing pattern approach is open to all those who work with young children irrespective of the setting. For example, in schools and preschools, in day-care settings, in social care practice, in hospitals, refuge centres of all types and most importantly in the home and involves having a deep interest in and concern for the process of human development as a continuum. While the thoughts and views on *Educare* as expressed in this paper can generalise to envelope those listed above on a daily basis, the paper targets specifically the notion that professionalism defines the effective Educarer who is in training for a profession that is relatively new to the Irish jobs market. Such a professional will be seeking employment in many of the settings listed above and in addition will be well equipped to undertake postgraduate pathways and to lead the early years sector to a respected position within the current educational system. Let me also argue that adopting a professional approach to *Educare* necessitates the development of leadership qualities in order to make the early years practitioner effective.

Education and Care

A sentence in the concluding paragraph of a recent doctoral study on the concept of *Educare* reads ‘... we can only agree that the concept of *Educare* exists in the Irish *psyche* when Early Years Education and Care is given equal status with any other stratum in the educational framework’ (Dinneen, 2002:345). The recently published OECD Report (2004) picks up on the status disparity within the educational framework in Ireland under its *Quality* theme. Taking the status of the professionals involved in the National Education system as an

example, it uses a comparative methodology to highlight the low levels of training and remuneration of staff involved in childcare practice, the depressed levels of staff retention in the sector and the non existence of a proper organization to advocate for the rights of practitioners. Such conditions stratify even further those involved in what is perceived to be either a predominately caring or predominately educational pursuit. Little encouragement exists within these sectors, to attract personnel across what is considered to be a chasm separating those who are essentially involved in the rearing process of the next generation, as they are presently constituted. Much suspicion exists between the sectors, a suspicion that is readily identified throughout the literature and which finds its roots very often in the concept of learning through play in early childhood (Lillemyr, 2003, Saracho & Spodek, 2003). This is where professionalism within the early years sector will have to take centre stage. The professionalism that I speak of has as its foundation *leadership qualities*.

Adopting a professional approach to Educare

Rodd (1998) states that a better understanding of the nature of *leadership* in the early years has a profound effect on the professionalism of the field.

Writing earlier on this topic, Pugh (1996) identified leadership needs in early childhood within the following contexts:

- the environment and the provision of experiences for the children
- relationships between adults and between adults and children
- the protection of children's rights and those of adults
- in working collaboratively with other professionals
- in crossing existing artificial boundaries to meet the needs of all concerned with the care and education of young children.

Writing on the topic of leadership itself, Rodd (1998) expounds on the different layers and levels of leadership. She acknowledges that it is not necessary to begin with top level sophisticated leadership skills for *all* practitioners but explains that:

It is more important to identify the roles and responsibilities within the early childhood profession, which permit leadership to be exercised at a more grass roots level so that practitioners are able to grasp the complexities of the work that they perform and the opportunities for leadership which exist in their daily working environment (*Ibid.* 1998:5).

Here, both Rodd (1998) and Pugh (1996) pre-empt the sentiments of Covey (2001) who maintains that leadership is within the grasp of anyone who takes control of their destiny!

While Covey's work centres on a philosophy for success in life using Seven Habits in all, he believes that leadership qualities are embedded within the first three habits or what he calls 'The Character Ethic'. The next three he names 'The Personality Ethic', these embrace the fourth, fifth and sixth *Habits of Highly Effective People*. The seventh habit, according to Covey, is the self-maintenance habit and as such holds a key position in the effective engagement with the other six. His rationale here is, that if one is to be truly effective, then one must have an alert mind that is contained within a healthy and well-maintained body. Covey believes that fidelity to the seventh habit ensures just that. Since the success of this method of becoming effective is based on the sequential development of the first six habits in two distinct stages, pride of place has to go the first three habits initially. The full development of these is the key to success according to Covey and indeed, when they are fully understood it can be agreed that they make good sense as a philosophy for life for anyone who cares to improve their lifestyle irrespective of their stage of personal development. The first three habits ask one to:

- Be proactive
- Begin with the end in mind
- Put first things first (*i.e.* to learn to manage time effectively and to learn to differentiate between what is *important* and what is *urgent*)

Applying these habits to the Aspirant Practitioner who is following a lengthy training period to degree level sees the student in training taking responsibility for their own learning. In this way the student who adopts a proactive approach to learning becomes not only a seeker of knowledge but demonstrates the desire to learn well and in this way acquires the necessary skills almost effortlessly. Therefore *Knowledge, Skills* and *Desire* [to learn] are key components of the first habit of highly effective people. Exercising the *proactivity habit* also means being true to your nature and in this way the student in training learns how to self-examine and more importantly how to empathise with others. This is especially useful in relationship building in early childhood settings since it facilitates the development of the skill of changed perspective taking or 'intersubjectivity' to allow for sensitive and meaningful interactions to occur

(Smith, 1993). According to Smith, 'It is through participation and sharing another's frame of reference that children learn' (*Ibid.* 1993:56).

The second habit encourages the development of leadership qualities, initially at a personal level. To shape the development of these, Covey advocates the writing up of one's own *Mission Statement*. When exercised, this habit sees the student carving out for him or herself clear learning goals within realistic expectations. This habit encourages self-confidence and assertiveness and links the student's ability to their potential rather than their past history (this may well have been one of failure or low achievement to date!).

The third habit is a natural congruent of the first two with its emphasis on time management at a personal level. Its regular use focuses on self-management or self-discipline linked with the achievement of learning goals, which in turn form part of one's own *Mission Statement*. In this way the student learns to bring balance into his or her life by attaching importance on a continuous basis to the stated learning goals. These three habits form the core of 'The Character Ethic' and consequently allow leadership qualities to emerge within each individual.

The successful development of the 'Personality Ethic' (based on habits four, five and six) depends on the full and wholesome development of the 'Character Ethic' (habits one, two and three). Covey (2001) therefore, emphasises the sequential development of the first six habits. The cultivation of the 'Character Ethic' however must come first. His work proposes a clear recipe for a successful life. He calls it 'A philosophy for success'. This paper advocates that inculcating the first three habits early in any educational programme that has as its aim the training of professionals to work with young children, has a very good chance of moulding professionals with leadership qualities. Rodd (1998) summarises the qualities of such a leader succinctly when she states that:

Leaders are able to balance the concern for work, task, quality and productivity with concern for people, relationships, satisfaction and morale ... They do this by using personal qualities which command respect and promote feelings of trust and security (*Ibid.* 1998:2).

Covey's first three habits are certainly embedded in Rodd's statement above. The seventh habit is evident also!

Rodd (1998) and others, for example, Jorde-Bloom, (1997) acknowledge that leadership within early childhood settings is elusive since it is essentially a holistic concept and as such has many facets. Additionally, the context in which leadership can be exercised effectively is a determining factor since this is never *a given* and involves such variables as the shifting nature of the group along with different and diverse organisational settings. Also, true leadership stems from a collaborative effort as Rodd identified in the quotation above.

However, in an effort to bring direction to the topic of leadership in early childhood settings, Rodd (1996:1997) offers a typology or framework for classifying selected characteristics, skills, roles and responsibilities which link directly with effective leadership in early childhood settings. She views such a framework as a monitoring mechanism for the development of leadership qualities. Many professionals working in early childhood settings in Australia and Great Britain assisted Rodd's efforts in drawing up the framework.

Typology of an early childhood leader (Rodd, 1998:27)

Personal Characteristics	Professional Skills	Roles & Responsibilities
Kind, warm, friendly	Technical competence as an early childhood professional to act as a model, guide and mentor	To deliver and be accountable for a quality service.
Nurturant sympathetic		To develop and articulate a philosophy, values and vision.
Patient		
Self aware	General administration	To engage in a collaborative and partnership approach to leadership.
Knowledgeable		
Rational, logical, analytical	Financial management	To engage in ongoing professional development and to encourage it in all staff.
Professional, professionally confident		
Visionary	Effective communication	To be sensitive and responsive to the need for change and to manage change effectively.
Mentor and guide, empowering		
Assertive, proactive	Human resource management	To act as an advocate for children, parents, staff, the profession and general community.
Goal oriented		

Discussion on Rodd's Typology:

One of the key advantages of the framework is that it is easy to see at a glance the important features of leadership whether it is being used for self-assessment purposes by students in training or as a means of identifying leadership qualities in others. Looking firstly at the *Personal Characteristics* listed above, the early childhood professionals who contributed to this study grouped the characteristics into three stages of emergence and development. The first of these stages contains the nurturing characteristics and they concluded that these are essential for all those working with young children and their families but that on their own, do *not* signal leadership qualities. The study also locates the manifestation and development of these characteristics at the novice stage of the training process (within the first three years). The next stage of development sees the characteristics associated with the rational and analytic use of a sound knowledge base with professional confidence evident in emergent leaders. These characteristics tended to be found among deeply committed professionals having between three and ten years of experience. The visionary and empowerment stage seemed to be reflected in people who possessed very high levels of training, had vast and varied experience including a history of leadership. In relation to the *Professional Skills* listed above, all are considered as major generic areas where leadership is concerned but it also emerged that aspiring leaders can easily get caught up in administrative and budgeting affairs, which in turn can thwart the fulsome development of the other three skills identified. Indeed, Jorde-Bloom (1997) cautioned that the hallmark of an effective leader was his or her ability to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences. Likewise, in relation to the items listed above under *Roles and Responsibilities*, all of these are seen to be generic for early childhood leaders but may adopt different emphases in different settings from time to time. The baseline for any discussion on leadership however must also include the concept of quality since effective leadership, like quality itself, is elusive and changes with our growing understanding of the developmental needs of others and of society. In her definition of leadership as '...the product of the endeavours of an interconnected group of individuals' Rodd concludes that when this happens '... the possibility of shared or collaborative leadership is opened up' (*Ibid.*, 1998:3). This definition of leadership, more than any other, heralds the possibility of successful discussions taking place at the highest levels under the themes of co-ordination, access and quality that are at the heart of the recently published *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* (2004).

OECD Thematic Review (2004)

The need for this type of review has been prompted by the unprecedented change in Western societies where the care and education of young children in the industrialised world has shifted from the private to the public sphere – this makes it a *shared responsibility of families and the state*. This Review focuses on *Co-ordination: Access: Quality:* areas that clearly call for sound leadership. Early childhood education and care in Ireland as a result of such scrutiny is now faced with major leadership challenges some of which are outlined below:

Themes of the Review	Leadership Challenges
<p>Co-ordination: One Department/designated funding & Policy Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access – establish a nationwide network of Child & Family Centres ... a free pre-school place for all: A trained Child Assistant in all infant classes ... • Quality – A strong training structure: Common Goals & Quality Framework: Replace a predominantly didactic approach in infant classes with a more active experientially-based pedagogy. 	<p>The leadership activity required here is termed – Advocacy (Simons, 1986)</p> <p>Advocacy in this sense is bound up with an understanding of how the politics of the public and private sectors affect the lives of children, their families and the early childhood profession.</p> <p>Advocacy also entails a necessity to collaborate with other relevant professionals.</p>

Attention to Rodd's typology of an early childhood leader was never more needed as it is in Ireland at the beginning of the third millennium! To train early childhood professionals to take up leadership responsibilities at all levels of their training is the task of those of us involved with students who are following a lengthy period of training to degree level. Clearly, where advocacy becomes the role and responsibility of the *Educator*, then that *Educator* must be able to rise to the challenge of the profession in meeting the needs of all children. To do this effectively draws attention to the importance of Rodd's other listed roles and responsibilities and also emphasizes the importance of Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* in the training for this brand new profession in Ireland.

Research-based evidence to support the importance of high-quality training for Educators

Example 1

Arnett (1989) focused on one aspect of quality *i.e.* *Training* in a monumental study that posed the question – Does Training Matter? He concluded that ‘... regulations requiring even a modest level of training for caregivers in day-care centers [sic] could have important and salutary effects on their job performance and on the quality of day-care environments’ (*Ibid.* p551). This study is monumental due to the fact that Arnett devised and used what has come to be known as, The Caregiver Interaction Scale to test the effectiveness of caregiving, based on the competency and skill of carers as a result of having different levels of specialised training. Caregivers who had completed a four-year university-based programme in early childhood studies, unsurprisingly, rated higher in skill and competence in their work compared with those who had less training.

Example 2

Some Irish Research Findings (Daycare)

Using the ITERS as a global quality measure the centres studied fell between the ‘minimal’ score of 3 and the ‘good’ score of 5 when the scores for both infant and toddler environments were combined (Dinneen, 2002). Low levels of general education and training identified the workforce in the above study. While one third of the total staff in the study had the required childcare qualification (NCVA Level 2 or its equivalent), two thirds were employed through community schemes of various types. Many had low educational standards and some had little or no specialised training in childcare.

Example 3

International Research Findings (Parental)

Parental responsivity coupled with the availability of stimulating play materials were more conducive to healthy development than measures of social class (Bradley *et al.* 1989). While this particular study does not specify that training existed for effective parenting, it points towards the importance of sensitive relationships and stimulating play materials as a means of meeting the needs of children whatever the setting. The concept of *Educare* is clearly understood when parents are responsive to the needs of their children.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the notion that adopting a professional approach to *Educare* makes the early years practitioner effective. Professionalism itself took centre stage throughout, but was linked at a very early stage with leadership qualities to the extent that they became inseparable. This merging of leadership qualities and professionalism stems from current influential literature on the topic (Rodd, 1998; Jorde-Bloom, 1997) and emphasises the role of effective leaders in early childhood settings where one is charged with the responsibility of educating and caring for young children. Leadership needs were clearly identified within the many contexts of early childhood starting with the context of home rearing. Many other contexts quickly followed – day care, pre-school, school and society generally where children’s needs must be voiced by responsible adults and children’s rights must be guarded and protected. The nature of leadership was carefully examined and was further elucidated through reference to Covey’s work (2001) on *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Covey is convincing when he states that leadership is within the grasp of anyone who takes control of his or her own destiny. Understanding what he means by the *Character Ethic* and practising the habits associated with it, offers students who are in training for the early years profession a success formula that permits them to take control of their learning. Consequently, they may become not only effective *Educators* but also effective leaders and advocates for children. This aspect of leadership more than anything else puts children at the heart of educational practice and should have the effect of uniting dissenting forces and interests.

In conclusion, it is clear that the secret of effectiveness in the task of educating and caring for young children is linked with a professional approach that stems from facilitating leadership qualities to develop during a lengthy training period.

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Training, Transition, Transformation in Early Years Education and Care

Pat Murphy

Introduction

In Ireland there is an abundance of training courses on offer for early years practitioners. At the moment however, they present a confusing maze for both worker and potential employer. The government has recognised this dilemma with the draft publication (Sept. 2002) of a National Qualification Framework Document. This document proposes a model framework for training for the new childcare profession in Ireland, which endeavours to standardise and give coherence to the plethora of courses currently on offer. Comparing levels of qualifications and experiences that adults have acquired with their roles, responsibilities, attitudes and expectations in the provision of early years education and care poses many problems. In the current *Preschool Services Regulations (1996)* defining and measuring quality is limited to the extent to which the application of checklists and frameworks can offer an adequate approach to quality assurance. However, within this model, one is confronted with the dilemma that measurables cannot alone provide an adequate analysis of quality. The more subtle and intangible aspects of quality provision are not recognised. The translation of frameworks is complex and is primarily a matter of reflective and carefully managed relationships which take time to understand and change.

This paper draws attention to some of the issues identified in the course of research undertaken recently into the currently available professional preparation available to practitioners in early childhood programmes.

Frameworks which inform Child Care and Education

Traditionally, in Ireland, work with children in the early years has tended to be effected by the organisational, academic and political discussions between what is seen as 'care' and what is seen as 'education'. Never before has so much attention being paid to early childhood workforce. There have recently been significant shifts not just in Ireland, but in Europe and Internationally, in government policies with regard to childhood. The Irish government is now changing its investment pattern and moving towards putting in place high

quality early childhood services. The reasons for this attention are multiple, including demographic changes in work and family patterns, national early childhood initiatives and research findings on the importance of high quality in early childhood programmes. Through the development of the County Childcare bodies and the funding of voluntary support agencies they are trying to expand services so that each child and family have access to an affordable childcare service.

The report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare (*National Childcare Strategy, 1999*) recognised the important role of the adult in children's learning, stressing that 'a high quality childcare service must be regarded as one of ... positive interactions between adults and children'. However, there is much debate regarding the role of the provider of early years' care and education. There are some within and outside the early years education profession who believe that childcare is meant to support mothers in their attempts to achieve self-sufficiency, while others believe it is meant to support children's learning and development (Daniel, 1996).

The demographic changes that are occurring so rapidly in Ireland, now show growing numbers of single-parent families and of working mothers. This means that children living with two parents and siblings, with a mother working full-time in the home, is no longer the norm. The opportunities offered to young children for spontaneous play activities in their own home are therefore restricted. Consequently, the delivery of quality training programmes must weave a pattern into the process to ensure a seamless transportation from school and home for the child. From the time of Plato, through Comenius and Rousseau, to Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori, educators and philosophers have pointed to the necessity of including play in the educational opportunities provided for young children. Because the natural activity of the child is play, the most natural and most effective way for a child to acquire competency in any curricular area is through activity and play. During this period of childhood children learn through their senses and through active engagement with people, objects, events and experiences in these environments (NCCA 2004). This knowledge places greater responsibility on early years educators.

The adult must be able to recognise and to 'exploit' the child's innate spontaneity, receptivity and creativity in the learning process. Play, a

learning activity, makes a contribution towards personality development, mental health, and emotional well being. Wilkinson (1980) notes the important role of the adult in being able to help the children at this time, when they are open to and accepting of new thoughts and information. Biber (1951 p19) has summed up the tensions between play and the ability of the teacher when he states that ‘ if play in school is to be a learning experience, it requires a skilled guiding hand, especially where children are collected in groups as they are in school’.

The Partnership 2000 Report (1999) states that many early childhood care and education (ECCE) workers gained skills and knowledge through experience rather than through formal training processes. It further identifies that the low occupational status accorded to childcare has implications for the quality of provision. An OECD (2004) report identified this dichotomy and further stated that workforce training is a key component of quality childcare provision. In addition, the National Childcare Strategy Report (1999) postulates that low pay has led to difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff. This chimes well with findings from the USA, which state there is a connection between the working conditions of staff, as reflected in levels of pay and job satisfaction, and child/adult interactions and child development. According to Whitebook, Howes & Phillips (1990) there is more likely to be high rates of staff turnover and low levels of job satisfaction in centres that offered low salaries and inappropriate child/adult ratios.

In Ireland, the training of personnel within preschools is not State regulated. Training is treated as a personal matter. However, since the 1990s national and international developments recognise the need to develop solid structures to address quality elements in preschool education and have initiated frameworks, for example, the 1991 Childcare Act (section V11 – Preschool Regulations, implemented in 1996) to cement the issues which do not encompass training. The Child Care Regulations (1996) place responsibility on providers of preschool care and education to comply with the basic standard requirements of the static elements in their services to ensure the health, safety and hygiene of children in early years education. The Child Care Act 1991, through these regulations, commits the Regional and National stakeholders to protect and care for children. Successful inspection is a safeguard for the rights of children in education, play, recreation and understanding, free from discrimination

(Nutbrown 1996). However, inspection in the Republic of Ireland does not, as yet, embrace these dynamic aspects of childcare.

The Model Framework for Education, Training & Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector, produced by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2002) identifies two main sources of teacher training: one is acquired through experience and the other is acquired through education and training. A core set of values and a core standard for the profession is identified at all of the five levels on the ladder within the framework from basic practitioner to expert practitioner.

On the International front the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ireland ratified in 1992 provides the basic tools for analysing and evaluating quality practice. There are extensive research findings in the literature on the effects of different curricula on children’s learning experiences on educators. This point is elaborated further in the literature by Horgan (2002) who intimates that a curriculum is always a socio-cultural construction. She suggests that curricula divide broadly into two types. One is official curricula based on ministry guidelines and another developed by voluntary and other organisations, such as developmentally appropriate practice. However, nationally little or no research has been conducted in the crucial area of how the levels of training of educators in early years services influence the role, responsibilities, and perceptions of the educator. One body of research in early years education in Europe (Italy Spain and England) and other Western cultures by Penn (1997) and others, suggests that expectations and assumptions of the role of educators were very different. Some regions advocated the care aspect while others saw their role as educating the child. Whitebook, Howes & Phillips (1990) indicate the factors which influenced practitioners’ attitudes and perceptions of young children and led to more appropriate care-giving. These included the number of completed years of formal education and the training in early childhood at college level. Good working conditions also influenced the caregivers’ attitude. Other studies (Cassidy, Buell, Pugh-Hoese, and Russell 1995) suggest that the quality of the practitioner’s interaction with children showed a marked improvement when they participated in courses in ECE and child development. Rhodes & Hennessy (2001) found that even a relatively modest amount of training may have a significant effect on the quality of pedagogical practice.

According to Zigler (1971) the central element determining whether a childcare programme is developmental or not depends on the quality of the child's educator. However, in Ireland the wide range of functions performed by preschool teachers encourages a lack of agreement concerning what constitutes 'good' or even 'adequate' teaching.

Clearly training has a variety of incontestable effects on the teacher's behaviour and children's developmental outcomes. However, there has been much disagreement within the caring/education research literature as to what constitutes the most effective model of education. Some theorists suggest that a general education, as in a teachers level of school and college based education is best suited to educate young children (Whitebook *et al*, 1989). Others advocate specialised training in child development as best likely to produce improvement in children's learning outcomes (Ruopp *et al*, 1979), while yet other theorists believe that a combination of the two is more effective (Arnett, 1989).

Katz (1996) suggests there has been extensive effort through curriculum model development to emphasise preferred teaching procedures and objectives over the past three decades, but the efforts seem to have provoked bitter divergence among workers in the field. Bredekamp (1987) argues that although the quality of an early years curriculum may be affected by many factors, a major component of curriculum quality is the extent to which knowledge of child development is utilised in programme practices.

Expanding on Bredekamp's theory, children's cognitive development has been associated with teacher training. Research conducted in the USA by Ruopp *et al* (1979) showed that children in classes of trained teachers were frequently more involved in tasks or activities than children in other classes. The study also found that these children showed longer durations of attention to tasks and activities. Similarly, findings by Fitzgerald *et al* (1994) showed that the performance of children in early childcare settings is predicted by the teacher's behaviour. The study found that a child's cognitive development was positively related to teacher's qualifications in early year's settings. Further, Whitebook, Howes and Phillips (1990) found that, while the amount of general education obtained by the teacher was the strongest predictor of appropriate teacher behaviour, specialised training in early childhood emerge as an additional predictor in infant classrooms.

Theoretical Models of Teacher Education

Definitions of 'quality teaching' like those of 'good practice' are hard to find, as most writers tend to be unwilling to commit themselves to state exactly what constitutes a 'good early years teacher'. Watt (1987) had some appropriate comments to make of professionalism stating that 'whatever the future shape and nature of early years services, kindergarten teachers and other staff will continue to serve clients well if they exemplify in their attitudes and behaviours the hallmarks of professionalism'.

Parry & Archer (1984,p34) expand on the list of qualities when they identify key principles for an early year's teacher ... 'needs to be highly educated personally and professionally in those areas of knowledge, understanding and skill which she will be conveying to children ... albeit indirectly at their stage of development and in those spheres of learning which are essential to her understanding of children and adults and to her skill in dealing with them'

An analysis of relevant literature shows that different models and approaches to the preparation of teachers will inevitably reflect differences in expectations and standards, as well as philosophical differences and divergent conceptions of the nature of teacher education (Goodlad 1991; Valli 1992). According to Russell (1950 p135) 'The teacher like the artist, the philosopher, and the man of letters, can only perform his work adequately if he feels himself to be an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not dominated and fettered by an outside authority'. The tension that Russell identified some five decades ago is in many ways found at the heart of many competing efforts at educational reform in today's society. The desire for increased control and accountability on the one hand is paralleled by calls for increased teacher autonomy and empowerment on the other (Reagan *et al* 2000). The literature attaching to teacher education reveals that four models dominate current ideological thinking in the educational agenda in different countries. Thus a cursory glance at these models is warranted.

The Apprenticeship Model of Teacher Education

The traditional or apprenticeship model of teacher training is based on the belief that the routines of the more experienced practitioners are scrutinised and emulated by the novice teacher. Advocates of this model believe that respected teachers are produced by the imitation of the various practices of the more learned teachers (Stones 1972). Traditionally referred to as the 'model the master

approach', the experienced teacher observed 'great practice at the feet of the great master'. The new teacher can then reproduce this perceived good-practice. Kincheloe (1999) argues that this approach promotes professional amnesia which precludes contextual understanding. The apprenticeship model encourages teachers to be passive, imitative and non-reflective. This is reminiscent of the old monitorial system model practised in the nineteenth century by Lancaster & Bell and now re-emerging in United Kingdom and in United States of America. A critique of this model states that this development is predicated on political aims.

In an attempt to expose the inadequacies of the apprenticeship model of teacher training, the term 'sitting with Nellie' was first applied by Stones (1972). 'Nellie' is the factory worker who has been doing the job for years and to whom new recruits are attached while they learn the job. The apprentice learns by observing the experienced person at work.

This argument is reiterated by Kincheloe (1999) who states that the expert practitioner, however versatile, can only offer the student a limited set of skills, techniques, attitudes and methodology, all of which reflect the particular biases of that practitioner and may, consequently, deny the individuality of the student practitioner. Further, inherent in this model is a basic contradiction between the acknowledgement of the professional freedom of the teacher at a philosophical level, and the curtailment of thinking in practice. Ultimately, it stands for imitation rather than analysis, and it puts obstacles in the way of understanding teaching. Furthermore, the Irish National Teachers Organisation publication (INTO, 1995 p48) declares that 'teacher preparation through apprenticeship is educationally unsound and professionally indefensible.'

The Rationalist Model of Teacher Education

According to Eisner (1993), historically the aims of education were predicated on the belief that the schools' mission was to transmit or deliver the culture from libraries, concert halls and museums into the heads of the young so they could become civilised members of the community. This view of teacher education proposes that it is the teacher's task to impart knowledge and the duty of the students to receive it.

Advocates of the rationalist model of teacher education argue that good practice comes about through exposing prospective practitioners to a mixture

of subject content and 'academic' theory. Kincheloe & Steinberg (1998) state that, when teachers emerge from higher level education of this type, they are frequently unprepared to teach.

In most university institutions there is neither the time nor the desire to tease out the practical relevance of theoretical concepts. As a result, the role of teachers in social, and institutional life is unexamined and the power to anticipate the consequences of social action is engulfed (Britzman 2000).

Critics of the rationalist model question the relevance of theory-based methodology, arguing that the reliance on theory is a window-dressing, ego-boosting exercise by third level institutions; and that in academic institutions there are exceptionally low levels of conceptualisation, lack of discussion and lack of relevance and reflection. As long as officially certified 'experts' retain the power to determine what counts as knowledge, little reform is possible in teacher education.

Teacher training programmes in Ireland have a view of the child as a constructor of personal knowledge, but at the same time frequently fail to perceive colleges in this way. However, the difficulty in affecting change is that this view is embedded in teacher education. The current education system is driven by examination results. Research shows that there is an incredible washing-out of theory once students have graduated (Burke, 1992). Kincheloe (1999) made the point that the problem is not with the theory, but rather with the way it is presented to students. Students miss the point because they have no contextual framework on which to hang their ideas.

The Competency Model of Teacher Education

A major school of thought on how students can and should 'learn to teach' has emerged as the competency model. According to Furlong & Maynard (1995) competency training is the latest flowering of a long-established tradition in teacher education which has attempted to develop a 'technical rationalist' approach to training (Carr & Kemmis 1996; Popkewitz 1987).

Supported by behaviourist psychology and demands for accountability, many countries in the 1970s designed teacher certification procedures entirely based upon programmes of competence. Such a model of training was not new

however. Bell & Lancaster's monitorial system, previously noted in the apprenticeship model, popular at the beginning of the nineteenth century had something in common with the modern competency approach. It, too, was based on the idea of defining components of classroom organisation and discipline which could then be passed on to largely uneducated and unpaid monitors. In the more recent past, scientific approaches to training achieved considerable popularity in the 1970s with the development of interaction analysis (Flanders 1970; Wragg 1994), micro-teaching (Stones 1976; Wragg 1984) and some interest in the American competency movement (Houston & Howsam 1972).

Teacher education programmes in the competency-based mode are based on actual performance with children. Within this model, assessment and evaluation would conceive 'personal capacities' as essential, nevertheless classroom management is identified as an integral goal of the competency model.

According to Jessup (1991, p23) the clearest contemporary example of the 'performance' approach to competency training is the National Vocational Qualification model (NVQ). Within this model, all occupations are seen as classifiable within one of five different levels. Teaching is seen as being at Level IV in that it involves 'competence in the performance of complex, technical, specialised and professional work activities, including those involving designing, planning and problem-solving, with a significant degree of personal accountability'. If the model were to be applied, the role of the teacher in its social, organisational as well as pedagogical measurement would be analysed in terms of a series of units, each of which would be broken down into its fundamental elements. Each element would then be defined in terms of its own 'performance criteria' which would set out, with a precision 'approaching that of a science,' exactly what a candidate was expected to do to demonstrate competence in that element of the role (Jessup1991, p134).

Advocates of this model are well established in America and UK. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that it is now gaining ground in Ireland, with FETAC Level 2 being perceived as the necessary accreditation to work in childcare. A related issue regarding the competency model is now raising its head in the national school system. The national schoolteachers are strongly opposing the highly contentious proposal for league tables in Irish schools.

Katz (1996) suggests the pressure to specify and demonstrate the necessary skills could result in the formulation of lists of discrete skills, each of which can be observed and assessed separately. If teachers are assessed on the basis of checklists of demonstrable skills, such as classroom management, methodology and evaluation of content, there is the possibility that the really influential aspect of teaching, the meaning individual learners assign to teacher behaviours, will be overlooked. Marshall (1990 p30) suggests that competency training, like other forms of technical rationalistic education, implies that there is a common framework with fixed goals for people. In the words of Popkewitz (1987p12) such an approach 'flattens reality and obscures the struggles which fashion and shape our world'.

The Reflective Model of Teacher Education

The origin of the concept of reflection as an aspect of teachers' professional thinking owes much to the writings of American philosopher John Dewey in the early part of the twentieth century. Furlong & Maynard (1995) maintain that central to the view of Dewey on reflection was the idea that there is a fundamental dichotomy between routine-action, that is action guided primarily by tradition, external authority, and circumstances on the one hand, and reflective action on the other.

The view of reflective action is fundamentally different in character from routine action, in that it involves the 'active persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it' (Furlong & Maynard 1995 p6). The move from routine to reflective thought is based on the need to solve a problem. Reflective teachers are never satisfied that they have all the answers By continually seeking new information they constantly challenge their own practices and assumptions. In the process new dilemmas surface and teachers initiate a new cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Ross 1990).

In line with the argument that Dewey proposed, van Maanen (1977), posits that teachers can address more fundamental moral and ethical questions, concerning 'the worth of knowledge and the nature of the social conditions necessary for raising the questions of 'worthwhileness' in the first place' (p227). This position is mirrored by Carr & Kemmis (1986) who call for the development of forms of reflection that will lead to a 'critical educational

science' serving the emancipatory interest and promoting freedom and rational autonomy (pp156-7).

In essence, the reflective model of practitioner preparation suggests that the first three models under examination, – *i.e.* The Apprenticeship Model, The Rationalist Model and The Competency Model – are inadequate. The central premise of the reflective paradigm of teacher education is that meaning is constructed. Much of this ideology is accredited to philosophers such as Gadamer and Habermas (INTO, 1995) who compare teachers to other sub-groups in society. Students at this level are not homogenous. Even though each one is given the same formal content, each one is going to interpret and understand the content in a unique way based on life experiences. In light of the fact that Hayes (2001) suggests that researchers are urged to study childhood and childhood within the cultural contexts that they experience, an endeavour is now made to contextualise training programmes that are available to students in Ireland.

Teacher Training in Context

Within an Irish context, the variety of teaching preparation programmes for early childcare educators reflects long-standing disagreements, within and outside the early childhood field, about the types of personnel that should staff programmes of early childcare and education, about what qualifications they should have, and how they should be prepared. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) states that there is no convincing evidence that a Bachelor's Degree from an academic institution is a prerequisite for effectively teaching and caring for young children. However, research has shown that increased levels of professional education or child development are associated with improved outcomes for young children (INTO 1995). Furthermore, the INTO suggests that an interdisciplinary approach to teacher education is essential. The disciplines of sociology, history, psychology and philosophy can inform and guide, and for this reason are essential to a programme of professional preparation of teachers. Scheffler (1973), cited in INTO (1995 p62) arguing for the inclusion of theory in teacher training programmes, maintains that any arguments to the contrary are like suggesting 'that shock absorbers and automatic transmissions ought to be done away with, since they are not essential to transportation ... that literature and fine arts are unjustified as civilised pursuits because they are unnecessary to sustain life'.

Within preschool settings, how the practitioner decides to structure the learning environment depends largely on her own beliefs, the resources at her disposal and the level of her professional development. The recently published draft Model Framework Document (2002), previously referred to, sets out the occupational profiles and core skills that are deemed necessary to produce reflective practitioners. The development of a framework of qualifications is situated in the context of the 1999 Qualifications (Education & Training) Act. The Qualifications Act lays out certain basic features of the Framework. It is to be a 'framework of the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State ... based on standards of knowledge, skills or competence to be acquired by learners' (p6). According to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland Board (NQAI), at each level in the framework there will be one or more award-types. Each award-type will have its own award-type descriptor.

Research into the Quality Improvement Programme

In the light of the considerations outlined above, this research project sought to determine what effects teacher training has on the attitudes and perceptions of practitioners. The research focused on 30 practitioners participating on a Quality Improvement Programme (QIP), developed by the *Early Childhood Organisation* IPPA, in ten centres in Cork City and County, and compared this with practitioners in other playgroups. According to IPPA, participation in the QIP is not intended as an initial qualification for early years' educators, but rather as a top-up training for those already working within the sector. The rationale for an examination of the QIP is that the IPPA has traditionally been to the forefront in the training of its members. This research links into the development of the playgroup movement and builds on research conducted in the late 1980s through to early 1990s by Dr. F. Douglas of University College Cork.

As previously noted, the origins of the concept of reflection as an aspect of teacher's professional thinking owes much to the philosopher John Dewey. The central premise of the reflective paradigm of teacher education is that meaning is constructed. It could be argued that the template of the programme content in the QIP is embedded in this model of teacher training since it recognises that the ability to reflect on what one is doing is a key component of professionalism.

The Quality Improvement Programme is modelled very broadly on a version of the Effective Early Learning project (Pascal and Bertram, 1997) in that the contents of each session reflects the contents of the curriculum and include topics such as, experiential learning, creating a supportive environment, a daily routine, small group tasks, child observations and a reflective journal. Each programme works with ten to twelve services in a programme of training, workshops, on-site support and action planning and implementation. The observation of children and their response to the environment is a crucial element in the project. Assessment is based on attendance at monthly workshops, compilation of a portfolio of work, and a demonstration of improved knowledge and skills in specified practices.

A study conducted by Rhodes & Hennessy (2000) into High/Scope methodology concluded that the degree of change in practitioners depended on their attitudes and beliefs at the beginning of the project. These findings are replicated in this study.

The Research Findings

The primary aim of this study was to establish whether there was a link between training and practice in early childhood education.

An eclectic research approach was used to examine characteristics which were deemed to be important in the provision of a high quality environment for children in out-of-home care. This approach embraced the use of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale –Revised (ECERS-R) instrument (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998), interviews of practitioners, a study of the structure of the classroom, and an examination of procedural documentation. In addition, the results of the observational study were contextualised using factual and attitudinal information obtained from a global questionnaire survey. The same questionnaire was also given to staff at ten centres partaking on a quality improvement programme in Cork City and County which were visited by the researcher.

To retain focus on the research questions, concepts of quality which were deemed to be important were divided into five strands:- types of training for practitioners; concept of quality; structural frameworks; implementation of curriculum; and parental involvement, The clustering according to the five elements of quality was at the core of this study.

As was evident during the course of this investigation, tensions exist between teacher preparation programmes in higher education and practitioners in the community. The dominance of vocational (practical) aspects of teacher training was revealed from an analysis of practitioners' attitude. Findings in this study revealed that fifty two percent of practitioners have trained in FETAC Level 2 or similar qualification.

Results show a significant number of practitioners (73%) recognised the necessity for regular in-service training. However, a sizeable majority (84%) thought that quality within a centre depended on the personality and attitude of the practitioner. Whitebook *et al* (1990) posit that the education of practitioners plays an important part also. This had consequences for children in this study where results from the factual section of the questionnaire revealed that less than a third (30%) had completed their education to Leaving Certificate standard. Following Whitebook's train of thought, Pascal (2002), recommends that an indicator of quality in centres is where staff are well-educated and have access to good quality training opportunities regularly.

From results of observations in classrooms and also verified in the interviews, it can be comprehensively concluded that practitioners placed high emphasis on structural factors relating to safety issues. The results of the global questionnaire survey and the interviews of the targeted centres showed that almost all practitioners identified Inspection Regulations as necessary for the provision of high quality services and justified their practice with statements like 'this is to comply with the Health Board' or similar sentiments. The introduction of the Preschool Regulation Inspection was accompanied by a criteria-reference assessment system, whereby childcare services were described in terms of static-related statements about what the regulators deemed as best practice. Inspectors are confined merely to the static elements within childcare services.

With respect to parental involvement, the findings showed that practitioners merely paid lip service to parents being involved in their children's education. In many instances the practitioners were aware of the crucial role of parents as educators, but quoted instances where it does not work. This was borne out in the interviews with practitioners and in observation of classrooms. In light of these findings new innovative means need to be explored to involve parents as partners in the education of their children.

A possible criticism of the study is that 'Hawthorne Effect' may have been in operation in some cases, i.e. that the presence of the observer in itself influences what is observed. Indeed, it could be argued that in any observational study the reaction of the participant to the presence of an observer needs to be acknowledged. Participants in this study were aware they were being observed since the observations were conducted in the natural setting of the playschool. This holds true for the interview methodology also where respondents may reply with the answers that they think are expected. Nevertheless, the practitioners with academic qualifications identified care and education as being inextricably linked and applied the curriculum accordingly. In contrast however, practitioners with vocational training, such as the FETAC qualification, placed more emphasis on caring aspects of childcare. This was more evident in centres where practitioners were employed in initiative schemes or where staff had low levels of education and training. This finding is also borne out by international research (Whitebook *et al* 1990), which concluded that the most compelling forecast for adult behaviour was the level of formal education achieved by the practitioner. This is a view supported by Moss & Penn (1997), where they suggest that a well-educated, well-supported and self-confident workforce, 'with the ability to be reflective about their work' results in a high degree of autonomy in services, enabling the active participation of all the stakeholders.

