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Development Through Interaction During The Early Years The Adult and Child as Co-constructors

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Development Through Interaction During The Early Years
The Adult and Child as Co-constructors

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Submitted to the Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology, in partial fulfilment of the requirements leading to the award of Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies.

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ABSTRACT

By their very being, significant adults both impact upon and shape the young child's development. This research explores what is known, understood, respected and reflected upon in the practises of early childhood professionals, with an emphasis on the interactive style of the adult, emotional development and the potential impact of adult-child interactions on the child's holistic development. Through drawing on interdisciplinary research, including emerging theories of brain and emotional development, the work of past and current theorists and an examination of contemporary and best practice, the importance of the empathic adult who engages in positive interactions with the young child will be explored. A sample consisting of ten senior childcare practitioners participated in the present study. A qualitative research design was employed and semi-structured interviews were conducted; the data was then thematically analysed. Analysis of these themes highlighted the importance of adult-child interactions on the developing child, with particular reference to: the characteristics of the adult which enhance positive adult-child interaction; the context in which these interactions occur; the potential impact of such interactions on the developing child; strategies which can be adopted in order to enhance and increase positive interactions with young children. Findings are discussed with reference to potential implications for professional training and practice.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present the aims and objectives of the present study. This will be followed by the research questions, background details, rationale of the study, methodology and research design and key terms.

1.1 The aim of the research

The aim of this research is to explore the perspectives and attitudes of practitioners working with young children, with an emphasis on the interactive style of the adult, emotional development of the child, and the potential impact of adult - child interactions on development.

1.2 Objectives of the research

The researcher will aim to access beliefs and understandings held by the participants in regard to the influence of their interactive style on the emotional development of the child, and the potential impact of adult - child interactions on development -

The researcher will further explore participants' views of the characteristics that support positive adult - child interaction.

The participants' experiences and strategies in fostering positive adult child interactions will be examined. The researcher will explore participants' views on the potential impact of adult - child interactions on the young child's development.

The researcher will also aim to address current training needs in the area.

1.3 The research questions

- What are the key features of adult-child interactions which are perceived to impact positively on a child's development?

- Does the practitioner's continuous learning and practical experience facilitate further knowledge with regard to the influence of the practitioner style on children's emotional and cognitive development?
- How important is the practitioners' sensitivity, empathy and role modelling?
- Does pedagogic training encompass a focus on the interplay between biology, neuroscience and psychology regarding the importance of healthy emotional development?
- How can the training of early childhood practitioners be improved regarding the importance of adult child interactions on the child's emotional development and its consequences for cognitive development?

1.4 Background

Ireland is currently undergoing a severe recession, with unprecedented pressures on public funding. In a major policy change the Irish government (April 2009) announced the introduction of a free preschool year for all children. Service provision includes creches, preschools, playgroups, nurseries and infant classes in primary school. Within all these services, adult child interactions take place on a constant basis. French (2007) highlights that there are no standard qualifications required for the adults who work in early childhood care and education settings (ECCE) outside of infant classes. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recommended this initiative be successfully implemented, placing a priority on disadvantaged and immigrant children to empower learners in the community (OECD, 2009). Great sensitivity is required on the part of the practitioner to deliver these programs.

The potential impact of significant adults on child development is now a recognised area of focus in early childhood education abroad (Mashburn, 2008) All children are entitled to sensitive, empathic and respectful professionals who recognise and celebrate the uniqueness of each child. Early childhood professionals must become aware of their immense influence on the young child's development, and consequently ensure they sensitively provide children with a positive, empathic role model. Exploring professionals' practices will demonstrate to what extent theory is put into practice.

1.5 Rationale

The researcher has a personal interest in, and experience of, working with young children. A long career in early childhood care and education in Ireland and Canada, has allowed various approaches to the education of young children to be explored. The researcher is currently involved in the supervision of students', training to become early childhood practitioners. Sensitising them to the influence of their interactive style on the young child's development has motivated this project.

Sharing this knowledge with all who care for young children may help provide powerful insights into the holistic nature of children's development and the importance of positive adult child interactions on such developments.

1.6 Methodology and Research Design

Qualitative methods are used in this study in order to gain insight into the views and perspectives of the participants. Semi-structured interviews are used. Although, relatively small in number these interviews provide in-depth insights into the experiences of early childhood practitioners.

1.7 Key Terms

Within this study 'early childhood' will be taken to represent children aged under eight years.

The term 'impact' will be taken to refer to a profound effect.

The term 'style' will be taken to refer to the manner in which one interacts.

The terms 'participant' and 'respondent' will be used interchangeably, referring to the participants who took part in the interviews.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A deeper understanding of human development is emerging as researchers from the disciplines of biochemistry; neuroscience, psychoanalysis and psychology engage and collaborate (Gerhardt, 2004). A young child's learning and development occurs through high-quality emotional and instructional interactions. The importance and power of these interactions is gaining recognition (Pascal & Bertram, 2001). The links between the child's emotional, regulatory, social, cognitive and physical development must be explored, honoured, and advanced into the public domain to ensure a fundamental re-examination of the nation's responses to the needs of young children (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). Early childhood development takes place at a rate that exceeds any other stage of life. Recognition of each child's individual and unique unfolding must sensitise the adult to the impact of their manner, or style of interacting, on the young child's absorbent mind (Montessori, 1956). Addressing the interplay of experience, emotional and brain development, the aim of this literature review is to present the current state of knowledge on: Emotional development; Brain development; Insights of three pioneers in early childhood care and education- Froebel, Montessori and Steiner; Siolta and A new science of learning and teaching.

2.2 Emotional Development

Understanding the development of human emotions is a key aspect of understanding the potential impact of adult interaction on children's lives. Human children have been called the best learning machines in the universe (Gopnik, 1997). From simple beginnings endless forms develop, grow and mature. Development, a continuous creation of more complex forms, involves biological processes, cognitive processes and social processes, which are

interwoven as the child develops (Santrock, 1996). Goleman (1996) explains that the most primitive part of the brain, the brain stem, surrounds the top of the spinal cord and regulates basic life functions. From this primitive root emerge the emotional centres. He says “this new neural territory added emotions proper to the brains repertoire”. (Goleman, 1996, p. 10). Over the course of evolution of these emotional areas, evolved the thinking brain, or the neocortex. Goleman proposes this reveals much regarding the relationship between thoughts to feelings, as the rational brain developed after the emotional brain. How the young child feels, affects his/her cognitive abilities. It is important to be aware of this when interacting with young children. He explains the crucial role the emotional brain plays in neural architecture and says the emotional areas are intertwined via myriad connecting circuits to all parts of the neocortex. Damasio (1999) argues that emotions are indispensable for rational thought. This gives the emotional centres immense power to influence the functioning of the rest of the brain. How often, when upset, do we feel ‘we cannot think straight’? Goleman cautions that” these emotional circuits are sculpted by experience throughout childhood, and we leave these experiences utterly to chance at our peril” (1996:27). Miller (1990) believes children’s feelings and concerns impact on their learning abilities, yet educators tend to focus only on one aspect of experience- the rational, calculating intellect.

Bowlby (1969) demonstrated how predictable adult-child interactions underpinned the development of a secure emotional base, essential to a child’s well being. He professed that the root of human personality lies in the earliest primary relationships which profoundly shape the child’s development. How the adult interacts with the child has an effect on how the child experiences himself and later relationships. Bowlby (1969) advanced his theory of attachment wherein the infant experiences and creates a model of relationship process, which is held in the unconscious memory, forming a template for future relationships. Early attachment patterns were studied by Ainsworth (1979). These early attachment relationships occur at the same time as significant brain development is taking place. Interactions between the adult and child, impact not only on the child’s emotional development but also alters brain structures. Research has shown these relationships affect the development of structural right brain neurological systems which affect stress modulation, the processing of emotions and self regulation. Shore (1993) calls this the ‘neurobiological core’ of the human unconscious. Devinsky (2000) explains that an early maturing right brain helps develop a continuous, coherent, unified sense of self, so important to resilience in later life. Shore (2008) believes that attachment theory has shifted

to regulation theory, which has succeeded in integrating psychological and biological models of human development.

Emotions, in the earliest stages regulated by others, over time become self regulated. Early impulses and arousal are contained and regulated via the external environment. Interactive psychological regulation is deeply affected by non-conscious attachment dynamics. Interactions may be impacted by such non-conscious dynamics – on the part of the adult or the child involved. Close relationships not only provide a sense of safety but are increasingly being seen to generate brain development by promoting synaptic connections in the right brain (Fonagy & Target, 2005)

Ainsworth (in Keenan, 2004) concluded that adults become a ‘safe haven’ and ‘secure base’ for the developing child from whence they can explore their environment. Sensitivity, on the part of the care giver to the child’s needs, cultivates ‘secure attachment’, whereas insensitivity, overly intrusive behaviour or neglect can cultivate an ‘insecure attachment’. Attachment theory suggests the importance of practitioners taking in children’s feelings and showing empathy to support the children in understanding and managing their feelings (Kurowski, 2009). The ability to manage ones feelings so that one is not overwhelmed by them has been named ‘containment’. Crawford (2000) explains containment theory as an explanation of how children feel pain and the management of such pain through a caring person’s intervention. Repeated contact with such an empathic person helps the child ‘hold’ the inarticulate, primitive and unmanageable feelings. The child learns to ‘be themselves’ and achieve ‘emotional containment’. Where this support is lacking and the child’s understanding of the emotional experience disorganised, problems in development can occur. Kurowski (2009) cautions that a child who learns to ‘not mind’ their mental pain and suffers passively, is at risk of turning such passive suffering into ‘active cruelty’. Forming potential positive relationships, in the early years, can affect the child’s life in a later stage. This impact of the adult on the young child has huge implications for the manner in which they interact with the young child, ‘It means that early year’s staff should either have the requisite skills for empathy or be able and prepared to develop them throughout their careers (Kurowski, 2009, p. 29). What is at stake is the child’s ability to form relationships with others, a skill that will affect the whole of their lives. Theoretical insights into containment and attachment help one understand the potential impact of the adult’s responsiveness on the young child’s development and the importance and impact of such theories on practice, particularly in the area of adult child interactions.

2.3 Brain Development

The child's brain can be likened to a framework, upon which many influences interact. Research in the area of neuroscience helps us understand the establishment of neural pathways to higher cognition and self awareness. Smith (2002) explains that the brain is the world's most complex wholly integrated system of interconnected parts. He stresses the brain has phenomenal processing power and that how children's brains experience life in the first five years influences how they will do so forever. Insights into the relationship between the brain and behaviour are the results of research into: (1) what the brain is and how it functions (2) How the brain transmits information.

Past notions that brain development was genetically determined and that growth followed a biologically predetermined path have been challenged by new research using sophisticated technology that show 'scientists have discovered how early brain development and care giver- child relationships interact to create a foundation for future growing and learning' (Gable & Hunting, 2000:3). Increasing research regarding brain development has challenged previous knowledge or notions, held on the transformative development taking place (Shore, 1997). Early experience can dramatically impact the way genes are expressed in the developing brain and good experiences enhance positive development (Lally, 1998). Unfortunately, negative experiences and neglect also have a dramatic effect on brain development as exemplified by studies of children raised in Romanian orphanages, in environmentally deprived facilities (Hayes, 1993). The children developed severe intellectual problems, showed severe retardation in the emergence of gross motor skills and became apathetic and unresponsive (Shaffer, 1998). The environment, of which their carers were an intrinsic part, did not respond to their needs, so that neural trimming accompanied their sense of despair and apathy. Smith (2002) explains that, harsh words, the abuse of trust and dramatic changes in mood, are profoundly harmful to the developing brain. He notes that research on abused children, showed abnormalities in an area of the cerebellum linked to motivation and reward. Many showed symptoms of borderline personality disorder. The researchers concluded that over activation of stress responses had generated molecular effects and altered their brain wiring, or framework, and so determined their future. Gerhardt (2004) says 'stress management is at the heart of mental health, in children and adults'. Stress management is also at the heart of positive adult-child interactions and childcare practitioners must be encouraged to become aware of, cope with and improve stressful environments. Understanding the internal factors that involve coping with stress is

so important because ‘managing stress is the extreme end of emotional regulations’ (2004:57). Experiences that prove to be too challenging, cause a stress response in the body, the stress hormone called cortisol is produced, triggered by the hypothalamus. Cortisol can actually be measured in the saliva of children and adults, aiding research into the cause of stress and most importantly, how active and individual is every persons stress response. Rising cortisol levels put brakes on the immune system, the capacity to learn and the ability to relax. Gerhardt (2004) explains that persistent high levels of cortisol negatively affect the brain where the hippocampus is situated. The repercussions can be enormous, as the hippocampus is central to learning and memory. Interacting with children exhibiting a stress response, requires great sensitivity on the part of a practitioner, so as to manage the situation yet emotionally support the child.(Derrington & Goddard, 2007) The young child’s emotional development influences their response to life.

Gopnik (1997) explains that particular kinds of consciousness are connected to particular kinds of functional or neural processes. She believes children are in some ways more conscious than adults. Children are bad at inhibition and far more open to experience all around them. She summarises her studies to date by revealing that “thinking about development not only changes the way you think about learning , but it changes the way you think about evolution... people are starting to recognise that our capacities for care giving are...fundamental in shaping what our human nature is like” (1997:10). The implications of such findings regarding the impact of childcare practitioners are enormous.

Each child is unique and just as they reach milestones in their physical development, they also do so in their emotional development, yet emotional development receives relatively less recognition as a core emerging capacity in the early childhood years (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC), 2006). Children’s feelings must get the same level of attention as their thinking. Research by the NSCDC (2006) explains emotion is a biologically based aspect of human function that is “wired into multiple regions of the central nervous system...and that early emotional experiences literally become embedded in the architecture of their brain” (2006:2). Emotional and cognitive development, shown to be interrelated, relies on the interconnection of complex neural circuits. Well regulated emotions support executive functions such as decision making but poorly controlled emotions can seriously interfere with attention and decision making. Meadows (1993) explains that children operating from a secure base have working models of people that grow more complex and integrated as they develop, whereas insecurely attached children, unsupported and misunderstood, and prone to negative emotional states

are in danger of building less coherent, accurate and modifiable cognitive models. Practitioners must always be aware of the affective influence on cognitive development and provide nurturing secure environments, positive interactions and responses to the differing needs of children. Neven (1997) offers a psychodynamic perspective on the meaning of behaviour. She recommends observation of the child's play, to tap into the child's unconscious mind, his or her fears, hopes and expectations. She stresses that the strong emotional relationships that develops between carers and young children provide containment for the child and facilitate continued development. Love is the driving force. Neven (1997) further advocates that relationships be put right at the centre of any childcare facility saying "the capacity of the very young child to relate and to form attachment to a consistent care giving figure is of primary importance and informs all the other activities the child is able to engage in" (1997;125). Such relationships have been highlighted by the pioneers of early childhood education.