The disparity continued into the management of centres. In centres where staff had more academic qualifications, they perceived their role as a member of a team and embraced a partnership approach in the development and implementation of programmes and in the delegation of responsibilities. In comparison the staff with vocational qualifications tended to view their roles in a hierarchical fashion, – that of manager, leader, worker, and assistant. The profile of the staff did not always fit well with these job descriptions. Levels of responsibility did not always accord with levels of training. Further, the teacher-led activities in some centres showed that not all practitioners had an understanding of theoretical ideologies conducive to a child's holistic development. In responding to the questions on the provision of quality care, practitioners isolated lack of resources as a major stumbling block. Lack of funding emerged as a most significant barrier to the provision of quality care. However, all participants on the quality improvement programme said they experienced some degree of support and understanding from their involvement

in the programme, although clearly not all to the same level. Nevertheless the case studies examined in this research revealed that highly motivated practitioners who also possessed an understanding of the uniqueness of each child in their centres, succeeded in surmounting many of the obstacles which frustrated several of their colleagues in other facilities even when these latter had an abundance of resources in purpose-built centres.

Recommendations

A key point emerged in the empirical study which showed that the majority of practitioners indicated that training programmes should concentrate on experiential learning rather than theory. As already discussed in the analysis, the majority of teacher training in this study was achieved through a vocational award. Therefore further research is needed to evaluate the gap between academic and practical training programmes. The gap between theory and practice is too wide. A deeper understanding of the philosophy behind different ideologies should be an essential feature of all childcare courses. However, there may never be consensus regarding 'model' teacher programmes. Questions of what to teach are important at every level, including educational programmes for early years practitioners. In the study it was found that a sizeable minority of the staff in the centres under investigation had worked or were working on Community Employment Scheme. Therefore it is recommended that the existing government policy on childcare should be critically examined. It is clear that government agencies must cease to utilise pre-school care and education in community-based centres as employment outlets for unqualified personnel. The government's one-year employment scheme used as a bridge for unemployed people to join the workforce, would suggest there is a fair percentage of 'half-trained' unemployed personnel out there who were never afforded an opportunity to continue their training in childcare. The transition from student to expert professional can be accelerated when a trajectory for change is plotted and made visible to workers. In this period of transformation in early childcare and education services, it is recommended that stakeholders strive to achieve a comprehensive, integrated and coherent childhood service that provides for people's needs.

Practitioners in this study were found to be generally working hard in attempting to attain a recognised qualification to enable them to 'climb the ladder'. The process is bound to take time however. New training courses will

need to be developed to bring education and social-service provision together without relinquishing any of their functions (Moss & Penn 1996).

Since training as recognised by regulators, is very fragmented, there is a need to recruit a well-educated and self-confident workforce capable of teamwork in all roles and responsibilities within a centre. The process will inevitably mean that training will be in a transition-period for most workers until they have achieved a childcare and education qualification. This transition period can be implemented in a coherent fashion if funding for specialised training courses is made available to all existing workers. The National Qualification Framework (2000) and Moss & Penn (1996) in their recommendations for a quality service advocate a special training programme to enable current workers to convert to an early childhood teacher qualification. This fits well with the findings in this research which suggest that during the transition period there should be a structure put in place allowing existing workers to obtain early childhood qualifications. Real difficulties identified in this study related to access and progression in training programmes, and the inflexibility of the organisation of current provision. Lack of state-funded support for training does little to engage practitioners.

Metaphorically speaking, childcare in Ireland now dances centre-stage on the political arena. In contrast to our European neighbours where the type and availability of services are determined by the nature of public policy, Ireland is still in the embryonic stage of developing a coherent structure to include the variety of qualifications and training routes into childcare. As the findings in this study showed, participants with more training identified funding as the most important factor in the quality process. This issue leads to the next recommendation which concerns the pay and conditions for workers. Throughout this study the results revealed that the low status of the childcare worker does impact on the quality of provision. Childcare is regarded as something that workers (all women in this study) can already do, ie, look after children. This point was made again and again in the interviews. Similar research by DfEE (1996) in the UK showed that participants on childcare courses were ill prepared educationally, and often emotionally. The findings in my research showed many of the interviewees were vague when asked about their long-term goals and said they did not know if they would continue working in the childcare sector when their employment scheme finished.

The final recommendation in this study concerns itself with parents and their involvement in the education of their children. The findings showed that there was minimal support or opportunities available to parents to be involved in the daily organisation of centres. Further, it could be argued from the data which came from the interviews, that some workers strongly opposed it. Under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (2000-2006), the government has committed 188.6 million Euro to community based groups (2004) and is now the major funding agency for childcare, which in the case of community-based services, are usually situated in Family Resource Centres where new, holistic early childcare services are rapidly developing and expanding. The conditions attached to this funding dictate that the users of services should manage them. Thus parents should be in a pivotal role in the implementation of policies. This juxtaposition suggests parents themselves adopt two roles within centres, that of parent and of employer. Tensions within this hierarchical system were very evident in this study. Therefore it is recommended that further research needs to be undertaken to examine this recent Irish phenomena. It is imperative to establish and cement connections between in-school and out-of-school practices in supporting the holistic development of children. Arguably, in the present climate of change it may well be pertinent to suggest the development of a national curriculum for the pre-school child, not just as an ideological syllabus, but a curriculum that identifies and embraces the uniqueness of all children.

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Section Three
Researching and Supporting
Quality

A Vision for the Future – Principles of Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland

Maresa Duignan

Introduction

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched in October 2002 to complete a comprehensive Programme of Work (CECDE, 2001) in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper 'Ready to Learn' (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). The CECDE is jointly managed by St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra and the Dublin Institute of Technology. Our remit is comprehensive, focusing on all care and education settings for children from birth to six years of age, bridging many of the traditional divides between education and care and between the early years settings and the formal education system.

Within this context, the *objectives* of the CECDE are:

- To develop a National Quality Framework for early childhood care and education settings (NQF/ECCE);
- To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs and
- To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged in the White Paper (CECDE, 2001:4).

This paper focuses on the first of these functions, namely the development of the NQF/ ECCE in Ireland. The framework comprises three distinct, but interrelated elements related to defining, supporting and assessing quality. It is anticipated that each of these elements will be mediated to practice settings through mechanisms and infrastructure especially designed to take account of the unique nature of ECCE in Ireland.

This paper examines the development of the first, and arguably, the most critical dimension of the NQF *i.e.* a set of core principles, which will inform and underpin all other aspects and processes. It briefly relates the methodology

used in the development of the principle statements, describes their breadth and scope and the vision they represent of ECCE in Ireland. Finally it describes the proposed practice related elements through which these principles will impact on practice in ECCE settings towards the development of high quality early childhood experiences for all children in Ireland.

Context

Early childhood services in Ireland have only very recently attracted the attention of government and policy makers (Department of Health [DoH], 1991, Department of Health and Children [DHC], 1998, Department of Justice, Equality and Law reform [DJELR], 1999, DHC, 2000). Prior to the early 1990s, many services for children under six years of age, were not subject to statutory regulation. Even those services which were provided by the state, the most notable being the infant classes in primary schools, were not recognised as having a different needs in terms of, for example, premises, curriculum and staffing, to that of formal schooling which commenced at age six in the first year of primary school. Outside state provision, a bewildering array of provision, support infrastructure and, funding arrangements had evolved, usually managed either by the community and voluntary or private interests, to meet very specific and local needs of children and families. Whilst all these services were pursuing a common objective of addressing the care and education needs of young children and their families, they were doing so along pathways that rarely met and which had no frame of reference within which to establish such connections.

The policy initiatives that have occurred since 1990 have, for the first time, begun the process of creating a single identity for this diverse range of provision. The seminal reports of the DJELR and the DES in the late 1990s (DES, 1999) and the regulations instituted by the Department of Health in 1996 (DHC, 1996), all contributed to this development process. However, it is only since the establishment of the CECDE in 2001 that national policy developments have been initiated which truly embrace and engage the whole range of early childhood provision that exists in Ireland. Our brief to develop a quality framework for all settings where children aged birth to six years are present is ground breaking on many fronts, not least of which is the task of accommodating this diversity of both practitioner identities and practice.

The Approach

Given this challenging context for development, it was recognised that strategies for encouraging ownership by all stakeholders would be a critical prerequisite for success. This is acknowledged within the CECDE Work Programme as follows:

‘Consultation with stakeholders will be a crucial part of the process of developing quality standards’ (CECDE, 2001:4).

In addition to consultation, it was also recognised that there would be multiple and perhaps even competing perspectives on quality in ECCE. It was important that these would be understood and addressed in the development of the NQF/ECCE. Analysis of literature pertaining to the development of quality standards indicated that, in order to establish the validity and reliability of the NQF materials and mechanisms, all development needed to be grounded in solid research evidence.

The first stage of the NQF/ECCE development process therefore, involved addressing these issues through the production of four key strands of research

- Talking about Quality documents a national consultation with stakeholders in ECCE regarding the development of the NQF/ECCE. It draws on the wealth of experience and expertise related to the promotion of quality in ECCE that exist in Ireland (CECDE, 2004).
- Insights on Quality presents a review of national policy, practice and research, focusing on quality and distils implications for the development of the NQF/ECCE (CECDE, 2005A) (see Walsh, T., in this volume for further details).
- Making Connections examines the international context for quality through consideration of a range of selected countries and distils best policy and practice and research in relation to the development of the NQF/ECCE. (CECDE, 2005B)
- Early Childhood in Ireland – Evidence and Perspectives (CECDE, Forthcoming) presents the CECDE position on child development and learning in Ireland and distils implications for the NQF/ECCE. (see Fallon, J., in this Volume for further details).

It was identified during this phase that some sort of unifying mechanism, which would clearly identify the characteristics of quality in ECCE in Ireland, was a

necessary prerequisite to the development of national standards for quality and their associated materials and processes for implementation. This mechanism, it was decided, could be articulated through a set of principles which represented the consensual views of all stakeholders on what the critical contributing factors in provision of quality early childhood experiences were. If this consensus could be captured and articulated clearly, it would encourage the development of a common language and common sense of purpose, both critical to the future development of a coherent identity for the sector and for the provision of quality early years services for young children.

Development of the Principles

The publications, which resulted from the evidence gathering work of the CECDE, provided the material basis for the development of the principle statements. A meta-analysis of the content of these documents generated a comprehensive volume of statements, words and phrases, which collectively addressed the issue of how to provide quality early childhood experiences for young children. This data was then subjected to thematic analysis that identified ten key areas of provision. Using the language generated through the meta-analysis, principle statements were devised for each area, to attempt to convey the ideas succinctly and with clarity. In the process of doing so however, it was recognised that given the diversity of perspectives that existed amongst all the stakeholders, it would be necessary to accompany each statement with a brief explanatory note to ground the vision in practice and remove the opportunity for ambiguity.

The following were the ten key areas that comprised the initial ten principle statements:

- The distinct and unique nature of early childhood
- The centrality of the child
- Parents and families
- Relationships
- Environments
- Diversity
- Equality
- Safety and welfare
- Role of the adult
- Pedagogy

- Play
- Coordination and Communication

Consultation

Once the principles and their explanatory notes were drafted, a process of consultation with stakeholders was initiated. This process was mediated through the representative structure of the CECDE Consultative Committee. This committee comprises representatives of 50 different stakeholder organisations. Each organisation was afforded the opportunity to engage with the proposed principles and explanatory notes and give their collective feedback through their representatives to the CECDE development team. A feedback template was designed for the purpose and circulated in hard copy and also via email attachment. In addition, representatives were encouraged to send their feedback through a confidential web based version of the feedback form.

Revision

The most surprising result from the consultation process was the overwhelming consensus evident across all the diverse stakeholder groups regarding the validity of the key areas of quality. A total of 24 of the 50 organisations submitted feedback (48%). In relation to the question:

‘Do you agree that this statement should be a core principle underpinning the National Quality Framework?’, the numbers indicating ‘Yes’ ranged between 79% (Play) and 96% (Environments).

Taken as a whole, the average level of agreement across the ten principles was 88%, a very positive response by any standards. This positive response was further reinforced when the remaining 12% of responses was analysed in more detail. Of this 12%, a total of 9% had left the Yes/No box blank. This left only 3% of responses indicating No.

In all of these cases, however, it became apparent that even those who had ticked ‘No’ did not intend this to indicate disagreement with the validity of the principle. Rather it meant that they wished to suggest changes to the wording of either the principle or explanatory note. We therefore concluded with some confidence that there was 100% agreement with and endorsement of the ten Draft Principles for inclusion in the NQF/ECCE.

A number of organisations suggested word changes within the principles and the explanatory notes. Each organisation’s response was reviewed in detail – in particular for evidence of trends and consensus. Each decision taken in relation to the changes to the original wording was recorded and where there was evidence of consensus, the changes were incorporated into the revised principle statements or explanatory notes. This process of record keeping was felt to be important to ensure openness, transparency and accessibility of the revision process to all interested stakeholders. Some Principles attracted very little comment or suggested changes *e.g.* Safety, Welfare and Well being of the child (25%). Others, such as the role of the adult stimulated more debate and therefore more comment (58%). The statistics were quite similar for the explanatory notes, with the majority of changes overlapping and minor in nature. During this process of review, it became apparent that much of the comment focused on the use of language and terminology. Differing perspectives were evident in this feedback and this evidence prompted the development of a Glossary of Terms that would clarify exactly how language was being used in the context of the NQF/ECCE.

There is no doubt but that the principles were enhanced and solidified by the feedback from the Consultative Committee. In some cases changes were suggested to reinforce the message already contained within the statement *e.g.* changing ‘a’ to ‘the’ or changing ‘should’ to ‘must’. A number of the suggestions included focused on the practical application or implementation of the principles.

In addition to alterations to the existing 10 draft principles, a number of organisations proposed the inclusion of additional principles. Following analysis of the feedback, a further two principles were devised and added to the existing list, which now rests at twelve. The first of these principles relates to Parental Partnership, which was suggested by 30% of organisations who felt that this aspect was not represented adequately within the draft principles. The second additional principle relates to the issue of Coordination and Communication between all adults working with the child, both within the settings and also external adults who are involved in the care and education of the child. The feedback and suggestions from the Consultative Committee was used to phrase these principles and explanatory notes.

Realising the vision

Collectively these twelve principles articulate a vision of early childhood provision that supports the centrality of the child in all his/her unique complexity, as the starting point for the provision of quality services. They are inter-related and interdependent and reflect the Bio-ecological model of child development, which states that:

‘The effective functioning of child rearing processes in the family and other child settings requires public policies and practices that provide place, time, stability, status, recognition, belief systems, customs and actions in support of child rearing activities not only on the part of parents, caregivers, teachers and other professional personnel, but also relatives, friends, neighbours, co-workers, communities and the major economic, social and political institutions of the entire society.’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1997:38)

In addition they mediate this theoretical perspective within the Irish context. The Principles have, for the first time in the history of early childhood provision in Ireland, gained the endorsement of all stakeholders regardless of their traditional, philosophical and professional or practice contexts. They therefore have the potential to act as a framework for the development of a distinctive identity for all. In the first instance, the principles will provide the overarching frame within which the NQF/ECCE will be developed and implemented. They will be the benchmark against which the standards and indicators (or components) of quality will be measured. They will inform the development of assessment mechanisms, tools and processes and they will act as the catalyst for the provision of a comprehensive range of support.

Conclusion

These principles developed by stakeholders in the ECCE sector in Ireland in 2005, express for the first time a vision of the future of service provision. It is very positive to note that this vision is a shared one and that it reinforces and complements existing national policy. Through the mechanism of the NQF/ECCE, it is to be hoped that the vision becomes reality. This will not be an easy road to travel and will undoubtedly throw up many and varied challenges for all of us whether we are parents, professionals or policy makers. As usual in Ireland, we have set ourselves a high bar to achieve. However, the

commitment, passion and enthusiasm articulated in these vision statements demonstrates that we have abundant potential to reach our self-imposed goals.

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Informing the National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (NFQ/ECCE):

A thematic Perspective on Child Learning and Development in Ireland

Jacqueline Fallon

Introduction

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is an initiative of the Department of Education and Science (DES) in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999). The brief of the CECDE covers all settings for children between the ages of birth and six years, bridging the various strands of provision which have developed in Ireland; these include sessional services, infant classes in primary schools, family daycare and full daycare. Within this extensive brief, the core objective of the CECDE is the development of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NQF/ECCE). Work on the NQF is well advanced and it will be published in the Autumn of 2005.

The NQF is comprised of three distinct but interconnected strands:

- Defining Quality
- Supporting Quality
- Assessing Quality.

The first of these strands, Defining Quality, is the most substantial element of the NQF, as the way in which quality is defined will determine to a large degree how we support and assess quality practice. There are three elements to the Defining Quality strand of the NQF:

- Principles: these, taken as a whole, express an agreed value statement which underpins all provision for young children in Ireland.
- Standards: the Standards cover a comprehensive range of issues and activities and will serve to indicate the achievement of quality in practice. The Standards translate the values expressed in the Principles for practical application.

- Components of Quality/Signposts for Reflection: these itemise the Standards and raise questions to support reflective practice.

The Principles, Standards and Components, taken together, are intended to support quality practice in several ways. It is envisaged that they will be a resource:

- To inform the planning process;
- To support and guide the actions which take place as a result of that planning;
- To complete the cycle, to guide the evaluation process for the practitioners involved, and for external evaluation and support.

Given the national significance for the ECCE sector and the innovative and unique concept of the NQF, the CECDE based the development process on a firm foundation of research evidence. This body of research evidence has been made available in four publications, now referred to as the four pillars of the NQF. While each is important in its own right, cumulatively they come together to form a firm foundation for the NQF, ensuring that the Framework reflects and builds upon national and international best policy, practice and research.

The four pillars are as follows:

Talking About Quality; Report of a Consultation Process on Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (CECDE, 2004)

The CECDE is firmly committed to the principle of consultation with the sector as an important element of the development of the NQF and the public consultation reported on in this publication was an important step in the process. Almost 400 people from all over Ireland took part, including parents, teachers, childcare workers, policymakers, students and researchers. The results present a fascinating insight into how the issue of quality is viewed in the ECCE sector here.

Insights on Quality; A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004 (CECDE, 2005a)

This report presents a detailed and comprehensive review of documentation pertaining to quality in ECCE in Ireland, focused on policy, practice and research. The report considers the themes that have emerged from the review in relation to

defining, assessing and supporting quality in ECCE in Ireland. A synthesis of these themes is presented along with eight recommendations for future actions towards the development, implementation and maintenance of the NQF. This report is discussed by Walsh within this issue of Conference Proceedings.

Making Connections; A Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (CECDE, 2005b)

While the NQF will primarily reflect Irish developments in recent years, it is important to pursue an understanding of international models of policy, practice and research in relation to quality, and to reflect best international practice in the NQF. This report provides a valuable insight into international best policy and practice, and enables us to look critically at our own practice and analyse assumptions in a new light.

Early Childhood in Ireland; Evidence and Perspectives (CECDE, Forthcoming)

This is a discussion document in which the CECDE considers various thematic perspectives on child learning and development, as well as current and historical perspectives on early childhood in Ireland. This document is one of a set of two companion documents, the other being the *Foundation Document* (CECDE, Unpublished). Initially, the CECDE commissioned a literature review on the child's physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, moral and spiritual development. This resulted in a substantial and extensive review which will be of great interest to students, researchers, practitioners and others with an interest in the development of the young child. This significant document was augmented by two further sections; the first of these sections describes the historical and cultural context of ECCE in Ireland from the end of the nineteenth century to approximately 1990. The second section discusses current perspectives on ECCE in Ireland from 1990 to the present.

Once the *Foundation Document* was finalised, the CECDE used it in a number of ways. Primarily, it informed the development of the NQF and secondly, it provided the evidence base for *Early Childhood in Ireland; Evidence and Perspectives* (CECDE, Forthcoming).

The CECDE considers that development does not happen in discrete blocks in the different developmental domains and we have moved away from that

approach to develop a set of themes which focus on a holistic view of these processes. The themes are as follows:

- Relationships in development and learning
- Child-centred development and learning
- Holistic development and learning
- Environments for development and learning
- Diversity in development and learning
- Communication in development and learning
- Play for development and learning

This paper draws on the discussion paper, *Early Childhood in Ireland; Evidence and Perspectives* to briefly present some elements which have informed the development of the NQF. The order in which the themes are presented do not indicate a hierarchy and all the themes are interconnected and must be considered as a whole.

Relationships for Development and Learning

The child's relationships are conceptualised as a continuum, not as a set of compartments which the child visits in turn. This has implications for parents, caregivers, service providers, teachers and other significant adults in the child's life. Communication and partnership between the adults is essential if the child is to experience the continuity necessary to a holistic experience of life. It must be emphasised that care and education can not be fractured, but must be integrated for the child in her¹ relationships. A child's holistic development and learning is best supported in the context of secure, supportive and nurturing relationships. These relationships should indicate to the child that she is valued, her contribution is important and that she is listened to and heard.

Relationships with siblings and peers can be an important source of friendship and support for young children. These relationships can promote moral reasoning, conflict resolution skills and social understanding in very young children. Play activities with siblings and peers can foster the development of pro-social behaviours, such as sharing and co-operating, and enhance the child's sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Toddlers can begin to show interest in their peers as friends even before the age of two, and adults should not underestimate the importance to the young child of her friends and friendships. Significant

adults need to facilitate the child's friendships, and, in particular in out-of-home settings, foster relationships between the children in their care.

For the significant adults who interact with the child in out-of-home settings to support learning and development, it is essential to understand that it is within the adult/child relationship that much of the learning takes place. Adult interactive styles are crucially important. The adult must start from the point of the child's interests in her activities and learning situations. She must emphasise the child's strengths and competencies, while helping the child to cope with mistakes and frustration through to the experience of success, resiliency and problem solving. In relating to the child, the adult must be appropriately non-directive, must discuss, question and consider outcomes, and partner the child in constructing meaning.

Child-Centred Development and Learning

The child is an active agent from birth in her own learning and development, with her own strengths and needs, potential, cultural identity, gender and complexities. This personality is also, of course, much, much more than the sum of its parts. And it is part of the expertise of the practitioner to know and understand this complex individual.

Significant adults need to acquire knowledge and understanding of the child's life through listening to the child, hearing her and being responsive. For young children especially, it is the significant adults in the environment who will ensure she becomes aware of her own sense of agency, self-reliance, independence and control. To this end, the activities and opportunities for play and discovery made available to the child through quality services and supports must foster the child's sense of purpose and give meaning to her engagement with the world. Crucially, the child must be allowed to exercise choice as a requisite part of active participation.

A child-centred approach based on knowledge and understanding of the child's life must recognise also that the circumstances in which a child lives her life are not always optimally conducive to her harmonious development. A child living in circumstances of disadvantage, experiencing marginalisation on racial, ethnic or cultural grounds, or because of having special needs arising from a disability, has the same rights to quality experiences as her peers. It is the child's experience

which must be the starting point where interventions are put in place to eliminate marginalisation. It is the child who must benefit directly from interventions, and all interventions involving children must primarily focus on supporting positive outcomes for children.

Holistic Development and Learning

The child's development does not happen in discrete categories. The child's developmental and learning domains are fundamentally inter-related, and exert reciprocal influences, each upon the others, towards holistic development. Curriculum and learning contexts, in responding to the holistic and complex personality of the child, must be child-centred and reflect the child's interests. They must provide activities and opportunities for the child to engage actively with the learning process. Learning programmes, curriculum content and adult methodologies must reflect and support the child's holistic development in which the child herself is an active participant and constructor of meaning.

It is fundamental to the CECDE that care and education are not sustainable as separate experiences in a child's life. Just as the child's developmental domains are inter-connected, so is the child's experience of the world inter-connected and holistic. To artificially divide that experience in the structures and contexts designed for nurturing the child is to deny her holistic experience. Care and education are inextricably linked in the child's life.

Environments for Development and Learning

As an active, competent learner from birth, the child engages with the environment in a dynamic process. Discovery, autonomy, opportunity, experimentation, exploration, enthusiasm and wonder are some of the hallmarks of that activity. Ultimately, the interaction between the child and her environment should provide her with fulfilment and joy. We believe that this is true of all children, whatever the child's level of ability, and each child must be appropriately supported to fulfil her potential for interacting with the world in this way.

Environments structured to meet the child's needs should reflect the child's active approach in safety and security, yet with provision for appropriate level of risk. A level of risk can be challenging for the child and offer scope for the exercise of self-reliance, independence and autonomy, for problem-solving

using individual strengths to overcome difficulties and give a beneficial sense of control over outcomes. The environment should also foster co-operation between the child and her peers within small groups.

The environment should stimulate curiosity, choice, interests, and be varied and dynamic, without overwhelming the child. Expert planning by the adult, on the basis of knowledge of each child gleaned from observation, is vital. Cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation are crucial to ensure that the environment supports each child's developmental potential.

Diversity in Development and Learning

The child's individuality is the basic source of diversity among children. Individuality and diversity are companion concepts in the child's life experience. The concern of the significant adults in the child's life must be to make both individuality and diversity a celebration of the unique complexity of each child. An appreciation of this individuality contributes to the application of the principles of child-centredness and holism in relationships with the child.

Accompanying this principle of individual profile is the awareness of diversity among children. Diversity is not about placing a child in a category in which the child is identified only by, for example, special needs arising from a disability, by ethnic origin or by the level of disadvantage she experiences. Any of these conditions can exist together in a child's life, along with many other attributes and experiences.

The child must know herself to be valued, her first language respected and supported while additional language learning is proceeding. She must find that her culture is visible, a necessary part of supporting self-identity. Her needs must be identified and met in the context of holistic development. For example, special attention may be required to meet the needs of a child whose health suffers because of socio-economic and/or cultural disadvantage.

Communication in Development and Learning

Each child needs to communicate and be communicated with. Communication is about more than language – a parent can communicate love, comfort and reassurance through a hug as, or more effectively, than with words. It has been pointed out that a baby's first language is the language of the

senses. A child who does not acquire language, for example, because of a disability, can communicate with her environments and be responded to.

Technology provides alternatives to speech, as does sign language; we can have reciprocal communication through the senses, self-expression through the arts and so on. Each child must be supported in communicating within her environments through the most appropriate means. In most cases, this will mean supporting the child's language learning, and this requires different levels of support in different contexts. For example, the effects of disadvantaged circumstances can impact on a child's language development and specific interventions may be required. Hearing problems can also impact on the child's ability to communicate. Children for whom English is not their first language also require specific interventions, and there are other possible scenarios. The core principle remains that each child must be able to engage in reciprocal communication within her environments.

The interactive styles of the adults who are supporting the child's learning are most important in affirming the child as an active co-constructor of meaning and as an active agent in her own holistic development. It is fundamental to the effectiveness of the adult interactive style that the relationship with the child be conceptualised as a dialogue and a discussion. Adults need to communicate with the child in ways which show empathy, sympathy, kindness, sensitivity and responsiveness. But the communicative process should also challenge the child, in a way appropriate to her developmental potential, to move towards new learning, understanding and meaning-making.

Ongoing communication between parents and other significant adults is a further necessary element in promoting the child's well-being. Such communication is essential to a full understanding of the child. It is also fundamental to developing a partnership between home and out-of-home settings, and an absolute pre-requisite of parental involvement. Equally, in settings and circumstances which involve more than one person working with the child – for example in centre based day care and therapeutic teams – communication between the members of the team is crucial. Sharing knowledge of the child, maintaining consistency in meeting the child's needs and ensuring that all relevant information is available to all involved with the child and to those keeping records is crucial.

Play for Learning and Development

Play is the process and state of being in which the child will predominantly engage with her own holistic development. There is no single definition of what play is, but the child is not in need of a definition – play is what she does. Perhaps the difficulty which adults have in defining play is a reflection of the ownership which children have over the process. It may well also be a reflection of the immediacy and spontaneity of play, and the open ended, flexible nature of what happens when children are playing. What is not contested is that play is a source of fulfilment and joy for the child, a source of wonder to adults and a major contributor to the well-being of children.

During play, the child can be solitary or social. She can deploy previous experience and knowledge and exercise meta-cognitive skills. She can explore her own developmental process and incorporate new learning. She can engage with concrete objects and/or ideas. She can explore emotion and culture, and experience autonomy and purpose, and much, much more.

Activities characterised in this way require an element of risk if they are to be truly experimental and exploratory – difficulty and challenge are needed too. Coping with mistakes and frustration is part of learning and development. Provision for play – in whatever context or for whatever age – must provide opportunities for risk taking in what is ultimately a safe and secure environment.

Conclusion

These seven themes have contributed to the development of the NQF in conjunction with the other elements of the research evidence base elucidated by the four pillars referred to in the Introduction. Having one of the four pillars of the NQF focused specifically on the child has ensured that the Framework itself reflects the centrality of the child in quality provision. This perspective is evident from even a cursory examination of the sections completed so far, *i.e.* the Principles and Standards, which have been finalised and subject to extensive consultation. The high level of consensus from the ECCE sector, which both the Principles and Standards have achieved, indicates that the CECDE perspective on child learning and development resonates very well with current best practice. Of course, such consensus also illustrates a fundamental of ECCE in Ireland – the universally held concern to provide the best quality services for all children.

¹ The female pronoun is used throughout for ease of reading.

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Insights on Quality:

A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education

in Ireland 1990 – 2004

Thomas Walsh

Introduction

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched by the Minister for Education and Science in October 2002. It is jointly managed by the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College of Education, Dublin. The aim of the CECDE is to develop and coordinate ECCE in Ireland in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). The remit of the Centre is comprehensive, focusing on all aspects of ECCE for children aged birth to six years in Ireland, in both informal and formal settings.

Within this context, the CECDE has three core *objectives* (CECDE, 2001):

1. The development of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NQF/ECCE) is the core function of the CECDE. This involves devising quality standards for all settings in which children aged birth to six years are present. It also involves developing appropriate support mechanisms for personnel working with children, as well as a system of assessment to ensure quality is achieved.
2. The CECDE is currently in the process of implementing three targeted interventions for children who are experiencing disadvantage and who have special needs in the birth to six age-category.
3. The CECDE is preparing the groundwork for the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA), as envisaged in the White Paper, *Ready to Learn*.

Three distinct elements can be identified within the core objective of the CECDE, *i.e.* the development of the NQF/ECCE. First of all, it will *define*

what is understood by quality for children in the Irish context. Secondly, a system of inspection or *assessment* will be devised to ensure that quality is attained and maintained. Last of all, an infrastructure will be developed to *support* all those working in the ECCE sector to accomplish quality as prescribed in the standards.

The CECDE has undertaken a *Programme of Work* (CECDE, 2001) in the past two years to ensure that the NQF/ECCE is evidence-based and builds on national and international best policy, practice and research. Within this, four distinct pillars of evidence were identified and researched to underpin the development of the NQF/ECCE, as follows:

- *Questions of Quality* is the report of a national consultation process with stakeholders on all aspects of Defining, Assessing and Supporting quality (CECDE, 2004);
- *Insights on Quality* is a national review of quality in ECCE in Ireland in relation to all aspects of policy, practice and research from 1990 to 2004 (CECDE, 2005a);
- *Making Connections* is a review of international policy, practice and research relating to quality in ECCE across six countries (CECDE, 2005b);
- *Evidence and Perspectives* is a thematic review of current research on child development and learning in Ireland (CECDE, Forthcoming).

This paper presents an overview of the second pillar of research, *Insights on Quality*, which was published in February 2005. It first of all outlines the rationale for the production of the report and how it fits within the CECDE *Programme of Work*. A brief overview of the methodology used is then provided. This is followed by a concise summary of the structure of the report, which outlines the parameters of the research and gives an overview of the literature documented. A particular focus is placed on the implications for the development of the NQF/ECCE in relation to the elements of Defining, Assessing and Supporting quality, which was the primary purpose of producing the review. The paper concludes with a broad overview of the recommendations emanating from the research.

Rationale

A *Programme of Work* was designed for the CECDE, through a partnership of

the Department of Education and Science, the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College of Education (CECDE, 2001). This was further elaborated upon within the CECDE *Research Strategy – A Work in Progress*, which detailed the undertaking of a national review of quality as an integral element of our work (CECDE, 2003a:6). The rationale for the inclusion of a national review was to ensure that the NQF/ECCE was evidence-based and built upon existing national expertise and practice within the sector. This ensures that the rich diversity of good practice in the Irish context is captured and can be shared among all those with an interest in quality practice for our youngest children. In recent years, there has been increasing momentum within the ECCE sector towards the achievement of quality practice, and the harnessing of this rich well of indigenous experience and expertise will be crucial to the development of quality services for our youngest children. Reassuringly, it highlights the commonalities of many of the issues and concerns across the whole sector in the achievement of quality. *Insights on Quality*, while an important publication in its own right, must be viewed for the purposes of the NQF/ECCE as one element of the evidence that has coalesced to inform its development and implementation.

Methodology

The starting point for conducting this national review was the *Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education* (CECDE, 2003b). This Audit identified 1,082 individual pieces of research that had been produced in relation to ECCE in Ireland since 1990 and categorised them under 12 themes. The theme in relation to Quality was one of the smallest, containing just 53 pieces of research. As part of the research process, all 1,082 pieces of research in the Audit were re-analysed. This identified many additional publications, which, while not focused primarily on quality, they addressed the subject in some detail. In addition, the online database of research which the CECDE hosts on its website (www.cecde.ie) was consulted. This has been hosted since 2003, and in addition to the contents of the Audit of Research, it is updated on an ongoing basis as publications come on stream. In this way, research published in late 2003 and early 2004, following the publication of the Audit, was identified.

In addition, a large number of ECCE organisations were contacted regarding policy, practice or research documents they had produced between 1990 and 2004. This exercise proved very valuable and produced

many more important recent publications regarding quality in the Irish context. In total, 66 organisations were contacted by letter, and follow-up phone calls where necessary, including the County Childcare Committees, organisations comprising the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative group¹, government departments and agencies, the health boards and the primary schools inspectorate. This response ensured that our research analysed the most current policy, practice and research available on quality in the Irish context.

Outline and Structure of the Report

In excess of three hundred publications were reviewed for the report. There are three main sections to the report; namely, Policy, Practice and Research. Each of these sections relates to quality in both the formal and informal sector, at national, regional and local levels. In this way, it crosses many of the traditional divides of previous reviews completed, which reviewed either the 'care' or 'education' elements separately. Each section within the review concludes with a set of implications for the development of the NQF/ECCE, categorised under Defining Quality, Assessing Quality and Supporting Quality. These three elements comprise the Defining strand of the NQF/ECCE, while they also provided the theme of the CECDE International Conference held in Dublin Castle in September 2004, *Questions of Quality*.

Each section incorporates literature from statutory agencies/government departments, non-statutory agencies and a number of other organisations or individuals. Within the government departments, a particular focus was placed on the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The non-statutory organisations were largely comprised of members of the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative. In addition, a number of other organisations such as the Combat Poverty Agency, the National Disability Authority, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and a number of Partnerships, which had produced publications, were also included. Moreover, a number of individuals who have produced documentation, largely within the research section, feature within the report. A number of international or cross-national reviews, which included Ireland, were incorporated within the policy section.

Implications for the NQF/ECCE

For the purpose of this paper, the implications from the review are listed below. These are categorised under the aforementioned headings of Defining, Assessing and Supporting Quality. A selection of implications that emerged for *Defining Quality* and which impacted on the development of the NQF/ECCE is as follows:

- First of all, quality is a subjective and dynamic concept that is difficult to define and is perceived as a continuous process as opposed to an end product.
- Secondly, there are a number of diverse perspectives (children, parents, providers, policy makers) as to what constitutes quality, all of which the NQF/ECCE must acknowledge and accommodate.
- Placing the needs, abilities and interests of the child at the centre of provision is an inherent characteristic of quality.
- The environment in which the child develops and learns, both indoor and outdoors, is of paramount importance in ensuring quality services.
- Parental partnership and community involvement are important indicators of quality within services and mechanisms to harness this important input must be put in place.
- The levels of training and qualifications of staff are important in attaining and maintaining quality services.
- Lastly, the presence of efficient management and effective leadership makes a significant contribution towards the achievement of quality.

In relation to *Assessing Quality*, the following implications were distilled from the report:

- The complexity of assessing quality, especially the more intangible and dynamic features, must be acknowledged and a mechanism devised to assess all aspects of quality within settings.
- Assessment consists of two aspects, both internal assessment and

external assessment. A combination of these is most valuable in providing a more comprehensive overview of quality within services, as opposed to either individually.

- Any system of evaluation must be holistic and developmental in nature, must recognise positive elements of practice and identify aspects in need of improvement. To this end, it is important that any assessment mechanism provides definite and unambiguous feedback for staff with clear recommendations for future progression.
- Last of all, it is advisable to build any assessment infrastructure on the existing statutory systems in operation within early years settings, namely, the Department of Health and Children preschool inspection system and the inspection system operated by the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate within primary schools.

Finally, a number of implications for *Supporting Quality* from the report emerged, including the following:

- Increased coordination of the ECCE sector is a prerequisite of the rollout of the Framework, which would be enhanced by the establishment of a centralised agency, such as the Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged in the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999).
- Sustained long-term commitment on the part of the State, especially in relation to funding, is essential to the development of quality services.
- The availability of a qualified workforce, with clearly defined support structures and regular opportunities for continuing professional development, is fundamental to the development of quality ECCE services.
- Fourthly, the existence of a comprehensive and cohesive infrastructure at national, regional and local level is a prerequisite of quality services.
- Lastly, the production and dissemination of relevant policy, practice and research developments in the sector assists in building the capacity of the sector towards the delivery of quality services.

Recommendations

Based on these aforementioned sets of implications for Defining, Assessing and Supporting quality, the report concluded with a number of recommendations. A concerted effort was made to distil the most pertinent recommendations from the report rather than produce a long and unwieldy set of recommendations. This helps to ensure that they have more of an impact and are more easily implemented. Eventually, two generic recommendations and six recommendations regarding the development of the NQF/ECCE were produced.