2.4 Insights of the Pioneers, Froebel, Montessori and Steiner

Integral to today's understanding of the potential impact of child-adult interactions are insights of the pioneers Froebel, Montessori and Steiner. 'This is not from a sentimental desire to continue in the past... but because there is an urgent need to conserve, what is of value and articulate it in more modern, acceptable and accessible language' (Bruce, 1997, p.1). Quality adult-child relationships in the early years are essential to children's security self-esteem and learning. Elicker & Fortner-Wood (1995) investigating such relationships identified four factors that contribute to the quality of the relationship. These were identified as, the characteristics of the adult, the characteristics of the child, the adult-child interactions and the context surrounding the relationship. The central role of early relationships was stressed by early pioneers in the field of early childhood care and education, such as, Friedrich Froebel (1782- 1852), Rudolph Steiner (1861- 1925), and Maria Montessori (1870-1952). Hayes (1993) describing Froebel's life commitment to education, says that while in the beginning he concentrated on the education of older children..."he began to realise the importance of early experiences to later learning" (1993:12). Froebel's (1887) advice regarding the behaviour management of disruptive children , includes 'the only and infallible remedy ...is to find the original good source, the original good side of the human being that has been repressed disturbed or mislead into the shortcoming and then to foster, build-up and properly guide the good side'(1887:121). Many modern day programmes such as Marte Meo and Parenting Plus, use this approach,

structuring positive experiences and distracting the child from negative behaviour until he/she has control of their emotions and are open to listening. Froebel proposed a holistic approach to learning and teaching, recognising children as active, feeling and thinking human beings, seeing patterns and making connections with their own lives. He stressed observation by skilled and informed carers who transmit their own positive sense of self in interactions. Maria Montessori was also a keen advocate of observation. Bruce (1997) notes that Froebel's emphasis on mutual respect and a truly reciprocal partnership between the child and the adult is central to his philosophy.

Rudolph Steiner, founder of the Waldorf School (1919), believed childhood to be the most important time of life, the most decisive phase for the development of the whole human being. He called the early years the age of imitation and urged parents and teachers to be conscious of this. Steiner (1997) wrote, "Children absorb impressions from all the people around them with the same intensity that sensory organs receive impressions from the environment" (1997:8). He stressed the individuality of each child, and the need for vigilance on the part of the practitioner interacting with the child "they need teachers that look and act with happiness and most of all with honest, unaffected love" (1997, p. 22). Such love is grounded in respect for the developing child. He urged that teachers be trained in psychology and recognise the reality of how the child actually develops and their impact and importance on such development. An interaction is where the adult and child engage and influence each other. He advocated inner development, akin to modern self reflection and proposed the day will come when teachers will be tested for what they are as human beings, who co-construct the young child's development.

Maria Montessori was another theorist who dedicated her life to the teaching of children. Challenging the norms of women's roles in society in the early nineteenth century, she became the first woman physician in Italy's history. Her first professional interest was in mental retardation. She believed development does not come about passively, through hereditary and growth; rather it depends on the effort of the individual and the environment, wherein the adult is a major influence. Montessori believed the preparation of the 'teacher' or 'guide' the most important determinant of the success of her method, which she developed following many years of observing children. She advised those working with children to become like scientists, eager to discover the child's inner life. She recognised the importance of the adult child relationship, because 'they are quite sensitive - more than we know to external influences' (Montessori 1956, p.127). The interactive style of the adult

on the young child's development was clearly evident to the pioneers of early childhood education.

2.5 Síolta

Síolta is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland. Síolta has relevance for the work of a wide range of ECCE practitioners and is valuable for professionals whose work requires that they interact with young children and their families. It is dynamic, reflecting the changing nature of Ireland's ECCE sector. The framework allows early childhood establishments evaluate their level of quality provision.

Standard 5 of Síolta's Sessional Services User Manual which focuses on interactions begins by explaining that explicit policies, procedures and practice underpin constructive interactions. These must be based on mutual respect, sensitivity and equal partnership. Characteristics, modes of practice, including changing one's style of interaction to match the actions of a child are advocated for children with special needs but not for individual differences. Children outside special needs category are perceived as generic. Their individuality is not given enough recognition.

Although, Standard 11 of Síolta's Sessional Services User Manual advocates that in Professional Practice values and attitudes, skills and knowledge be explored and practice reflection encouraged, the emphasis is on professional qualification and practice improvement rather than process improvement and reflection. Self reflection leading to self awareness and the impact of self to others is not emphasised enough. Positive interactions require self awareness on the part of the adult.

2.6 Towards the new science of learning and teaching

Empathy has been described as the capacity to understand another's experience from that person's perspective. Eisenberg, N (1987, p. 108) describes empathy as 'an emotional response that stems from the apprehension of another's emotional state or condition, congruent with the other's emotional state or condition'. As a communication tool, empathy is powerful and its' benefits tangible for both giver and receiver, who together co- construct meaning. Many teacher education programmes include components to increase the empathy skills of student teachers (White 1998). French (2007) describes learning as a continual process of meaning making, through engagement with people and materials. A new science of learning, devised from synthesised research in the areas of neuroscience, psychology,

education and machine learning is already influencing how we think about learning and classrooms. The creation of a new environment, grounded in scientific research on how best children learn, was undertaken by a unique collaboration of experts, sponsored by the National Science Foundation (Sejnowski 2009 cited in Salk Institute). Their research shows how computational and social factors interact during learning. Face to face interaction is vital. Connection to others enables learning by example and imitation. Three principles emerge from the study: first, learning is computational, second, learning is social and third, learning is supported by brain circuits, linking perception and action that connect people to one another. Interactions can be seen to be underpinned by these principles, wherein the empathic adult builds upon the child's existing knowledge in a warm and caring way. Meltzoff (2009 cited in Salk Institute) says, social interaction, underpins early learning, and that humans learn best from other humans. Sensitive interaction and relating is the key. Exploration in the working of the brain -- how computational abilities are changed in the presence of another is high on the agenda Kuhl (2009 cited in Salk Institute).

The sensitivity to others noted by Montessori and Steiner, echoes in Ramachandran's (2006) work on mirror neurons. Mirror neurons nicknamed 'empathy neurons' help cast fresh insights into the biological mechanisms of learning and development. They provide a unified framework and help explain a host of mental abilities. Ramachandran predicts that mirror neurons will do for psychology what DNA did for biology. Discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti in 1995, mirror neurons, are evident in newborn babies, who have been shown to imitate adult actions "it appears that the child's need to imitate is a vital aspect to learning" (Pound 2009, p. 13). Pound explains the role of mirror neurons in young children's learning, as supporting the development of communication, fostering empathy, allowing imitation, which helps in the absorption of a vast array of complex skills and understandings. Researchers at UCLA found that cells in the human anterior cingulate, which fire when one injures a patient with a needle, also fire in the onlookers' brain. These actions or responses help children tune in to the importance and feelings of those around them and affect adult – child interactions. Research by Pineda (2000) showed autistic children lack the mirror neuron systems, resulting in a lack of empathy skills, language skills, theory of other minds and imitation. Pound (2009) explains the discovery of mirror neurons has excited psychologists, neuroscientists and practitioners alike. Ramachandran (2006) offers that mirror neuron discovery has dealt a death blow to the 'nature versus nurture' debate and suggests we consider the 'nature via nurture' alternative theory. Positive interactions nurture the unfolding child. Considering the 'barrier dissolving nature'

of mirror neurons, and the implications of the new underpinnings of interpersonal relations, early childhood practitioners must be cognisant of their influence on the young child.