1. The first general recommendation relates to the development of a national strategy to promote ECCE services. This includes adequate and sustainable funding, the inception of a national data strategy to collect current and reliable information at national, regional and local level and mechanisms to support education, training and professional development.
2. Secondly, it was recommended that professional practice be recognised, rewarded and supported with clear pathways of entry, transfer and progression put in place for all practitioners in the sector.

There were six additional recommendations relating specifically to the development of the NQF/ECCE.

1. The report proposes that the Framework must take account of the multiple perspectives on quality that exist in the Irish context. To this end, it needs to be flexible and dynamic to meet the evolving needs of children, families and Irish society.
2. The NQF/ECCE must be child-centred with a focus on children's rights. In this way, it must provide a reference point for the coordination of all other policy, practice and research in the Irish context.
3. It is considered essential that the NQF/ECCE incorporate clearly stated national standards on a number of particular aspects of practice. These include the environment, parental involvement, professional qualifications, the programme or curriculum, resources and materials. Furthermore, these standards should be interpreted by a series of guidelines for practitioners.

4. The NQF/ECCE should include an assessment mechanism which complements and builds upon the existing infrastructure and expertise. Such an assessment framework should offer national accreditation for existing quality improvement/assurance programmes and should promote internal and external assessment processes within settings.
5. In tandem with the assessment framework, a comprehensive range of support mechanisms are proposed to facilitate the implementation of the NQF/ECCE. These include the establishment of networks to provide advice and mentoring for all stakeholders, the provision of multidisciplinary teams to meet the diverse needs of children, families and service providers, the availability of reliable, comprehensive and current data in accessible formats and a wide-ranging programme of initial and continuing professional development for all personnel involved in ECCE.
6. Finally, in order to ensure that the NQF/ECCE promotes the coordination of existing national policy, practice and research, the roll out of the Framework should be the responsibility of a centralised agency, which in turn is supported by a coordinated infrastructure at national, regional and local level.

Conclusion

Three of the four pillars of research have been published, while the fourth, Evidence and Perspectives, will be published in Summer 2005. Concurrently, the development of the NQF/ECCE has been progressed, which is underpinned and informed by this research. This has been achieved within an intense process of consultation with our Consultative Committee, a representative group of fifty stakeholder groups from the broader ECCE sector. The draft NQF/ECCE will be launched in October 2005, followed by a nationwide pilot implementation project. This represents a crucial step in the attainment of quality services for all young children in Ireland.

¹ Members of the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative are: Barnados; Children in Hospital Ireland; Childminding Ireland; Forbairt

Naíonraí Teo; IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation; Irish Steiner Early Childhood Association; National Children's Nurseries Association and St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.

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Researching Quality in Irish Early Education

Karen Mahony & Nóirín Hayes

Introduction

Interest in quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) has become evident, both nationally and internationally, in recent years. Within the Irish context developments within ECCE have predominantly related to policy and advocacy, with such becoming increasingly more apparent in the latter half of the 1990s. However, research in the area of early childhood care and education and in particular research pertaining to quality, has not been as evident (Walsh, 2003). As a nation, we are currently obliged to draw on international studies relative to quality early childhood care and education to support and advocate for high standards. The examination of such international literature outlines that benefits or outcomes associated with the provision of good quality early childhood care and education (both immediate in nature, but also in the longer term) include academic, social and economic outcomes.

The assessment of quality standards places an ever-increasing emphasis on the evaluation of both static and dynamic elements of a setting, but also demands the assessment of child outcomes to justify the review. However, determining the indicators of quality (be they dynamic or static in character) is highly dependent on the social norms and values of the society under examination. Research suggests that the classification of indicators of good quality are strongly influenced by the perspectives of all those persons with an interest in early childhood care and education (Moss and Pence, 1994), therefore an Irish definition of quality is dependent on the voice of those with a stake in the Irish early childhood care and education sector.

In 2004, the Centre for Social and Educational Research was commissioned by the Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education to conduct research relating to early childhood care and education, specifically research accessing the multiple perspectives of Irish ECCE stakeholders. The following paper provides an overview of such a project, preceded by a chronological examination of Irish policy and advocacy developments in the area over the past decade. An overview of emergent international research outlining the benefits of good quality

provision is examined, with a brief discussion on defining early childhood care and education, followed finally by an analysis of the elements outlined internationally as determinants of quality early childhood care and education.

Irish Policy and Advocacy Context

Although developments relating to early childhood care and education in the Irish context were more evident in the latter half, than the earlier half, of the 1990s and principally related to policy and advocacy the initial piece of legislation relating directly to the sector emerged in 1991. The Child Care Act, 1991 for the first time, provided for the regulation and inspection of early childhood care and education settings in Ireland. It placed responsibility on the regional health boards (currently health service executive) for the inspection of health and safety standards of ECCE settings within their geographical domain. However, the legislation was limited and failed to include those services taking care of less than three children *i.e.* childminders. In 1996, the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations were enacted and regulation commenced. The regulation defined the specific health, safety and welfare regulations relating to birth to six year olds attending ECCE settings. It defined acceptable standards relating to ventilation, nutrition adult/child ratios, provisions for sleeping and space as well as other structural aspects. However, neither the 1996 regulations nor the 1991 Child Care Act acknowledged the dynamic aspects of ECCE settings, nor did they focus on staff training or child outcomes. The limitations of both the Child Care Act and the Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations are discussed in '*A Guide to Quality Practice in Preschool Services*' (Western Health Board, 2000) which addresses child outcomes, and both the dynamic and static aspects of quality in the early childhood care and education sector.

The latter half of the 1990s witnessed an upsurge in literature relative to early childhood care and education. Firstly, ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* by the Irish Government in 1992 placed an obligation on the state to ensure Irish children were afforded basic rights and that their needs were appropriately considered. Ratification also placed a greater responsibility on the government to support the development of early childhood care and education, making it available to all children and families requiring it. Article 18.2 of the convention states that '*State Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions,*

facilities and services for the care of children' (United Nations, 1989:Article 18.2). In 1996 the EU Childcare Network published a ten-year programme towards enhancing the quality of early years services. The publication was titled '*Quality Targets in Services for Young Children*' and stated that good quality early childhood care and education programmes can best be achieved when early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings are supported within a national framework. In Ireland, two particular publications led the way towards the development of such a framework in 1999, notably the *National Childcare Strategy* in 1999 (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999) and '*Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Care and Education*' (Department of Education and Science, 1999). Among other things the White Paper recommends the establishment of an Early Education Agency and to this end the Department of Education and Science has funded the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College of Education to establish and develop the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). The White Paper also recommended the development of a National Quality Framework for Early Education and appropriate curriculum guidelines for the sector, for which the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) currently hold responsibility. It also called for a national outline of suitable qualifications and training for staff, with a suitable method of inspection being introduced.

Developments in the subsequent decade far advanced those of the previous, initially the '*National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives*' (Department of Health and Children, 2000) was launched in 2000. The strategy provided a wider national framework for working both for and with children. It is guided by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child aspiring to '*... enhance the status and further improve the quality of life of Ireland's children*' (Department of Health and Children, 2000:6). Although the strategy is not specific to early childhood it does recognise the importance of the early years and the need to develop and enhance ECCE services, particularly for children who may be disadvantaged or have special needs. In 2002, the publication of '*Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector*' (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2002) provided guidance on the professional development of people working in ECCE, whilst the '*OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood*

Education and Care in Ireland' (Department of Education and Science, 2004) made recommendations in relation to training, a national framework and accreditation system in early childhood care and education in Ireland. More recently the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment launched '*Towards a Framework for Early Learning*' (NCCA, 2004), which outlined the importance of the development of a national curriculum framework for ECCE. It is anticipated that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's forthcoming 'Final Consultation Report' will outline the need to support both practitioners and parents in their roles and that the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) will publish a report supporting a strategy for the future including the coordination of policy at both national and local levels and the provision of committed resources provided on a regular basis.

Benefits and Outcomes of Quality Provision

The benefits of providing high quality early childhood care and education are both immediate and long-term in nature (Field, 1991; Kelleghan, 1977; O'Flaherty, 1995; Schweinhart, 2004). Immediate-term benefits such as high self-esteem, emotional stability and greater assertiveness have been noted as a result of research carried out with children attending full-time day-care (Field, 1991). In 1993 Kelleghan and Greaney reported some evidence of a connection between child attendance in early education settings and gains in IQ and academic attainment for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs. Developed reasoning and problem-solving skills were also identified amongst such children.

In relation to longer-term benefits the '*High/Scope Perry Preschool Study*' (Schweinhart, 2004) found the majority of participants in its study (average age forty) displayed positive social and emotional development, increased economic performance and reduced perpetration of crime, when compared with their peers who had not attended an early education setting. Other studies supporting such findings include Laevers 'International Study on Experiential Education', 2003; the US Head Start Programme (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997) and Ramey and Campbell's Carolina Abecedarian Project (1991).

A unique feature of all findings outlined above, be they immediate- or long-term in nature, is their dependence on the presence of high quality. Hence, the benefits of providing quality early education have not alone immediate-

and medium-term effects, but indeed durable and long-lasting effects on children aged birth to six.

Defining Quality

The importance of good quality in terms of early education services is acknowledged and well documented. Equally, poor quality settings have been found to have negative effects on children (Belsky, 1986; Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999; Sims, Guilfoyle and Parry, 2005; Stipek *et al*, 1995; Sylva and Wilshire, 1993). However, no single definition of what constitutes 'quality' in early childhood care and education provision exists and the idea of a universally accepted standard of quality has been rejected in favour of a more relativist, values based approach which recognises that quality changes over time and contexts: '*... quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interests, rather than on objective and universal reality*' (Moss, 1994:4). Moss and Pence (1994) and Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) suggest that it is much more accurate to speak about quality perspectives than a universal standard of quality *i.e.* different people consider different elements as contributors of quality. Also, perceptions of what constitutes quality in early education can vary immensely, and depends greatly on the cultural values of a particular society. Therefore, the concept of quality needs to be contextualised spatially and temporally to recognise cultural and other forms of diversity, as well as regularly recognising shifts in culture and diversity.

Theorists have acknowledged that a multitude of perspectives exist in any one society. In 1990, Farquhar identified that such perspectives may overlap somewhat, but may also exert significantly different emphases. Such perspectives can include the child development perspective, the government or regulatory perspective, the social services perspective, the parental perspective, the child's perspective, the social policy perspective, the staff perspectives and finally the cultural perspective (Katz, 1992).

Unfortunately, because of the diverse nature of its stakeholders the diversity of perspectives may lead to conflict and disagreement amongst and between them. Most often the perspectives of those holding the greatest level of power take precedence over the perspectives and values of other stakeholders, which creates a process based on exclusion:

'... the power of different stakeholders often determines the influence they have in the process: power can come from various sources, including economic resources, political or administrative position and professional status and expertise. Some stakeholders may be totally excluded, or if included, they may have little influence ...' (Moss, 1994:4). To date the trend has predominantly presented prominence to a narrower range of experts who control the process of definition and evaluation on the basis of technical expertise.

Therefore, to attempt to understand quality within any particular geographical context, multiple perspectives must be consulted. The development of a framework which considers the diverse perspectives of its stakeholders is a challenge, but one which must be considered. The 'National Framework for Quality' being developed by the CECDE must consider all those perspectives, whilst striking a balance of the common objectives of those perspectives.

Determinants of Quality

The quality of early education settings varies enormously nationally, and is determined by a combination of static, quantifiable and dynamic, less-quantifiable factors. The static elements include the physical and structural characteristics such as the building and surroundings, the equipment available. The dynamic factors on the other hand are far more difficult to define and measure, and include the day-to-day experiences of the children, relationships and communication in the setting (Hayes, 2004:59). The 1996 Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 1996) allow for the primary assessment of settings relative to health and safety elements *i.e.* the static elements outlined above. More recently publications such as *'A Guide to Quality Practice in Preschool Services'* (Western Health Board, 2000) are focusing on both the dynamic and static aspects of quality, as well as the child outcomes. The current review of the regulations will allow for more careful attention to both static and process variables hence improving, supporting and regulating quality early education and care.

In Search of Quality: Multiple Perspectives

The *'Multiple Perspectives'* study aims to gain a greater understanding of quality in the Irish context, in particular to access multiple perspectives on the meaning of quality within a variety of early childhood care and education settings in Ireland. It focuses primarily on defining and understanding quality in the early

childhood care and education sector across a range of stakeholders including policy makers, early childhood care and education staff and teachers, parents and children.

While there has been extensive debate in the early childhood care and education sector regarding what constitutes quality, the voices of parents and children have been less evident than those of researchers and persons working in the early childhood care and education sector. This is mainly attributable to the power dynamics which are present in the sector, presenting distinction to the experts who control the process of definition and evaluation on the basis of technical expertise (Balageur, Mestres and Penn, 1992; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999).

The National Children's Strategy, reflecting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), states that children and young people should be given *'... a voice in matters which affect them and views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity'* (Department of Health and Children, 2000:30). To date only a small body of research has been completed which bestows a voice to children as valued stakeholders in determining quality in the provision of early childhood care and education (Clarke, McQuail, and Moss, 2003; Hennessy, 2001; Mooney and Blackburn, 2003; Stephen, 2003). The inclusion and empowerment of children in defining and evaluating quality assists in balancing power relations amongst all stakeholders in the process of defining quality early education whilst also providing a subjective, experienced outlook of early education settings: *'... the actual or true predictor of a program's effects is the quality of life experienced by each participating child on a day to day basis'* (Katz, 1993:5).

The current study aspires to not only consult those deemed experts in the field of early childhood care and education *e.g.* the Departments of Education and Science, Health and Children, and Justice Equality and Law Reform, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the National Children's Office, but also professionals in a supportive role *e.g.* Pre-school Inspectors, County Childcare Committees and representatives of the National Voluntary Organisations. However, a particularly unique aspect of the study for Ireland is the fact that the research team also aspire to consult service providers, parents and children. Therefore, it is anticipated that the study in question will balance

the scales of power relating to early childhood care and education, by uniquely including the views of all the relevant stakeholders.

The Sample

The project seeks to gather data from a variety of settings¹ covering both sessional and full-day care provision, across the age-range of 0-6 years. Four Border-Midland Counties (Donegal, Leitrim, Roscommon and Galway) and four South & East Counties (Clare, Limerick, Carlow and Meath) have been selected as the geographical districts which allows for a national distribution of settings. The research team aims to consult with a total of thirty settings, consulting with one staff member and two families within each setting (one/both parents/guardians and one child from each family). To date twenty-two settings have resolved to participate (three preschools, three playgroups, four nurseries, six crèches, one naíonra, one infant class, four childminders).

The current study will assess both the observable and perceived aspects of quality early childhood care and education. The observable aspects will be examined using standardised observation scales and external research assessments, and the perceived aspects will be addressed through individual interview and focus groups with the adults in the sample. The techniques developed for use with adults are not appropriate for children, particularly given the age-span involved. Therefore, access to the views of children will be gained through a combination of child-research techniques drawing on existing research (Clarke, McQuail and Moss, 2003; Clarke and Moss, 2001; Greene and Hogan, 2005; Kernan, 2005; Measelle, Ablow, Cowan and Cowan, 1998; Mooney and Blackburn, 2003; Stephen, 2003).

Observable Quality

One of the best known observational tools for the measurement of quality is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms and Clifford, 1980) revised in 1998 (Harms and Clifford, 1998). The revised edition (ECERS-R) will be used in this study. The ECERS-R looks at forty-three items over seven dimensions, notably: personal care routines, space and furnishings, language reasoning, activities, programme structure, interaction, and parents and staff. Scoring is on a 7-point scale which spans from excellent (7) to inadequate (1).

However, the ECERS-R is designed to focus on the childcare environment and is not designed to assess the high quality interactions and experiences for the child *i.e.* the dynamic elements of early childhood care and education settings. To address this aspect of quality the research team have adjusted the observation tool used in the IEA Preprimary Project (Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan, 1997), to allow researchers observe and record the interactive environment experienced by the child. This tool will assess the adult's Management of Time (MOT), Adult Behaviour (AB) and Child Activity (CA). It will categorise the quality of the relationship in broad terms *e.g.* warmth and indifference, but will also focus on the units of interaction *i.e.* who initiated the interaction; child/adult, how did the child respond etc. (Dunn, 2005). Used together, the ECERS-(R) and the adjusted IEA Preprimary tools will provide a rich overview of both the static and the interactive environment experienced by the child at any given time.

Perceived Quality

In order to assess stakeholder perception's of quality early childhood care and education, face-to-face interviews will be held with experts in the field *i.e.* representatives from the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the National Children's Office; staff members of the relevant early childhood care and education settings (which have been identified through the sample); and parents/guardians of the children (each setting has randomly selected two interested families to participate in the study). The face-to-face interviews will take place throughout the months of May and June 2005.

Focus groups will also be carried out with a broader sample of practitioners, representatives of the County Childcare Committees, groups of Pre-school Inspectors, and representatives of the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations. The focus groups will be informed by the results of the semi-structured interviews and the literature review.

To access children's perspectives on the meaning of quality within a variety of early childhood care and education settings, the research team will adopt a combination of consultation tools. As the children are very young (0-6 years) it will be necessary to move away from the written word, and to concentrate on the spoken word, visual methods and sensory methods. It will also be necessary

that the field researchers are flexible in their approach to researching the children's perspectives. Methods such as the use of cameras, photographs, puppets, role-plays, and arts and crafts as proven methods of consulting young children (Clarke, McQuail and Moss, 2003; Mooney and Blackburn, 2003; Stephen, 2003) will be used with the more mature children. An observational approach which looks at behaviour as a source of voice on quality, and the observation of play as a language of childhood (the concept of 'embodiment' *i.e.* the body as the voice of the child) will be developed for the younger children (Laevers, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

Additional to the general principles of ethical research, particular issues had to be considered by the research team prior to involving children in the research. These include the use of selection procedures, which must be as inclusive and equitable as possible. Informed consent was sought from the parents and guardians of children, but also, where appropriate, from the children themselves (particularly children aged 3+). Involvement in the research must be completely voluntary on the child's behalf, and he/she must be made aware that they are free to withdraw should they wish to do so. Every effort will be made to ensure that the purpose and nature of the research are as clear and transparent as possible, as will the extent of confidentiality and anonymity. Mechanisms for feedback to the participants will be outlined prior to participation, and will be followed through.

Time-scale

The project began in November 2004 and will run through to September 2005. To date the research team have carried out an extensive literature review, which will be continuous for the duration of the project; carried out their sampling procedures and contacted the participants, refined the research instruments, trained the field researchers, and are presently piloting the research instruments. The fieldwork is due to commence early May 2005, and will take place over a two-month period.

Project Outputs

The project will yield empirical data on the multiple perspectives of quality held by a variety of interested parties ranging from those at a national policy level through to the children attending varied early educational settings in

Ireland. In addition, the project will use a variety of methodologies to gather data and will pioneer methods for listening directly to very young children.

Upon conclusion of the project we will have a clearer view of how quality is viewed in Ireland. This greater understanding will allow for a more careful consideration of how best to support quality for young children and their families. The study hopes to identify common understandings of quality, while highlighting different focuses from different groups. The findings from this research will inform the development, implementation and support of the National Quality Framework being developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. They will also guide policy and practice informing future development of training, quality enhancement and pedagogical practice and impact positively on the education and development of children in this age-range.

¹ Including pre-schools, playgroups, early start classrooms, day-nurseries, crèches, naóinraí, infant classes and childminders.

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IPPA Quality Improvement Programme: An Action Research Approach

Carmel Brennan & Lillian Joyce

This paper is contribution to the process of evaluation and dissemination of learning that has been a continuous element of the IPPA Quality Improvement Programme. The programme has now come through a pilot, implementation and adaptation stage, reflecting new research, new insights and the changing resource and capacity context of the Irish early childhood sector. Here we briefly document the thinking underpinning our approach, the story of implementation and the challenges and achievements of the programme. At an evaluation seminar in Ballymun, Dublin in January 2005, the guest speaker, Dr. Noirín Hayes praised the programme for contributing to the sector powerful photographic images of competent children that told stories of communities of learners in action (IPPA 2005). To appreciate some of the spirit and vitality of this programme we refer you to our many IPPA publications. The programme has been a story of exploration, often led by children, that for many has relit the spark that brought us to this profession in the first place. Our observations and shared reflections have helped to 'make the familiar strange' again (Bruner 1996) and has highlighted action research as a way of working with both adults and children in early childhood services.

IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation has been engaged in supporting the quality of early childhood services since its foundation in 1969. In particular, the organisation has provided:

- Training – when there was no other training available in Ireland
- National Advisory Service – 11 IPPA advisors served every area of the country
- Research and Development – through members and through involvement in such projects as the Border Counties High/Scope Project

In recognition of this experience, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform offered funding for an eight month period to develop and pilot a Quality Improvement Programme. This funding was further extended to allow the development and expansion of the programme.

Research Question

The research question for this pilot project was: How can we work with services to best support them to continuously improve the way they work with children, families and community?

Rationale

'Anything less than quality is at best of minimal advantage and at worst a damaging experience' (Ball 1994). There is a growing recognition of the importance of early childhood in the life cycle of the person and of the potential of early childhood services to support the childrearing role of families. There is also increasing recognition that the quality of these services is critical and in particular that poor quality services can add to the stress suffered by children who are already disadvantaged.

In Ireland, a range of recent reports pointed to the importance of the quality of early childhood services. They included:

- Strengthening Families for Life (Dept. of Social, Community and Family)
- Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education
- The National Childcare Strategy (JELR, 1999)
- Our Children – Our Lives; The National Children's Strategy (Children's Office, 2000)

The introduction of the Childcare Regulations 1996 saw the sector struggle to meet these minimum standards in health, hygiene and safety. There was then a sense that service providers equated these minimum standards with quality. This is an outcome noted by Moss and Penn (1996), 'Any regulatory model based solely on minimum standards has the effect that many providers, particularly in the private sector, equate meeting such standards with quality provision'

Research (Stern 1985; Moss and Penn 1996) proposes that the most significant indicator of quality is the level of training of the staff in the service. Taking this as an indicator, the baseline in Ireland appeared extremely low as the majority of staff had no accredited qualification (Area Development Management Ltd. 2003). This situation has improved in recent years but there is still no minimum training requirement in the sector and community services are still largely staffed the Community Employment Schemes, where training levels are low or non-existent. The low rate of pay and the lack of viable job options minimises the

incentive to train. In many services, staff are paid by the hour for group contact time only. We needed to devise an approach that worked within the reality of the situation and was a strong motivating force.

Theoretical Framework

Defining quality

'Quality is never an objective reality, to be finally discovered and pinned down by experts. It is inherently subjective and relative, based on values and beliefs that may not only vary among and within societies, but will undoubtedly vary over time.' (Moss and Pence 1994). It is very tempting to import models or to accept universal 'quality indicators' proved to work in other contexts. This may work in the industry sector but where people are at the centre of a service then quality is primarily dependent on building relationships and expertise. Quality improvement then becomes a process of ongoing critical analysis, reflective practice and shared meaning making. 'We are being constantly offered solutions before we have asked the critical questions' (Ginsberg 1999) and the critical questions are not only 'What has worked for others?' but 'What is childhood about?', 'What do we want for our children?' 'What sort of a world do we live in today?' (Moss, 1999). These are reflective questions that are guided by community beliefs, values and way of life. There are no universal answers – they require consideration and consultation.

A review of quality programmes internationally indicates broad agreement on static measures, such as ratio, facilities etc. and consequently assessment tends to focus on these. 'Structural measures may be associated with quality but they do not guarantee it. Process measures are the best indicator of quality' (Melhuish and Moss 1991). As Dahlberg *et al* (1999) point out, when we concentrate on the static measures, we often lose sight of the child and the everyday experience of children and families.

The static and dynamic debate also reflects the difference between an assessment approach and a developmental approach to quality. The former measures the service through perhaps annual inspection against set standards, while the latter aims at ongoing improvement and concentrates on support, encouragement and self-evaluation. 'Adults are best helped to reflect on and develop their practice when they feel supported and valued in the process rather than feeling 'regulated'' (Pugh 1996).

Jensen (1994) describes quality as always one step beyond the present status. Pascal and Bertram (1997) propose that leaps of change do not occur; rather change is incremental and cumulative. The ongoing challenge is to effect change in personal and professional values and attitudes and ultimately, in practice amongst those in the sector. We were particularly interested in lifting the quality of everyday life within the services for both adults and children.

Again, from our review of international programmes, we identified three requirements for a supportive programme – (1) training, particularly training that is strongly related to practice (2) mentoring support- the Professional Support Worker is there as co-researcher, ‘critical friend’ (Blenkin and Kelly 1997) and mentor, providing expertise and professional support and (3) evaluation-improvement tools or system.

Action Research as a reflective practice tool

To this end, we were drawn to the ‘action research’ model as a development tool because we wanted it to be a participatory and democratic process that engages staff, parents and children and that allows for diversity in services.

Action research is a relative newcomer to the research world and is still battling for wider acceptance and recognition. Kurt Lewin (1946) was the first to coin the term ‘action research’. He developed a theory of action research as a spiral of steps, a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Stenhouse (1975) promoted the idea of teacher as researcher. Elliott (1991) using an interpretive approach developed this idea and involved teachers in action research into their own practices. In 1986, Carr & Kemmis (1986) developed the model and encouraged use of the term ‘educational action research’

Action research is a process of constructing understanding about practice in order to improve it. The key to action research is ownership. ‘Action research is an enquiry by the self into the self, undertaken in company with others acting as research participants and critical learning partners’ (McNiff 2002/15). Schon (1983) predicts that practitioners gain deeper understanding through reflection in and on action and dialogue with others. He claims theory that is located in and generated out of practice is the most powerful and most appropriate.

According to Blenkin & Kelly (1997) action research is a continuous cycle in which the individuals select an area of practice to investigate for themselves. Through consultation, analyses and reflection, they develop new ideas and act upon them, incorporating them into their daily practice. Finally they evaluate and monitor the process of change. This approach is designed to empower the practitioner personally and professionally. This was the model they used in their ‘Principles into Practice’ programme and used also by Pascal and Bertram (1996) in the Effective Early Learning Programme.

Both had a profound effect on our thinking. Ultimately we wanted to impact on the everyday life of families and children in services and ensure that experiences were enriching emotionally and cognitively. With due respect to the static elements of the service, our focus was on the dynamic interpersonal relationships and activities that support the quality of children’s everyday experiences in the present. Ultimately, this kind of practice requires the ‘reflective practitioner’. This research led us to the use of the ‘Quality Cycle’ as an improvement tool.

Quality services require quality supports

While our work is primarily with the providers of services, we also try to impact on the sector. Quality systems require a comprehensive approach. This includes formulating, at a national level, clearly defined goals for the early childhood sector, investing in support systems for transferring these goals into practice, conducting research on early childhood issues and improving access to services. Providers alone can only work within the constraints and affordances of the infrastructure. They cannot carry all the responsibility for ensuring quality services-that responsibility is shared by the stakeholders in the infrastructure.

Implementation

The format of the programme

The programme involved the participation of ten childcare services with two people from each centre attending 20 monthly, full day workshops over two years. We felt it was vital to the success of the programme to involve staff and management in order to establish the whole teams commitment to the programme. Each workshop focused on one area of quality, all inter-related, but structured as follows:

- Aims and values of the service
- Physical environment and resources
- Activities and experiences

- Daily routines and rituals
- Partnership with parents
- Interactions, learning and teaching strategies
- Observation, analysis and documentation
- Assessment and planning and evaluation
- Staff and Management

The information from the training day was disseminated among the rest of the team and a staff or room meeting was held to discuss how the learning could be used to improve the daily experience of the children attending the centre. The teams then devised plans for improvement and decided who, when and how these plans were to be implemented. Changes were monitored and evaluated by the teams. This was the Quality Cycle in action.



Working collaboratively in this way is an important aspect of the programme as it supports team building and helps to keep staff motivated and focused. The changes made, their effects, and most importantly, the process involved were documented in the form of a brief, written, monthly report. Photographic evidence of changes and improvements was also included. Participants kept a diary, and recorded brief observations. We wanted to establish a reflective way of working.

An IPPA Quality Development officer visited each centre monthly to support the work being carried out. Video footage was sometimes taken during the visits and used to assist staff in identifying children's interests and skills, current good practice and further quality targets. The following example shows how staff in one centre were supported in reviewing current practice from the perspective of the child's experience:

The staff of the 'Toddler' room felt the children were too young to have daily 'Free Play' sessions as they considered the children to have very short attention spans. Video footage showed Ali, for example, deeply involved in water play for 30 minutes. He poured from one container to another, compared the contents of identical containers, poured water over the back of his hand and then over his fingers, examined the water falling as he poured it from a height, (just as his friend was doing beside him) and tasted it. He was totally engaged in his investigations, 'wallowing' as Tina Bruce describes it, in his exploration of the properties of the water. ('Ali the Scientist', Power of Play, (Brennan 2004)



When staff watched this footage with the quality officer, they were amazed to see the concentration, perseverance, precision, intense scrutiny, and enjoyment the child displayed while experimenting with the water. This encouraged the staff to re-examine their ideas on both free-play and the children's capabilities and they were open to including free play in their daily routine, offering the children choices of activities and more time to explore and experiment. They also discussed and made plans to further support this children's interest in water.

Participating centres had the opportunity to have the quality officer facilitate quarterly in-service training for staff, make presentations to parents or meet with board of managements.

The third year of the programme consisted of five bi-monthly networking meetings to share information, further progress and developments both within their own centres and in the sector in general. It was hoped that the participants would take ownership of this network and continue to meet together once the programme was completed.

Evaluation

Participants

Both formal and informal methods of evaluation were threaded throughout the programme. Each monthly training session began with a verbal report on progress in their centres. Participants also had the opportunities for small and large group discussion at each workshop. They were encouraged to document their comments on all aspects of the programme in their monthly diary. Every six months, questionnaires and discussion groups yielded feedback on content, resources, and the impact of both the training days and monthly visits and contributed to the development of the programme. Documenting the process of implementing the programme was an important aspect of each service's portfolio work.

IPPA Team

The IPPA 'Quality' team met on a monthly basis to review progress, reflect on learning and implement change. We were anxious that 'action research' would become a way of working for those developing and implementing the programme as well as a way of working with children in services. We also wished to document our experiences and learning in a way that would be helpful to the wider sector. We wrote articles for the IPPA magazine 'Children@Play', we disseminated learning through seminars and conferences and we produced a series of booklets on children's experiences and a major publication funded by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation 'Power of Play'.

Challenges

During the implementation of the programme there were some areas that proved to be challenging, both to ourselves and to the participants. This was a new way of learning, that required service staff to think about their way of working with children on an on-going basis and to assess the impact on children's learning. It is a way of working that requires time for reflection. This is difficult in a sector where staff ratios are tight, where staff are paid for group contact time only and where resources and funding for the everyday activities is extremely limited.

- Because the programme was implemented over a three year period, there was inevitably some changes in personnel in the participating services during that period. This meant that the dynamics of the group

was constantly changing and new participants struggled to keep up with the work.

- Smaller sessional centres, that operated four days a week, could attend all the training sessions. Larger centres, however, sometimes experienced difficulties attending, owing to staff illness or annual leave. Most large centres found it difficult to get reliable, trained, relief staff.
- Facilitating regular staff meetings was difficult for some centres due to staff rotas; however some found that having team or room meetings was a manageable option. Greater progress was evident in centres where staff met consistently to discuss and plan for improvements.
- Both private and community based centres were restricted in their efforts to make costly changes due to lack of funding. However some centres were so motivated that they applied for funding from a variety of funding sources both during and subsequent to the programme.
- The idea of involving all the team in discussions, planning and reflection was a very new concept to some centres and they found it difficult in the beginning. Some managers were initially hesitant about consulting staff and involving them in planning for all aspects of the centre and others found it difficult to arrange times suitable to all.
- The participants differed in their abilities to facilitate the dissemination of the learning from the training days for a variety of reasons. This led us to revisit the information on the handouts issued many times to ensure that they were supporting all staff in the centres and to offer in-service training to the staff team. We were constantly challenged to make sure that our training was appropriate to the range of skill and experience among staff members.

Achievements

This programme has made a significant contribution to our understanding of children's learning and of quality care and education within the early childhood sector nationally. In particular, the programme has driven the shift from (1) the image of the needy child to the image of the competent, cultural child (2) from

the 'checklist' approach to ensuring quality to a view of quality as a process that requires thinking adults who support children's thinking and (3) to centralise the importance of building relationships and making connections in our work with children and families.

Staff and Management:

We began this programme with a child and family centred focus. We learned from service staff that when adults are motivated and energised, children and families are the immediate beneficiaries. This was the greatest and in ways, unforeseen outcome of the programme.

- There has been a huge shift in thinking about the role of observation and assessment in centres. Staff are now more focused on the skills, interests and knowledge that children display during play and are using this information to inform curriculum planning – especially in the areas of activities, materials and daily routines. The focus is on giving children opportunities to follow their interests and demonstrate their competencies.
- This has led to the production of 'Learning Stories' (Carr 2001)- photographs of children engaged in activity accompanied by a description of the skills and capabilities the child is displaying. These stories are a true insight into the quality of a service.
- Staff are highly motivated and there is an excitement about, and an appreciation of the work they do on a daily basis with children and their families. Now that they have insight into children's achievements, they want to share it.
- Participating on the programme has empowered staff, as a team, to share their knowledge about leaning through play, and to link theory with their daily practice. This contributes to their sense of professionalism.
- Documenting the changes and improvements made in each service gradually built into portfolios which are a wonderful resource that helps parents, new staff and other stakeholders to appreciate the commitment the centre and staff have to providing a quality service for the children and their families.

- The group found sharing experiences, efforts and progress with their peers during the programme very valuable, generating ideas and solutions around all aspects of quality provision. As one participant said 'We have learned that we the adults, are competent and caring'.

Children and their Families

- Physical environments that are inviting and stimulating; that support autonomy, exploration and relationships.
- Provision of challenging activities and experiences that are based on the interests and the competencies of the child.
- Routines that are based on children's, rather than adults, requirements.
- Sharing of Learning Stories that provide positives images of children engaged in meaningful activities. This has given a new meaning to partnership with parents. It is now about coming together to support children's learning. The stories provide parents with evidence of their children's skills and learning as it occurs through play.
- An appreciation of the valuable work childcare workers carry out on a daily basis.

IPPA Team

This programme brought us on a journey that embraces 'uncertainty and ambiguity' (Dahlberg *et al* 1996). We have shared the thinking of international researchers, many of whom have shared their thinking with us at IPPA conferences, from Reggio Emilia, P eng r e e n, Ferre Laevers. Pacal and Bertram, Margaret Carr, Howard Gardner, Marte Meo and many others. We have made a shift from the positivism of Piaget to embrace the sociocultural view of knowing explored by Dewey, Vygotsky, Bruner, Rogoff, Lave and Wenger, Vivian Gussin Paley and others. We have looked outside the box, wallowed in new concepts and shared them with the sector. The action research approach has been new and difficult but enriching. We think that our programme is about people and the dynamics of relationships. Here, questions are as important as answers. We have helped services, not to reach perfection but to take a step forward. The reflectiveway of working, however,

requires on-going mentoring and sharing. Without it, we fall into routine ways of working. We strongly recommend that such a support service is integrated in each county infrastructure.

Developments

Publications

The video footage taken during on-site support visits and the content of reports compiled by staff in the various centres yielded wonderful evidence of the learning that occurs through play. This was the basis of the 'Power of Play'- a collection of learning stories that clearly show the links between practice and theory. Other publications in booklet form emerged from aspects of provision covered on the programme and include:

- 'Children's approaches to learning' – multiple intelligences
- 'Children with additional needs in Early Childhood Services'
- 'Open-ended material'
- 'Supporting learning in early childhood through a play curriculum'
- 'Challenges and Recommendation for the Early Childhood Sector'

Programmes

In order to make this programme more affordable and accessible, IPPA has decided to develop a range of short term, incremental programmes from which services can choose depending on their particular interests and capacity. The programmes draw on the research and implementation experience of the original programme but obviously require redevelopment to fit the new format. These programmes include the:

Quality Play Programme

The aim of this programme is support practitioners in establishing a basic framework for quality play in their service. The format is similar to the original programme but has been reduced to six workshops and three on-site support visits.

Quality Improvement Under Three's Programme

This programme will also consist of six workshops and three on site visits and will support mostly full day care services to improve provision for Babies and Toddlers. A pilot programme will be run in Cork from September 2005.

Quality Improvement After School Programme

Currently being developed to support the provision of quality after school care in both crèches and after schools groups.

Quality Leadership Programme

This will build on the progress made in the Play programme and will focus on staff motivation and developing the skills of assessment, planning and sharing children's learning.

Quality Outdoor Play

During the course of facilitating the original programme the need to encourage and support the provision of outdoor play became very apparent and this will be the focus this programme

The journey goes on ...

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Section Four
Research and Practice in Community
Playgroups and Family Centres

Provision of Early Years Care/Education/Family Support

Mary Barry

Introduction

This paper aims to present the realities of working practice within the context of the OMEP conference held in Dublin in April 2005. The focus of the conference was *'Contemporary issues in Early Childhood Care and Education.'* There are many issues facing the early year's sector today:

- Quality is of course a topic,
- the development of professionalism in the childcare sector,
- the increasing acknowledgement and inclusion of parents in aspects of practice,
- the growth of the childcare and early years sector into national awareness and legalistative arena ,
- the growing value put on these vital early years,
- Consistent and reliable funding remains the single barrier for the growth and development of all these values.

To those of us working in the sector there has never been any doubt as to the merit and importance and absolute imperativeness of any of these issues. This paper is an examination of work in practice and aims to present a microcosm of these issues and the broader debates that currently surround childcare/early years. It is hard to differentiate between these terms for as we are well aware in the working field, care and education cannot be separated in the early years. This principle is upheld in all documents guiding this sector in the 21st century. It is reflected in government thinking..

'Care and education are inextricably linked elements in a child's holistic development – this reality must be reflected in the ethos and programme of all services.'

(Expert working group on childcare 1999).

The Before 5 Nursery and Family centre is a working example of many of the debates that surround the early years sector. It reflects the changing currents of

early years thinking, but most importantly in its own development it shows the inextricable links that govern care /education of young children and the value and necessity of family supports to foster the development of the child. Early years work cannot be separated from home, family, and even community if we are to remain true to the principle of the holistic development of the child.

This paper will look at a working project which illustrates how such a practice evolved from the children's needs, family needs and community needs.

It considers the contemporary issues for working practitioners on the ground which are reflected in the microcosmic story of the Before 5 Nursery and Family centre.

The paper will therefore ...

- trace the growth of the Before 5 Nursery And Family centre from its earliest days as a pre-school to the busy encompassing centre it is today,
- link that growth directly to the community needs,
- illustrate how that all times, the provision of services came from the needs of the community, and that the Family centre responded to the needs of the people living in the locality down through the years,
- indicate the ongoing need for such service provision and to make the case for providing permanent funding that will ensure both the growth and maintenance of such services.

Government thinking consistently emphasises the vital importance of such connections. Report from the Commission *on the family 1998 p229 states that ...'Children are recognised as individuals within the family and in the wider community with rights to equal support, care and promotion of their well being'*

Most recently the NCCA document *'Towards a Framework for Early Learning'* provides another example of how the early years sector are finally moving towards national, government, and legalastive recognition and being awarded the status long deserved. This consultative document provides a framework for quality service provision. It needs to be matched by committed and ongoing funding.

Socio/Economic Background

The geographical background and socio-economic location of the Family centre is important to give a contextual framework for this work. The Before 5

Family Centre is located in the North west Sector of Cork City, its direct catchment areas include the parishes of Churchfield, Gurrabraher and Knocknaheeny. This sector covers an area of great disadvantage, and has been designated as such over the years through various Government initiatives e.g. the Programme for Economic and Social progress (PESP) in the 1990s and reflected by its status today as a *Rapid* area. The sector has been characterised by high levels of unemployment, corporation housing estates with little shopping and service facilities; early school leaving age and a rising incidence of drug related crime. There is an imbalance of development reflected by inadequate services for children, youth and the elderly. An increasing number of children born into this sector are to lone parents.

However the community does reflect the changing economic development of Ireland as a nation. Developments are occurring through various initiatives by both government and voluntary bodies. Youth outreach workers and community development workers of HSE are tackling many of these endemic issues (e.g. employment, school attendance, family supports.)

Certainly the benefits of the 'celtic tiger' and the various initiatives occurring can be seen in the community. For many families living locally opportunities are now more available. The parent profile of the family centre indicates that many two-parent families are in the happy position of regular and sustainable employment.

However for those children and families who live on the margins, the fact remains that they are becoming increasingly marginalised in Irish society today. This is a concern and challenge for practitioners working in the community and voluntary sector of early years.

Also the principle of this paper not only applies to communities experiencing disadvantage. The holistic development of any child in any setting is linked to the family as a whole. The Before 5 centre merely serves as an illustrative example of how this universal tenet applies.

Grass roots And Growth of Before 5 Nursery and Family Centre

The Before 5 Nursery and Family centre began its life as a pre-school facility, built in 1974 to provide pre-school education to 3-5 year olds living locally. The

initial catalyst for the opening of the centre was a family situation, the father was in hospital, the mother had three young children at home and was experiencing a lot of stress trying to care for the children and visit the hospital. A local priest in the parish could identify many similarly stressful situations among his parishioners; he had an awareness of programmes such as Headstart in the US at the time and had an appreciation for the value of educational stimulus for young children. A fundraising campaign was started, the SHB agreed to give a grant toward staff pay and the nursery opened in September in 1974.

A Montessori programme was initiated which is still maintained in the nursery, the benefits of this method of education proving itself over the length of years. By the 1980s there were 120 pre-school children attending each day, experiencing quality early childhood education.

People and visitors who view the family centre today can appreciate the forward vision of that priest and religious sisters at the time who created in simplest terms a building- – but really the foundation stone for a vibrant and essential community centre that has always maintained its roots in responding to local community need.

In 1984 a group of parents who were involved in the initial fundraising campaign expressed interest in doing something for themselves. Traditionally of course it was the mothers who looked for this. Initially they wanted Irish and Maths so that they could help their older children with homework, Later requests came for personal development, cookery and aerobics.

In order to meet the growing demands of the mothers it became necessary to expand the building beyond the pre-school facility.

An extension was opened in 1989 providing two rooms for adults and a small crèche space for their younger children who were looked after while the mothers did their courses. Again quite simply this was a response to local community need.

The adult section has continued to grow and each year over 100 adults attend courses, which range from the leisure and recreational pursuits to personal development and stress management.

In 1994 there was an increasing awareness of the need for a service for children under the age of three and their parents. It became obvious to staff at the centre that children coming into them at three years of age already had behaviour issues and that parents were looking for advice and support in dealing with their young children. Again this reflected a wider global trend that was examining the need for some sort of service provision for the child prior to pre-school provision. The founding of the Under 3 Unit occurred in 1995- when the Before 5 was approached by the Southern Health Board and their then pilot project 'The Child Development Project'. Their aim was to '*facilitate the optimum development of the young child by focusing on the unique importance of the relationship between the parents and the child*'.

The Health Board initiative aimed to develop services for the younger child by capitalising on local statutory and voluntary bodies already in existence in the community. The clearly stated aim of the Under 3 Unit in its origin was to '*provide community based support services for parents and their children aged 0-3 years*.' The wider aim was that this pilot project would become an integral part of local service provision and that there would continue to be an emphasis on the important roles of parents and professionals working in partnership to optimise the development of the young children in their care. With this context in mind the Under 3 Unit was started at the Before 5.

In 1996 a need was identified in the community to provide something for school going children after school hours. This need arose through discussion with the home school liaison teacher at the local national school (physically next door to the centre) and a local youth worker. The children identified were literally left wandering the streets after school because home was not an option to return to. As part of this scenario, homework support for these children was clear. The afterschool club was thus established, children come to the centre after school to do their homework but more importantly to have fun and games, do art and craft activities so it is not an extension of the school day but a club for them. It provides a safe, stimulating and supportive environment for them to come to each day. Parents and families of children who attend the club are given ongoing support by the club co-ordinator who does home visits each Friday. This work provides enormous personal support for the family, children are supported by home and club, and vital links are made between the centre and these families. The links and connections are immeasurable in the type of

informal support that can sometimes help children and families through crisis situations. The afterschool club is another example of how a project responded to community need at a very simple level, but whose deeper ramifications are difficult to measure.

Most recently the children and their families in the club are engaged in a pilot project which looks at developing these links further. Parents and children are involved in a project which takes them outside the parish on cultural and agricultural trips aiming to extend their awareness beyond the confines of their neighbourhood. The emphasis is again on the family unit, providing shared experiences from which they can grow and develop as a family.

Such then is the story of the family centre in its growth to where it is today. What is important to note is how these services grew organically in direct response to local need at a given time. The continued success and ongoing demand for the services, (to an extent that there is a permanent waiting list for all), is as a result of the ethos to be part of local community life, to provide quality early childcare education and care programmes, and to support and work in partnership with parents. In this manner the programmes provided encompass all aspects of family support, childcare and development of the individual and family.

The family centre is committed to maintaining and developing this ethos of service delivery. Inclusion and equality are important values in the delivery of all services at the Before 5 Nursery and family Centre and it is an integral part of the local community.

Current provision

Montessori Pre-school:

- 4 Montessori classes daily serving 80 children.
- Two in the morning, another two in the afternoon.
- Twenty children in each.
- Staffed by a Montessori teacher and a childcare assistant.
- There is a policy of integration in relation to special needs, and generally intake one child with specific learning needs into each group.
- When possible a special needs assistant is employed for that child.

Under 3 Unit

- Serving 39 parents and their children under 3 years of age.
- Participants attend once a week, parent/guardian and child together.
- A drop in crèche is available on Fridays to facilitate the separation process from parent/child.
- A social and health programme incorporated into annual programme.
- Staffed by a Co-ordinator, Qualified in Early years & Social Science degree and Assistant on CE Scheme.

Crèche

- Two sessions daily; max. number 9 children in each.
- In total catering for 32 children on a weekly basis.
- Staffed by qualified Childcare Supervisor and 4 CE Workers.
- Morning sessions cater for people in courses, training /employment.
- Afternoon to cater for community needs.
- Highscope programme currently being implemented.

Afterschool Programme

- Two sessions daily catering for 57 children.
- First for children in Junior and senior infants. 1.00- 2.30pm
- Second for children from First to fourth class. 2.00-4.30 pm.
- Staffed by Co-ordinator a qualified Childcare Worker, Assistant with arts and crafts remit. And 4 CE Workers.
- Summer scheme run each summer.

Adult Courses

- Approx. 100 adults living locally enrol in a variety of courses. Courses range from leisure/recreational to personal development.
- Tutors paid through VEC Hours.
- Courses run in morning and evenings.

Additional Services

- Centre rooms available to local community groups on request.
- *e.g.* Gurranabraher Development group, Rapid group,
- Local childcare networks, Local youth drug outreach.
- Bereavement courses run when requested.
- Low cost counselling available on request.

Community Employment Scheme

- A joint scheme with Knocknaheeny family centre is located in the centre.
- Commitment to employing local people.
- Employs 11 people in childcare/ caretaker positions.
- Ongoing training and personal development for participants.

Future identified growths

The main growth area in the last couple of years is the crèche facility, as indicated the initial raison d'être of the crèche was to care for children of parents who were attending courses for adults at the centre. With the advent of EOCP funding in 2000 this facility was opened up to allow for people in the community access it for other reasons. Funding dictates that it is open only for people who are undertaking employment or going back into education or training. A questionnaire was distributed to determine local need for a crèche service. Findings indicated that the greater need in the community was for a sessional crèche service. Parents requested the need for their younger child under 3 years of age to interact in a social setting with other children. Another need identified was that it provided a chance for parents to have time for themselves away from the busy demands of a young child. Very often it was to share combined care with a grandparent or childminder. This was an interesting result. In the local community family care was the preferred option, but some value was put on a crèche facility, mainly in social terms for the child.

The Before 5 Centre are currently in the process of building a new crèche facility to meet the growing demands for this kind of service.

Challenges Ahead

This paper has shown the work currently in practice at the Before 5 Nursery and Family centre. It is a growing centre and there are constant challenges. Even maintaining the quality of service provision currently available is a challenge in itself.

What are identified as challenges ahead for the centre are again what can be considered challenges facing the early year's sector as presented in the debate at this conference.

1. The first concern is the ongoing commitment to funding in this sector, and the piecemeal approach by government to the early years. Funding for the pre-school and Under 3 Unit comes through the Dept. of Health. Funding for the crèche and afterschool services comes through EOCP, problematic in its own right. There are serious threats to cuts in this funding unless we meet criteria that do not respond to our community needs. Funding for the adult courses comes through VEC.

When will such services receive centralised committed funding and through what government department?

2. The continued reliance on CE schemes to staff early years centres must be considered a challenge. To employ qualified professional staff costs money; trained staff deserve to be paid reasonably commensurate with qualifications and experience. There is a truly committed personnel in the sector who are seeking to develop their profession to a recognised level. Children deserve the best that can be provided for them in these vital formative years.

The academic and research side of early years is been given due status and funding to earn its rightful recognition. But this is not been reflected by government recognition in terms of pay to the practitioner on the ground.

Professionals working in the Early years must be recognised as such; training paths must be identified with clear career progression and commensurate pay.

3. Because of the dictates of funding bodies, centres such as the Before 5 are being put under pressure to become self sustainable in terms of fee structures. This will never be a reality in the areas in which they operate, and there is a fear that the families most in need of support will become increasingly isolated on the margins.

Who will take responsibility to provide early, preventative, supportive and quality care if centres located in the heart of communities are driven to charge fees outside the ability of local families to pay?

Conclusion

This paper is a piece of reflective work practice. The OMEP conference provided the opportunity to put a working practice into the framework of

examining ‘Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education and Care.’ The organic growth and development of the Before 5 Nursery and Family Centre has been illustrated and the case has been made for the need to consider all factors in a child’s life in providing early years provision. In no way is the Before 5 unique; there are many similar projects/community development resource centres doing similar work in Cork and throughout the country.

In the context of the 2005 OMEP conference, it must be noted that the Before 5 Family centre had its origins in early year’s education- its development has illustrated that it did not and could not simply stay as such. The need for family support services, the need for early intervention in the 0-3-age range, the involvement of parents at all levels prove that work cannot be done alone with the child in isolation.

This presentation to the OMEP Conference emphasises the importance of the work provided by the Before 5 Nursery and Family centre and other similar services nationally. The challenges identified are challenges to the sector as a whole, both at regional and national level. Workers on the ground provide essential services that very often remain undocumented and unquantifiable. This paper aims to raise awareness of both the valuable work that is ongoing and of the challenges that face the survival of quality work in the future.

The Changing Face of Preschool Services: A Case Study

Rosaleen Murphy

There have been major changes in pre-school provision in Ireland in the last ten years. This paper will present a snap-shot of how these changes have impacted on one community pre-school located in a high-priority area of Cork and the consequent effects on the quality of the service provided. The factors influencing its development include the introduction of the Preschool regulations under Section VII of the Child Care Act 1991, the capital and staffing grants it has received, and the changes in the population it serves. The paper also documents how the introduction of the High/Scope curriculum, coupled with an on-going commitment to improving the quality of service, has influenced practice in the pre-school.

Introduction

The whole area of early childhood care and education services has undergone major changes in recent years. Some of these changes are related to the provision of services, including a demand for extended hours and more places for children, especially those aged under three. There has also been much debate as to how the quality of services can be improved. A major factor in regard to this latter has been the upgrading of the skills of those who work in early childhood services.

The main factors influencing these changes have been the introduction of legislation setting out basic standards for early childhood services, the setting up of the Childcare Committees at national and local level, and the availability of funding under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000-2006. Coupled with this have been major societal and economic changes: less unemployment, increased labour force participation by women, population changes especially immigration, and changing family structures. As a result of all this, there have been efforts in recent years not only to increase the number of childcare places available but also to maintain and improve the quality of services. There is a particular concern with the role of early years services in disadvantaged areas, both as a support for parents who wish to re-enter the workforce and as a measure to combat educational disadvantage.

The development of pre-school services has been further influenced by the many discussion documents and papers that have appeared in recent years, most notably the Department of Education White Paper *Ready to Learn* (1999), the National Childcare Strategy (1999) and the National Children's Strategy (2000), the NCCA (2003) discussion document on the early years curriculum *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland (2004) and the many documents produced since its inception by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). Among the most notable of these latter is the National Framework for Quality in early childhood care and education currently being developed by the CECDE in consultation with parents, providers, the national voluntary organisations and other stakeholders. This paper sets out to show how these changes have affected one early years service, located in the Mahon area of Cork.

Mahon Community Pre-school: Background and History

Mahon Community Pre-school is located in an area about three miles from the city centre. This area is geographically fairly self-contained, bounded on two sides by the river and on a third by a major ring road. Almost all the development here has taken place in the last thirty years. In 2002, the population was around 12,000 people, mainly living in social housing provided either by the local authority or by voluntary housing associations. There is also a limited amount of private housing. The original development plan for the area envisaged a much more balanced mixture of public and private housing, but land allocated for the latter was never fully taken up at the time, although this is now changing. Unemployment rates in the area have traditionally been much higher than in surrounding areas. The area lacks such basic facilities as a post office, bank, or library. A community centre has opened only this year, 2005. Since many of the residents do not have cars, access to services can involve long journeys on foot or by public transport. (Mahon Community Development Project Annual Report 1998). A major shopping centre has recently opened beside the ring road. However this is designed to be accessed by car and draws customers from farther away, rather than serving the needs of the immediate area.

In the early 1980s, community workers with the Southern Health Board became aware of the need for pre-school provision in various areas of the city. Together

with Joan Roberts, then IPPA Cork adviser, they were instrumental in bringing together groups of parents and setting up community playgroups in these areas. The Mahon area was one of those targeted in particular at that time—unemployment rates in the area in 1986 were over 37% and there were (and still are) a large number of families with young children. Mahon Community Pre-school started out in the early 1980s as a community playgroup, and in common with many other groups it has expanded its services in response to the needs of the families it serves. The service that it now offers is perhaps closer to a nursery school model, but it continues to be closely rooted in the community. It is managed by a group of local parents and community members, and has received some funding from the Department of Health through the Southern Health Board (now the Health Service Executive), as well as grants under the EOCP.

A cluster of support services for families with young children in the area now exists. These include a family resource centre, a community crèche for children under three years of age and a *Náionra* (Irish language playgroup) as well as the Community Pre-school which is the subject of this paper. Schools in the area include separate boys' and girls' primary and secondary schools and a co-educational *Gaelscoil*. In recognition of the number of children at risk of educational disadvantage in the area, three Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinators have been allocated to the schools in the area. Both the HSCL scheme and the Family Resource Centre provide crèches for parents attending courses. In 1995 an Early Start unit which caters for 30 pre-school children was set up in one of the primary schools. All of these facilities are located within a short distance of one another. The most recent arrival in the area, a Family Support project sponsored by Barnardos, is also nearby. A specialist early years clinic for children with developmental and other problems is also located nearby, but this serves a much wider population rather than local needs.

These services do not operate in isolation from one another. A number of networks have been formed to enable coordination of services and the sharing of information and expertise. The Early Years Network brings together services dealing with the pre-school child, while the Networking Group caters for all providers of child, family and educational support. In many cases, families will be using several different services either sequentially or simultaneously, and it is important that service providers are aware of this. Services also support one

another – members of one service may serve on a management or advisory board of another, for example. They have recently come together to work towards the provision of a secure outdoor play area for children under six which will be used by all the different groups.

In common with other community groups, the Mahon pre-school depends on a patchwork combination of fund-raising and grants from external bodies to supplement income from fees in order to continue in operation. Increasing fees would mean that the families who now use the centre could no longer afford to do so. While the centre has three core staff, it relies on a combination of voluntary help and Community Employment and other schemes to maintain adult to child ratios and deal with administrative and other tasks. Major changes in the building and staffing structures of the pre-school have come about in the last three years, due principally to grants under the EOCP and support from the Southern Health Board. Capital grants have meant that the building itself has been considerably upgraded. New windows and doors have made the rooms brighter, while for the first time there is a staff room, which can also be used to talk to parents and hold small meetings. Equipment and furniture is also being upgraded.

The pre-school now caters for fifty-five children in all. Forty children attend the first session, from approximately 9.15 to 11.45 a.m. By adding an afternoon session from noon to 3.30 p.m. an extra fifteen places were created. The morning session is divided into two groups by age, the younger group aged from two and a half to three and a half and the older group aged three and a half to four and a half. Many children stay on for a second year and progress to the older group, which has more structured and advanced activities. The Mahon pre-school, unusually, has for many years offered an option for children to stay on for an extra hour, until 1 p.m. This extended opening was in response to a need expressed by some parents, to allow them to work part-time or take training courses. It means that the children can be collected at the same time as older siblings who are in infant classes in the neighbouring schools. The numbers availing of this option vary from day to day; some families use it regularly, while others find it useful once or twice a week. Core staff now work a full day, from 8.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. while those on Community Employment (CE) schemes start and finish earlier or later. The centre now stays open all year round, including the summer holidays.

The centre has also benefited from staffing grants under the EOCP. This meant that the core staff who have been working there for many years have at last received an adequate salary in recompense for their hard work and dedication. However, the scheme under which they receive these grants will finish in August 2005, and they have as yet (April 2005) received no assurance that they will continue to be funded. This makes planning for the future impossible- staff do not know if they will still be employed next September, and they do not know how many children they will be able to enrol. They also continue to rely on fundraising and Community Employment schemes to pay the other staff, with the attendant consequences for continuity and quality. The negative implications of low pay and poor conditions of employment for continuity and quality of staffing have been pointed out many times, most recently in the recent OECD Thematic Review (2004).

While EOCP funding was not intended as a long-term measure but rather to enable services to expand and reach a stage where they were economically viable, it seems obvious that services such as this will continue to need subsidies if they are to serve the target population and fulfil their stated purpose of combating educational disadvantage. It is highly unlikely that parents in this area could pay fees at a rate that would make the preschool viable without reliance on grants. It is also unlikely that support will be completely withdrawn from this service and others like it, given the existing level of investment in expanding and upgrading facilities and the recognition of their value implied by this. A proper system of on-going support and funding by the state for pre-school services such as this is long overdue.

The effects of existing funding are immediately apparent. This paper chronicles some of the changes brought about in the pre-school in recent years by this funding and the on-going commitment of its staff to improving the quality of service. In particular, the implementation of the High/Scope curriculum has meant a more structured and reflective experience for both children and staff.

Staff and parents together continue to strive to improve the quality of the service they offer. In this process, one can discern the elements necessary to develop a high quality early childhood service:

- Training
- Structures

- Adequate support- funding, advisory
- An identifiable curriculum
- Reflective practice
- Parent and family involvement

Training

Staff members have continually upgraded their professional skills, in spite of the difficulties posed by a reliance on Community Employment schemes to supplement the core staff. The turnover of staff necessitated by this scheme poses problems for continuity; however it means that many local women have had experience of working in the pre-school and have had the opportunity to acquire basic training in childcare. Core staff members have been building up a range of skills and competencies over the years and have completed courses including FETAC Level Two in Childcare and the High Scope Implementation course. Two of them are currently undertaking FETAC Level Three, which includes supervisory skills. All staff are encouraged to acquire and up-grade their qualifications. They also participate regularly in seminars and short training courses. Recently, these have included the Parent and Family Involvement Project (Murphy, 2004), the Watoto *Children from Around the World* course on multi-cultural awareness, the Children First child protection seminars run by the Health Board and a local Transition to School initiative. They have incorporated elements from all of these into their practice, but the greatest change has been the gradual implementation of the High/Scope curriculum.

Curriculum

Funding was made available three years ago by the Health Board under whose aegis the pre-school was initially set up for three of the staff to take part in a High /Scope curriculum implementation course. The High/Scope preschool educational approach is well established in the United States and it is based on over forty years of longitudinal research (Schweinhart, 2005: Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997; O'Flaherty, 1995). High/Scope was first introduced into Ireland in 1998, and it has been welcomed by the playgroup movement north and south. While it is more structured than the existing play based approach, it is compatible with the general philosophy and emphasises the role of play in the learning process. This combination has been shown to be the most effective way of promoting young children's development (Sylva, 1994; Schweinhart, Weikart and Larner, 1986; INTO, 1995).

The High/Scope approach has now been adopted in the Mahon preschool and staff members speak enthusiastically of the difference it has made. The existing curriculum was a largely unstructured play-based one, and they have found that the High/Scope approach builds on the best aspects of this while improving the children's focus and concentration. They say that the children are now more engaged with learning, that their level of language use has improved and that there are fewer conflicts between children. They have found also that it provides the staff themselves with a framework to plan and reflect on their own practice. It has also helped them to communicate their practice and share it with parents.

The central element of the High/Scope approach is active learning- that children learn best from activities that they themselves plan, carry out and reflect on. Around that central idea are the four elements that allow this to happen:

- a daily routine including Plan-Do-Review, small and large group times
- a learning environment which is organised in such a way as to allow children to be as independent as possible,
- an adult-child interaction which supports the development of trust, autonomy, initiative, empathy and self-confidence and
- an assessment process based on observation of the children and staff working as a team.

The daily routine is predictable in outline but flexible in operation. Children know that when they arrive, they go first to their key worker to begin planning the day, then comes work time, followed by clean-up, recall time, large group time and so on. Each of these times will be signalled by aural and visual cues – sounds, flipping over to the next picture, moving a pointer on a chart – so that they know when each segment is coming to an end. The pictures are often photographs of the children themselves, thereby increasing their relevance. The routine gives children a sense of security- they can predict what is likely to happen next and prepare for it. At the same time, they have many opportunities to make choices within this overall structure.

At first glance, the activities the children engage in do not look very different from a traditional playgroup- they play with sand and water, dress up, play in the home corner, paint, make playdough, do jigsaws and other games. The difference lies in the Plan-Do-Review cycle, which is central to the High/Scope

approach. The children are helped to think about what they would like to do in the course of the morning, to make a written plan with the aid of their key worker and to carry it out, and then to come back, remember and record what they have done. This encourages reflective thinking as well as language use, while 'writing' their plan helps to make the written word more meaningful. Visual aids also help with planning- children can see photographs of themselves at work in the various areas. These also help children whose language skills are less well developed or who do not have English as a home language to communicate. Thus, with the support of a trusted adult, children are helped to make thoughtful decisions about their own behaviour, thereby developing thinking skills (Epstein, 2003, Sylva, 1994).

The environment is also important. The rooms are organised into 'Interest Areas' where the children can find and use the materials they want, and storage is clearly marked so that they can return them after use, thus encouraging autonomy and responsibility. There are areas for block play, art, a book corner with comfortable seating, a dressing-up area with clothes on hangers and a mirror, a home corner and so on. Boxes and shelves are labelled with the names and pictures so that the children know exactly where things should go. They quickly begin to associate the written label with the picture and the object itself.

The High/Scope implementation process has encouraged the further development of the reflective practice that has always been a feature of this pre-school service. Staff have always worked as a team, with regular meetings to plan the curriculum. It has been noticeable with more training has meant an increased ability to analyse their practice and greater skill at documenting and explaining it to parents and others. Staff themselves participate in the Plan-Do-Review cycle, planning activities while building on the children's own current interests and needs. The High/Scope approach means that activities are planned to provide key learning experiences. These Key Experiences are grouped under ten headings: Creative representation, Language and literacy, Initiative and social relations, Movement, Music, Classification, Seriation, Number, Space and Time. An activity may provide experiences under several of these headings- working together on an art project provides children with language and social experiences and experience of spatial relationships as well as creative representation.

Staff are also developing skills in dealing with the occasional conflicts that arise among the children. The High/Scope training uses a problem-solving approach which includes the children themselves in finding a resolution. Children's feelings are acknowledged, the problem restated, the children themselves are asked to suggest solutions and the adult provides support (Norris, 2005). This helps the children to develop social skills. Over time they become adept at finding their own solutions and fewer conflicts occur between them. The High/Scope trainer support staff in acquiring these skills, and there are regular 'cluster group' meetings where staff from different services can share experiences and support one another.

The process of implementing the High/Scope curriculum is by no means complete. The rooms and equipment are gradually being adapted and organised, and the staff continue to participate in High /Scope workshops and cluster groups. In common with many other Irish pre-school services, they need to develop their area for outdoor play in order to make it usable all the year round.

Parent Involvement

In the early years, the playgroup used to operate a rota of parent helpers but no longer does so, since they now have sufficient staff. As an interim measure, parents were offered the opportunity to come in voluntarily on one day a week, but not many availed of this. Parents continue to help with administration, maintenance, fund-raising and they are invited to participate in regular events throughout the year. They are also welcome to come into the classroom when bringing and collecting the children. Some parents who no longer have children of pre-school age continue to be involved, especially those who live in the immediate area. Staff are very appreciative of the help given by those parents who are involved, and say that it would be impossible to run the pre-school without them. The majority of parents help with fund-raising and once-off events, but are less willing to make an on-going commitment such as involvement in management.

The effect of training on the ability of staff to share with parents their children's learning is noticeable. As the core staff members completed the FETAC Level 2 qualification in childcare, they become more accustomed to analysing their practice, and more skilled at documenting and explaining it to parents and others. Their commitment to working with parents was reflected in their

participation in the Parent and Family Involvement Project (Murphy, 2004). High/Scope has furthered their skills in this area- they use photographs of the children at work, posters, and to share aspects of the children's learning with parents and carers. The hallway is bright and welcoming, with examples of the children's work, notices about events and courses of interest to parents, and information on the programme that the children are following.

Conclusion

The Mahon Community Pre-school is by no means unique. Many other groups are also endeavouring to provide young children and their families with an excellent service that is responsive to local needs and that is based on the most recent research into what is most developmentally and culturally appropriate. The Mahon case study presents a snapshot of one such service at a particular moment in time. They continue to build on their pre-existing strengths: closeness to parents and the local community, links with other services in the area, an on-going commitment to improving the qualifications and skills of staff and a team-work ethos which includes parents as partners. The importance of training can be seen in the changes they have made in their environment and everyday practice. These changes are informed by the knowledge and skills which they have gleaned from the various training courses that staff have attended, which have enabled them to adopt those practices which are most appropriate to the children and families who use the pre-school. They acknowledge also the support they receive from local networks, the Cork City Childcare Company and its Childcare Coordinator, the Cork City Partnership and the health board.

The effect of EOCP and Health Board funding is visible in the improved physical and working conditions that now exist, but the short-term nature of funding for staffing in particular makes it impossible to plan affectively for the future, even a few months ahead. Funding for this pre-school and others like it urgently needs to be put on a more adequate and permanent basis. It is undeniably the responsibility of the state to support this essential service for our youngest citizens, if indeed all the children of the nation are to be given equal opportunities to grow and develop to their fullest potential.

This study was undertaken while the author was an IRCHSS Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Education, UCC.

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Researching Community Playgroups

Jean Whyte, Aoife Daly, Pilar Bujia & Nuala Smyth

Introduction

The Children's Research Centre was commissioned by the Playgroup Research Consortium in September 2004 to carry out a study of Community Playgroups in Ireland. The aims of the study are:

- To identify the role of community playgroups in the areas of early childhood care and education, community development, family support and social inclusion in Ireland;
- To examine the factors which contribute to or undermine their existence;
- To make recommendations for reconceptualising community playgroups in contemporary Ireland at a policy and practice level.

The study is due to be completed in June 2005. In this paper I will outline the literature available in the area, methodology used in the study, and highlight some of the issues involved in carrying out a study of this kind.

But first of all, a little bit about the Children's Research Centre. The Centre was established as a joint venture between the Department of Psychology and the Department of Social Studies in Trinity College Dublin, in 1995. It has a staff of 15 people, from diverse range of disciplines. Co-founder of the centre, Professor Sheila Greene, now serves as Director.

The establishment of the centre coincided with unprecedented advances in Irish policy, law and services for children and this was a timely opportunity for the Children's Research Centre to contribute to thinking about, and provision for, children.

In its research, the Centre strives to give voice to the experience of children, and in particular, to those who are experiencing various forms of disadvantage. The aims and objectives of the Children's Research Centre are as follows:

- Conduct policy relevant research on children, young people and on the family, community and other contexts in which children live their lives;

- Promote child centred research that gives voice to the child's experience and perspective;
- Integrate perspectives on children and childhoods from relevant disciplines;
- Build capacity for research on children within the University and within Ireland more generally;
- Build effective links with colleagues in the field of children's research internationally;
- Maintain effective links with services and organisations concerned with provision for children;
- Contribute to policy debates relevant to the work of the Centre;

Researching Community Playgroups – Part 1: Review of Background Literature

1. Context of the Project

This project should be seen in the context of a heightened awareness of children's rights and needs. It responds directly to the goals of the National Children's Strategy, 2000, which states 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'.

Through this research, children were actively involved in voicing their opinions and contributing to the development of Community Playgroups. Playgroup leaders, parents, teachers and others have also had their voices heard. It is hoped that this involvement contributes to the development and operation of Community Playgroups in Ireland.

2. The Nature of Community Playgroups

Community playgroups have been active in Ireland for more than a generation. Hayes, in her article *Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland*, states that from the mid '60s to the present time, parents and interested community activists have come together to provide early childhood care and education, in response to their own needs and those of their children.

Community playgroups share certain characteristics. These are outlined by Statham, Dillon & Moss, 2000, in their article *Sponsored Day Care in a*

Changing World. They:

- Are local;
- Are low cost;
- Are accessible;
- Value Play as the vehicle for children's learning;
- Emphasise the role and importance of parents as primary educators.

In some instances they are totally managed, operated and funded by parents. In many instances some, usually small, level of state funding is provided either in the form of direct grants, or through supporting organisations.

Kalinowski (2002) states that community playgroups are generally cost effective, easy to establish, close to the needs of the children and communities, and with little or no cost implications to the state. In many instances, the approach is characterised as child-centered, with a strong value placed on community support and participation, and the child being seen as an active, creative and independent subject. The provision of play opportunities and materials suited to the child's stage of development is the core activity.

3. Benefits of Pre-School and Playgroups

There is evidence to suggest that exposure to pre-school experience has a significantly positive effect on the outcomes of the academic achievements of children. In the study of Daniels (1995), children who had attended nursery school or playgroups in the UK scored better than other children in the subjects of reading, writing, number and science when they were 7 years old.

There is also evidence that playgroups in particular provide benefits regarding social interaction for children, which can be seen when they go on to school. A recent study presents findings which suggest that children who have attended a playgroup or nursery school (as opposed to nursery care or no pre-school experience) have better social skills at school (Erwin and Letchford, 2003).

The authors state that, 'the provision of a systematic curriculum and guided play activities characteristic of nursery school and play groups appears to provide a better foundation for later social development than the more laissez-faire environment of the nursery, or the generally fewer opportunities for peer contact in children cared for at home' (Erwin and Letchford, 2003, p131).

4. Naíonraí

Lindon (2000) defines a naíonra as a Irish-medium pre-school, in which a stiúrthóir (leader) speaks the Irish language when interacting with the children. Hickey, in her 1997 study on Naíonraí, found that the majority of children attending naíonraí are from English-speaking homes. However some naíonraí are situated in Gaeltacht areas, where Irish is the first language of the inhabitants. Naíonraí were founded in the 1960s, when there was growing concern among those who supported the Irish language that it was developing a lower status in Irish schools than it once had.

The organisation that oversees Naíonraí, (Forbairt Naíonraí Teo) states that the naíonra has two main objectives. It aims to help the child to develop in every way, and to help the child to acquire Irish or to improve his/her knowledge of Irish by using it as a means of communication. Like in an English-language playgroup, children engage in stimulating and enjoyable play, the only difference being that they do so through the medium of Irish. Naíonraí are covered in this study because of their similarities with community playgroups.

5. The History of Community Playgroups in Ireland

The majority of community playgroups are members of the umbrella organisation of the Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association (IPPA). Founded in 1969, IPPA is the largest voluntary organisation working for young children and their families in Ireland. IPPA's membership of over 2000 includes Playgroups, Parent and Toddler Groups, Full Day Care Groups, After-school and Out-of- School Groups and individual members.

According to Hayes (1995), in Ireland, as elsewhere, the impetus to develop community playgroups came largely from young mothers who could not afford the limited early years services such as private play groups or day nurseries. Typically they lived in areas which were often lacking in play facilities or community 'contact points' in which parents could meet with their children.

The value of early childhood care and education was little understood at the time, according to McKeown & Sweeney (2001). However, in the late '60s and early '70s the recognition of the value of early childhood provision, based on play, began to make an impact, and with it came a surge in growth of both private and community playgroups, in the UK, continental Europe and Ireland.

Throughout the '70s and '80s and into the '90s Ireland's membership of the EU began to impact in several ways. Many things contributed to forcing the issue of childcare onto the national agenda. These included: the increased participation of women in the workforce, and higher levels of access to second and third level education (Hayes, 1995).

6. State-funded Initiatives Affecting Community Playgroups

There have been some recent state-funded initiatives which have affected Community Playgroups in Ireland.

The realisation of the need to develop childcare provision in Ireland came to fruition with the Pilot Childcare Initiative (1994-1995). Furthermore, the National Development Plan (2000-2006) allocated £250 million (?400m) for the development of childcare facilities under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (Dept. of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000).

This investment in childcare provision has been widely welcomed, and according to McKeown (2000) has enabled an unprecedented level of service development in a short space of time. However it has had some negative consequences for sessional playgroup services. This is because the programme is primarily a labour market support measure, designed to facilitate women's entry into the workforce, rather than to provide services to children for its own sake.

The development of the Early Start pre-school pilot in 1994 was another important state initiative in the area of early childhood care and education (Dept. of Education & Science, 2002). It established 40 pre-schools in disadvantaged areas, based in primary schools and staffed by primary teachers and qualified childcare staff. However, the pilot had immediate (and in some cases devastating) effects on the existing community playgroup services by physically displacing some, as well as attracting parents away from community playgroups since places on Early Start are completely free.

Therefore some government schemes have undermined the viability- and in some cases the existence- of Community Playgroups.

7. The Part Community Playgroups Play In Ireland Today

Despite these setbacks, many opportunities have been grasped. The early years

sector has undoubtedly benefited from the availability of training, organisational capacity building, expanded service development and the development of national structures to support childcare. Playgroups are the most widespread form of pre-school provision today. It is estimated that 5-6% of the age-group (2-4) attend the playgroups (Lindon, 2000).

Importantly for playgroups, childcare is now well established as a key policy discourse, and is the subject of increased research and development. Research carried out by Community Playgroups Together (2003) highlights the vibrancy of the provision and the valuable contribution it can and is making to children, families and communities in Dublin.

Today, there are 267 Community Playgroups (registered with the IPPA), 137 Naíonraí (with FNT), and 66 Gaeltacht Naíonraí in Ireland – in all, 470 playgroups.

Researching Community Playgroups – Part 2: Methodology

So now let's look at the methodology used in this study. The aims of the study were:

- To identify the role of community playgroups in the early childhood care and education, community development, family support and social inclusion areas;
- To examine the factors which contribute to or undermine their existence;
- To make recommendations for reconceptualising community playgroups in contemporary Ireland at a policy and practice level.

In order to fulfill these aims, we set up a series of objectives, and appropriate methodologies were selected in order to attain each objective. The objectives were as follows:

1. To review the literature and research nationally and internationally on community playgroups;
2. To carry out a scoping exercise on examples of best practice;
3. To map the existence and location of Community Playgroups throughout Ireland, drawing on existing databases;

4. To investigate structural elements of Playgroups including but not limited to: management and support structures, opening hours, staffing levels, access issues, type of curriculum used, in-service training, funding, fees, costs and premises;
5. To describe the Community Playgroups model/s in operation in Ireland, identifying the links between Community Playgroups and the wider community;
6. To investigate the impact of Community Playgroups in marginalised communities as an early intervention strategy to address educational disadvantage;
7. To identify contributions that Community Playgroups make (and their potential to contribute) at micro and macro level, drawing from elements of best practice;
8. To identify the key success factors necessary for continued growth and development of Community Playgroups;
9. To make recommendations re:
 - Addressing the challenges facing Community Playgroups;
 - Avenues for growth and reconceptualisation;
 - Improved practice for providers;
 - Development of supportive policy;
 - Further research.

Basic Approach to the Research Project

In many of the projects undertaken by the Children's Research Centre, we practise and promote the principles of cooperative inquiry. This means that we encourage and support the active participation of those involved with or affected by the issues being investigated.