Research undertaken by the University of Virginia (2008) measuring quality associated with development in the preschool years, revealed the quality of teacher child interactions, plays a key role in accounting for gains in children's development. Other quality indicators such as class size, education standard of teachers and child to teacher ratio were also examined Mashburn (2008) concludes that young children's learning occurs in large part through emotional and instructional interactions with teachers. He stresses the findings have implications for state policymakers, designing and regulating child care programs. Teachers, sensitive to children's needs, motivations and interests, respectful of individual points of view, help high quality emotional interaction happen. Active listening and reflection are needed to create pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi 2005) and a pedagogy of relationships Malagussi (1993b). Emotional regulation helps in developing empathy (Decety and Jackson 2006). When early childhood practitioners respond empathically to young children, they respond with a deep understanding of where the child is coming from: they see the child's perspective. The two-way nature of the development process explored here, how adults affect the child's development, juxtaposed with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecology of human development, highlights the importance of integrating knowledge and research findings, regarding the potential impact of the adult on the young child's development.

2.7 Conclusion

'Educating and caring for young children is a complex set of activities influenced not only by the dynamics of personal interaction, but also by what each teacher brings to the educational setting...which affects and is affected by the attitudes, values, style and unique characteristics of each member' (Schwartz & Robinson, 1992, p. 105). Early childhood practitioners have a wealth of information on the impact of their interactive style on the young child's emotional and cognitive development. Interdisciplinary research promises a deeper understanding of human development. Gerhardt (2004), entitled her book 'Why Love Matters'; through this literature review part of that question is answered. Human development is dynamic and interaction between the adult and child is where this dynamic takes place. Never has so much research elucidated how young children learn and the importance of supportive adults surrounding them. Helping practitioners incorporating this knowledge into their professional practise is a major concern of this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by introducing the reader to the research design used in this study. Next it outlines the data collection techniques; in depth interviews. Following this, sampling and selection techniques are highlighted, including the pilot interview. Explanation of the data analysis is given. Limitations to the study are considered and ethical issues are explored.

3.2 Research Design and Rational

'When ideally executed, the distinctions between researcher and participants blur, creating a democratic inquiry process' (Marshall & Rossman 1999:6)

A democratic inquiry process with early childhood practitioners, exploring their perspectives and attitudes regarding the impact of their interactive style on the young child's emotional and cognitive development, suggested that a qualitative approach be adopted for the present study. Certain aspects of human behaviour, often complex, are best studied using qualitative methods. The data gathered gives rise to a conceptual framework. An exploration of the phenomenological nature of adult – child interactions can be explored. Phenomenological philosophy proposes that social reality is constructed through social interaction (Berger & Luckman 2009). A phenomenological approach examines the way people interpret events and make sense of their personal experience.

Phenomenology is the study of human experience and the way in which things are perceived as they appear to consciousness (Langdrige 2007:7). Through usual qualitative methodologies, a rich and complex understanding of the interlocking network of beliefs held by early childhood practitioners can be explored (Kennedy 1997). Spontaneity between the researcher and participants can flow, deeper exploration can follow and a rapport can be developed (Spradley 1979). Gaining insight into people's attitudes, value systems and behaviours via semi-structured, open ended interviews helps reveal the quality and texture of experience. This places an emphasis and value on participant perspectives on their world. Qualitative inquiry is a rewarding journey, sometimes revealing insights hitherto unknown or unseen by the participant. A collaborative process ensues, revealing rich data, significant for practice and policy. Goodnow & Almy (in Rodd 1998:143) challenge those

working with young children ‘To identify and strengthen the growing professionalism of the field with the scientific application of research findings to care and educational settings for young children, thereby linking practice to professional knowledge.’ The researcher’s experience as an Early Childhood Educator, initiatives by the Irish government to expand the ECCE experience for children, research into issues of quality care and themes from the literature review both Irish and international form the basis for the topics within this qualitative study. It is to be noted that the literature review demonstrated little direct research and emphasis on the interactive style of the adult in Irish literature. Further work in this area is warranted.

3.3 Participants

Ezzy (2002) points to the notion of targeting an interesting population that represent groups affected by the issues under exploration. Participants with varying backgrounds in early childhood care and education encompassed a broad range of interested people. These were chosen because of their expertise, experience and the involvement of many in delivering programmes and training future providers of programmes, as per government strategy.

3.4 The Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were the methodology of choice. This technique can generate illuminating data, meanings can be shared between the researcher and the respondent and concentration is enabled (Ezzy, 2002). They provide scope for comparability and analysis using structured themes. Questions devised for the semi-structured interviews were based on the original research question and were informed by the literature review and brain storming with the supervisor in order to elicit:

- Participants present perspectives and attitudes to the research questions
- Influence of their training and practice in this area
- To inform recommendations which may influence practice and policy within this area.
- Relevant data for analysis

Open ended questions were used and respondents were encouraged to expand and explore their responses. The researcher had the flexibility to probe initial responses – to ask how or why, sometimes enabling participants to spontaneously reflect on issues. This was later described as most beneficial in exploring current practice by one participant. Iraossi (2006) urges the use of non-jargonistic language and while every effort was made to attend to this, sometimes the researcher had to explain specific terms.

(See Appendix II)

3.5 The Pilot Interview

A pilot interview was arranged for a number of reasons including testing the clarity of the questions; estimating the approximate length of time the process would take; ensuring proficiency in the use of the recording device; examining the type of information forthcoming and determining if the interview was useful as a key resource tool.

As the pilot began the participant seemed a little nervous, yet eager to share her perspectives. Half way through as she elaborated on her replies, she herself questioned if she was repeating herself too much and said a prior copy of the questions would have helped. She requested the recorder be turned off a number of times to allow her to reflect. She seemed to grow more anxious so I suggested we look over the remaining questions before continuing the interview. This resulted in a more relaxed respondent. Subsequently, I offered the participants a copy of the questions prior to the interview. (See appendix 2)

3.6 Laying the Interview Groundwork

Participants were contacted by phone and information given regarding the background of the researcher, the focus of the research, its relevance to practice and policy and the nature of the study. Drawing on the learning from the pilot study, an offer was made to make questions available; most participants took this offer up. It was envisaged that access might prove challenging, yet the response was excellent. The commitment and interest of practitioners was a testimony to how important this area is to quality practice. Written

permission was obtained from all participants to audio tape the interviews. (See Appendix 1). Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following participants:

- An Early Childhood Professional with a Montessori background
- An Early Childhood Professional with a background in Waldorf Education devised by R. Steiner
- An inner city Pre School Manager
- A Primary Teacher
- An Early Educator Area Coordinator
- Curriculum Advisor
- Marte Meo Practitioner
- Speech and Language senior Therapist
- Children's Psychoanalytical Therapist
- Further Education Centre Tutor

Interviews took place in a variety of locations; school rooms, therapy centres, a community hall and health services executive centre. This greatly enhanced an understanding of some of the environmental issues influencing adult child interactions.

3.7 Data Analysis Section

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is an empathic method and helps the reader understand experience from another's perspective (Shaw 2010 cited in Langdridge). From the transcripts, data was categorised under different themes associated with the interview questions. Each theme was then linked to the research objectives and related literature. Analysis is data driven as opposed to theory driven. Providing an audit trail ensures interpretations made are based on the data from which identified themes have emerged. A system of coding was then applied to data generated. Establishing recurrent or salient themes led to thematic analysis. Conveying the interplay between the participant's

perceptions, their own reflections on experiences and the researcher's interpretive activity added a dynamic element to the analysis.