We do this from the very beginning- asking their help in deciding the issues to be investigated, and the measures to be used. When we are interviewing participants we always reassure them that there are no 'right' answers and that every contribution is valued for its own sake. We have guidelines for good practice and these emphasise the duties and responsibilities of researchers to respect the rights and the dignity of children, to obtain their voluntary

informed consent to participate in research, to safeguard their anonymity and confidentiality, and to be honest and open with them about the purposes of the research and the destiny of the data.

The Research Process

There were seven stages to the research. It was overseen and supported by an advisory group and this was made up of: the research team, 1 or 2 representatives of the commissioners of the research, an external expert, 2 providers of services (one statutory, one non-statutory) 2 parents whose children have attended Community Playgroups .

The Advisory Group met at the beginning of the project, in the middle and at the end. Its function has been to act as a sounding board for the research team, to advise on issues of concern , to provide contact information where feasible and to offer support where necessary.

Stage 1: Literature Review

The literature review examined both national and international literature on Community Playgroups, the ways in which Community Playgroups have been conceptualized and factors which underlie changes in their conceptualization.

The aims of the review were to attain some of the objectives outlined earlier:

- To see how Community Playgroups are structured and managed in other countries;
- How researchers have identified their contribution at micro and macro level;
- Which factors have been found to support the growth and development of Community Playgroups in Ireland and elsewhere;
- To identify models of best practice in all aspects of playgroup provision.

Stage 2: Mapping the existence and location of Community Playgroups

Drawing on existing databases, we had intended to map the current provision of Community Playgroups throughout the Republic of Ireland; however this has not proven to be possible from the data available; so recommendations will be made to enable adequate databases to be constructed so that this can proceed as a separate task.

Stage 3: Informing stakeholders about the research

When we had examined the databases made available to us, and identified the community playgroups and Naionrai who were to be invited to participate in the study, an information leaflet was sent to all those on the databases informing them of the aims and methods of the research study. This was sent *as Gaeilge* to the Naíonraí.

The participation of Committee members and Playgroup leaders was invited on any one of a number of levels – for example they could express concerns and views about issues during the consultation phase. They were invited to complete questionnaires. They were also given the opportunity to make known their interest in site visits during the data collection phase.

It was made clear to them that our preferred method of approach is collaborative, and that their contribution to the research would be greatly appreciated , but that they are would not be under any obligation to participate. They were also told that the findings of the project would be made available to them through various methods, *e.g.* workshops, seminars, and a report.

Stage 4: Consultation with stakeholders

So, we carried out consultations by means of focus group discussions and individual interviews as a first stage in the process with stakeholders, who have been identified as:

1. Parents – who have children in Playgroups – and we intended to have parents who do not have children in playgroups, but did not manage to track any of them down as yet.
2. Children currently attending playgroups, and older children who attended playgroups in the past.
3. Individuals involved in the provision of playgroups – playgroup leaders, management etc.
4. Other sources of social support to be identified in consultation with the Advisory Group such as public health nurses, home-school liaison teachers, primary school principals, infant class teachers, representatives of the overseeing bodies (IPPA, FNT), and of Childminders Ireland.

Our first contacts were with three community playgroups – two were English-speaking and one was a Naionra. We contacted them with the information leaflet and a letter, followed up by a telephone call.

We drew up an interview schedule – which we amended a little after this phase. We carried out site visits, observed the activities and talked with the Playgroup leaders and staff.

We asked them to distribute leaflets and letters to the parents of the children who attended their Playgroups. The letters invited the parents to respond directly to us if they would like to participate in the project. Those parents who responded were then asked in the course of their interview or discussion (where we could get three or four of them together) – for permission to observe and talk with their child in the Playgroup.

Some of the other stakeholders – teachers, public health nurses, preschool service officers – were contacted either by telephone or by email where a face to face interview could not be arranged.

The purpose of these consultations was:

- to establish the relevance of issues identified in the literature search for this study;
- to determine issues specific to the Irish scene;
- to define the criteria used to evaluate the quality of playgroup provision and
- to raise questions which should be investigated in subsequent stages of the research through the case studies.

Stage 5: Case Studies

Using the database as a guide, five playgroups were invited to participate as Case Studies so that there would be representation of Playgroups of different sizes, in different locations, under different management structures, operating different sessional arrangements, with different financial arrangements. Two of these were naíonraí. A minimum of two session-long visits were scheduled with each of the Case Study playgroups.

The same procedure in contacting parents and other stakeholders, and getting permission to observe children was followed as during the consultation stage. Issues which have been highlighted through the literature review and initial

consultation process were investigated in depth using the following methodologies:

- Observations/conversations with children as they played;
- Interviews with staff using a semi-structured schedule;
- Interviews with Management committee members;
- Conversations/interviews with parents;
- Interviews with teachers in local school;
- Interviews with other professionals associated with the playgroups.

When the Case Studies had been completed we reported back to the Advisory Group that we were concerned that we would not be able to say how representative the selected Case Study Playgroups were, because they seemed to be so diverse.

After long discussions and considerations it was decided that we should seek additional funding and extend the study to include a further five Case Studies (again with two being naíonraí and three being English speaking).

It was also agreed that we should design a questionnaire and send it to all the playgroups on our databases, so that everybody would have the opportunity to contribute. The questionnaire asked respondents to complete rating scales for statements about how playgroups help children, how playgroups help parents and childminders, how playgroups contribute to the community and about the future of playgroups. Playgroup leaders were also asked to complete details about their playgroups – the hours of operation, administration, funding, training, and so on.

Stage 6: Data Input and Analysis

Consultation, interview and conversation data were transcribed and we have already subjected the transcripts to content analysis. We are currently analysing the findings and from the transcripts and from the questionnaires – of which 120 were returned.

Stage 7: Writing-up

The Report will be presented in chapters covering:

- Background and review of the literature;

- Result of the mapping exercise;
- Methodology including sampling, access and description of the measures and procedures;
- Findings in relation to each of the Objectives outlined in section 1;
- Conclusions and recommendations.

The Report will be presented in draft form to the Commissioners and stakeholders for comment before the final version is completed and we plan to have the final version ready by July 1st.

Finally, just to mention that it has been a great experience for the research team to be involved in this research project, and to have the opportunity of meeting a group of extraordinary people with such dedication to the children with which they work.

Thank you very much for your attention. We are looking forward to sharing the findings of our project with all of you.

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Lessons Learnt from the Community Playgroup Initiative (cpi) 2001 – 2004

Geraldine French & Noelle Spring

Executive summary of the final evaluation report:

Valuing community Playgroups: lessons for practice and policy

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; the findings are presented and recommendations made.

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. It was agreed 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 euro 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, Carlow, Co 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 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*;
- the regional co-ordinator of child care services, SEHB;
- childcare managers SEHB;
- pre-school services officers SEHB
- 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. The staff was 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.

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. The co-ordinator role supported the playgroups' ongoing professional development. It was interactive, formative and developmental in approach and part of a dynamic process. As articulated by an advisory group member, in the final evaluation:

‘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.’

Funding

Considering the 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. The fact that most of the funds were spent on current items (salaries and rent) and not capital expenditure (equipment and premises) implies that funding should be directed towards salaries. 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).

The delivery of *cpi* was built on solid foundations and was sufficiently flexible to deal with unexpected challenges and difficulties. The *cpi* has emphasised the importance of working systemically and of anticipating the complexities of community-based work during the planning phase.

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 for parenting or committee roles. Parents and children can gain, when learning is shared about the important benefits of having stimulating early experiences through play, and when staff 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. They provided information on how to access other supports and agencies.

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 are not likely to 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. Staff should avail of specific child protection training provided through the Health Service Executive or other relevant agencies.

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 the parents in *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;
- parents booklets 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 fun fundraising ideas such as a sponsored 'toddle' could be provided.

Key recommendations for *cpi* model of delivery

Co-ordinator or development worker in early childhood care and education

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 families in most need to access places. A sliding scale could be introduced for those parents who are unemployed or who are on low incomes.
- Assistance should be provided to community playgroups to help them to access funding.
- Secure premises should be made available cheaply by communities to playgroups; awareness within communities of the value of 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 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 regarding support of community playgroups.
- The role of the city and county childcare committees should be expanded and should include a small grants scheme for community childcare 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 improvements 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 important, 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 learning.

Copies of the full report *Valuing Community Playgroups: lessons for practice and policy* are available through the Katharine Howard Foundation at IFSC, 10 Grattan Crescent, Inchicore, Dublin 8, telephone 01 453 1831 or email to info@khf.ie

* 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.

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Section Five
Contemporary Issues

A Study of the Effectiveness of Education about Risk Factors Associated with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome on Changing Attitudes and Relevant Practices in a Group of Traveller Women

Maria Cassidy

*When I awoke in the morning to feel the sun on my face,
I awoke from a dream that one day the children of our
cultures will live in peace.
That the questions they ask will be of innocence and joy not of pain.
I dreamed
That one will not see the eyes of a child old before their time with
the experience of prejudice and the confusion that brings.*
Mc Donagh, 2000.

Despite the fact that Irish society is becoming increasingly multicultural, many Irish Travelling families deal, on a continuous basis with the repercussions of discrimination, the criminalisation of the travelling way of life, poor living conditions, and the stress and trauma of eviction. Therefore, it is little wonder that Travellers health is poorer than that of the settled community, and this is especially evident in the health of Travelling children. This paper explores the effectiveness of an educational initiative aimed at reducing the risk of SIDS (SIDS), which has a much higher incidence rate in Travellers.

'Travellers are a distinct minority group of Irish people. They differ from the general population in many respects including their life-style, their culture and their treatment by society,' (Department of Health and Children, 2002). The origins of the Travelling people are disputed. Existing theories include the idea that Travellers are descendants of those dispossessed of their land by Cromwell and the Irish famine (Gmelch & Gmelch, 1976), the remnants of either a pre-Celtic or Celtic group (O Siochain, Ruane & Mc Cann, 1996), or that perhaps their origins stem from itinerant craftworkers of early Christian times (Ni Shuinear, 1996, Mac Laughlin, 1995).

According to the census of 2002, there were 24,000 Travellers living in Ireland,

accounting for 0.6% of the population, (CSO, 2002). Of the 4,898 Traveller families living in Ireland in 2000, the majority (1,353 families) were in the Eastern Regional Health Authority area, followed by the Western Health Board and Southern Health Board areas, with 747 and 602 families respectively, (Department of Health and Children, 2002). In 1986, 48% of Traveller families were living in trailers, (Barry *et al*, 1986), with a slightly lower figure- 46% in 2000. 22% of Traveller families were living on unofficial halting sites (Department of Health and Children, 2002). The reality is that many Travellers live without such necessities as running water and sanitation, things that most Irish people simply take for granted. It has been argued that Travellers living on unserved sites and on the roadside live in 'conditions, not of nomads, but of refugees' (O'Toole, in Mac Laughlin, 1995, p.59). Consequently, it is not surprising that there are negative repercussions on general health and child development. Research conducted on the health of Travellers in the U.K. concluded that 'Travellers are among the unhealthiest people in the country' (Bunce, 1996).

According to the Report of the Travelling People Review, Body (1983), the age profile of Travellers is very young, with 55% of the Irish Traveller Population in 1981 under the age of fifteen, demonstrating a similar demographic pattern in the Travelling community to that recorded as far back as 1944 (Commission on Itinerancy, 1963, Helleiner, 2000). This is much higher than the figures for the general population, which indicate that 24% are in the 0-14 age group (Department Of Health and Children, 2001). Furthermore, children under four years constitute almost 20% of the Traveller population (Barry *et al*, 1987). Travellers of all ages have much higher mortality rates and shorter life expectancy. The life expectancy rates for travellers are 62 years for male Travellers, and 65 years for females, compared to 72 and 77 years respectively, for the general population (Traveller Visibility Group, 1993).

The report on the Commission on Itinerancy (1963) stated that there was very little difference between the overall health of Traveller children and those from similar income groups in the settled population, but argued that itinerancy, rather than poverty was the major factor in the poor health status of Traveller children. However, it is now widely recognised that the health status of Travellers is poorer than that of the general population (Keane, in Jackson & O'Donovan, 2001) and this applies particularly to their children.

Since the 19th century mortality rates have been routinely collected in developed countries, and infant mortality rate (IMR) 'has been the traditional measure which reflects the general health status of the population' (Spencer, 2000, p.50). Infant and perinatal mortality rates are key indicators of 'the health and social well-being of a society and, more specifically reflects the standard of antenatal care afforded to women' (Department Of Health and Children, 2001, p.54). Perinatal mortality rates in 1987 were 28.3 per 1000 live births for travellers, and 9.9 per 1000 for the general population. The infant mortality rate in the same year was 18.1 per 1000 live births for Travellers while the national figure was 7.4. 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 and Children, 2002). In one study of a West of Ireland Travelling Community, it was revealed that 40% of the mothers surveyed had had four or more miscarriages, and 16% of all births had been premature (O Nuallain & Forde, 1992). Research conducted in the U.K. has also shown high perinatal and infant mortality in Travellers (Van Cleemput, 2000). Immunisation levels among Traveller children are also low, at around 50%, compared to rates of 68-86% for MMR, and 79-91% for the three in one vaccination in the general population (National Traveller Health Strategy, 2000).

Traveller babies also have an increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is also referred to as 'Cot Death' or 'Sudden and unexpected Death in Infancy'. It is not a condition, disease, or indeed a cause of death, but has been defined as '... the applicable diagnosis when no other identifiable sufficient cause is found' (Dwyer & Ponsonby, 1996, p79). SIDS accounts for four out of every ten infant deaths in Ireland (Garvey *et al*, 2003).

Several risk factors for SIDS have been identified, including:

- Prone sleeping position, (Fleming *et al*, 1996);
- Overheating; (*ibid*)
- Smoking; (Milerad *et al*, 1998, Mc Garvey *et al*, 2003)
- Co-sleeping; (Fleming *et al*, 1996, Mc Garvey *et al*, 2003)
- Poor antenatal care;
- Low birth weight and pre-term babies;
- Maternal caffeine intake. (Ford *et al*, 1998)

The possibility of a relationship between SIDS and vaccination has been explored, but there appears to be no scientific evidence to support this relationship (Griffin *et al*, 1998). The fact that SIDS would appear to have a higher occurrence in childcare settings appears to be attributable to the child being placed in prone or lateral sleeping position (Moon *et al*, 2000).

The most significant breakthrough in SIDS prevention has undoubtedly been the discovery of a definite link between prone sleeping position and SIDS. As far back as 1944, Abramson called for caution in the use of the prone sleeping position, citing possible links with accidental suffocation (Dwyer & Ponsonby, 1996). In 1985, it was noted that in Hong Kong where tradition dictated that babies generally were placed in the supine position to sleep, the incidence of SIDS was dramatically low. Much research was subsequently conducted on the subject, and campaigns promoting the supine sleeping position resulted in a notable decrease in the number of SIDS deaths. These campaigns also highlighted other risk factors, particularly smoking and overheating. Figures for England and Wales showed a decrease of 50%, from 912 deaths in 1991, to just 456 deaths in 1992 (*ibid*). Similarly, in Ireland there has been a 70% decrease between 1988 and 1995 (Irish Sudden Infant Death Association, 2004). While this is a dramatic reduction, it should be noted that 554 Sudden Infant Deaths still occurred during this period (Irish Sudden Infant Death Register, 2005).

According to the Sudden Infant Death Register, Travellers continue to account for a disproportionately high number of Sudden Infant Deaths. The occurrence of SIDS in Traveller babies in 1999 was twelve times the national figure (Department Of Health and Children, 2001). This, however, may be an overestimate for other years, as the figures for 1999 were unusually high, (Sudden Infant Death Register, 2005). The National Traveller Health Strategy, 2002-2005, discloses that 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. This trend continues despite a considerable body of research identifying major risk factors for SIDS.

Aims/Objectives

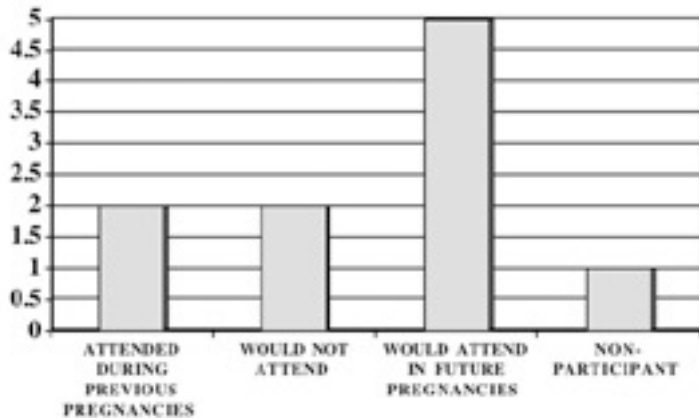
The aim of the research project was to explore the hypothesis that information gained by Traveller women as part of a Traveller women's Primary Health Project outlining risk factors for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) did not necessarily result in changes in relevant child-rearing practices.

Methods

The focus group method was deemed to be the most suitable method of data collection for this particular project. The use of focus groups is widely used in the research of issues affecting Travellers, and is noted as being particularly useful, in that it does not discriminate against illiteracy (SHB Traveller Health Unit, 2001). This method also ensures that research is not biased by the researcher's own beliefs and perceptions, which may serve to influence other methods of data collection such as questionnaires. A group of ten Traveller women, who had recently been taught about SIDS prevention as part of a Traveller women's health initiative were interviewed in a group format, with their permission. Discussion centred on knowledge of issues relating to SIDS and whether, having been educated in risk factors associated with SIDS, their attitudes and practices were altered accordingly.

Results

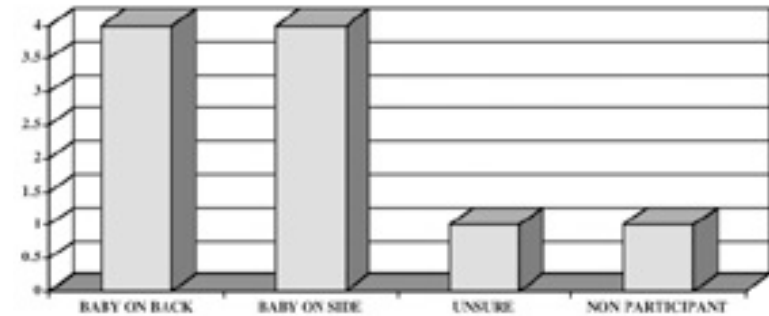
Antenatal Care



Only two of the women present stated that they had attended antenatal clinics or seen a doctor at any stage during the pregnancy. Five women stated that they would seek antenatal care as a result of having now acquired the knowledge of why it is so important. However two women said that they would still not attend a doctor or clinic citing a sort of tradition in their family of not attending doctors during pregnancy as the reason. Reasons for poor uptake of ante-natal care in Traveller women included the fact that traveller women are

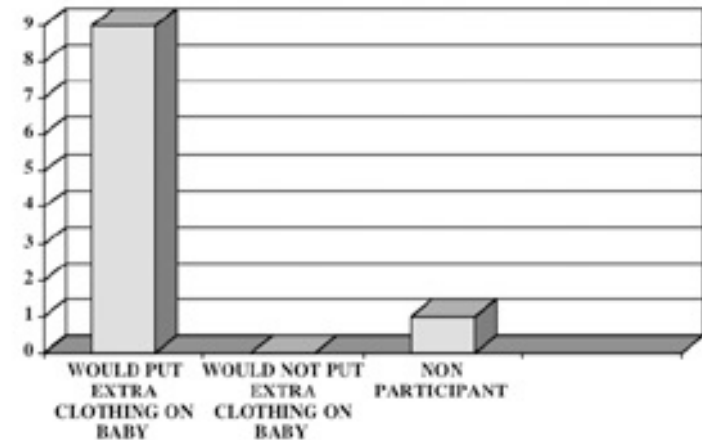
shy about going to the doctor, do not know what to expect and are afraid of what might be said to them.

Sleeping Position



Of the women who participated in this study, only four stated that they would now place a baby on its back to sleep as a result of the information they had received. Four said that they would continue to sleep babies on their sides, citing choking as the main reason and also the fact that travellers 'always do it that way'. One woman said that she was unsure, but would ask her sisters and take their advice even if it conflicted with the information on SIDS.

Overheating



On the issue of putting extra clothes, blankets and quilts on babies sleeping in trailers, all of the women who participated said that they would continue this practice, despite the 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. One issue that arose on this topic was that of traveller mothers moving into a house and continuing the practice out of habit.

One woman present did not participate.

Conclusions

This study has had obvious limitations including the unsuitability of some methods of data collection due to cultural considerations, and the tendency for participants to give what they perceive to be the right answer or that most accepted by their peers. However, some interesting issues have emerged. On several occasions, the point was made that this information is for settled people, by settled people and travellers are different. This was most in evidence on the issue of overheating for families sleeping in trailers. The existing guidelines on ideal room temperature, layers of light blankets etc. are completely irrelevant to Travellers in this position. Another important fact to emerge was the issue of tradition and word of mouth, particularly with regard to sleeping position, taking precedence over information yielded through empirical research. The importance of the roles that culture and tradition play in the travelling way of life are very much in evidence in this instance. This may, perhaps, illuminate the suggestion made by Murray (2002) that 'information awareness campaigns about identified risk factors may be less effective in reaching Travellers as a target group.' Thus, it would appear to be imperative that Travellers, themselves, need to be involved in *all* areas of research, health promotion and provision in order to ensure their relevance in a cultural context. This is reflected in the document Traveller Health A National Strategy 2002-2005 (see foreword & Chapters 6&7).

While it appears from this particular study that education in this area has had some positive effect overall, most notably in the area of ante-natal care, it appears to have been limited due to a degree of perceived irrelevance as a result of the absence of traveller participation and involvement.

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The Missing Link? Early Childhood in Ireland and Educational Disadvantage

Tracey Connolly

The relationship between education and society is dynamic and interactive. Education not only reflects a society but is an influence in shaping its development. It helps equip children to share in the benefits of the society in which they live and to contribute effectively to that society's sustenance and evolution.

(Primary School Curriculum, 1999)

Introduction

Despite the vast literature on educational disadvantage in Ireland, educational disadvantage in early childhood has received little attention. In addition to this, the majority of initiatives by the Department of Education and Science, which attempt to tackle educational disadvantage are at primary and post-primary levels.

This paper begs the question – would early intervention effectively address the issue of educational disadvantage in Ireland? The paper examines educational disadvantage and where our understanding of educational disadvantage is now, it assesses the causes and consequences of educational disadvantage and discusses how prevention in early years can impact educational disadvantage.

Defining educational disadvantage in Ireland

The Education Act (1998) in Ireland sees a link between social and economic disadvantage with educational disadvantage, as it defines educational disadvantage as a barrier to participation:

the impediments arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevents students from deriving appropriate benefits from education in schools. (Education Act, 1998 Section 32.9)

Similarly, the 1992 Green Paper on Education, *Education for a Changing World* holds social and economic factors as 'barriers to participation, which mitigate against those from disadvantaged backgrounds' and 'influence the extent to

which young people and adults participate in education'. (cited by A. Hyland in *Primary Education: Ending Disadvantage* p47). While Evans defines educational disadvantage as:

those pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, who failed to reach the necessary standards in schools, often drop out, and as a consequence fail to become integrated into a normally accepted pattern of social responsibility, particularly with regard to work and family life. (OECD *Our Children at Risk* 1995, p13)

Discontinuity between school and home experiences is presented as another definition of educational disadvantage. The Conference of Major Religious Superiors Education Commission (CMRS) stated:

The term educational disadvantage refers to a concept, which over the last 30 years, has been used to explain why children from poor backgrounds do not derive the same benefit from their schooling as children from more comfortable backgrounds. Underlying the concept of [educational] disadvantage is the idea that there is a discontinuity between the school and non-school experiences of children who are poor. (Education and Poverty: Eliminating Disadvantage in the Primary School Years, 1992 p xvii)

According to CMRS educational disadvantage and this discontinuity is made more complex when we consider 'the child's inability to cope with the school, we also focus on the school's inability to cope with the needs of the disadvantaged child' (p11)

Continuing on the theory of the discontinuity between school and home experiences, Boldt and Devine's define educational disadvantage as:

a limited ability [of children] to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to that of their peers ... as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not compound to the student's knowledge, skills and attitudes into which they have been socialised.
(Educational Disadvantage and Early School Leaving, 1998, p10)

They go on to argue that educational disadvantage must be understood in the context of the individual deriving less benefit from education while participating in the formal education system and in the context of the diminished life chances of the individual who has left formal education without recognised qualifications.

Levin has argued that 'people defined as educationally disadvantaged lack the home and community resources to fully benefit from recent educational reforms, as well as from conventional school practices' (cited in Evans, p18).

In a similar vein, Natriello *et al* offer a comprehensive definition of the term educational disadvantage, which places it in the process inside and outside of schools (within the family, community and formal education). Their definition is that:

Students who are educationally disadvantaged, have been exposed to insufficient educational experiences in at least one of these three domains [family, community and school]. While the first awareness of the consequences of such experiences may surface in the schools where student performance is formally assessed, the source of the problem may rest with the school and/or with the family and the community in which the student is reared. (*Schooling Disadvantaged Children: Racing Against Catastrophe*, 1990 p13)

From the various definitions given here, educational disadvantage clearly finds its roots in the wider context of socio-economic disadvantage.

Causes of educational disadvantage

There is substantial evidence in the literature that poverty is the prominent underlying cause of educational disadvantage and that pupils from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to underachieve in education compared to their peers coming from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

An OECD report has shown that schools with high proportions of children from poor families tend to have low academic performance and high dropout rates – all indicative of educational disadvantage. For example, the report

highlights that students from low-income families in the United States are twice as likely as high-income students to perform in the lowest quartile on standardised achievement tests. (Duffy, 1995 *Social Exclusion and Human Dignity in Europe* Council of Europe cited in Stephen Kalsen 'Social exclusion, children and education: conceptual and measurement issues' OECD, 2000 p21)

Archer and Weir refer to the literature evidence that 'children's academic achievement and general development are influenced to a great extent by the kind of educational roles adopted by their parents'. (P. Archer and S. Weir *Addressing disadvantage: a review of the international literature and of strategy in Ireland* Summary report to the educational disadvantage committee, 2004. p9) Such roles may include the parents' attitude to education as well as their level and experience of education. Archer and Weir emphasise findings from studies that 'show a strong association between children's performance in school and home process variables' which are 'mostly related to the ways parents interact with their children and how stimulating the home environment is'. Substantiating this view are the findings of school effectiveness literature, which 'show a positive association between student achievement (individual and aggregated at school level) and the amount of parental involvement in the work of the school'. (Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore 1995 cited in Archer and Weir)

Community factors such as poor housing, a lack of community support, the non-availability and non-use of leisure facilities and the lack of political resources were all seen as predictive of 'at risk' status according to Evans (p23). Literature sees the community as an important variable in contributing to educational disadvantage. This ties in with the definitions of educational disadvantage as being multifaceted. The Combat Poverty Agency refers to this view that wider issues including the community causes educational disadvantage. The Agency states that while educational disadvantage is a problem in its own right it

is more correctly understood as a symptom of a wider range of issues affecting the lives of children and adults, the families and communities, and the structure and content of the education system. (Combat Poverty Agency, Poverty Briefing No.14, Summer 2003 'Educational disadvantage in Ireland' p3)

In the Combat Poverty Agency's Poverty Briefing, 2003, it recognises the following family and community related causal factors:

- the welfare needs of children not being met;
- high participation costs of education;
- lack of family/community tradition in education;
- the failure of school curricula to reflect and validate the cultural backgrounds and learning styles of learners;
- the failure of the education system to address the needs of minority groups; and
- barriers facing adults seeking to return to education

Educational disadvantage as manifested in early childhood

The causes of educational disadvantage outlined here indicate that educational disadvantage is often a result of societal and family circumstances that effect children from an early age. According to Boldt and Devine family and community circumstances can be manifested in the child's inability to cope with education as a consequent of

the environment which the poor child encounters, in the four or five years before coming to school, [which] strongly influences the development of characteristics which make it difficult for them to take on the work of the school. (p9)

Rutter's research shows that risk factors of educational disadvantage have a multiplying affect, as children suffering from one risk factor were likely to experience serious consequences with the same probability as those with no risk factors. If two or three risk factors were present the chances of an unfavourable outcome increased four times and with four risk factors the chances of a negative outcome increased by ten times. (cited in Evans p20)

According to UNICEF 'the realisation that such [educational] disadvantage becomes established, and measurable, at a much earlier age than was previously suspected' is the 'most significant of the insights gained in recent decades'. (UNICEF *A League Table of Educational Disadvantage in Rich Nations*, 2002 p22)

To substantiate this claim, UNICEF refers to a study in which a cohort of almost 1,300 children born in the United Kingdom in the year 1970 were

tested at 22 months and 42 months (using specially devised, age suitable tests) and again during their school careers at the ages of 5 and 10 years. The subsequent educational records of those children were then monitored up to the age of 26 years. The findings showed that children who ranked in the top 25% on the ability scale as measured at 22 months were three times more likely to gain advanced educational qualifications. (L. Feinstein 'Early cognitive inequality in the 1970 cohort, *Economica* 2002 cited in UNICEF p24)

Consequences of educational disadvantage

Research has shown that educational disadvantage is intergenerational so combating educational disadvantage can have a positive impact on future generations. Kelleghan argues that educational disadvantage can be perceived as a threat to democracy and social justice. (T. Kelleghan 'Approaches to Problems of Educational Disadvantage' in *Primary Education: Ending Disadvantage* 2002 p.18)

Klasen refers to the fact that children experiencing educational disadvantage grow up as adults who experience social exclusion and may be unable to be healthy, well nourished and well housed as adults. (S. Kalsen 'Social exclusion, children and education: conceptual and measurement issues' OECD, 2000 p8).

Klasen further argues that 'social exclusion may have close empirical relations to other social problems that threaten the stability and prosperity of society at large such as crime and violence'. Referring to Article 28 of the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child, Klasen states that:

Education is one of the most important factors affecting the development of children. It has great intrinsic significance as access to education is an important right and being educated is an important and very valuable capability.

Initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage in early years in Ireland

To date there have been 3 national initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage in the early years in Ireland. The first was the well document Rutland Street Project, based in Rutland Street Dublin. The project sought to provide children in a pre-school setting with experiences to facilitate development of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to later school success. It also sought to increase parental involvement through home visits, parent-teacher meetings,

encouraging parents' classroom participation.

Early Start began in 1994 in 8 primary schools. By 1995 it had expanded to 32 schools providing provision for 3 year-old children. Early Start is broadly concerned with the development of the whole child with a focus on language promotion and cognitive development.

Preschools for Travellers were initially set up on an *ad hoc* basis with the aim of encouraging greater involvement of traveller children in primary education. The pre-schools seek to foster links between traveller parents and the primary schools. Pupils are generally aged between 3 and 5 years old and attend for 3 hours a day. Between 1984 –1994, 54 preschools were supported by Department of Education.

Direction in tackling educational disadvantage – integration, lifelong learning and early childhood

A large amount of literature on educational disadvantage in Ireland has critiqued policy on educational disadvantage. In particular, much of the literature condemns the lack of integration of various services in addressing educational disadvantage.

Kelleghan has been among those who looked at other means of addressing educational disadvantage in his research. In the mid 1990s, Kelleghan *et al* put forward ideas of how educational disadvantage might be addressed through a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach as follows:

- curriculum adaptation at primary and post primary levels;
- smaller classes, particularly in the early grades, to facilitate individual attention and the development of relationships between teachers and pupils;
- preschool provision, reflecting an emphasis on prevention;
- a high degree of parent involvement in the educational process;
- the reform of school organisation to develop a unity of purpose and build on existing strengths of teachers and pupils;
- adequate financial resources for schools to operate comfortably; and
- a high level of involvement of other community agencies. (Kelleghan *et al*, *Educational disadvantage in Ireland* Dublin, 1995 pp66-67)

Writing in 2002, Kelleghan again put emphasis on an integrated approach to educational disadvantage arguing that 'as disadvantage is multi-dimensional ...

procedures to dealing with it should also be multi-dimensional, and should involve communities, families, schools, and other institutions in society' (Kelleghan *Ending Disadvantage* p.19)

Kelleghan goes on to state that

where possible, services should be integrated and co-ordinated. Since the educational needs of children cannot be separated from their economic and social needs, it would seem obvious that problems that might arise in meeting these needs should not be addressed in isolation (p19).

Likewise the Combat Poverty Agency puts forward the view that tackling educational disadvantage should ensure integrated responses to educational disadvantage at a national level to 'guarantee effective delivery of professional services and programmes' (Combat Poverty Agency p6). In addition, the agency recommends ensuring 'integrated multi-level responses, involving the home, school, adult education, community and relevant services'.

At an international level, the OECD claims that 'the integrated provision of education, health and social services is regarded by many member countries as the most promising solution' (OECD *Co-ordinated Services for Children and Youth at Risk: A World* Paris 1998 Philippa Hurrell and Peter Evans 'An introduction and review of the literature' p13) to educational disadvantage. Similar to other discussions on integration, this statement draws on the fact that educational disadvantage is multidimensional.

A growing body of literature in Ireland argues that tackling educational disadvantage should begin before children at risk start school. Referring to 'failure to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills' which 'is often followed by a school career that involves poor later scholastic achievement, grade retention, disruptive behaviour, absenteeism, suspension, and early school leaving' Kelleghan argues that this should be prevented by 'providing intervention as an early stage, at both preschool and primary levels' (Kelleghan *Ending Disadvantage* p21).

In a similar vein, the Combat Poverty Agency urges 'that early identification of young people at risk of underachievement within the education system, and

early intervention' become 'core parts of any initiative to tackle educational disadvantage' (Combat Poverty Agency, p6)

The National Development Plan (1999) notes that the need for a lifelong learning approach is necessary as it holds that 'addressing educational disadvantage requires intervention in the context of a continuum of provision from early childhood through to adulthood' (National Development Plan, 1999 pp97-98).

A UNICEF report states that there is a need for early intervention in light of advances in neuroscience which

have shown the earliest months and years are the time when the brain develops most rapidly, laying down patterns and templates for future competence and coping skills. Learning is now known to be a process that begins at birth and can be catalysed or inhibited by the earliest interactions and experiences. Clearly, all these findings suggest that attempts to mitigate educational disadvantage needs to begin even before a child starts school. (UNICEF, p24)

Such evidence from neuroscience has 'fuelled a steadily rising interest in early childhood development and in ways and means of giving children the best possible educational start' according to UNICEF. The report goes on to state that 'whereas many governments have been slower to respond to this challenge than parents and publishers ... a majority of OECD nations have now made policy commitments to early childhood education'. Ireland is among the nations that have lagged behind in committing to early childhood education.

However, some controversy surrounds early childhood education. For example an OECD report on early childhood education, *Starting Strong*, states that 'the clear trend is towards full coverage of three to six years old' implying at least two years of free publicly funded care and education before the beginning of compulsory schooling (cited in UNICEF p25). While the report clearly sees the 'purpose and theoretical basis' of this, it questions 'is there any evidence that they actually work?' and sees the answer as being 'by no means obvious'. UNICEF argues in favour of early childhood education and contends that such questioning by the OECD report:

reflects the relative newness of many early childhood education and care (ECEC) initiatives, the lack of rigorous evaluation of long-running programmes, and the logistical difficulties of measuring impact over a period of years or even decades and societies in which there are many rapidly changing variables.

UNICEF goes on to argue that the potential of ECEC can only be liberated by quality ECEC and this

quality implies a well informed and clear vision of purpose and aims, strong partnerships with both families and primary school systems, well thought out access policy to enable children at risk to participate, high standards of staffing, motivation, and in-service training, and a built in long-term agenda for research in evaluation.

Schorr states 'successful programmes see the child in the context of family and the family in the context of the surrounding' (Schorr cited in Concepta Conaty *Including All*, Dublin, 2002 p.45)

And so perhaps early childhood is the missing link in tackling educational disadvantage. Whereby quality early childhood education takes an integrated approach mindful of lifelong learning, with set goals, which are monitored and evaluated.

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The Role of the National Parents Council – Primary

Lorraine Crossan

In this paper I intend to outline the origins of NPC-P and its legal status within the Education Act, the aims of NPC-P, the people whom it serves, work at National and County level and its future development in view of a major strategic plan which is currently underway.

Background

The Programme for Action in Education 1984/87 stated ‘that in recognition of the primary role of parents in education that parents would be facilitated in organising themselves into a National Parents Council through which the views of parents would be expressed and that, once established on a national basis, the Department of Education would consult with the Council on matters relevant to educational development.’ The National Parents Council was established in 1985, by the then Minister for Education, under Circular 7/85 from the Department of Education.

NPC develops its position on educational issues within some broad legal and policy frameworks. It is guided by the law of the land while all the time endeavoring to ensure that the law works to promote the wellbeing of children and parents. Some of the most important pieces of legislation for parents and NPC are the Education Act (1998), the Education Welfare Act (2000), and the Children Act (1999).

While the Education Act (1998) was being prepared, NPC-P worked hard to make sure that the Act would give clear rights to learners, and clear legal duties to all the parties that have responsibilities for our children’s education. NPC wanted to see the role of parents as partners enshrined in the new law. It also wanted to make sure that the Act would make secure arrangements for the quality of children’s education and the accountability of those providing it.

Section IV, Item 26, (1)/(2)/(3) of the Act states:

‘The parents of students of a recognized school may establish and maintain from among their number, a parents’ association for that

school. A parents’ association shall promote the interests of the students in a school in co-operation with the board, Principal, teachers and students of a school ... The board shall promote contact between the school, parents of students in that school and the community and shall facilitate and give all reasonable assistance to parents who wish to establish a parents’ association and to a parents’ association when it is established’

Membership and structure

National Parents Council – Primary is a three tier organisation. Membership of the Council comprises county branches. There are thirty county branches. Parents associations affiliate to the Council through their county branch and elect representatives to that branch. There are over 1000 parents associations affiliated to National Parents Council – Primary. The Council is incorporated as a company limited by guarantee and has charitable status.

Each county branch elects a committee and also elects one representative to the national executive. Special Schools, Irish speaking schools, minority religion schools and the Integrated Education Group, in addition to their representation through the county structure, elect two extra representatives each to the national executive. There is also special provision of a European Officer. The national executive thus has a potential membership of 37 and elects an officer board. The executive meets about seven times a year.

Aims

The Council is established to contribute to the advancement of the early education and primary education of each child and to support the involvement of parents at all stages of such education, bearing out our fundamental understanding that parents have a crucial influence on children’s life chances. This is done in a variety of ways as follows:

- We negotiate with the Minister and Dept. of Education & Science for improvements in the system and better resources for primary education.
- We represent the views of parents, on curriculum, class size, school transport, health and safety and many other issues of concern to parents.
- We are represented on a wide number of local, county and government working groups and committees.
- We work for the rights and entitlements of parents and children and are

very proud of our record in regard to children with special needs.

- We work with teachers, management bodies and the department to promote partnership in local schools and at national level.
- We provide advice and training to new parent associations starting out, existing parent associations who may need a refresher course and parent representatives on school boards of management.
- We provide workshops, talks and training on a range of topics of interest to parents, for example, special needs, relationship and sexuality education, early learning, transition to post primary.
- We provide a helpline that is open to all parents to seek help, information, support and a sympathetic ear.
- We provide an advocacy service for parents who are taking or intending to take a formal complaint to the board of management of their child's school.
- We provide an information and interactive website with links to the Departments website and other important educational websites.

Policy and accountability

Policy is set by an annual delegate conference and provides an operating framework for the executive. The Council publishes an annual report and a statement of account, prepared by independent auditors, to the membership and to the Minister for Education. Parents, through their P.A and subsequently through their County Branch, can propose motions to be included on the Order Paper for discussion at the ADC. This not only allows parents to channel their views, ideas and concerns to national level, but also empowers them to become involved in the decision making of their own organization.

The detail of NPC positions is worked out through discussion and examination at National Executive meetings, Working Groups on which NPC is represented and Research undertaken by members of staff to assist the council in developing its thinking on complex educational matters. Often, positions emerge in the course of work with the partners in education, the teacher unions, management bodies, health board committees, the NCCA and others.

NPC has developed detailed positions on children's education rights under several headings:

- The right to an appropriate, properly resourced education

- The right to any support services needed to ensure each child can participate fully in education in accordance with his/her needs and abilities
- The right to quality in education
- The right to a positive school experience

One of the important challenges for the council is to remain flexible and on top of new developments, so that it can make sure that its position on educational issues reflects the changing circumstances and needs of children and parents.

Funding

The Council is grant aided by the Department of Education and Science. NPC also collects affiliation fees from parent associations. (32 euro – 95 euro depending on the size of school) A set portion of the fee is paid to national level and the remainder is used to run the county branch.

In a voluntary organization, funding is always sought after. Over the years, we continued sustained representation for increased funding from the Government and at a recent meeting of the National Executive with the Minister for Education & Science, Mary Hanafin, the members pressed her to provide adequate funding in order to run the organization. Documentation was provided on the work and future plans of NPC. After the Annual Delegate Conference held in Cork on 15th-17th April, 2005, it was confirmed that the grant to NPC will be increased.

NPC Training and Development Programme 2004

The Training and Development Unit, within the Council, called The Parents Programme also receives a grant on an annual basis from the Teacher Education section of the Department of Education and Science. As the name – The Parents Programme suggests, parents themselves play a lead role in identifying their own training and support needs. Training programmes are designed and run in a way which takes full account of the needs and experience of parents. In its approach to its work, The Parents Programme is committed to using best practice in adult learning.

Because of the funding received, NPC is enabled to provide a range of essential supports to parents, and to contribute to developing the skills, the knowledge and the confidence to engage in partnership at school level, at local level and at national level.

Some of the programmes offered include:

- Training for New Parent Associations;
- Training for Parent Reps. on Boards of Managements;
- Special Education Journey Series of Talks;
- Early Learning/Starting School Project;
- Relationship and Sexuality Education Workshops;
- European Home/School Partnership Module.

Training for New Parent Associations

This year alone NPC held training workshops for new parent associations in over 30 locations around the country. The aim of the training is to raise awareness of the importance of partnership in a school community and offer ideas as to how to manage and develop a Parents Association once it has been started in a school.

Training for Parent Reps. on Boards of Management

These sessions were also held in over 30 locations around the country and were very well attended especially as the term for new Boards started this school year. The aim of the training is to review Parent Representatives perception of their role and their contribution to the board of which they are now members and it examines the role and function of a BOM and the attendant legislation that governs its operation.

Special Education Journey of Talks

A series of talks for parents of children with special needs took place over a four week period in both Cork and Galway this year. The topics covers were: how to recognize a child with Special Needs; Dylexia; Language Disorder and Transition from Primary to Post Primary School for children with Special Needs.

Early Learning/Starting School Project

This project has to date been run as a pilot in 3 locations in Dublin. The programme is aimed at parents of children from 0 to 5 years. Its aims are to look at how children learn, particularly how children learn through play and the importance of play in young children's development. The module is designed to be both a practical guide for parents in their children's development and a useful resource in preparing your child for school.

RSE Workshops for Parents

The Training Programme received funding from The Crisis Pregnancy Agency to run relationship and sexuality education training for parents. The aim of this training was to help parents in this area of their children's lives in conjunction with the school RSE Programme. To date the training has taken place in 7 different counties and after receiving additional funding from The Crisis Pregnancy Agency for 2005 we are planning to continue the programme in other counties in the next academic year.

European Home/School Partnership Module

Since the launch of the Partnership module in Rome in Nov. 2003, NPC Training and Development unit has successfully delivered this programme to three Colleges of Education in Dublin. The module focuses on creating a positive Home School Partnership. It is hoped that other colleges will incorporate this module into their teacher-training programme in 2005.

The People whom NPC serves

Any parent/guardian of a primary school child can become a member of NPC. Where a P.A. has been established in a school and that P.A. affiliates to NPC then members can avail of reduced fees for certain services.

At an Extraordinary Delegate Meeting held in December 2000, a motion was put forward to amend the text of Section 2 of the Memorandum of Association, to include Early Education in addition to Primary Education in all NPC's activities. The motion was unanimously carried. This would now allow for parents of Pre-school children to become members of NPC. In theory this was a very welcome development but in practice it hasn't really met the needs of the people whom it wished to serve. Only a small number of parents in Pre-schools in the Dublin area have become members, but it is hoped that when the Strategic Plan is put in place and different categories of membership are opened up, then entry to NPC for parents of pre-school children will become easier and more flexible.

Operation at national level

Since it was established in 1985 the Council has provided representation for parents as partners in education on various Government appointed education bodies. This representation ensures that a parent perspective influences policy and practice.

Some of the current committees on which NPC have representation are outlined below:

Primary Curriculum (NCCA)

A review of the operation of the primary curriculum is now taking place and in harmony with the views represented by NPC the views of parents and children will be sought in addition to the feedback from teachers.

Guidelines for parents on the Primary School Curriculum and for schools on how best to include parents in the partnership process are being developed by NCCA in close cooperation with NPC. Interactive guidelines on DVD, CD, video, web and paper format are being developed.

Special Education Steering Committee (NCCA)

The Special Education Steering Committee was set up to draw up a curriculum across the full range of subjects for students with mild general learning disabilities; moderate general learning disabilities; severe and profound general learning disabilities. These Guidelines were launched by the then Minister for Education and Science in Oct. 2003. A number of schools were selected to pilot the programme, Special Schools and mainstream primary and post primary schools and evaluations of the pilot were carried out. The meetings held since have been to discuss amendments and additions to the various subjects which have been put forward for ratification by three Education Officers on foot of the feedback from schools.

ICT Steering Committee (NCCA)

The role of the committee is to oversee and coordinate the role of information and communication technologies in curriculum and assessment. NPC believes that parents have an important role and can contribute significant expertise to the development of the use of ICT in education. At present a framework for ICT in curriculum and assessment is being developed. At primary level ICT is seen as a tool to support the curriculum rather than as a stand alone subject.

Early Childhood Committee (NCCA)

The committee was established in 2004 to develop a framework for early learning and to consult with all interested parties to produce a draft document.

Ireland has no national framework to guide adults in supporting children from birth to six years in their learning.

Language Committee Primary (NCCA)

The role of this committee is to advise on the teaching of language – Irish in English medium school, English in Irish medium schools, language for children whose mother tongue is neither Irish nor English. The committee will also advise on the teaching of a third language such as a European language.

Transition between primary and post primary schools (NCCA)

‘Moving Up’ a study commissioned by the NCCA from the ESRI – this is an important piece of research, which should help schools and parents plan for successful transition between primary and post primary school. The booklet can be downloaded from the NCCA website.

National Education Welfare Board (NEWB)

The NEWB is required to ensure that every child attends a recognized school or otherwise receives an appropriate education. To discharge its responsibilities, the Board is developing a nationwide service that is accessible to schools, parents/guardians and others concerned with the welfare of young people. The NEWB offers a helpline which aims at putting children first; offering parents information and assistance and providing a bridge between home and school.

NEWB School Implementation Group

The Group, which includes parents, teachers, principals and school management, has been set up to give on-the-ground support and advice to the NEWB. Under the Education Welfare Act parents will participate fully in drawing up codes of behavior at school level in accordance with national guidelines. Understanding that some children experience particular difficulties, we will be seeking guidelines that are child and parent friendly. This is very important as parents will have to sign the code of behavior of the school their child is attending.

Commission on School Accommodation Steering Group

The Minister for Education & Science in 1996 established the Commission on School Accommodation. The partners in education structured the commission to combine the benefits of technical expertise and participation. Some examples of their brief include the rationalization of VEC's; criteria and

procedures for the recognition of new primary schools and criteria and procedures for establishing and maintaining provision through the medium of Irish in second level.

Gender Matters Review Steering Committee

The committee was established to review the current approach to gender issues in schools and to develop a module/pack to assist schools in achieving gender equality. A research group was set up to explore gender equality in primary education. With the advice of the Steering Committee a template has been devised. The template requires all schools to develop a gender equality policy and schools must regularly review its ethos and practice with regard to gender equality.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education Consultative Committee (CECDE)

The CECDE is developing a set of Principles underpinning the National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education. The Consultative Committee was established to inform interested participants of developments in relation to the project; to give them the opportunity to present their views and to provide a forum for discussion on issues related to early childhood care and education. Over 40 organisations, Government Department and personalities are represented. Early discussions have covered the intrinsic link between early childhood care and education, the Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill 2003 and the role of the Irish language in early childhood care and education. One of the key objectives of the Centre is to prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by the White Paper.

New Schools Advisory Committee (NSAC)

The Minister for Education & Science established the NSAC to give him independent advice on applications for the establishment of new primary schools. NSAC considers applications under the following criteria: whether the proposed school will meet a need that cannot reasonable be met within existing provision; the desirability of diversity of provision; the degree of local community support for the proposed school.

School Development Planning Consultative Committee

The School Development Planning Consultative Committee is made up of

representatives from the Department of Education & Science, NPC, INTO, Catholic Primary School Managers Association and the National Coordinator of School Development Planning. SDP is now happening in all schools. A leaflet for parents on school development planning has been prepared in consultation with NPC. Guidelines are being written to help schools, parents and children develop a code of behavior.

National Assessment of Mathematical Attainment

This group was established to conduct a survey of mathematical attainment of pupils in fourth class in primary schools and will be used to compare the results with a survey which was conducted in 1999. The survey was completed in May 2004. The study will also examine the use of calculators on fourth class and make recommendations on the mathematics curriculum.

Education Centre Management Committee (Blackrock)

The remit of the Education Centers was broadened in the Education Act (1998) to include the wider community. A major review of the operation of Education Centers took place in 2003. The recommendations of this review together with budgetary restrictions are presenting Education Centers with new challenges. Many of the Education Centers around the country are now cooperating with NPC to deliver training for parents' representatives on Boards of Management and for parent associations.

Children's Rights Alliance

The Alliance is an umbrella group of non-governmental organizations and individuals concerned with promoting the Rights and welfare of children in Ireland. The Alliance promotes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and worked to have an ombudsman for children in Ireland which we now have in place. NPC is a founder member of the CRA.

Eastern Regional Health Authority – Working Group on Obesity

Established in 2004, to prepare an action plan for implementing the recommendations of the National Obesity Task Force in the eastern region of Ireland. The committee will examine best practice and look at current responses to prevention and treatment and will also examine prescribing diabetes medication and identify the activities of private support groups and look at playgrounds and leisure facilities and initiatives of the Department of Education and Science.

European Year of Education through Sport 2004 (EYES)

The committee was set up to promote EYES by organizing a competition for schools and raising awareness in schools of sport as a medium for learning. The committee developed a mini curriculum for teaching through sport/physical education. A competition was held and sponsored by AIB. Because of the influence of NPC the plan included communication with parents.

Another important aspect of the work of NPC at National level is the provision of the *Helpline* which has been running for 7 years now. Parents can access information, encouragement and support to assist them in responding to their children's educational needs.

During the past year (2004) the helpline received over 2,500 calls, mostly from parents, but also from teachers, on a wide range of issues and concerns. The highest number (a third) were about setting up parent associations, their role, and disputes) 20% were about board of management issues 20% were about school and education policies (code of behaviour, enrolment, homework, assessment, class size, uniforms, transport, supervision and safety, 9% were about bullying, 5% special needs the remaining 8% included national policy issues, school attendance and the National Educational Welfare Board and another for example: supervision and safety; in-service days, erosion of the school year: unauthorised school closures. unqualified substitute teachers.

Finally, a very important service offered to parents is the Advocacy Service. This is a service for parents who are taking or intend to take a formal complaint to the board of management of their child's school. A skilled, trained advocate can help a parent to prepare well for a hearing of their complaint and present their case clearly and effectively.

Operation at county level

A county branch of NPC is a structure through which parents and parent associations in a county can come together and work for the best possible educational experience for children. It is the link from the parent to the national organisation. Delegate meetings are held at least once a term and in the more active counties, once a month where the elected delegates from affiliated P.A's are invited to come and participate in information sharing, discussions on educational issues of local/national importance and hear organised talks from invited guest speakers. It is at these Delegate meetings that motions are brought

forward and discussed for inclusion at Annual Conference. It is through the county structure that parents can have their voices heard.

The county structure offers opportunities to:

- Build a network of parents at county level who can give and receive support
- Enable parents to exchange ideas about their children's education, parental involvement and children's learning
- Channel the views, ideas and concerns of parents to national level
- Make links with teachers and others in the county who are interested in children's education
- Offer opportunities for sharing information about the activities of parent associations within the county
- Offer training and development projects to improve parents' capacity to help their children and to become involved in their schools
- Disseminate up-to-date information on the work of NPC at national level to parents in the county.

County branches undertake many projects during the year. Themes of talks, projects, workshops and seminars have included:

- NPC strategic plan
- Special educational needs
- Literacy and numeracy
- Homework
- Bullying
- The internet
- Board of management information evenings
- Training for BOM's
- Training for Parent Associations
- The school building programme
- The hazards of clubbing on our young people
- Dental hygiene
- The environment
- Presentations on the work of parent associations
- Self esteem
- Coping with dyslexia
- The new curriculum
- European day of parents and school

Some counties have a link to the NPC website (www.npc.ie) which makes the work of the counties accessible to all providing another way to share ideas and create networks between parents.

Future Developments

The capacity of parents to influence educational outcomes for the better is not confined to middle-class, well educated parents. All the evidence points to the input and commitment of parents of all backgrounds to influence outcomes. We just need flexible and responsive ways to invite all parents to engage. At this time, NPC is actively engaged, through its strategic planning process in ensuring that ours is an organisation for all.

To that end a lengthy and wide ranging consultative process got underway whereby all interested parties were encouraged to partake in the process of re-organising the Council which has sought to promote and support their needs since 1985.

In January 2004, parents endorsed a broad framework of proposals for change and development of NPC as an organisation. The changes proposed were:

1. Setting up two new categories of membership:
 - a. Individual parent members and
 - b. Associate members
2. Changes to ways of working at county, local and regional level
3. Setting up a policy-making Council, which will also elect the board of parent directors.

At the Annual Delegate Conference in 2004 an Implementation Group was set up to investigate and examine any changes needed to the Memorandum and Articles of Association and Rules of NPC arising from the proposals.

The Implementation Group began its work in May 2004. As a first step in the task, it looked in detail at how the broad proposals adopted by EDC would be made to work in practice. On completion of this stage, the Implementation group provided a report of its advice to National Executive in November 2004. This initial report contained proposals on the follows:

1. The new categories of membership;
2. Ways of working at county level;
3. The operation, membership and election of Council;
4. The operation, membership and election of the Board;
5. Finance and administration issues.

The advice on these matters was finalised following detailed discussions and feedback from National Executive and the proposal and its implications were presented to the delegates at ADC in Cork in April, 2005.

Conclusion

From the foregoing I hope you now have a better picture and understanding of the role of National Parents Council – Primary and its mission in supporting parents of pre-school and primary school children in this country.

I leave you with a quote from our Chairperson when she addressed Conference in 2003:

‘Parents carry a heavy burden of responsibility for children’s lives and their learning. Our ‘reason for being’ as an organisation is that we know just how much influence parents have on children’s life chances. We believe that parents must take this responsibility very seriously.’

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'Girls and Boys Are Different!' An exploration of Parental responses to a Questionnaire Survey on Gender in the early Years

Maura Cunneen

Introduction

In recent years, much debate has surrounded the subject of gender stereotyping and its long-term effect on life choices and chances. However, the gendered patterns of behaviour and employment choice which emerge in adulthood, may have their genesis in the experiences of childhood, particularly early childhood

The main theories of gender development diverge along a continuum from 'innate' to 'learnt'. Psychoanalytic theory places great emphasis on biological determinism as Freud (1856-1939) contends that the biology of females and males pre-determines their later gender roles which are universally unmodifiable and inevitable. In contrast, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1968) emphasises environmental factors through which sex-stereotyping and differential gender roles are learned and, as such, are not unmodifiable or inevitable. Biological and environmental factors are considered influential in the development of gender identity in Cognitive-Developmentalism, as Piaget (1952) and Kohlberg (1966) stress the importance of developmental timing, as changes in children's understanding of gender are structured by their experiences. A more recent theory to emerge is that of Gender Schema (Cognitive/Information Processing) which emphasises the importance of past experiences. Individuals build up an internal conceptual framework (a Gender Schema) which may assist in the development of sex-stereotyping, as gender consistent information is encoded more efficiently and is also better remembered (Bem, 1981a).

In consideration of the abovementioned theories, therefore, parental attitudes and expectations, as to what constitutes masculinity and femininity and their attendant gender roles, are immensely influential especially in the early years. Furthermore, it has been noted by Bailey (1993, p83) that,

'Because the early childhood years are a critical time for children's learning, a time when they are attempting to make

sense of the world around them, this is also the time when information about role behaviours for females and males will have a significant impact'.

In order to ascertain parental attitudes towards the topic of gender in the early years, a questionnaire was circulated nationally to a randomly selected group of 100 parents of children under six years of age. This questionnaire formed part of a wider study into gender socialisation practices which included the observation of 160 children under the age of six in various early years settings, and the circulation of a questionnaire to 100 randomly selected State and Voluntary practitioners nationwide.

Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire was structured so as to minimise response time and expedite the analysis of findings.

Section One sought factual information on matters such as the sex and age of respondent. This entailed the filling in, or 'ticking off', of the appropriate box.. Section Two concerned itself with an assessment of parents' responses to a number of attitudinal statements. The 'Likert Scale' is the instrument most frequently used for testing attitudes. This consists of an attitudinal statement containing a scale which registers opinions ranging from none to extreme. This questionnaire used a seven-point Scale, wherein the respondent indicates a preferential attitude by circling a number after each Scale.

Section Three was open-ended in composition. It was hoped that, by allowing respondents such freedom of expression, an insight would be gained into their underlying attitudes and aspirations.

Parental Responses

Seventy-seven percent of questionnaires were completed and returned by parents. A computer analysis of the completed parental questionnaires, using the S.P.S.S. package, was undertaken and a Reliability Coefficient – Alpha 0.88 – resulted. An analysis of Section One revealed that the majority of respondents were female.

(97.4 per cent) and aged between 30 and 35 years (42.8 per cent).

Section Two contained 41 statements relating to the subject of gender. These statements related to various aspects of gender such as the following: attitudes to gender, gender and social development, temperament and gender, gender specific activities/toys/clothes, and the education/ ability/careers of girls and boys.

A sample of responses relating to the aforementioned headings is outlined below:

Percentage Agreements of Parents with Regard to Questions Concerning Gender

	Disagree	Agree
Fathers have more difficulties than mothers with regard to boys playing with 'girls' toys.	30%	68%
Parents have different behavioural expectations of their sons and daughters.	50%	44%
Young boys are physically more competitive than young girls.	46%	52%
Young girls are more adept at emotional blackmail than young boys.	43%	49%
Boys are, by nature, more disruptive than girls.	44%	52%
It is easier to teach girls than boys.	53%	31%
Girls' achievements are better in single sex schools.	35%	36%
Co-education in the primary school is healthy.	6%	90%
Young boys need a strong male role model.	26%	65%
Male infants should be dressed in pink occasionally.	63%	10%

While Section Two of the questionnaire produced results which allowed for statistical analysis, Section Three provided invaluable personal insights into what respondents considered to be of great importance in relation to gender in the early years. In some instances, respondents contradicted the answers they had given in the previous section of the questionnaire, while many wrote at length and in depth concerning what they considered to be particularly relevant. Furthermore, an analysis of responses to this Section of the questionnaire was noteworthy for the fact that, unlike Sections One and Two,

it was not completed by any of the paternal respondents while many of the maternal respondents concentrated the majority of their comments on boys.

In the main, respondents remarked on the need for girls and boys to receive an equal education; that they should be taught together if possible, that both sexes should learn to respect each others' differences and learn to co-operate. The majority of respondents expressed concern about their sons' interest, or lack thereof, in school or school work. Others noted that, while their daughters enjoyed both Pre-School and Primary School, their sons preferred Pre-School. Many stated that their sons were more immature on entering school, that they lacked concentration and required a great amount of assistance with their homework. It was interesting to note that many more respondents remarked upon their sons' educational difficulties, while very few did so for their daughters. In relation to their daughters, the adjectives 'neat', 'tidy', 'diligent', 'caring', 'conscientious' were used by many. On the other hand, the adjectives 'noisy', 'messy', 'boisterous', 'active', 'loud' were mentioned in connection with their sons.

With regard to opinions expressed in relation to the subject of gender and the upbringing and education of young children, the following extracts are representative examples of many of the respondents comments:

Boys are always physical and noisy. They believe in thumping first and talking later ... I feel boys relate to each other by wrestling and hitting each other, as it is not acceptable by society for boys to be hugging and kissing each other. Boys appear to tune out if you use flowery language or elongate orders – straight clear and concise orders/speech works wonders!!!

I feel girls are born with a nurturing instinct. They talk things over and analyse issues without jumping in. However, girls are more manipulative and shy, and very good at getting their own way!!!

... Fathers seem to have very set ideas on what a boy should be like, on how he should act and what he should become. I have found that boys are a lot more affectionate in the presence of females only. I feel strongly that these feelings should not be suppressed ... While I agree that co-education at primary level benefits both males and females as boys get older and become more aware of their bodies and their feelings towards the

opposite sex they become terribly self-conscious and this affects their academic abilities. Therefore I do not agree with co-education at secondary level.

It is my opinion that girls are allowed a lot more freedom to express themselves than boys ... As regards educating girls, again I would disagree with co-education at secondary level, with the view that it is a distraction for girls.

I have exposed them (boys) to a variety of experiences and toys. I have sent them to co-educational pre-schools and primary schools and I encourage them to mix with girls ... I encourage their sensitive and creative sides and certainly refuse to act as a servant to them.

I think girls are more mature than boys at a young age and are more capable but lose this self confidence as they grow older. I try to treat both sexes equally and expose them to the same materials and experiences but then genetic factors and environmental factors become apparent especially as they grow older.

Although we didn't consciously steer them towards 'boys' toys and activities, they seemed to naturally go in that direction but homework is a much bigger chore.

Our girl has been into books from a very young age and finds schoolwork very easy ... She has little patience to sit and make Lego and is much more headstrong than the boys.

I think boys are more boisterous than girls in general. I do think they need a strong male role model. I find boys to be very 'loving' more than I would have expected. I think it is very important to develop them emotionally especially in a society where very often they need to be seen as 'tough'. I would think that boys are generally attracted to traditional boys toys anyway.

I feel boys upbringing should be geared towards getting in touch with their feelings and being allowed to cry and express whatever feeling is appropriate for them. I also think co-education is necessary for the development of boys.

I feel girls also need to be free to express feelings and educated towards the wider male dominated subjects e.g. metal work, carpentry. They should also be encouraged in everything they do to gain self-confidence.

I would like to see less emphasis on 'macho' things. Boys shouldn't be considered odd if they have no interest in sport of any kind. ... Boys are wonderful and need to be left develop their own strengths instead of pandering to traditional preconceived notions of man-hood.

I believe girls need their self esteem raised right through childhood. ... Boys and girls are different!

It is essential for boys to interact with girls in the primary school environment ... it may encourage boys to behave slightly less boisterous and may even encourage their competitive spirit in academic work.

Perhaps the mixing of primary school children will encourage girls to become more involved in sports especially as they reach the higher classes 5th 6th and all secondary level.

My little boy is only at playschool at the moment, and I must say I thought he wouldn't be as clever as my daughter, but he has surprised me so far.

My daughter is in Senior Infants, and loves school. She is very clever, loves looking at books and writing. When she was one year old her Grandad would show her books and read them to her everyday.

My daughter was certainly easier to teach than my boys. My boys are pretty stereotypical boys I am afraid to say! Always dirty, cursing, big into sports, not bothered about anything only fun, games, food, friends and the latest fads.

No matter how old fashioned it sounds I like boys to be masculine. I like girls to be assertive strong and able to compete with any male academically but without losing the feminine side. I like my kids to be quite tough – 'wimps' (awful word) either aged 6 months or 60 years I cannot tolerate.

Conclusion

One of the most fundamental aspects of human society is the relationship between the sexes. Therefore, the issue of gender (involving the cultural, social and psychological differences between females and males) is of the utmost importance, particularly in the early years when gender roles are acquired or assimilated. In relation to parents, Wilder and Powell (1989) reviewed research

conducted into parental socialisation patterns of girls and boys. They concluded that parents encourage, respond to, interact with, provide activities for and hold expectations of girls and boys which are quite different.

As is evident from an analysis of respondents' questionnaires, parents of young children hold differing views in relation to the issue of gender in the early years. Some parents hold stereotypical views of both sexes, *i.e.* boys are boisterous while girls are nurturing.

However, the emotional development of boys was a cause of particular worry to many respondents who decried the emphasis placed on macho behaviour for boys, while others expressed concern at girls' loss of self confidence as they grow older. Finally, parents are the first educators of their children and they, above all, need to be made aware of the impact that differential treatment and expectations has on their daughters and sons.

'The most important educators and carers during a child's first years are the parents.'
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The Spirit of the Infant World: Self, Objects and People

Francis Douglas

'Love thy neighbour as thyself'
(2nd Commandment).

Introduction

Psychology is named after the Greek goddess Psyche. Psyche, of course means 'mind' but in mythology, Psyche was the sister of Venus, and she was so beautiful that the God Eros fell in love with her. Psyche is that elusive and beautiful mind or spirit that we all have (and that can be studied but perhaps never fully understood). In the story, the Psyche of Greek mythology, despite tremendous obstacles, persists in her search for what makes her soul complete. And what makes her soul complete is love.

This paper takes the findings from psychology and applies them to the human infant with respect to their own being or 'self', their relationship to objects in the surrounding environment, their relationship to other human beings and most importantly their need for spiritual sustenance.

Current infancy research is part of a tradition that is deeply rooted in Western philosophy, in particular the tradition of dividing mental life into separate arenas such as cognition, perception, motivation, attention, social behaviour, emotions or personality. The resulting representation of mental life is a sort of juxtaposition of separate 'psychologies' that function as discreet units. Such divisions do not foster what is particularly apparent in infancy: the great interdependence of all these areas.

In comparison to other primates, human infants are born too soon. According to some estimates, for humans to have the growth level at birth of other great ape species, their gestation time should more than double – from nine months to more than twenty-one months. (Rochat 2001). One reason which has been given for this is that the rich stimulation in the extra-uterine environment is necessary for the human brain to develop. This stimulation would determine

the higher learning and unique psychological functioning developed by humans. Accordingly, the development of intellectual power would depend on a supportive and stimulating environment.

Another contributing factor, one linked also to the particular demands of human brain growth, might simply arise from the amount of food required to support human physiological growth. Beyond forty weeks of gestation, it is feasible that the fast development of the fetal brain can no longer be supported by maternal energy reserves and supply. This would contribute to the premature birth of human infants. Outside of the womb, via breastfeeding and other forms of external nourishment, infants would get access to richer sources of energy to support their highly demanding growth.

With immaturity comes social dependence and supervision. The prolonged immaturity characterising human infancy is associated with richer parenting compared to other primate species. Psychological scaffolding from parents is pervasive from birth, fostering infancy as a period of play, teaching, exploration, and experimentation. This scaffolding is particularly pronounced in humans and is an important expression of how unique we are in primate evolution.

As it is relatively safe thanks to the caretakers' supervision, play also invites infants to try new combinations of behaviour. In other words, play fosters creativity – the exploration of new means to achieve particular effects, attain particular goals, and discover new objectives.

In general, there is a large excess of brain cells at birth that are selectively eliminated during development based on whether they are activated and whether they find a target area to innervate. In certain brain regions, like the visual cortex, most neurons find some connection with other neurons because they are densely packed. Cell density limits the process of cell death in this particular region. In other regions, like the spinal cord, a selective cell death is more pronounced because targets for neurons are more limited. These facts demonstrate that even at the level of brain growth, the enormously complex network of neurons forming the nervous system is actually sculpted in the course of ontogeny, mainly by selective attrition from experience. The remarkable plasticity of the brain in development points once again towards the mutual relationship between nature and nurture in infant development.

Synaptogenesis in the human cerebral cortex begins by the second trimester of pregnancy – after most of the billions of neurons forming the fetus's nervous system have already found their targets – but it occurs mainly after birth. For example, the number of synaptic connections in the human visual cortex at birth is only about one sixth of that found in adults. Interestingly, synaptic connections there show a ten-fold increase between birth and six months, with a sharp decrease starting at twelve months of age, and from two years on, a slower decrease.

As neural networks in infancy do not develop independently from experience, the structure-function relation is not simple. It is mediated by the experience of the infant as perceiver and actor in a meaningful environment. But what is meaningful to infants? In this paper I promote the hypothesis that infants develop in relation to three basic categories of infantile experience: the SELF (that is one's own body), physical OBJECTS, and PEOPLE. These three pillars are inseparable and they support and hold the infant world together.

The ecological niche of infants is specific and comes with particular kinds of experience. Imagine an infant in her cot, just fed and with a new nappy on, awake and happily looking around. She might bring one of her hands to her mouth and suck one of her fingers. Or she might explore the colourful lining of the cot. She might also make eye contact with a talking face leaning over her with a smile. Each instance captures one of three primary categories of experience that are the foundations of the infant world: the experience of SELF, OBJECTS and PEOPLE. Quality of interaction is going to be vital.

Some of the findings within the different fields of psychology have been very informative for the Early Childhood Sector. In particular, the findings of neuroscientists have made an important contribution to the understanding of children's growth and development. After birth, the developmental process of the brain is primarily concerned with the creation of synapses between neurons. Neurons receive and send messages from one part of the brain or body to another. The point at which two communicate is a synapse. The amazing fact is that, by age two, a child has as many synapses as an adult; by age three, toddlers have more than 1000 trillion synapses, roughly twice as many as the average adult! The explanation for this is that the developing brain creates many times more neurons and more synapses than it will eventually need. This unwieldy mass of synapses is then gradually pruned, with unneeded or unused

synapses dropping out. The pruning process appears to occur throughout childhood, although it does not occur at the same time in all parts of the brain. For example, the maximum density of synapses in the portions of the brain that has to do with language comprehension and production occurs at about age three. (Montessori would have described this as the critical period for language and Froebel as the budding point for language).

The crucial message is that the pruning process is heavily dependent on the child having sufficient experience if the particular neural connection is to become a permanent part of the brain. However, synapses that are not used, or not used often enough, will be pruned out (Bee, 2000, p108)

These findings are significant for the care and education of young children. It is clear that the brain thrives on variety and stimulation, and will retain a more complex network of synapses than when growing up with fewer forms of stimulation. Monotony of surroundings, toys that only do one thing, a classroom display kept up for too long, are soon disregarded by the brain (Brierley, 1987. In Nutbrown, 1994, p.7). Another important point is that this plasticity of the brain in early childhood also means that the child may at this time be most vulnerable to major deficits, making these early years a critical period for brain development. A really inadequate diet or a serious lack of stimulation in the early years will thus have long-range effects on the child's later cognitive progress (Bee, 2000, p109).

The 'Self'

The body is a privileged object of exploration in infancy and much of infant's behaviour is orientated towards their own bodies and how their body relates to the environment. Froebel (1837) through his close scientific observation of infants established this as a fact. The direct perceptual experience of the body is permanent, unlike that of other physical objects and people in the environment. People and objects come and go; the body does not. From birth, one's own body is the companion of all psychological experiences. The same applies to other aspects of the self such as feelings and emotions which are unique to the person.

The early inclination of infants to explore their own bodies forms the cradle of self-perception and the developmental origin of self-knowledge. For infants, the body is a major feature of the world. (Rochat, 2001)

As Stern (1985) suggests, young infants perceive themselves primarily by experiencing fluctuations in their own bodies: stillness and movement, silence and self-produced noises, surging and fading feelings of satiety, comfort, joy, hunger or pain. Infants experience their own vitality as perceivers and actors in the environment, and they do so on the basis of multimodal perceptions specifying their own bodies. By engaging in self-exploration, infants pick up information that uniquely specifies their own body in action. This activity is a primary source of learning about the embodied self.

Spitz (1985) maintains that the mouth for the infant is the cradle of perception. We might add that as the primary locus of self-orientated action, it is also the cradle of self-perception. As grown ups, we perceive ourselves mainly in what we do and the results of our own actions. We only spend so much time in front of a mirror or inspecting directly our own body parts. More than a static body image, we have a sense of our own agency in the world, what we are capable of achieving, what we have achieved or failed to achieve. We perceive ourselves as more or less in control of situations in the environment that we have caused or to which we are subjected. Infants engage in a similar process but they have still much to learn.

Many developmentalists believe that infants are born without a sense of self. Mahler (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975) likens the newborn to a 'chick in an egg' who has no reason to differentiate the self from the surrounding environment.

Other developmentalists (Brown, 1998. Meltzoff, 1990) believe that even newborn infants have the capacity to distinguish the self from the surrounding environment. For example, newborns cry at hearing a recording of another baby's cries but not upon hearing a recording of their own cries, thus implying that a differentiation of self and others is possible at birth (Dondi, Simion and Caltran, 1999).

Meltzoff (1990) says,

'The young infant possesses an embryonic 'body scheme' ... [Although] this body scheme develops [over time], some body scheme kernel is present as a 'psychological primitive' right from the earliest phases of infancy (p160)

Although debatable in the first two months or so almost everyone agrees that

the first glimmerings of this capacity can be seen in the first two or three months (Samuels, 1986; Stern, 1995).

So if a two to four month old baby could talk, he might answer the 'Who am I?' question by saying 'I am a looker, a chewer, a reacher, and a grabber who acts on objects and makes things happen.'

Once infants know that they ARE (that they exist independently of other people and other objects), they are in a position to find out who or what they are (Harter, 1983). When do infants perceive themselves as having unique physical characteristics? When do they construct firm self images and view themselves as an object that has a sense of permanence over time?

One way to answer these questions is to expose infants to some visual representation of the self (that is a videotape or mirror reflection) and see how they respond to these images. Research of this type reveals that infants only four to five months old seem to treat their own faces as familiar social stimuli (Legerstee, Anderson and Schaffer, 1998. Rochat and Striano, 2002)

One social experience that contributes to self-awareness in humans is a secure attachment to a primary caregiver. Pipp and her associates (1992) administered a complex test of self-knowledge to two and three year olds, a test assessing the child's awareness of his name and gender as well as tasks to assess self-recognition. Securely attached two year olds were outperforming their insecurely attached age mates on the test, and differences in self-knowledge between secure and insecure three year olds were even greater. (This is not surprising as the more the child is played with by their caregivers the more the child realises his or her own identity).

Parents and caregivers contribute to a child's expanding self-concept by providing descriptive information ('You're a big girl'; 'You're such a clever boy') and by evaluating noteworthy events that they have shared with them, such as a trip to the seaside. In these conversations children are typically asked 'Where did we go last week?' 'What was your favourite thing about the trip?' These interchanges help to organise their experiences into a storyline narrative and allows recall of events that have personal significance – as things that happened to ME (Farrant and Reese, 2000)

And these autobiographical memories, which are initially co-constructed with the aid of an adult, help to illustrate that the self is stable over time, thus contributing to a growing sense of EXTENDED self (Povinelli and Simon, 1998)

The ability to experience SELF CONCIIOUS emotions such as embarrassment depends on self recognition. Furthermore, toddlers who have reached this self-referential milestone soon become more outgoing and socially skilled. They now take great pleasure in imitating a playmate's activities (Asendorph and Baudonniere, 1993; Asendorph, Warkentin and Baudonniere, 1996) and will occasionally even co-operate (as illustrated by one child's operating a handle so that another can retrieve toys from a container) to achieve shared goals (Brownell and Carriger, 1990)

Once toddlers display clear evidence of self-recognition, they also become more sensitive to the ways in which people differ and begin to categorise themselves on these dimensions, a classification called the CATEGORICAL SELF. (Stipek, Gralinski and Kopp, 1990). Age, sex and such evaluative dimensions as good-bad are the first social categories that toddlers incorporate into their self-concepts, as illustrated by such statements as 'I big boy, not a baby' or 'Jennie good girl' This has obvious implications for future self esteem.

Young children even become aware of racial and ethnic categories although it may take a while before they can classify themselves correctly.

Native American 3 – 5 yr olds, for example, can easily discriminate Indians from whites in photographs but are less accurate in specifying which category they must resemble (Spencer and Markstrom-Adams, 1990). A similar 'misidentification' phenomenon has been observed among African-American pre-schoolers, who show a clear pro-white bias and associate fewer positive attributes with the colour black or with African-American people (Cross, 1985; Spencer, 1988).