3.8 Precision and Accuracy in Recording Data

In transcription, the task is to capture faithfully the participant's perspective, pausing to clarify a response or simply asking if the researcher has got it right, is vital. This was the approach taken during all the interviews and particular care needed to be taken with two participants whose first language was not English. See Appendix III.

3.9 Ethical Issues and Limitations of the Study

A document was sent to the selected participants in which the purpose of the study, the background of the researcher and a guarantee of confidentiality was given. Anonymity was guaranteed, ensuring no negative repercussions could ensue regarding participants voicing sensitive issues and personal data. The researcher was vigilant to avoid bias in influencing participant's attitudes (Iraossi 2006).

While the number of participants was relatively small, their experience of service delivery, various training back grounds, engagement in continued professional development and experience in delivering early childhood education training was enormous. However, such an informed group of practitioners may not be representative of practitioners in general.

3.10 Concluding Observations

Midway through the interviews the importance of the study became apparent; how the practitioner's work had impacted on them, how their knowledge of and interest in children had grown. They were regularly engaging in reflection and aware of their reaction to stressful situations and the need for coping strategies in order to foster positive interactions with young children.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In this section key themes which emerged relating to participants' views on the features which enhance adult interactions with children will be presented under five broad headings as follows: Characteristics of the adult, Context in which interactions occur, Potential impact of interactions on child, Strategies for enhancing positive interactions with children and Training needs. These five main themes will be outlined with reference to a number of sub-themes. The researcher has deliberately chosen to present the findings mainly through the voices of the participants, creating a dialogue among experts. The insights gained from such a group of committed, experienced, highly qualified and passionate practitioners, condense into a striking reminder of both the complexity of pedagogical practice and the human and lived context of early childhood educational practice.

4.2 Section 1 – Characteristics of the Adult

A wide range of characteristics were mentioned by participants in this present study. In this section key characteristics will be highlighted. Most notable in participants' views was the emphasis they placed on the awareness of self which the adult displays.

4.2.1 Self Awareness

Most practitioners mentioned the need for self-awareness in order to foster positive interactions. One practitioner having observed a colleague's over reaction to a particular child who always seemed to 'push her buttons' highlighted the need for making allowances for over reacting to a situation. This can only be done if one is aware of one's vulnerabilities. Self awareness means being aware of the body language used. Given the understanding that we communicate more with our bodies than our words one participant advised her staff

'Do not stand over any child with your hands on your hips... and I do think your voice is hugely important. I don't think you should use a cross or nasty tone. I do think that hugely influences the interactions... you get down to their level whether it is on your knees, wherever and you deal with it' (Participant No. 1)

'It is more than non words, tone of voice, facial expression, use of the body... because their cognitive development is not quite there yet, that is my experience' (Participant No. 2)

Particular characteristics in children that may trigger certain responses in ourselves was also highlighted in these narratives as illustrated in the following quotes:

'Certain characteristics of the child could remind us of characteristics of people in our lives, past and present... just being aware in itself can be a break for you to think about things. It also just might mean you have to readjust the way you respond' (Participant No. 3)

'I think one of the things is that you should know yourself. I don't mean that in a detailed way but know your strengths and weaknesses and that is what I call knowing yourself' (Participant No. 4)

A further finding highlighted with regard to self-awareness was how such awareness can prevent adults becoming defensive in their interactions with children and, therefore, cutting off the possibility of growth.

'You have to be open to criticism... criticism can help and we are very bad in Ireland at that... I am sorry to say a lot of people see themselves as second class citizens... the most important concern I would have is that the staff get a lot of input on the whole area of themselves and their relationships with the children'.

When one is self aware, the ability to empathise is easier and this brings us to a second characteristic emphasised as significant, which was empathy.

4.2.2 Empathy

Empathy can be defined as the capacity to understand another person's experience or feelings. Sharing the feeling of the other person can help in understanding their emotional state, in taking the perspective of the other and in emotion regulation that maintains a boundary between the self and the other. The majority of participants indicated that empathy was a very significant characteristic in terms of positive interactions with children.

'You have to be able to put yourself in the child's situation... I think you have to be very accepting of the child... what is normal for them may not be for you but you have to accept their norm, that is where they are operating from' (Participant No. 1.)

The participants recognised the fact that in some of the settings, especially in disadvantaged areas the children's day to day lives may be very different from their own childhoods. The need to be non-judgemental, accepting and empathic in practice was understood.

'Children think differently to adults and we must adapt to their vision of the world... they are individuals and they are not just part of people who don't know that much' (Participant No. 3)

'I think is so important that while adults are not certain what is going on with a child, I feel that if the child feels that the adult has a real sense of what it is feeling, it helps to create trust' (Participant No. 6)

'It is very important for me to be empathic; you can step into the shoes of someone else and find what he is thinking' (Participant No. 8)

4.2.3 Openness

Being open involves a willingness to learn new things, challenge one's pre-conceptions and even embrace change. Such a quality was described as being central to being able to communicate effectively with children as illustrated in the following quote.

'I think you have to be... open yourself, because I think if you are not open enough then you have lost the children and I don't think you have any hope of getting across to them. I think working with children certainly influenced how I think about them... I'm a great believer in education but I do not think it encompasses all that is

required... I think working with children just shows you that you can be very limited'
(Participant No. 1)

The importance of this quality of openness for facilitating opportunities for learning and developing one's own practice was evident within these interviews.

'I think if you are open for learning, learning new strategies and different philosophies that you can develop a lot of important characteristics... I have learned a lot and developed characteristics that I never thought I would have before I worked with young children' (Participant No. 3)

'I certainly think the only way of learning is to learn as you go on the hoof with what you have. Be open and if you are aware of the sense of the funny and the ridiculous and a sense of the differences, you watch and you learn' (Participant No. 4)

Other participants stressed that being open to new ways of 'being' involves respecting difference and not trying to shape children to fit a particular mode.

'You have to have of course huge respect for them in the broader context of where they are coming from, where they live' (Participant No. 3)

'Respect... if you are respectful to a child they will respect you back. I have seen that in a lot of different residential settings' (Participant No. 9)

Some participants felt that within the Irish context there was a lack of respect for children. One participant compared her experience in Ireland with that in Germany as follows: Unfortunately in Ireland, respect for children is not seen enough.

'I see a big difference between Ireland and Germany... in Ireland people don't really care about children, don't care to be respectful and don't care about their [the children's] emotions'(Participant No. 8)

4.2.4 Sensitivity

Sensitivity was highlighted as an important characteristic by many of the participants in this study. Yet a distinction was made between the adults' sensitivities to experiences and sensitivity to the needs of the child. According to the views of the participants the more sensitive one is, the easier it is to pick up on subtle emotional nuances. The importance of

non-verbal cues was remarked upon. Regarding the actual experience of working with young children one participant advised:

'My opinion is it is very important to be sensitive and in tune or attuned to a child's non-verbal cues' (Participant No. 2)

Another noted

'I would put sensitivity right at the beginning as one of the most important characteristics'

In order for this characteristic to be seen in interactions with young children, many participants highlighted the importance of active listening.

'I think it is important that the child sees you as available, that you are listening to ask them relevant questions... it is very important to be very sensitive to children's emotions. What is going on with them, how they are feeling, helping them to talk about it' (Participant No. 6)

Other participants highlighted responsiveness as showing the sensitivity of the adult to the child's needs.

'Things that are important in terms of responsivity [include] noticing what the child is interested in... waiting to see what the child does and listening to the child... responding contingently' (Participant No. 10)

'It [sensitivity] means being responsive, nurturing and cherishing young children... it is in the constitution that we cherish as a nation and I think in lots of ways that we don't know how to cherish children. We pay lip service to it' (Participant No. 7)

Being sensitive to the child's needs involves observation of the child and their environment. Making such opportunities for observation is vital.

'Responsivity involves things like observing... involves your input into what the child is doing, matching input... it is much more powerful to follow the child's interests than if you try to change their focus of interest' (Participant No. 10)

'It was so interesting to see [on a classroom video] that while an adult may feel a child is not taking part and not getting much from an exercise, that standing back and taking time to observe that child, you will learn much more' (Participant No. 6)

4.3 Section 2 – The Context in which Interactions Take Place

Another theme that dominated many of the narratives was how much structural issues surrounding where, when and how the interaction take place illuminates the stress many practitioners have to contend with. Government funding while invaluable to increasing provision entails bureaucratic requirements in the form of paperwork, reports and projections.

'We are all subject to more and more and lots of different stresses as early years is being developed in this country. I think it is such a new area for those of us who are committed practitioners, all the other elements are starting to seep in, in terms of frustration, more and more paperwork, reports and accounts... I find it now very stressful' (Participant No. 3)

After completing a number of inspections one participant remarked:

'I actually think an awful lot of stress in these services is from adults as opposed to children' (Participant No. 1)

This same participant pondered on the impact that stressful environments had on young impressionable children.

'There were many days I came home and thought I would take the children home and teach them myself' (Participant No. 1)

Another participant drawing on the experience of over forty years of teaching young children, labelled stress as fear.

'fear from a heavy regime, from a teacher, a principle or beatings which I know in the older days people got... [children and practitioners] can be bullied and not by bullies but bullied by the system' (Participant No. 4)

Structural issues such as the working environment, including managerial skills were noted by many participants as influencing the atmosphere in which adult-child interactions take place:

'Managers have a huge responsibility to play ensuring that the conditions are as unstressfull, if you like... life is stressful with competing demands, paperwork demands, regulatory demands and then there is the interpersonal dynamics' (Participant No. 7)

'Montessori stresses the importance of the environment for both the adult and the child because if a child is stressed or unhappy the child will feel this and maybe at some level they think it is something to do with them' (Participant No. 6)

'The demands of a curriculum may result in children being rushed from one activity to another' (Participant No. 5)

'In the primary setting it is very regimented... there is no flexibility whatsoever, there is a big thing to conform' (Participant No. 1)

Regarding the current economic climate in Ireland, with service providers and practitioners experiencing cutbacks even more stress may be evident.

'Or if the parent is under strife themselves and incapable of responding appropriately, for example, asylum seekers who don't have their own accommodation' (Participant No. 9)

4.4 Section 3 – Potential Impact of Interactions on the Developing Child

The narratives all highlighted the belief that as human beings, we are all affected by our experiences of living life and our encounters with others. One participant summarised this saying

'I think you are the result of your experiences. This is what you are and if you have had very positive experiences you would develop a positive attitude and end up seeing things in a positive light but you can be realistic as well' (Participant No.9)

One participant remarked that from the tiniest baby gurgling in response to a smiling face, to a grown adult feeling hurt or shame at a stinging criticism, we are impacted by the other's response to us. Research has shown our brains literally activate or light up in particular areas in response to our experiences. Modern technology enables us to see the proof of this through functional magnetic resonance imaging scans (MRI). In the child's earliest years when the brain is forming, when synaptic connections are being made, the young human is

at their most vulnerable and most impressionable time of development. Their senses are wide open, as noted by a participant in relation to children in reception classes.

'They watch you all the time until they get used to your expression, your way of talking or way of saying it or if you are changing your tone' (Participant No. 4)

'Positive interaction builds on his confidence and his faith in his abilities, his opinion is valid' (Participant No. 6)

In modern day psycho-therapy, the therapist helps the client delve into the root cause or source of their feelings, into the sub-conscious, where experiences are stored. They examine the impact of experiences on the client's matrix of development and very core. This was mentioned by one participant.

'I think if they are responded to, their core can be impacted, their whole self-esteem can be affected' (Participant No. 7)

4.4.1 Positive Interactions

Despite varying backgrounds in early childhood education, in general participants felt positive interactions contributed not only to positive environments but to the child's expanding personality and trust in the world and self.

'So I mean interaction, communication and interaction is the foundation of an awful lot of emotional development. It seems simple but is a huge part of it' (Participant No. 10)

'It helps the child build trust in other people so that they know where they stand and they have fear of being ridiculed or not being accepted in certain situations, which I think, kind of enhances their self.' (Participant No. 3)

Some participants felt that crucial to the development of successful communication, is the adult that scaffolds the child's understanding of his/her emotions:

'We speak of containing the child's emotional arousal... [it] encourages and puts the child at ease and helps the child engage and focus in the activities that they are engaged in, as opposed to being nervous, stressed or uncertain' (Participant No. 2)

Participants remarked that children who felt relaxed seemed eager to learn new things and engage with others.

'I think it would give the child a sense of freedom to explore new things, as sense of security... that it is ok to make mistakes... to develop their interests and their talents and make them feel accepted' (Participant No.3)

4.4.2 Negative Interactions

The implication of the adult as role model was strongly highlighted by participants particularly in relation to the real threat of children imitating the practitioner under stress.

'If the adult is sarcastic it can have a huge negative affect, it is some kind of weapon of interacting with others [the child's] whole understanding is confused. It burns into the child, they cannot develop with it' (Participant No. 4)

'Just being cranky and off, I think that makes children very insecure, it gives them an awful model of relationships with other people. I actually think it kind of builds a fear in them and I have seen children who are afraid in early years settings and I think it is so wrong... it is very, very damaging' (Participant No. 1)

'They learn by imitation... if the adult is impatient or sarcastic, they will learn to think that this is ok without really understanding what they are doing. Fear or anxiety reduces us and we are not there' (Participant No. 8)

A participant whose work involved interventions in situations of abuse stressed that damaged self-esteem may result in cycles of abuse:

'The self-esteem is damaged... that child can grow up and do the same interactions with their children because it is all they know' (Participant No. 9)

4.4.3 Stress Free Environments and the Promotion of Learning

The need for emotional stability and stress free environments for the promotion of learning was stressed by all participants:

'We can only learn if we are emotionally stable... they cannot grasp what is going on in the cognitive area of their mind if they are frightened, wary or if they are weak' (Participant No. 4)

'Positive emotional experience in turn promotes a child's cognitive development. Children who are confident and feel good about themselves are open to learning and development in a positive way' (Participant No. 5)

4.5 Section 4 – Strategies to Enhance Positive Interactions

A number of participants reflected upon how certain strategies can be adopted in order to enhance and increase positive interaction with young children. The need for use of methodologies of active learning and fostering positive interactions was highlighted by many participants:

'Provide an age appropriate environment with suitable stimulating resources where adults facilitate the child's play. Being responsible and respectful to the child, following their lead and extending their experiences and learning...allow young children lot of time to explore and wallow in activities that they enjoy' (Participant No. 5)

'Be conscious of including all of the children's individual needs... asking open ended questions and giving the child the opportunity to respond, taking time... looking at the child's non-verbal cues' (Participant No. 7)

The above quotes encompass many strategies for the creation of positive interactions.

One participant, who had recently attended a conference on fostering young children's engagement and well-being, explained the importance of helping a child express their feelings. This enhances controlling or containing feelings, through conscious thought rather than physical body reactions:

'Naming their feelings can enormously help the child communicate their emotional state' (Participant No. 6)

In endeavouring to change child care workers' negative attitudes towards children who display challenging behaviour and their frustrated parents two participants organise episodes of role play with their staff in order that they might better develop empathy.