Minority children often display a pro-white sentiment and highly favourable self-concepts (See Spencer and Markstrom-Adams, 1990). The so called 'misidentification' that minority pre-schoolers display may simply reflect the same early awareness of negative stereotypes about minorities that white children display (Bigler and Liben, 1993) and desire to align themselves with what they

believe to be the most advantaged group (Spencer and Markstrom Adams, 1990)

A three year old child's perception of herself made up from a composite of several pre-school children might be like this:

I am three years old and I live in a big house with my mother and father and my brother, Jason, and my sister Lisa. I have blue eyes and a kitty that is orange and a television in my room. I know all my ABC's listen ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ. I can run real fast. I like pizza and I have a nice teacher at pre-school. I can count to 10, want to hear me? I love my dog, Skipper. I can climb to the top of the jungle gym ... I'm really strong. I can lift this chair, watch me!' (Harter, 1999, p37).

Developmentalists say that pre-school SELF CONCEPT is concrete, physicalistic, and almost devoid of psychological self awareness. Pre-schoolers seem to define 'Self' in terms of 1. Physical Attributes, 2. Preferences, 3. Possessions and 4. Actions.

In contrast psychological descriptors such as 'I'm Friendly' or 'I'm helpful' are rarely used by children this young (Damon and Hart 1988, Harter, 1999).

Not everyone agrees that pre-schoolers are limited in their self-concept to observable characteristics and devoid of any psychological self-awareness.

Eder (1989,1990) finds that when three and a half to five year olds are asked to respond to contrasting forced choice statements that require fewer verbal skills than 'open-ended' 'Who am I?' questions, they can quickly characterise themselves on psychological dimensions such as sociability – 'I like to play by myself' vs. 'I like to play with my friends'.

Furthermore, they characterise themselves differently on different dimensions, and these self-characterisations are stable over time (Eder,1990). Although pre-school children may not consciously be aware of what it means to be 'sociable' or 'athletic' or to be an 'achiever'. Eder's research implies that they have rudimentary psychological conceptions of self long before they can express this knowledge in trait-like terminology.

When adults think about the self, they know that it consists of a Public Self (or me) that others can see and a Private Self (or I) that has an inner, reflective (thinking) character not available to others.

The first steps towards acquiring a theory of mind are the realisations that oneself and other humans are animate (rather than inanimate) objects whose behaviour reflects goals and intentions. Remarkably, two month old infants are making some progress, they are already more likely to repeat simple gestures displayed by humans rather than by an inanimate object, thereby suggesting that they may already identify with human models (Legerstee, 1991). By age six months, infants perceive human actions as purposeful and know that humans behave differently towards people than they do towards inanimate objects. For example, if six month olds see an actor talking to an unseen stimulus behind a screen, they expect a person to appear when the screen is removed and are surprised if an inanimate object appears instead. By contrast, if the actor had manipulated the unseen stimulus, six month olds expect to see an object and are surprised if a person appears (Legerstee, Barma and DiAdamo, 2000). By nine months, infants engage in a good deal of joint attention, often pointing at or otherwise directing a companion's attention to objects or events, thus implying that they perceive a social partner as capable of understanding or sharing their own perspectives and intentions (Tomasello, 1999)

By 12 – 14 months, infants follow an adult's eyes to objects that the adult is looking at and are likely to visualise themselves or to point when they look on to this visual target (Brooks and Meltzoff, 2002). And by 18 months, toddlers have discovered that desires influence behaviour and can often reason accurately about other people's desires. (Rapacholi and Gopnik, 1997)

Between ages two and three, children often talk about such mental states as feelings and desires and they even display some understanding of the connections between different mental states. They know, for example, that a child who desires a biscuit will feel good (happy) if he receives it and feel bad (sad, angry) if he doesn't (Moses, Coon and Wusinich, 2000; Wellman, Phillips and Rodriguez, 2000).

Two and three year olds are also aware that they may know something that others don't (O'Neill, 1996) and that people cannot actually observe their thoughts (Flavell, Miller and Miller, 1993)

Yet, even though three year olds have become aware of the human mind and an emerging private self, they still have a primitive understanding of such constructive and interpretive mental products as beliefs and inferences. In fact they have been labelled DESIRE THEORISTS because they think that a person's actions generally reflect his desires and do not yet understand that what a person believes might also affect his behaviour (Cassidy, 1998; Wellman and Woolley, 1990).

Between ages three and four, children develop a BELIEF-DESIRE theory of the mind in which they recognise, as we adults do, that beliefs and desires are different mental states and that either can influence one's conduct (Wellman, Cross and Watson, 2001). So a four year old who has broken a vase may try and argue that it was unintentional and therefore O.K.

As with all complex issues, it is difficult to conceptualise self-knowledge without breaking down the concept into more meaningful parts. In his classic account, James (1884) distinguishes two basic kinds of self, the 'I' and the 'Me'. The 'I' corresponds to the self as the experimenter of the body and in the environment. It is the existential and situated self. The 'Me' corresponds to the identified or conceptual self. This distinction underscores the difference between the self that is identified, recalled and recognised and the self that is merely experienced at a physical level in transactions with the environment. In relation to the 'Me', James categorises it further into 'material self', the 'social self' and the 'spiritual self'. If such categorisation is relevant to account for self-knowledge in grownups, it is also in relation to the self in infancy, prior to unambiguous evidence of self recognition (namely the notion of 'Me' or conceptual self).

'Objects'

Children and adults alike use people as mirrors to reveal who they are. Infants do likewise. Much of how we perceive ourselves is indeed measured against how we think others perceive us. Self-perception is inseparable from our perception of others as onlookers of us. This is what being 'self-conscious' means, and it is close to impossible to escape the so called audience effect. Thus the perception of ourselves becomes essentially social.

The same is true for cognition: knowing about something is inseparable from knowing about the self. When infants learn about objects, they also learn about

themselves. When, for example, infants come to understand the notion of permanent objects – that objects continue to exist when they momentarily disappear from view – this understanding is inseparable from the developing sense of the infants own permanence in the environment. The notion that objects are permanent is possible only to the extent that infants start to consider themselves as situated, omnipotent perceivers of objects that can either be in or out of sight, that can come or go. If infants expect an object to reappear at a particular location, they do so because of what they know about the object and themselves: the two processes are inseparable.

From birth, infants encounter physical objects. Objects they see, touch, hear, taste and smell. Food, nipples, cot linings, mobiles, rubber pacifiers, trees, animals, and printed wallpaper. A world of things that do not reciprocate like people and behave independently of the self when the body is not acting on them. So what do babies perceive of these things and how do they make sense of them?

Fetuses exposed to short rhymes read aloud each day by their mother from the 33rd to the 37th week of gestation are shown to discriminate eventually between these rhymes and a novel control rhyme read by the mother. After daily exposure to the maternal rhymes, recording of the fetus's heart rate shows significant deceleration when these rhymes are played back. No deceleration is recorded when the control, a novel rhyme, is played to the fetus (DeCasper *et al.* 1994). Exposure to specific speech sounds appears to effect subsequent reactions to those same sounds. Evidence of this remarkable auditory learning in fetuses suggests that infants can learn in utero the familiar temporal patterning of their mother's voice.

The womb is indeed a noisy environment. In addition to their mother's voice, fetuses hear the heartbeat and physiological noises, digestive and others, of their mother's body. The rhythmicity of the maternal heartbeat that fetuses are exposed to probably explains in part the effectiveness of rhythmic soothing techniques for young infants.

Newborns not only hear, they also have a highly functional senses of taste and smell. Neonates are shown to modify dramatically their sucking pattern when they obtain sweet water from a nipple compared to plain water. When tasting

sugar, they slow down their sucking and appear to savour it. This is a very robust and reliable phenomenon that researchers describe as suggesting an innate hedonic response in the infant (Lipsitt, 1979)

Regarding smells, newborns manifest clearly differentiated reactions when different odors of impregnated cotton swabs are passed under their nostrils (Soussignan *et al.*,1997). Within 48 hrs of their birth, neonates heartbeats, breathing, and body movements are different when they are offered vinegary (acetic acid) compared to sweet (anise) scents. They display differentiated facial expressions in response to bitter (quinine sulfate), sour (citric acid), or sweet (sucrose) smells. In response to the sweet smell, neonates smiled, sucked, and licked. In response to the sour scent, the infants pursed their lips, wrinkled their noses, and blinked. To the bitter smell, they showed distinct depressed mouth corners and an elevated upper lip; some infants even spit (Soussignan *et al* 1997). Thus, infants from birth appear to discriminate among novel odors by responding in specific ways.

Hours after birth, neonates are shown to discriminate the smells of their own mother's body, milk, and even amniotic fluid from those of a female stranger (Marlier, Schaal, and Soussignan, 1998). These obviously have implications for bonding and attachment.

If audition, olfaction and gustation appear to be well developed at birth, vision is less mature and continues to develop in marked ways post-natally. Developmental psychobiologists have shown that across avian (bird) and mammalian species, the sensory systems become functional in an invariant sequence: tactile, vestibular (sense of balance), chemical (olfaction and gustatory), auditory and finally visual (Gottlieb, 1971)

In mammals, including humans, the delay in visual development is due both to the complexity of the system and the lack, if not the total absence, of visual stimulation in the womb.

To develop normally, vision requires ambient light stimulation. The same is probably true for other sensory systems, which in contrast to the visual system, get plenty of pre-natal stimulation: the amniotic fluid is tasted and smelled via fetal sucking and swallowing, and the rich and varied sounds are heard from sources both inside and outside the mother's body.

Prior to birth, some dim light may penetrate inside the womb, but the intra-uterine environment is essentially dark. Despite this darkness, ultrasonic imaging shows that by 23 weeks gestation fetuses have slow and rapid eye movements (de Vries, Viser, and Prechtl, 1984).

Can babies count?

Before we consider this question the following remarkable passage shows that crows can count!

A squire was determined to shoot a crow which made its nest in the watch-tower of his estate. Repeatedly he tried to surprise the bird, but in vain; at the approach of man the crow would leave its nest. From a distant tree it would watchfully wait until the man had left the tower and then return to its nest. One day the squire hit upon a ruse: two men entered the tower, one remained within, the other came out and went on. But the bird was not deceived: it kept away until the man came out. The experiment was repeated on the succeeding days with two, three, then four men, yet without success. Finally, five men were sent: as before, all entered the tower, and one remained while the other four came out and went away. Here the crow lost count. Unable to distinguish four and five it promptly returned to its nest. (Dantzig, 1954 p.3)

To test whether young infants are capable of simple arithmetic, Wynn (See Rochat, 2001. p113) devised the following simple and clever experiment using a looking-time procedure within the context of the violation of expectation paradigm discussed earlier. Five month old infants faced a puppet theatre with a Mickey Mouse doll resting on the stage. After a few seconds, a screen rotated up occluding the doll, and the hand of the experimenter emerged from the side of the stage, adding another doll behind the screen. Following the action, the screen was rotated down revealing either one or two dolls. A possible outcome was classified as one where the result was consistent with the transformations that would have occurred if basic arithmetic principles applied (one object plus another object leaves two objects). An impossible outcome was also devised in which the result was not arithmetically consistent (for example, one object plus one object leaves one object).

Possible and impossible outcomes were alternated in successive trials in which the infants' looking time was recorded. In one condition (subtraction), there were two dolls on the stage and a doll was retrieved by the experimenter's hand from behind the screen. In another (addition), a doll was added. Results show that in both addition and subtraction conditions, infants looked significantly longer at the impossible compared to the possible test outcomes. Similar results are repeated with a procedure involving three objects instead of only two (that is, 3-1 or 2+1)

It appears, then, that in addition to interpreting the object world according to core physical and causality principles, infants from at least four to five months of age also appear to abstract numerosity in simple physical events. Froebel (1837) obviously observed this innate mathematical ability and decided to introduce his first 'gift' of a soft woolly ball to the baby at approximately the age of three months.

Recent infancy research demonstrates that infants know much more than meets the eye of an observer who focuses on babies' self-generated actions on objects. Babies are active explorers from birth, but relatively slow-developing, clumsy actors. They need to overcome many motor and postural obstacles (look at the weight of the infant's head) before they can perform unambiguously knowledgeable acts on objects such as reaching with anticipation and searching for hidden objects.

'People'

Attachment

Although babies can communicate many of their feelings right from the start, their social lives will change rather dramatically as they become emotionally attached to their caregivers. What is an 'emotional attachment'? Bowlby (1969) used the term to describe the strong affectional ties that we feel for special people in our lives. According to Bowlby, people who are securely attached take pleasure in their interactions and feel comforted by their partner's presence in terms of stress or uncertainty. So ten month old Michael may reflect the attachment relationship he shares with his mother by reserving his biggest grins for her and by crying out to her or crawling in her direction whenever he is upset, dis comforted, or afraid.

Attachments are Reciprocal Relationships

Bowlby also stressed that parent-child attachments are reciprocal relationships; infants become attached to parents, and parents become attached to infants. In many ways this is quite remarkable as can be seen from the following question by a student after listening to his professor.

‘Why do you feel that way? Newborn infants drool, spit up, fuss, cry, dirty their diapers on a regular basis, and often require lots of attention at all hours of the day and night. Since babies are associated with so many unpleasant consequences, wouldn’t learning theory predict that their parents should learn to dislike them?’ (Shaffer, 2005. p131)

Even before their baby is born, many parents display their readiness to become attached by talking blissfully about the baby, formulating grand plans for him or her, and expressing delight in such milestones as feeling their fetus kick, hearing his heart beat with the aid of a stethoscope, or seeing her image on ultrasound (Grossman *et al*, 1980).

What is more, research conducted and widely reported in the 1970s and 1980s implied that parents who had extensive close contact (and ideally, skin to skin contact) with their newborn in the first few hours after birth would quickly become emotionally bonded to her, and that the parental bond that forms during this early ‘sensitive period’ would be stronger and remain stronger than those later established by other parents who had had no contact with their babies shortly after birth (Klaus & Kennell, 1976, 1982).

The ‘sensitive period’ hypothesis was a radical claim that other researchers quickly sought to evaluate. What later research has told us is that having close contact with a newborn can intensify positive feelings that parents may already have for their baby and help them get off to a good start with him or her, especially when mothers are very young, economically disadvantaged, and know very little, themselves, about how to stimulate or to care for an infant (Eyer, 1992). But there is no compelling evidence that parents who haven’t had early contact with a newborn will later have difficulties establishing intimate ties to that child. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary. Most adoptive parents are quite satisfied with and end up establishing very close emotional ties to their adoptees, even though

often they have had no contact with their adopted infants for days or even weeks after birth (Levy-Shiff, Goldschmidt and Har-Even, 1991; Rutter, 1981) Indeed, the likelihood that a mother and her infant will become securely attached is just as high (or higher) in adoptive families as in non-adoptive ones (Stams, Juffer, and Van Ijzendoorn, 2002; Singer *et al*; 1985).

Easing the Pain of Separation

At some point, most parents find it necessary to leave their infants and toddlers in an unfamiliar setting such as a crèche, nursery or pre-school. There are three positive things that they can do.

1. Provide an explanation for the separation

Cognitive developmental theorists tell us that separations are most upsetting when infants and toddlers cannot explain where caregivers have gone or when they will return. Toddlers who are left in unfamiliar settings cry less and play much more constructively if their mothers have taken a moment to explain that they are leaving and will soon return (Weinraub and Lewis, 1977). Brief explanations work better than lengthy ones (Adams and Passmore, 1981) and one need not prepare a toddler days in advance for an upcoming separation. In fact, two year olds who are prepared in advance often worry in advance; moreover, they protest more and play less constructively once separation actually occurs than do age-mates who have received little advance preparation (Adams and Passman, 1980).

2. Provide some reminder of home

Ethologists tell us that separation involving a strange caregiver in a strange setting are likely to be particularly upsetting. Separations can be made less painful for older infants and toddlers if they have some reminder of home with them, such as a favourite stuffed animal or a security blanket (Passman and Weisberg, 1975). Indeed, giving the toddler a sharply focussed photograph of his mother (or having one available for the substitute caregiver to show to the child) may also help him to respond more constructively to a necessary separation (Passmore and Longeway, 1982).

3. Choose a sensitive substitute caregiver

All developmentalists advise parents to select a substitute caregiver who enjoys children and is sensitive to their concerns. Although infants eight months of age and older are likely to become visibly upset when first left with an unfamiliar

sitter, their adjustment to this arrangement clearly depends on the sitters behaviour (Gunmar *et al*, 1992). If the sitter assumes a ‘caretaker’ role by first settling the child in and then pursuing her own interests, most infants and toddlers will continue to display signs of distress. But if the sitter acts as a ‘playmate’ by providing toys and attracting the child’s interest, most infants and toddlers will quickly stop protesting and join in the fun (Gunmar *et al*, 1992).

Attachments as Working Models of Self and Others

Bowlby (1980, 1988) and Bretherton (1985, 1990) have proposed an interesting explanation for both the stability and possible enduring effects of early attachment. They believe that ‘models’ – that is, cognitive representations of themselves and other people – are used to interpret events and to form expectations about the character of human relationships. Sensitive, responsive caregiving should lead the child to conclude that people are dependable (positive working model of others), whereas insensitive, neglectful, or abusive caregiving may lead to insecurity and a lack of trust (negative working model of others). Although this sounds very similar to Erikson’s (1963) earlier ideas about the importance of trust, ethologists (Bretherton, 1985, 1990) proceed one step further, arguing that an infant will also develop a working model of the self based largely on her ability to elicit attention and comfort when she needs it. So an infant whose caregivers respond quickly and appropriately to her bids for attention is likely to believe that ‘I’m lovable’ (positive working model of self) whereas one whose signals are ignored or misinterpreted may conclude that ‘I’m unworthy or loathful’ (negative working model of self). Presumably, these two models will combine to influence the quality of the child’s primary attachments and expectations she has about future relationships. What kinds of expectations might she form?

A recent version of this ‘working model’ theory is as follows (Adapted from Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991):

		Model of Self	
		POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Model of Others	POSITIVE	SECURE (Secure primary attachments)	PREOCCUPIED (Resistant primary attachments)
	NEGATIVE	DISMISSING (Avoidant primary attachments)	FEARFUL (Disorganised/ disorientated p.a.)

Infants who construct positive working models of themselves and their caregivers are the ones who should (1) form secure primary attachments, (2) have the self confidence to approach and master new challenges, and (3) be inclined to establish secure, mutual-trust relationships with friends and spouses later in life.

By contrast, a positive model of self coupled with a negative model of others (as might result when infants can successfully attract the attention of an insensitive, over intrusive caregiver) is thought to predispose the infant to form avoidant attachments and to dismiss the importance of close emotional bonds.

A negative model of self and a positive model of others (as might result when infants sometimes can, but often cannot, attract attention and care that they need) should be associated with resistant attachments and a ‘preoccupation’ with establishing secure emotional ties.

Finally, a negative working model of both the self and others is thought to underlie disorganised/disorientated attachments and an emerging fear of being hurt (either physically or emotionally) in intimate relationships (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

‘The Spirit of the Infant Child’

When the life of the infant child is viewed from a narrow evolutionary perspective, physical survival appears to be the fundamental truth because no other kind of evolution is discernable. It is from this point of view that ‘survival of the fittest’ appears to be synonymous with evolution, and physical dominance appears to characterise advanced evolution.

However, we must ask ourselves if this is true. Jesus, we are told, foresaw the plot against his life, even to the details of how his friends would act and react, yet he did not run from what he saw. The entirety of humankind has been inexorably shaped by the power and love of one who gave his life for others. All who revere him, and almost all who know his story, agree that he was one of the most evolved of our species.

If we bring up our children to believe that it is ‘A dog eat dog world’, and that to survive in it we must take advantage of others before they take advantage of us, we have missed the point that the spirit is more important than the body.

The cycles of life need to be approached with reverence, whether they be plants, trees, animals or human beings for they have been in place for millions of years. They are the very essence of the soul of the earth goddess Gaia whose consciousness moves into force fields and guides the cycles of life. If these life cycles are revered, how can we look at something as exquisite as our Earth's ecology and do one thing that would risk the balance of this system?

When we align our thoughts, emotions and actions with the highest part of ourselves, we are filled with enthusiasm, purpose and meaning. Life is rich and full. We have no thoughts of bitterness. We have no memory of fear. We are joyously and intimately engaged with our world. This is the experience of feeling empowered. This is what we want for our children.

Many human beings believe that every impulse and insight are his or her own. However, a more advanced mind knows that this is not always true and it is obvious from close observation of the human infant that intuition plays a major role. Impulses, hunches, sudden insights and subtle insights have assisted us on our evolutionary path since the origin of our species. That we have not recognised the guidance that has come to us in this way is the consequence of our limited belief.

Intuition comes from relationships between the spirit, emotion and rationality and we ignore any of the three at our peril. If the three are not in balance our intuition suffers. It therefore beholds the parent to foster in their offspring an equal measure of all three. This is done, primarily, by giving infants and young children 'freedom within limits' where they can develop their character, their will and their spirit.

Intuition serves many purposes including the ability to survive, to create, to relate to people, to inspire and to have clarity of thought. With respect to children and adults there are a number of positive steps that can be taken to help the intuitive process.

1. *Avoid negative emotions.* Emotions can block all our other senses – we can become numb, negative people. This attitude can even lead to a physically diseased body. On the other hand, positive emotions that revolve around love give scope for intuition and thus provide insights and wisdom.

2. *Eat the right food.* This can affect intuition as being physically toxic interferes with the process.

3. *Listen to the guidance that you are given.* Do not ignore it. Many people do not wish to hear what they hear.

4. *Be open to life and the universe* – you must approach all things with the belief that there is a reason for everything, even though you cannot in your present state understand it. You must believe that the reason is compassionate and good. You cannot control everything.

Much depends on relationships. Relationships between mother and child, between the child and the family, between the family and society and so on.

Relationships that are motivated by selfishness, whereby a person is seeking something from the other for themselves, are on a completely different plane to the person who is selfless and gives of themselves to the other. The former types of relationship never stand the test of time and tend to be repeated again and again with different people. The latter increase in depth and richness and provide real meaning to our existence.

Relationships involve intentions but intentions affect more than relationships. Intentions set into motion processes that affect every aspect of our life. If you desire to move house, for example, that change begins with the intention to change. As the intention to leave your present home emerges into your consciousness, you begin to open yourself to the possibility of living somewhere else. You begin to feel less and less at home in your present house. Your higher self has begun the search for your new home. When the opportunity presents itself you are ready to accept it. You may require additional time to step into the new situation consciously, to make it your own, because it is human nature to resist change, but, if you accept it, your attention will manifest itself physically. It will assume a physical form. In the same way your intentions for the education and care of your baby can take on a similar physical form.

Your dispositions, aptitudes, and attitudes reflect your intentions. If you are angry, fearful, resentful, or vengeful, your intention is to keep people at a distance. The human emotional spectrum can be broken down into two basic

elements: love and fear. Anger, resentment, vengeance are expressions of fear, as are guilt, regret, embarrassment, shame, and sorrow. These emotions produce feelings of depletion, weakness, inability to cope and exhaustion. Love produces buoyancy, radiance, lightness and joy. Your intentions create the reality that you experience. Until you become aware of this, it happens unconsciously. Eventually you will come to understand that love heals everything, and that love is all there is.

When you choose to respond to life's difficulties with compassion and love instead of fear and doubt, you create a 'heaven on earth'. You bring the aspect of a more balanced and harmonious level of reality into physical being.

Decisions such as where to live and how to educate and care for your child are not the only types of decisions that you make, nor are they the most important decisions that will influence your life or those around you. At each instant you make decisions in the form of your attitudes about the Universe, about other people, and about yourself. You make these decisions continually and your experiences at each moment are created by them. You are a decision making being. This process starts as a baby and defines who you are.

If you cannot love yourself you cannot love others and you cannot stand to see others loved. One manifestation of this syndrome is the adult who adopts a martyred attitude with respect to his or her love of others. They see this as a form of loving, but in truth the love that they give is contaminated because it is filled with sorrow for themselves. A sense of guilt and powerlessness results from such an attitude and when their affection is felt by another it does not feel good.

When you treat yourself kindly you know what it is to love yourself. It is only then that you can look at others who desperately need kindness and love and feel good about getting it.

Negativity attracts negativity, just as love attracts love. Therefore, the world of an angry person is filled with greedy people. And a loving person lives in a world of good people.

Finally, Mario Montessori in a Lecture concerning 'The Spiritual Hunger of the Modern Child' given in London in 1961 had this to say:

Two people get married – normal people who are quite selfish, who try to get as much fun as they can, to dress as nicely as they can, to amuse themselves as much as they possibly can – and then something happens. A stranger comes, because a child is a stranger, they never knew him before he was born. There we are, we have to clean him because he is dirty, we have to feed him, we have to stay up at night sometimes, if he cries we hug him and we caress him, we begin to put aside money and say, 'I must not buy this because this little creature will need it later on. 'What bigger conversion is there than this? Do you suppose that a preacher, no matter how inspired, could have persuaded these two young people: 'There is a paralytic person who cannot feed himself, he gets all dirty, you must stay up all night with him and clean him and take care of him and enjoy it?' No. There it is; this love has been aroused by what? By a few pounds of flesh which did not exist before. There is the power of the child. When you see the child himself, he is all power. How does it come that there is such a powerful abstract love, so much bigger than the child himself?

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Section Six
Children and the Media

Children, cinema and ideology in the Information Age – Analysis of Children’s Cultural Products

Sharon O’Brien

Introduction

This paper presents a critical examination of children’s animated film as cultural artefacts. It explores the notion of the child as a consumer and discusses some of the paratextual elements connected with children’s cinema. In order to explore the ideological values inherent in children’s cinema, animated films are deconstructed with reference to character, themes, motifs and representations of gender and race.

The Information Age

Since the early 1970s the unprecedented social change brought about by the technological revolution has resulted in a switch from manufacturing-based to services-based industries and from trading in goods to trade in information and knowledge. The information Society is characterised by rapid change, free flow of information and commodities and with the weakening of institutions and national boundaries, we now live in an interconnected global society where the axial principle of the age is information. (Bell, 1996)

Sternberg (1993:78) further argues that society has moved beyond consumer capitalism and is marked by an ‘*iconic capitalism*’, a market driven by the newest designer goods with designer personalities to match. He argues that whereas previous forms of capitalism produced *goods* that would be usable, now postmodern firms are producing *images* that are designed to appeal to customers’ *desires and longings*.

In a reversal of the modern industrial logic (in which the firm prepares a good and then considers how to market it) the postmodern firm begins with the celebrity, the pop-culture character, logo or news event – and then asks about the selection of mundane saleable items to which it can be attached

(Sternberg, 1993:79)

Sternberg’s argument is closely related to Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum. In his essay *Simulacra and Simulations* Baudrillard argues that the Information society is concerned with the primacy of the image over content, where a sign is no longer an index of a reality but of another sign, creating the concept of a simulacrum – an empty sign. This notion of simulacra is particularly relevant when looking at how animated film characters take on an iconic status of their own. Lara Croft and Jessica Rabbit are just some examples while Mattel’s *Barbie as Rapunzel* goes so far as to rewrite the traditional fairytale inserting its own simulacrum as heroine.

Children in the information age

Children are completely immersed in and consumers of media, with the primacy of the image becoming ever more obvious. Many recent studies show that television and other forms of new media are fast replacing books in the lives of young children.

A study conducted in the UK in 2000 by Dr Aric Sigman claims that the tradition of parents reading a magical bedtime story to children has ‘*plummeted from 93 per cent to 40 per cent in a single generation*’ (Poulter, 2000) and that children are now more likely to play a computer game or watch a television programme before going to bed.

A survey of adult reading habits conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts [NED] (2004) found the American situation to be ‘*dire*’. The study, which questioned more than 17,000 adults, found that less than 50% of Americans now read literature. The NED describe their surprise at the sheer *magnitude* of the decline but note that this transformation has been brought about by the shift towards electronic media. (NED, 2004)

A Children’s Book’s Ireland (2002) study revealed the situation in Ireland to be more optimistic. While there is no apparent decline in the reading habits of young Irish children, this does not imply a reduction in the use of other media. The Health Services Executive, (2005:10) recently launched a report on obesity, based on a national survey of parents of eight-year-old children. The report revealed that 83% of parents surveyed said that going to the cinema was their favourite family pastime and 61% reported that it was watching television or video. In addition, 33% of the children of those surveyed had a television in

their bedroom. Therefore, any analysis of what children are actually watching on television and what types of ideological viewpoints are being presented to them is valid and requires close scrutiny.

Children as consumers/ Commodity Flow

While children, like adults, are producers of meaning and decode media images daily, consensus about media effects on children is inconclusive and the success of such research is often hotly debated (McBeth, 1996; Hughes, 2001). Many studies however, have centred on advertising and commodity flow of children's television with little disagreement that children, more than any, seem to be aggressively targeted by producers of consumer goods.

Schor notes that where women used to be the domestic target of producers, now '*children have become conduits from the consumer marketplace into the household.*' (Schor in Hymowitz, 2005)

But increasingly, the lines between advertising and entertainment are becoming blurred. Commodity flow, which '*highlights the embeddedness of promotional and commercial techniques throughout television*' (McAllister & Giglio 2005:27) means that advertising and product placement can be so thoroughly embedded in children's cultural products that they can seem invisible. In other words, it begs the question: *where does advertising begin and where, if ever, does it end?*

To again take Mattel's *Barbie as Rapunzel* as an example, there can be little doubt that the film was made for its commercial value rather than for its artistic or cultural merit. But far more important than the sales of the cinema seats, DVD or video are the sales of the must-have new Barbie doll with extra long hair, complete with prince and other merchandise. It seems that it is no longer sufficient to own a single Barbie; rather, it is imperative that young girls have the latest collection, with each new item highlighting how outmoded the previous one has become.

McAllister and Giglio (2005:36) argue that the Pokémon series actually embeds the notion of collection into its text and note that '*Specific plot points often emphasized the importance of amassing large collections (a la the Pokémon brand slogan 'Gotta Catch 'Em all')*'

Genette's transtextual paradigm is a useful framework from which to look at a text in the Information Age. In the twenty-first century mediated world, a narrative does not exist in a vacuum but rather is surrounded by and embedded in a myriad of other texts.

Often referred to as Intertextuality, it is Genette's notion of paratextuality which is most useful in examining how children are targeted as consumers. The paratext of any given text is defined as '*all the physical and social texts that attend its existence, controlling its dissemination and reception.*' (Allen, 2000:103)

This includes titles, trailers, previews, reviews, interviews etc along with merchandising and toy-shop/restaurant tie-ins that accompany the launch of a product.

The paratext is heavily steeped in the world of consumption. Media convergence is a means by which to maximise revenue. Because the media is dominated by nine large profit-driven corporations who have interests in several media, the launch of a children's film is accompanied by a range of products in order to aggressively sell the same thing in different and more innovative ways.

The film soundtrack is part of the paratextual environment and can also increase the advertising potential, along with the perceived credibility of a film. Having released a film in the cinema, home videos and DVDs are released. The DVD in particular has created a space of its own and is an excellent medium for young children. A film can be played over and over without any loss of quality and the presence of additional '*interactive features*' gives the impression of choice.

In the case of *Shrek 2*, the DVD sold 21.6 million units in the US alone and was rated the number one home video and DVD release of 2004.¹ Currently, *The Incredibles* is the best selling DVD of the year. Since its June theatrical debut, *Madagascar* has grossed more than \$188.2 million in U.S. theatres and its arrival in mid-November 2005 on DVD will be supported by one of DreamWorks' biggest marketing campaigns ever for a home video release.

Following the DVD, is the release of the computer game. Numerous products can be found in toyshops and include books, action figures, dressing up

costumes etc. But the paratext then moves beyond the realm of the toyshop even extending to children's food products. In addition, the launch of many films feature tie-ins with McDonalds worldwide, where branded toys are given free with each purchase of a happy meal.

In fact, it seems that there is virtually nowhere free of marketing to children. Since successful advertising is dependant on prominent product placement, Shrek, Disney and Barbie products can now even be purchased in pharmacies. Body wash, liquid soaps and bandages are all for sale. It is apparent that should s/he so choose, a child could become completely immersed in the world of Far Far Away or Disneyland.

Ideology

It is the corporate, profit-driven nature of children's cultural products which has led to serious criticisms by many media theorists such as Schiller or Chomsky. Film functions as a cultural language and is a representation of a particular construction of reality and as such, it is not value-free. Stuart Hall (1982:356) defines ideological power as '*the power to signify events in a particular way*'. Perhaps because of its Marxist connotations, '*ideology*' is what Barthes (1972:81) refers to as a '*heavy*' word, unlike '*light, pure words*' such as '*passion*' or '*adventure*'. Every utterance and every text is spoken or written from a particular ideological viewpoint, and an individual author is always embedded in an existing pattern of social relations, whether s/he is conscious of this fact or not, to the extent that, according to Barthes, in the final analysis, culture *is* ideology.

Given its virtual monopoly over the children's cinematic text, Disney has been the receptor of much criticism over its ideological messages. The earliest criticism of the Disney Corporation came from Dorfman and Mattelart's (1975) study of Disney's *Duckburg* comics, claiming that not only is capitalist ideology encoded in all of Disney's productions, but that Walt Disney appropriated children's stories and made the timeless classics his own, imposing his right wing ideological viewpoints on older stories. This is a viewpoint shared by many theorists of Children's literature.

An interesting example of this is Byrne and McQuillan's (1999) theory of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) as a speech act, a commentary on the merits of Capitalism over Communism, one which tells the story of '*a deprived dissident's*

desire for the amenities of the West' (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999:24-25). They claim that the '*mer-world*' and Ariel's father represent the authoritarianism of the Eastern bloc while The Magic Kingdom on land represents not just the US and the attractions of consumer capitalism but '*Disney itself – a place which matches personal freedom with consumerist bounty and the pursuit of happiness*'. Ariel hordes the junk she finds from shipwrecks in a display of consumer fetishism, in complete contrast to the Anderson's original in which the little mermaid (who remains nameless) has no interest in any decoration except for red flowers.² (Tatar, 1999).

Disney has also been criticised for the sexist mouldings of its characters. Cinderella and Snow White have been accused of being portrayed by Disney as passive saccharine-sweet heroines, who can only be saved by a prince. (Zipes 1986; Craven 2002)

Some have commended Disney for the portrayal of Belle in the 1991 Oscar winning production of *Beauty and the Beast* (Craven 2002). Marina Warner notes that great care was taken to create a heroine that was active and had more contemporary notions of romance. The tale was made to appeal to the feminist sensibilities of '*mothers who grew up Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, who had daughters who listened to Madonna and Sinead O' Connor*' (Warner, 1994:313). June Cummins (1995 in Craven 2002:124) however, disagrees with this point, arguing that the film still promotes the notion that '*... true happiness for women exists only in the arms of a prince*'. Added to this is the criticism that the Disney version is one of domestic abuse. In the video, *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, Carolyn Newberger (Sun & Picker, 2001) refers to the Beast:

He screams at her, he imprisons her, he throws her father out the door and rips her family away from her. His behaviour is, without question, frankly and horrifically abusive.

Cummins (1995 in Craven, 2002:124) further argues that the Disney version of *Beauty and the Beast* '*strips the traditional fairy tale of anything but the romantic trajectory*' and Craven adds that the tale is carefully modified to comply with the conventions of consumer romance narratives. Parsons (2004:135) agrees and suggests that Disney is responsible for the '*perpetuation of romance ideology*' and the '*binary positioning of women and men*'.

This is a common juxtaposition in contemporary fiction; on the one hand, the protagonist is active and free-thinking but on the other, resolution is still based on the formation of a romantic love-interest.

What does this mean for children?

Giddens (1992) argues that we are constantly trying to develop a narrative of the self, a story about who we are. The messages received through the media are capable of '*suggesting models for the construction of narratives of the self*' (1991, 199). Self-actualisation then, becomes another commodity.

Even for young children, the maxim '*never judge a book by its cover*' sounds hollow in a mediated world obsessed with images of beauty. Image triumphs over content and a book is almost always judged by its cover. Nevertheless, obsession with beauty is not a message parents want to convey to their children and so it is a recurrent theme in children's film. But sometimes the degree of success with which it is dealt is questionable and there is a dissonance between the spoken words and other semiotic meanings. The following example, from *The Swan Princess* (1994) illustrates this point.

Derek tells Odette that he loves her because she is so beautiful:

Odette: Is beauty all that matters to you?

Derek: What else is there?

Odette, along with the young audience, knows that Derek has much to learn and, offended by his lack of insight, she deprives him of her attention and leaves him. Eventually however, he proves himself worthy of her love by saving her life, but unfortunately, the thread of the lesson Derek has to learn is left undone in the film. He fails to reach any realisation other than to recognise his desire for Odette. For her part, Odette is depicted as waif-like, with blonde, waist-length, flowing hair and huge, innocent, blue eyes. The real message that comes across is that Odette gets her prince – but it is precisely *because* she is beautiful and her protestation at his perception of beauty serves no real purpose. The question '*What else is there*' is actually left unanswered.

Shrek 2, on the other hand, attempts to deconstruct some of our audience expectations. While the goal is still a happy-ever-after, *Shrek 2* asks what this

really means, and challenges the conventions surrounding what constitutes a happy ending and how it is to be achieved. It addresses the notion of beauty but it also deals with it in meaningful way. In a twist to the conventional tale where the beast is transformed into a prince, both Shrek and Fiona *choose* to turn back into ogres. The realisation is that their happy-ever-after does not depend on an external notion of beauty.

The image of Fiona as the heroine of *Shrek* very clearly makes the point that the concept of beauty is a subjective one. In *Shrek 2*, the audience first identifies with Fiona as an ogre. In her ogreish guise, she is supposedly big and ugly. Animated fairytales in general do not have female protagonists who are unconventionally beautiful (*Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *The Little Mermaid*, (1989) and so identification with Fiona sends a positive message to a young audience.

As a character, Fiona is strong and active. She does not simply rely on her beauty; she takes an active role in her own destiny. For Fiona, beauty is irrelevant. In the first film, *Shrek*, she dreams of being saved by a prince, an expectation to which she has been ideologically programmed, but as she is explaining to Shrek exactly how he should save her, she actually saves herself. In *Shrek 2*, when Shrek is caught in a trap by villagers, it is Fiona who fights them off and saves him. The character of Fiona provides a positive role model for young children.

In contrast, in the *Swan Princess 2*, Odette's place is very firmly in the domestic sphere, while Derek's role is played in the larger world, managing the business of the kingdom. Odette sits patiently in the palace, waiting for Derek to return for dinner and reminding him of domestic matters, such as his mother's birthday. Any 'feisty' behaviour on her part is just empty gesturing until she returns to type. Derek constantly assures her '*You're so good Odette; you're so kind*' (*The Swan Princess*, 1997) but there is no indication of real intimacy between them. As such, the tale does not deviate from the traditional animation style or indeed the classic action-driven fairytale where character motivations are irrelevant.