'We just did a little role play from the child's point of view, from the parents point of view and from the childcare workers point of view... it was only at that point you could begin to see a shift... to the point where they were looking at it from the child's point of view' (Participant No. 1)

'I think role play, I would tend to call it practice role play, is incredibly powerful... it often gives really powerful insights' (Participant No. 10)

In relation to containing the child's emotional arousal to help more positive interactions take place, one participant advised.

'Getting to know your child's world, getting your child to communicate behaviour and then adapting your response to that: children often display very challenging behaviour because they don't have the words. The adult needs to mediate and help them to understand. The only ways they can communicate is via behaviour: all behaviour is communication. Desperate behaviour is desperate communication. I usually say to teachers "you have tried raising your voice.. why don't you whisper... there is no point in shouting as the child is not hearing you... use your body and whisper and stroke his arm"' (Participant No. 2)

All participants advocated building strong teams who could provide support and advice in stressful situations:

'Talk with another relevant adult and try to see how and what may be going wrong... tease away what the core issues are, try and work differently' (Participant No. 3)

'You really need colleagues, to have a good relationship with them where they can be honest to you, tell you to really reflect about your behaviour... to give a little bit of advice to you' (Participant No.8)

Besides the support of colleagues some participants stressed the need to develop reflective practice to promote positive interactions:

'I think what you need is reflective practice... your practice as opposed to say your processes. Everyone thinks they reflect... they think about things that happened... but I think reflection is much deeper than thinking about what has happened. I think intrinsically it is the idea of change' (Participant No. 1)

4.6 Section 5 – Training Needs

A final theme which emerged was the need for further training in the area of emotional intelligence enhancement. It was felt that the emotional intelligence of young children was not targeted sufficiently in training. In light of recent research, especially from America, emotional intelligence is becoming recognised as supporting the development of all other intelligences. As two participants stressed:

‘Emotional development is hugely overlooked... if you are not emotionally mature you just won’t do well regardless of any measures of your other intelligences... I think there is an over emphasis nowadays on behaviour management’ (Participant No. 1)

‘From working in crèches there was really very little evidence of knowledge of emotional development... it is just not on the agenda’ (Participant No. 8)

Some participants remarked that the concept of development taking place in different domains and the influence of adult interactions on this development has not been highlighted enough:

‘Training focuses an awful lot on child development. Where this child should be, rather than, maybe, this child has developed academically on this level as a three year old but emotionally this child is operating as a six month old... many children in foster care are operating at a much younger level emotionally’ (Participant No. 9)

‘In terms of the impact of the adult, I think and I mean hands on heart, that I have worked as a tutor for many years in early childhood education at FETAC Level 5 & 6, while I have always placed a great emphasis on the adult/child interactions, it is only a bare reference [on course material] ... I think what needs to be included in terms of childcare workers is self-development’ (Participant No. 1)

According to one participant, such deficits in training can occur because of the emphasis on academic knowledge by colleges:

‘Generally it is not sufficiently focused on... very much caught up in theories, it is very academically orientated. That is where you will learn about your philosophies, but hands on practical work is not sufficiently acknowledged, as to the impact it can

have... [focus on] the impact of the adult is still definitely in the early stage'
(Participant No. 3)

Another participant focused on a possible way to highlight the importance of positive interactions:

'There should be on-going training in nurseries, maybe by a psychologist or a person trained in this whole area... it opens the person to themselves, to others and to different personalities... not to think that everybody does it their way' (Participant No. 4)

Acknowledging the importance of the success of using methods such as the Hanen (which supports children's language development) or Marte Meo (video based observations) to promote interaction, participants who regularly use these methods, recommended their inclusion in all early childhood education courses:

'Bring in a Marte Meo tape [case study] my supervisor goes into UCD and does a presentation with social workers every year, it is very successful' (Participant No. 9)

'It would be critical... especially for disadvantaged schools where children have much more challenges but if you get good quality for three or four hours a day... that is major, that is overwhelming. The responsibility that they have' (Participant No. 10)

Questioned on how to promote such training especially to qualified, practising early childhood education practitioner's one participant recommended:

'First of all understand why it is important to do this... if they don't know why it is relevant they won't go on to learn it... then you must experience the change it makes and apply the learning and then also do what we call reflective feedback. It would be the experiential way. I don't think there is any other way to teach people'
(Participant No. 10)

In contrast another practitioner believed training was well addressed under certain circumstances in college:

'Where you have highly qualified professionals delivering the training, however in other courses it will depend on the training and the trainer' (Participant No. 5)

Hope that this area is gaining recognition in training and support was expressed by one participant's views of Aistear's early year's curriculum:

'The fact that Aistear in its introduction and supporting materials stresses the importance of loving a child is important. Aistear just supports people to understand, to tease out what is meant by well-being, identity and belonging and how do we provide for this – not just the theoretical concepts. What does that look like' (Participant No. 7)

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an overview of the findings which emerged from the data collected from interviews with participants. Several themes have been identified and further analysis of these will take place in the next section.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Key themes that emerged from each of the sections of the findings will be discussed. The findings are based on interviews with senior practitioners working in the areas of early childhood education and support services. The findings will be discussed under five broad headings that emerged as a result of the research.

These are; characteristics of the adult, context in which interactions take place, potential impact of adult interactions on the developing child, strategies to enhance positive interactions and the training needs of Early Childhood Education professionals.

5.1 Characteristics of the Adult

The personality of the adult and need for self-awareness was commonly cited among the respondents as being a key feature of positive interactions with young children. Consistent with this, previous research has shown that self-awareness demands introspection and reflection, the practice of mindfulness, that is being aware of one's sensory experiences in the present moment, is gaining recognition as a way to promote well-being in mind and body, leading to more positive interactions with others (Kornfield, 2008).

Participants in general were very aware of the impact of body language on the child's interpretation of interactions. Behaviour such as standing over a child with hands on hips was seen as threatening and intimidating to the child. This is in line with Bowlby's (1969) argument that tone of voice, posture and facial expression impact on attachment communication. Smith (2002) cautions that harsh words can be profoundly harmful to the developing brain. He points to research on abused children that found many of them exhibited borderline personality disorder. Shapiro (2003) explains that it is through body language that fifty percent of our emotional language takes place. The rest is shown through voice tone, and inflection, labelled paralanguage. This knowledge gives early childhood practitioners a powerful tool with which to promote positive interactions with young children and become attuned to the young child's needs. The psycho biologically attuned sensitive care giver is important to the mental health of the young child (Shore & Shore, 2008).

All participants acknowledge that stressful environments can interfere with self-awareness. In addition to lack of self awareness factors such as increased bureaucratic requirements and environment deficits were seen as contributing to stress in adults resulting in negative interactions. The effect of stress was explained by Gerhard (2004) as affecting the immune system, the capacity to learn and to relax. She believes stress management is at the heart of mental health. Recognising the bidirectional influences taking place when adults and children interact, she warns that continuous regulation is required more often than can be provided in poor quality or stress filled childcare institutions and advocates a willingness to prioritise relationships.

The second characteristic highlighted in the narratives and noted as being heavily influenced by ones self-awareness, was empathy, described in essence by a participant as the ability to put oneself in the child's situation and look through the prism of the child's eyes and mind. Again, it was understood that children think differently to adults, harkening Gopniks (1999) notion that children experience consciousness in a different way to adults. Kurowski, (2009) congruent with the respondents' emphasis on empathy, feels it is an essential characteristic and one that can be developed. Numerous programmes have been devised including, "Roots of Empathy", an evidenced-based classroom programme, to foster empathy development. Adults and children learn to identify and reflect on their own thoughts and feelings and those of others. Interactions based on an empathic understanding of the other, requires sensitivity on the part of the adult, a characteristic placed high on the respondents list and found to be one of three core "style" elements shaping the quality of adult-child interactions in research (Pascal & Bertram, 2001).