Deviating from the norm is part of the metafictional appeal of *Shrek 2* however. Turning the tables on traditional character expectations, the fairy godmother,

far from being quaint and kind, is a determined, cut-throat, albeit sugar-coated villain. For her, beauty is all-important; it is part of her business. She urges Fiona that a little 'nip and tuck' is all she needs to attain beauty and then she will find her prince. The fairy godmother represents the celebrity world of the image-maker. The fact that she is the villain, underlines the emptiness of her consumerist ideology and this is reinforced by her disappearance in the closing scenes in a cloud of bubbles, a virtual simulacrum. The signification here is that evil does not lurk in obvious places and that her hollow obsession with artificial beauty and the attainment of perfection is the antithesis to the meaning found in the less beauty-obsessed relationship between Shrek and Fiona.

Despite its irony and analogy, it appears that the real message of Shrek's transformation is not one of a man dwelling in the body of a beast trying to get out. Neither is about accepting the beast within. It is about seeing through the *image* of a beast, recognising that the beast is not in fact a beast, but willing to change for the sake of a relationship.

The limitations of this paper only allow for a brief textual analysis of elements of children's cinema but the findings are that the messages vary considerable between productions. While it is contested as to whether or not exposure to stereotypes and biased ideological positions automatically become predictors of anti-social behaviour, what is clear is that given the amount of images that children actively decode on a daily basis, there is a need for continued research in the area. Film and television now play pivotal roles in young children's cultural understandings. Perspectives on childhood are changing and the post-modern child is considered to be a competent social actor. As a result, even very young children are being targeted by the Culture Industry and children's cultural spaces are part of a larger consumer-orientated society where the image is a valuable commodity. What this paper has attempted to do is present a case for research and for close scrutiny of cultural products for children in order to identify ideologies encoded within them, thereby gaining insight into meaning production.

¹ Source: The Hollywood Reporter

² For an absorbing and detailed discussion of gender and culture in Disney, see Bell *et al* (1995)

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The First Face of Cultural Hegemony: The Global Hierarchical Models Young Children Find in Disney Animated Media

Ruth A. Doran

The Disney Corporation enjoys undisputed prominence in the market of childhood entertainment and education. Today, the Disney Corporation is the sixth largest transnational multimedia corporation in the world, and is heavily invested in the corporate image of innocence and as a leader of wholesome, family entertainment, and optimal childhood experience. Their success in positioning themselves in this way is evidenced by the rankings of the sales: eight of the ten top-grossing animations worldwide are Disney products, and represent the central economic force of the corporation. (Walt Disney Annual Report, 2004). Their reported three billion dollar (approximately Euro 2.4B) commodity share in the secondary market from print and related merchandise sales further support their claim to be world leaders in developmentally appropriate and child-friendly materials. Further, more visitors go to Disney theme parks than go to all of the fifty-four national parks in the United States combined (Budd & Kirsch, 2005). With this powerful, multi-million dollar interrelated advertising and promotion, together with the historical dominance of their products, movies, and theme parks equating family entertainment, it is of little wonder that not only parents, but also under-trained early childhood paraprofessionals frequently reach for Disney products as they build their curriculum in the field of early childhood education and care.

For early childhood advocates, what young children should be learning, how young children should be learning it, and how that learning is to be evaluated are central issues invariably attached to the mechanics of provision of services. (Bredekamp & Copple, eds., 1997). In addition to physical and cognitive growth, for very young learners, aged zero to five, *socialization* is a primary psychological and developmental process. Cultural values are transmitted to young learners engaged in the socialization process in a variety of ways, primarily through the stories that are exchanged and the behaviors that are modeled. (Piaget, 1963, Bredekamp and Copple, eds., 1997, Gerbner, 1997, Good and Brophy, 1995, Estes, 2004, Morrison, 2005). As Gerbner observed,

present-day stories which transmit cultural values are now told by a relatively small group of transnational conglomerates who have something to sell. (1997). [Disney] films 'appear to inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals as do the more traditional sites of learning such as the public schools, religious institutions, and the family.' (Giroux, 1997, p53). This effectively serves world markets, but leads to a less textured and homogenized world view, with an accompanying narrowing of perspectives in young learners. How does this all serve to advance the global citizenry?

Young children need to feel confident and strong in their own right to negotiate a fully positive socialization stage of development. (Gruber and Voneche, 1995). Animated media can serve to erode a young learner's ability to fully and effectively socialize by replacing primary, personal experience with secondhand experiences, where the child passively watches others (animated characters) do things and react to situations. In addition, the imitative play that accompanies the toys sold (passively promoted by the animations) further reduces a child's ability to develop their own scripts based on their own needs. (Levin, 1998). Yet, the importance of young learner's imaginative play to their cognitive and language development is well established in early childhood learning theories (Piaget, 1963, and Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987).

Further, the degree to which a child absorbs cultural bias is founded in socialization processes, the hallmark of the early learning years. According to the A.B.C. Task Force, early childhood literature and media plays a strong role in the development of cultural bias during these formative years (Derman-Sparks, 1989). To support this claim, in a study examining the acquisition of linguistic prejudice through animation, Pamdey discovered that very young learners (three and a half years of age) absorb linguistic prejudice through animation. She found that animated media is a powerful pedagogical instrument, conveying attitudes and social value systems to the child viewer. (Pamdey, 1997). People in general and young children in particular (due to their developmental stage) can and do absorb values and cultural messages directly from the media they consume. (Sammond, 2005). The messages and views present in the world's most popular animations are 'articulated within the realm of fantasy and pretend, [yet] are firmly rooted within the material world and have very real consequences for those living in the real world.' (Coakely, 2002. p5).

In order to help preschoolers learn tolerance in a multicultural society, many early childhood educators in high quality child care programs have adopted anti-bias curricular standards. The strength of anti-bias curriculum is found in its integration into the day-to-day activities of preschoolers. (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Wu, 2000; *et al.*). Like any other developmentally appropriate curricula, anti-bias curriculum is not a rigid set of practices and activities, but rather, a set of guidelines and standards to use to integrate and establish bias-free environments and curricular content in early childhood programs, with the intent to help children become sensitive to issues surrounding diversity. (Riehl, 1993). Strategies that work in early childhood settings include the promotion of imaginative and creative play (rather than imitative play). (Levin, 2003).

On the Nature of Fairy Tales

What are fairy tales? Folk tales are stories orally passed down from generation to generation that are modified as they are told to remain current in their contextual frame. Folk tales are categorized as pour quoi tales, tall tales, or fairy tales. Pour quoi tales are stories that answer 'why' or have a moral, such as fables. Tall tales are characterized by legends, and communicate historical facts or admirable traits of idealized figures. Fairy tales contain the grouping of stories that frequently feature fairy godmothers or contain other emphases on magical elements. (Temple, *et al.*, 2002). Folk tales and fables were not originally written for children, they were intended to reflect philosophical thought. More often than not, early tales depicted adult customs, beliefs, and habits of a particular time. (Morgan, 1999). Oral tales were told by adults for adults. The purpose of the oral folk tale was to foster a sense of belonging and hope that miracles were possible for a better world (Zipes, 1979). They were closely connected to the customs, beliefs and rituals of tribes and communities. Oral folk tales were interactive. The audience could participate and even modify the tales to fit the needs of the community. Thus, it is rather remarkable that over the years they have become staples in the lives of young children. Actually, this has only developed since the nineteenth century when, in the United States, 'chapmen' (peddlers) traveled from town to town selling sundries and 'chapbooks' (fairy tales) that were made popular by the young readers at the time. Fairy tales had their beginning in children's literature, then, as a marketing tool for cheap vendors. (Cashdan, 1999).

Since about 1800, the role of fairy tales in education has consistently drawn attention and animated discussion. Opponents of the use of fairy tale literature

in early childhood programs cite intense imagery, fearful responses to common situations, and the reduction of imagination by the substitution of imitative play over imaginative play. (Wolffheim, 1953, Mitchell, 1982, Levin, 2003). To opponents, the substitution of realia literature promotes rich discourse and normative play and the development of imagination. Advocates cite the development of the id, the resolutions of complex archetypical elements of development, and the provision of models of resolution of the triumph of good over evil. Advocates also espouse the role fairy tale literature plays in the transmission of cultural components within the construction of ethnic identity. (Bettelheim, 1976, Cashdon, 1999, Temple, *et al.*, 2002).

On the Nature of Disney Fairy Tales

'We just make the pictures, and let the professors tell us what they mean.' (Walt Disney as quoted in Bell, *et al* 1995, p1). Of the top-grossing Disney animated films, all but one (*The Lion King*) are based on fairy tales, and are successful, in part, due to their time-tested popularity and longevity in our collective cultural ethos (including re-releases). For example, *Cinderella* first made her debut in 400 AD China, and has traveled through most cultures and societies ever since. (Sur La Lune, 2005), so in most cases, the original author(s) have faded into unrecorded history. Disney was so successful in the appropriation of fairy tales that his name has eclipsed the names of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and others. (Zipes, 1995).

Disney's appropriated fairy tale, echoes and uses, but does not necessarily draw on, a literary fairy tale tradition without an obligation to representational responsibility. At one time, the Disney Corporation was dedicated to the production of entertainment. However, the corporate fine-tuning of this entertainment to maximize secondary market sales has morphed this emphasis, effectively, into one giant commercial. 'Disney constructs childhood so as to make it entirely compatible with consumerism.' (Smoodin, 1994, p18). While consumers of popular culture may believe that the Disney Corporation is still dedicated to provide age-appropriate, family entertainment, the undisguised truth is that the Disney Corporation now exists to benefit the stockholders. In order to benefit the stockholders, the Disney Corporation must produce profits. As outgoing Disney CEO, Michael Eisner, stated so succinctly: 'Disney has no obligation to make history, art, or a statement, but simply to make money.' (*Michael Eisner as quoted in Sun, 2001*). And make money they do. In

2004, The Disney Corporation passed the one billion dollar mark in international sales for the tenth year in a row: the first time in history that any company has reached that distinction. (Walt Disney Annual Report, 2004). Disney's heaviest profits come from their animation division, accounting for more than seventy percent of the corporation's profits. A cursory review of annual sales of, in some cases, 30 year old films, speaks for itself. Consider *101 Dalmatians*, (15.9 million copies sold in one year); *Fantasia*, (9.6 million copies in the same amount of time); *Pinocchio*, (sold 13.4 million copies in 1993 alone); *Snow White*, (sold 36 million copies in 1994, worldwide). (Schweizer and Schweizer, 1998). The sales of print media are also significant, as Disney is also the world's largest publisher of children's books and magazines. These media alone are 'read by 100 million people in 55 languages in 74 countries.' (Walt Disney Company Annual Report, 2004). These statistics become even more staggering when considered in the contextual frame of the very young age of the consumers of these products.

On the Nature of Animation

Animation, simplistically, the art of making films frame by frame, is a designed and developed art form that can be targeted to evoke specific psychological and, in some cases, physiological responses. Walt Disney was widely regarded as an American genius with his ability to shape reality with color, musical scores, character development, shape, and size – as a producer and director, as he was not an artist or an illustrator. (Capodagli, 1999, Maltin, 2000, *et al*). Although Walt Disney was not the founder of this medium (*Felix the Cat* predated *Steamboat Willie*), he became, nonetheless, the undisputed champion of animation. Smoodin (1993, 1994) understands that the nature of animation is under examined by scholarly discourse, slipping by as 'children's entertainment.' However, the messages embedded within the animated tale are laden with issues of power, social control, behavior, cultural attitudes, and even transnational relations. Animations have taken the dual role of educator and entertainer. As noted by Giroux, '... the Disney empire must be seen as a pedagogical and policy-making enterprise actively engaged in the cultural landscaping of national identity and the 'schooling' of the minds of young children.' (Giroux, as quoted in Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997, p65).

What is the Disney Corporate formula for animation? Identifiable and consistent natural style, using strict artistic and corporate protocols with respect

to the richness of color and shading, and depth of background detail. In addition, Disney animations use full musical scores, and utilize story lines that share consistent themes, narratives, and ideologies, frequently including the loss of, or absence of, the protagonist's mother. (Thomas and Johnston, 1984). There is nothing casual or informal about each frame of the Disney animation. 'Looking for creative variation in Disney is like looking for menu choices in McDonald's or some other industrialized fast food chain.' (Artz, as quoted in Budd & Kirsch, 2005, p79).

The way that the musical score leads us through the animation was a critical element to Walt Disney and has remained a corporate hallmark. He realized that the audience felt a certain security when they knew what was going to happen, and could be lulled into this security with music. When surprise was the desired outcome, he was able to achieve this with an unexpected note – somewhere in the middle of the musical measure – someplace where it wasn't expected. In this way, the audience was led to expect one thing, frequently with the emphasis on the downbeat in the musical score, but then, in a totally unexpected place in the musical score, something unexpected would be written in to convey surprise, or the unusual, or the startling. We are led to experience the lives of the animated characters primarily by the use of the music. Sound effects were added as embellishments, the foundational experience of the animation was held together with the music. (Thomas and Johnston, 1984).

Walt Disney was also a master of the use of light and shadow. An often-cited example of this mastery was an episode during the manufacture of *Bambi*. The animators were having difficulty with achieving a desired 'terror level' during the fight between Bambi's father and the other buck in the story. With a glance at the thumbnails, Walt Disney purportedly suggested that the entire scene be drawn as if 'back lit' with the bucks fighting on a craggy ledge of a mountain, and with their outlines in brilliantly lit silhouette (also known as 'rim lighting'). The unexpected use of close ups, with gnashing teeth and flailing hooves, together with a brilliantly timed musical score achieved the 'terror level' in the test audience that was desired. This example is used to demonstrate the genius that Walt Disney brought to the medium. (Maltin, 2000). The net effect of this rim lighting, of course, is to draw the audience even closer into the scene – when the audience needs to strain to see, their imaginations fill in the gaps – as subliminally led by sound and music and color. (Thomas and Johnston, 1984).

The part about animation that is particularly significant for young children is that animation lends itself to be freed from ‘... the restrictive dimension of physical laws and, with its symbolic personification of values and ideals, disarms resistance to fiction and fantasy, which merge easily within the medium.’ (Artz, as quoted in Budd & Kirsch, 2005, p77). In the Disney animation, the audience is encouraged to relax and be led down a path meticulously articulated by a huge team of professional masters of story telling and illustration, set to compelling music. This perfected showcase of fairy tale themes brought to life in animation has earned the Disney Corporation a place of unprecedented trust in the American family, becoming America’s most popular babysitter in the form of videos and DVDs. (Schweizer & Schweizer, 1998).

Child Development

It is important to consider child development as a contextual frame for the consideration of the use of Disney animated fairy tales with preprimary children. Jean Piaget’s theory of developmental stages provides the theoretical underpinnings for many approaches to early childhood education and care around the world. Piaget’s theory of cognition includes the notion that a child passes through a series of developmental stages in an invariant manner that is also transformative, meaning that the quality of later intellectual behavior depends on the quality of the experiences that preceded it. Preschool children are typically engaged in the preoperational period of human development (typically age two through seven) (Piaget, 1963, Gruber and Voneche, 1995, and Good & Brophy, 1995, *et al*).

The term ‘preoperational’ is used precisely because children have not yet reached the point of engaging in logical or operational thought. In this stage, children are egocentric, meaning that they have not learned to consider things from another’s perspective, rendering objectivity impossible. Young children also attribute life to inanimate objects, believing that these objects have a mind of their own (animism). Piaget noted that children engaged in the preoperational stage do not think abstractly, objectively, or in a logical sequence. As explained by Piaget, these developmental hallmarks of the preoperational stage preclude young children from the strategies necessary to properly distinguish fantasy from reality, as developmentally, their ability to process information is structurally limited. Instead, reality consists of whatever is felt, seen, or heard, at any given moment. (Piaget, 1963).

These unrealistic perceptions of the young child give rise to irrational fears of abandonment; of attacks by monsters hiding in closets or under beds; of being alone in the dark; and/or of witches, ghosts, dragons, and other creatures of fantasy. Since fantasy literature (including animated fairy tales) cannot be distinguished as make-believe material and is often interpreted literally by the child, new fears may be created by reading stories to him or her about monsters, evil witches, trolls, giants, and other scary characters. (Whitin, 1994). This authentication by trusted adults (via storytelling) adds credibility and power to the ethereal and undefined fears of the young child. To attempt to explain to very young children that their fears are illogical and unfounded can be a futile exercise as the child is governed by what is perceived. (Mitchell, 1982).

The Disney Corporation’s founder, Walt Disney, perceived young children as *tabula rosas*, as evidenced by his comment that, ‘I think of a child’s mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly.’ (Walt Disney as quoted in Giroux, 1999, p54). This is precisely where Walt Disney, Piaget, and other developmental theorists converge: young learners are exceptionally impressionable and wide open to the cultural messages that are presented to them as reality. Interestingly, the literature is replete with the alignment between national values and curricular choices that exist throughout the world (Wasko, 2001; Spodek, 2005). What is remarkable, then, is that what we know as educators and parents, theorists and corporate founders, does not seem to inform the choices we make on behalf of children. Although the experiences encountered during the first years of a life set a trajectory which precludes other possibilities from developing, we find ourselves allowing children to become the specific target of corporations, who seek to enhance the bottom line for their stockholders. An elaborate interconnection of all efforts targets and retargets the young learners as young consumers.

Although, in a Piagetian developmental context, many young children cannot distinguish fantasy from reality, parents and educators alike continue to choose fantasy-type literature as appropriate for very young children, perhaps due to the interest preschoolers show in the medium. This is particularly true of Disney products, judging from their worldwide rank in the sale of products in the secondary market. Curiously, one of the reasons preschool children enjoy fairy tales is their very inability to think abstractly. From age three to five they

are magical thinkers, believing that thinking something causes it to be so. This is supported directly by Piaget's research. Liberal leaps over logical progression are the norm in preschool aged children's processing of information (Mach, 1993, Brierly, 1994).

Using this neo-Piagetian contextual frame, very young children are actively engaged in primary socialization processes and are particularly open to accepting the images of other cultures (as well as gender roles, moral, and socioeconomic values) that are defined and promoted through animated media. For very young children, animated media effectively establishes a cultural hierarchical model.

Bettelheim (1976) also shares the relevance of the transmission of one's cultural heritage contained within the unique nature of fairy tales. To Bettelheim, the fairy tale is an art form fully comprehensible to the child. Although most fairy tales fundamentally transcend both time and borders, it is important to remember that frequently, cultural variations on basic fairy-tale themes reflect the values and identities of the societies they represent. For example, the Western fairy tales support principles of revenge and justice (by the destruction of evil, even vigilante justice is endorsed), and that one must pay for one's sins. Western fairy tales grapple with the seven deadly sins of greed, vanity, gluttony, lust, deceit, sloth, and envy, and typically a fairy tale theme constellates around one of these sins. This explains the emotional fervor of children to certain fairy tales: the issues s/he is grappling with are found in the tale. (Cashdan, 1999). While lessons found in fairy tales form the essential force in our cultural heritage, they cannot be viewed as the therapeutic and developmental imperative for young children (Zipes, 1979). This, too, is where the corporate formulas promoted by the Disney Corporation loses some of the merits of the fairy tale as a conveyer of culture. With the strict protocols adopted by the Disney Corporation, the fairy tales blur into one another: the underlying themes are the same, and those themes support the dominant culture. (Giroux, 1999).

Maria Montessori was also widely known to be an avid opponent of the use of fairy tales in the early childhood setting, preferring, instead, to guide children to realistic thinking and to the conscious examination of reality. (Montessori, 1972). Fairy tales are illogical for children, and the confusion of the tales are a burden on the imaginations of the preprimary student. (Woffheim, 1953).

Another consideration is the representation of gender imbedded within the fairy tales. Are women portrayed as competent and self-reliant figures, or do we meet incompetent and flawed characters, or cruel and wicked witches, stepmothers, and queens? In the film, *Mickey Mouse Mbnopoly*, writer/researcher Chyng Sun observes that female characters '... present a distorted version of femininity – highly sexualized bodies, coy seductiveness, always needing to be rescued by a male.' (2001).

Racial stereotyping is another area of concern within Disney animations. For example, there are no African-American protagonists in any Disney animated product, which are replete with tokenism. Characters represented in Disney animated media are notable for the absence of representations of race and ethnicity, and, during the rare instance where they are found, tend to support cultural stereotypes about the groups represented. 'Latinos are irresponsible chihuahuas in *Lady and the Tramp* and *Oliver and Company*; African-Americans as jive crows in *Dumbo*, as human-wannabe orangutans in *Jungle Book*, and totally absent in Tarzan's *Africa*; Latinos and African-Americans as street gang thugs in *The Lion King*; Asians as treacherous Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp*; Arabs as barbarians in *Aladdin*; and Native Americans as savages in *Peter Pan* and *Pocahontas*.' (Sun, 2001).

It is important to be aware of the forces that play on these choices of literature and 'family' entertainment and literature while selecting experiences for very young children. However, it is nearly impossible to control the conglomerates that promote this media and substantively aim at profits made at the expense of the fantasy life of children and families. As Zipes (1979) points out, educators truly interested in aiding children in their development of critical and imaginative capacities must first seek to alter the social organization of culture and work that is presently preventing self-realization and causing the disintegration of the individual. Do Disney animated and printed media support imagination, or do they aid in supplanting imagination with the intrusion of powerful, archetypical imagery found in fairy tales? Further, the electronic age has contributed another consideration: with the advent of video and DVD and the essentially universal access to these media, children are repeatedly exposed to these animations. This potential for repeated and continuous exposure to the media enhances the potency of that media with respect to its ability to influence the way young children think or feel. (Pamdey,

1997). The expansion of this medium into other genres just emphasizes the necessity to examine the messages that this medium contains. Further observation and discourse is warranted to determine the relative benefits, if any, of the use of animated and print media fairy tales for preprimary aged children.

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Young Children: Their Television Viewing Habits and the Associated Influences on their Behaviour

Francis Douglas

Introduction

Facts and Figures

Strange though it may seem virtually no children watched television before 1950 as early televisions were very expensive and only the very rich could afford them.

More recently in the U.S.A. 98% of homes have one or more TV's and children aged between 3 and 11 watch an average of 3-4 hours of television a day (Bianchi and Robinson, 1997; Comstock, 1993; Husten *et al*, 1992)

T.V. viewing begins in infancy, increases until about age 11 and then declines during Adolescence – this holds true for Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, The U.K., Ireland and most of the E.U. countries as well as the U.S.A. (Larson and Verma, 1999).

By age 18, a child born today will have spent more time watching television than in any other single activity except sleeping (Liebert and Sprafkin, 1998).

Research by G.M.T.V. in December 1994 analysed diaries kept by 250 mothers of children aged two to three. The results showed that these children spent more than 18 hours a week watching television.

A survey by Greenberg (1976) suggests that all children are generally free to watch whatever they wish (Cullingford 1984).

Research by G.M.T.V. indicates that 80% of viewing by children aged two to three is unaccompanied (Freen, 1995). This research also showed that 75% of the mothers interviewed said that they used television to occupy children while they did other things.

Boys watch more T.V. than girls and ethnic minority children living in poverty in the Western World are especially likely to be heavy viewers (Huston *et al*, 1999)

This paper is built around eight questions that a wide review of the relevant literature has promulgated as being of seminal importance in this area.

1. What difference does gender make to T.V. viewing?

Gender and T.V. viewing has not been researched particularly widely. This may be questionable in itself. Issues that are widely researched and publicised deal with behaviour that is problematic for adults. This behaviour is thought to be mainly associated with boys, whereas more acceptable behaviour, associated with girls, is not considered a problem. The most important research regarding gender is probably that of Stein and Freidrich (1972) which provides valuable insights despite being an old text.

It has been discovered that boys like cartoons more than girls do, but that there are few other differences in the types of programme liked or watched by boys or girls (Stein and Freidrich, 1972).

However, the representation of the two sexes on television itself is vastly unequal. It is clear that the presence of males dominates television; that they are more likely to have active and authoritative roles and are more likely to be considered 'experts', in comparison to females (Messenger Davies 1989).

These types of stereotypical roles are overwhelmingly displayed on children's T.V., especially cartoons (Stein and Freidrich 1972). In children's programmes boys are usually shown as leaders or experts, presented as more constructive and often rewarded for such behaviour. In comparison girls are shown as sensible, quiet and motherly, they initiate less and are passive in most situations. This power differential is displayed further with regard to violence. Males are shown to be more violent, whilst women are less violent and are less successful when they are (Gerbner, 1973).

Such gender roles influence children's attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of the World. The gender roles are observed, interpreted, and imitated by children and play a crucial part in their understanding of how they should behave.

However, the gender role stereotypes are not to be blamed solely on television. Other sources contribute to children's perceptions of their gender role, including peer group, family and societal pressure, personality, and a child's

physical attributes. Thus, pressures to conform to a particular role may be attributed to and reinforced by a number of factors including that of television.

2. What effects do violence and aggression on T.V. have?

In one well known American field experiment by Stein and Freidrich (1972) a sample of nursery children were carefully observed in order to establish a baseline level of aggression for each child. Then for the next month at school, children were exposed daily to either a violent T.V. show or to a non-violent programme. Following this month long viewing of television, the children were observed daily for two additional weeks to measure the effects of the programming. The results were clear. Children who had watched violent programming were subsequently more aggressive in their interaction in with their nursery school classmates than were those who had watched the non-violent programming. The fact remains though that the young children almost certainly thought that the violent programmes were more exciting than the non-violent ones and therefore incorporated them more readily into their play.

Even if young viewers do not act out the aggression they observe on television, they may be influenced by it nonetheless. For example, a steady diet of televised violence can make children believe that the world is a horrible place where people rely on aggressive solutions to solve their interpersonal problems (Comstock, 1993; Slaby *et al*, 1995). In fact 7-9 year olds who show the strongest preferences for violent television are the ones most likely to believe that violent programmes are an accurate portrayal of everyday life (Huesmann *et al*, 2003).

In a similar vein, prolonged exposure to televised violence can desensitise children – that is, make them less emotionally upset by violent acts and more willing to tolerate them in real life. Drabman and Thomas, 1974 tested this desensitisation hypothesis with 8 to 10 year olds. Each participant watched either a violent detective show or a non-violent but exciting sporting event while at the same time being connected to a physiograph that recorded their emotional reactions. They were then asked to watch a videotape of a kindergarten that they believed was a relay of an actual situation taking place next door. They were asked to inform the experimenter if anything went wrong in the kindergarten. The videotape showed the children steadily becoming involved in a pitched battle. Participants who had watched the violent

programme earlier were found to be less aroused emotionally by what they saw and informed the experimenter much later that something was wrong compared to the matched group who had watched the non-violent but exciting sporting event. Coie and Dodge, 1998 argue that although television may be only one of many social causes of violence it is difficult to deny that a heavy exposure to T.V. violence does not have a salutary long-term effect on anyone, and that its capacity to do harm is substantial.

3. How does T.V influence the young child's understanding of fantasy and reality?

The majority of researchers hold the opinion that play emerges sequentially, relating to the degree of a child's capacity for socialisation. Another way of classifying play uses categories defined according to function. Within these categories fall many specific types of play including 'imitative' and 'make believe play'. Imitative play refers to a child copying an activity that he or she sees in everyday life. This is one way a child learns about life situations or adult roles, and provides them with a quick learning method for interpreting the world around them. Make believe play leads on from this and involves a child inventing pretend situations, which allow the practice of acquired skills and knowledge gained through other play. This type of spontaneous play lets the child explore their own interpretations of their social world within the security of their fantasies. On the basis of such definitions these types of play appear to be most significant when looking at children's lives and how they interpret them.

There are a number of combining factors influencing a child's play. Internal factors which involve a child's personality, and external factors which may include family relationships, school environment, peer interactions, and the media. The extent to which the mass media, particularly that of television, influences children is a well debated controversial issue. Arguments against television focus on its negative aspects.

The distinction between fantasy and reality was explored by the British Psychological Society Criminology Conference in 1995. The research presented at this conference revealed that 'four year olds are unable to tell the difference between fact and fantasy'. One piece of research maintained that children between the ages of three and five think that cartoon characters are 'real' despite the fact that when they are closely questioned they know that they are not!

(Kamel Ahmed, 1995). Even later comes the understanding that the characters in non-cartoon programmes are played by actors and aren't real people. This does not occur until at least five years of age (Hunt, 1999).

The above provides some explanation as to why children imitate characters such as the Power Rangers. They are seen as real people, rather than just characters, who have the ability to 'morph' into super human characters and fight evil, when in reality they can do no such thing.

4. How has T.V. influenced children's lifestyles?

One early survey found that a majority of families altered their sleeping patterns and mealtimes once they had purchased a T.V. (Johnson, 1967). The presence of a T.V. at home also had the effect of decreasing the amount of time that parents spent with their youngsters in non-T.V. related leisure activities such as games and family outings, and most parents at least occasionally used T.V. as an 'electronic babysitter'.

Bronfenbrenner (1970b) has argued:

The primary danger ... television ... lies not so much in the behaviour it produces – although there is a danger there – as in the behaviour that it prevents: the talks, games, the family festivities and arguments through which much of the child's learning takes place and through which his character is formed. Turning on the television can turn off the process that transforms children into people.

The biggest impact of the coming of television is to persuade children to substitute T.V. watching for such other leisure activities as listening to the radio, reading comics or going to the movies (Huston and Wright 1998; Liebert and Sprafkin, 1988).

Children watch more television in the winter months when the weather is bad and they have nothing better to do (McHale, Crouter and Tucker, 2001).

However, as long as T.V. viewing is not excessive, children exposed to the medium show no significant cognitive or academic deficiencies, and spend no less time playing or socialising with their peers (Huston *et al*, 1999; Liebert and Sprafkin, 1988). In fact, one review of the literature reveals that children may

actually learn a great deal of useful information from television, particularly educational programming (Anderson *et al*, 2001).

Children continue to ask for products that they have seen on television, and conflicts often ensue when parents refuse (Atkin, 1978; Kunkel and Roberts, 1991). Young children may be so persistent because they rarely understand the manipulative selling components of the advertisements, often treating them like public service announcements that are intended to be helpful and informative (Liebert and Sprafkin, 1988).

Nevertheless, although in moderate doses T.V. does no harm, it is still a medium that can be good or harmful according to what the children are watching.

5. What do we mean by television literacy?

This is defined as one's ability to understand how information is conveyed on the small screen. It involves the ability to process programme content, to construct a storyline from character's activities and the sequencing of scenes. It also involves an ability to interpret the form of the message – production features such as zooms, fade-outs, split screens, and sound effects, which are often essential to understanding a programme's content. Indeed, it is the knowledge of such phenomena that makes children's programmes such as Sesame Street such a success.

Before the age of eight or nine, children process programme content in a piecemeal fashion. They are likely to be captivated by zooms, fast paced action, loud music, and children's (or cartoon character's) voices and will often direct their attention elsewhere during slower scenes that feature adult males or quiet dialogue (Schmitt, Anderson and Collins, 1999).

Consequently, pre-school children are often unable to construct a causal chain of events leading from the beginning to the end of a story. Even six year olds have trouble recalling a coherent story line due, in part, to their tendency to remember the actions that characters perform rather than the motives or goals that characters pursue and the events that shaped these goals (McKenna and Ossoff, 1998; Van den Broek, Lorch and Thurlow, 1996). Furthermore, children younger than seven do not fully grasp the fictional nature of television programming, often thinking that the characters retain their roles (and scripted

characteristics) in real life (Wright *et al*, 1994). And even eight year olds may know that T.V. programming is fiction, but they still view it as an accurate portrayal of everyday events (Wright *et al*, 1995).

6. Does T.V. Provide a source of social stereotypes?

With respect to young children the evidence from the literature is extremely limited. From what little that has been written it seems that, like gender, children's ethnic and racial attitudes are influenced by televised portrayals of minority groups in either a positive or negative way. This is an area crying out for further research.

7. What has T.V. done to children's health?

Obesity is clearly a threat to physical health, having been implicated as a major contribution to heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. Unfortunately, rates of obesity have been increasing among all age groups, even young children (Dwyer and Stone, 2000). There are many contributors to obesity, with hereditary predispositions and poor eating habits being most heavily cited. However, it is also true that many people are obese because they do not get sufficient exercise to burn the calories they've consumed (Cowley, 2001). Unfortunately, television viewing is an inherently sedentary activity that is less likely to help children to burn excess calories than physically active play or even performing household chores. Interestingly, one of the strongest predictors of future obesity is the amount of time children spend watching television (Anderson *et al*, 2001; Cowley, 2001) with young couch potatoes who spend more than five hours a day being at risk of actually coming to look like a potato (Gortmaker *et al*, 1996).

Aside from restricting children's physical activity, television viewing also promotes poor eating habits. Not only do children tend to snack while passively watching T.V., but the foods they see advertised (and may be snacking on!) are mostly high calorie produce containing lots of fat and sugar and few beneficial nutrients (Tinsley, 1992).

8. How beneficial Is T.V. to young children's development?

Charlton and David (1977) in the remote island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic found that 'watching television is not bad for you'. The island, with 800 child inhabitants, opened its first and only T.V. station in 1995. All the usual

types of children's programmes were shown. Charlton and David monitored the effects and concluded that 'T.V. has not generated any unfavourable effects upon the children's behaviour (Pukas. *The Express Newspaper* 29.4.98). Nevertheless, as an academic one would have to question many other aspects of this particular culture before coming to such a bold conclusion.

Many T.V. programmes – especially those like Sesame Street – are designed, in part, to illustrate the benefits of pro-social activities such as co-operation, sharing and comforting distressed companions. One major review of the literature found that young children who often watch pro-social programmes do become more pro-socially inclined (Hearold, 1986). However, it is important to emphasise that these programmes may have few, if any, lasting benefits unless an adult monitors the broadcasts and encourages children to rehearse and enact the pro-social lessons they have learned (Freidrich and Stein, 1975; Freidrich- Cofer *et al*, 1979).

In 1968, the U.S. Government and a number of private foundations provided funds to create Children's Television Workshop (C.T.W.), an organisation committed to producing T.V. programmes that would hold children's interest and promote their intellectual development. C.T.W.'s first production, Sesame Street, became the world's most popular children's series, seen an average of three times a week by about half of America's pre-school children and broadcast to nearly 50 other countries around the world (Liebert and Sprafkin, 1988). Sesame Street was targeted at three to five year olds and attempted to foster important cognitive skills such as counting, recognising letters and numbers, ordering and classifying objects, and solving simple problems. It was hoped that children from disadvantaged backgrounds would be much better prepared for school after viewing this programme on a regular basis. Nevertheless, one cannot help wondering if the psychological techniques used in the programme to gain the children's attention would result in an even greater inattention in schools as schools would not be in a position to use such inputs.

During the first season that Sesame Street was broadcast, its impact was assessed by the Educational Testing Service. About 950 three to five year olds from five areas of the U.S. took a pre-test that measured their cognitive skills and determined what they knew about letters, numbers, and geometric forms. At the end of the season, they took this test again to see what they had learned.

When the data was analysed it was clear that Sesame Street was achieving its objectives. Children who watch Sesame Street the most (four or more times per week) were the ones who showed the largest improvements in their total test scores, their scores on the alphabet and their ability to write their name.

Three year olds showed bigger gains than five year olds, probably because the younger children knew less to begin with. The results of a second, similar study, which included only urban disadvantaged pre-schoolers paralleled those of the original study (Bogatz and Ball, 1972), and others have found that regular exposure to Sesame Street is associated with impressive gains in pre-schooler's vocabularies and pre-reading skills as well (Rice *et al*, 1990). Finally, disadvantaged children who had been heavy viewers of Sesame Street were later rated by their first grade teachers as better prepared for school and more interested in school activities than classmates who had rarely watched the programme (Bogatz and Ball, 1972).

It is worth noting that critics of educational T.V. programmes for young children have argued that watching television is a passive activity that displaces valuable, growth enhancing pursuits such as structured play activities under the guidance of an adult (Singer and Singer, 1990). However, it has been found that time spent watching general audience programmes during the pre-school years is associated with poor performance on cognitive assessments of children's readiness for school, whereas time spent watching educational programmes is associated with better performances on these same school related skills tests (Anderson *et al* 2001; Wright *et al*, 2001). What is more, parents who encourage their children to watch educational programming are also inclined to provide other educational alternatives to television – experiences that have their own enriching effects and serve to further limit their children's exposure to general audience programming (Huston *et al*, 1999).

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds watch Sesame Street about as often as their advantaged peers (Pinon, Huston and Wright, 1989) and learn just as much from it (Rice *et al*, 1990). Recent longitudinal research reveals that heavy pre-school viewing of Sesame Street is associated with better academic performance and, to a lesser extent, with an increased involvement in creative activities ten to thirteen years later in high school (Anderson *et al*, 2001).

The formidable task is to convince more parents that Sesame Street and other educational programmes are valuable resources that they and their children should not be missing (Larson, 2001).

Conclusion

Television is a technology that has the capacity to do good or harm, depending primarily on what children happen to be watching. In other words, it is the message not the medium, which is important. If we wish we can alter television programming to make it a more effective agent of socialisation that teaches the attitudes, values and behaviours that more accurately reflect the mores of a free society, or we can choose not to do so.

Young children in the Western World spend a great deal of time watching television and they have many favourite programmes that greatly influence their play. The large amount of time children spend watching television shows an immense enthusiasm for it as an activity. It is a medium that totally grips children with its lavish exciting stories, leading not only to discussions about characters but also the acting out of their parts in play.

The significance of the influence of television depends to a great extent upon what topic or issue is being referred to. It would seem that with respect to gender roles, the influence upon children's play is notable in that children's play is linked to their programme preferences that, to some extent, is gender related. However, this is not as explicit as that of violence and aggression, which is displayed very strongly in children's play for a period of time after viewing such programmes. It should however be noted that children see violence and aggression as part of the excitement within such programmes, whereas parents and teachers tend to see them with regard to their anti-social influences upon children's behaviour.

What is obvious is that there is a need for monitoring what children watch and linked to this is the education of parents and carers.

One particularly striking finding of this paper is the amount of time that children spend watching television alone, unmonitored and un-regulated. It may well be that this lack of supervision will be more important in the long run than what these children actually watch.

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