A final characteristic that emerged of significance was openness. Participants reflected that actually working with young children opens up the possibility of a new understanding of development and can highlight the limitations of one's way of interacting. Gopnick (1999) echoes this sentiment, questioning if practitioners and indeed the general public, truly appreciate the processing power of the young child's mind and its dependence on supportive adults. Gopnick's belief in the evolution of the human mind demands practitioners who are willing and eager to engage in continued professional development (CDP), and to share insights. The narratives highlighted a thirst for such exchange. Participants agreed that active listening and contingent response is important to the child's development of self esteem, yet raised concerns regarding new demands on their time, skills and energy in the

form of bureaucracy. In fact the narrative suggests a preoccupation with bureaucracy at the present time, as discussed below.

5.2 Context in Which the Interactions Take Place

‘Bullied by the system’ was how one participant phrased it. This concern about the burden of regulatory requirements has been raised elsewhere, where quality control, increasing standardisation and regulation, can lead to control by quality (Darlberg, 1999). Early childhood services and delivery can be termed to be in a transitional phase. The paradigm shift in public policy towards children and early childhood education including the formation and promotion of Siolta has meant that services are experiencing pressure and feel at times unsupported. In the primary school system, the demands of the curriculum were noted in the study to cause a sense of anxiety to both the children and teachers, impacting negatively on interactions. The importance of the role of the manager of early childhood settings in facilitating the development of contexts which can support positive interaction with children was also highlighted in the interviews

The need to address both the adults and children’s welfare and emotional needs was highlighted in the narratives, as an important role of the manager, including team building and mutual support, especially in challenging interactions. Rodd (1998) concurring, believes communication and interpersonal relationships form the bedrock of successful teams and managers, who set the ethos of a service must be skilled in developing both. Participants reflected that young children observing positive adult interactions would have a role model or template of such interactions. Narratives pointed to the need for programme structures (another core role of the manager) to include time for reflective practice, wherein change could be explored and relationships improved. Daly (2004) promotes reflective practice to enhance the quality of the environment for service provision.

5.3 Potential Impact

The impact of adult-child interactions, both negative and positive, was explored in the study, where participants’ highlighted that the child’s core can be impacted positively or negatively. Children’s responses may be shaped in early childhood by negative or positive influences, for example, an intrusive, controlling adult might stunt a young child’s initiative and damage their self-esteem. Moderating such concern, Gerhardt explains that although early childhood experiences shape ones response to others and can have a disproportionate

impact on one's life, important neural pathways continue to be established 'especially up to the age of seven' (Gerhardt, 2004, p. 195). Positive interactions were understood by participants to support emotional development. These understandings are not only reiterated by Goleman (1996) but reinforced by his cautionary note that to neglect the child's emotional development and the emotional circuit sculpted, could prove perilous. Respondents pointed to the dangers of cycles of abuse continuing, if the child exposed to sarcasm, impatience or neglect grows up and engages in 'the same interactions with their children'. (Montessori (1956) addresses such danger and urges that adults become aware of their great influence as role models. Her insights in this important area have been supported by Ramachandram's (2006) work on mirror neurons in the child's brain, whose importance lies in helping the child 'tune' into the feelings of those around them. The narratives suggest that children continuously monitor adults in their environment. Practitioners working with young children could model behaviour they wish the child to display and engage in positive interactions and so support positive emotional circuits being sculpted.

Trust development was also highlighted in the narratives, linking the adults' understanding and responsiveness to the underlying mechanism of secure attachment, which encourages expansion of the child's personality and eagerness to explore and learn new things. Respondents also pointed to the perceived impact of interactions, especially when the child is feeling stressful or overwhelmed, as containing the child's emotional arousal. This feeling is in line with containment theory, wherein the child supported by a continuous empathic relationship with another, learns to 'hold' inarticulate and unmanageable feelings Crawford (2000). A further perceived impact of feeling secure through positive interactions, noted by the respondents was the promotion of learning abilities. Modern technology allows a deeper understanding of brain functions and chemicals that effect specific synaptic gaps and neural transmitters. Congruent with the respondent's perceptions research has shown that emotions produce chemicals that physiologically affect the synapses, supporting or diminishing the brain in learning thinking or remembering (Smilkstein 2003). The nurturing environment can thus be seen to be of the utmost importance and hinges on positive adult child interactions.

5.4 Strategies

The findings highlighted the expertise and experience of the respondents in the practical approaches to promoting positive experiences within the framework of active or experiential learning, such as devising age appropriate environments peopled by responsive and respectful adults. Less noticeable in this section, was an appreciation of the notion of a practitioner's style. Laevers & Heylon (2004) in contrast, urged that practitioners become sensitised to their style describing it as a pattern in the way adults intervene or interact with young children. They further argue that the person of the teacher is more important than other environmental factors such as space, materials and activities.

Changing ones response to a troubling situation, through focused attention on the needs of the child, was highlighted in the narratives as an important strategy in the creation of trust and empathy. Weitzman & Greenberg (2002) recommend changing long standing patterns of interaction as well as ideas about what a teacher's role really is. Narratives highlighted the use of role play in order to examine the dynamics of a situation. This practice links back to the development of empathy. Laevers & Heylon (2004) juxtapose the practitioner's style with the ability to engage in acts of empathy. This is an interesting move from the view of the practitioner as instructor or director to one of collaborator. This has been noted elsewhere in the literature 'the model of the teacher as the source of learning, from whom young people receive knowledge is still strongly felt within the system, while the notion of the well-being and involvement of children... needs to be developed' OECD (2004).

The findings drew attention to the need for targeted initiatives to improve children's communication of their emotional state. Putting feeling into words not only supports communication and interactions between adults and children but also supports brain development. Gerhardt (2004) confirming the respondents' views on communication, explains that empathic interactions enable emotions to be integrated into higher functioning. She explains that putting feeling into words enables the integration of the left and right brain allowing regulation of feelings and stress reduction.

The final theme that emerged in this section was the benefit of reflective practise. Highlighted was the need for practice reflection that addressed the actual interactions that took place, the support of the child's holistic development and in particular self esteem and initiative, as opposed to mere processed reflection, which only addressed skill acquisition and production. Addressing reflective practice, the Siolta (2006) literature urges that programme designers factor in time for reflection on practice, where additional knowledge

or changing approaches is deemed necessary. This is a most encouraging and heartening sign post from the standpoint of this study. Additional knowledge sources include continued professional development training and college courses, an area addressed in the findings.

5.5 Training Needs

Commonly cited among the respondents was the lack of emphasis on emotional development in childcare training, despite research into its importance in supporting cognitive growth and all round development Goleman (1996), Meltzoff (2009), Steiner (1997), Shonkoff & Philips (2000). In contrast, highlighted in the narratives was the emphasis on child development in childcare training courses and the neglect of emphasis, on the impact of the adult interaction on such development. This concern echoes Dahlberg's (1999) view, that in de-contextualising the child sight is lost of their experiences, theories, feelings and hopes, leaving only the knowledge of 'how far this or that child conforms to certain norms on the maps we use' p36.

Concern was raised in the findings that some early childhood training courses barely make reference (in course material) to supporting emotional development through positive interactions with self aware, empathic, warm care givers. The narrative suggested a possible solution was in designing specific modules that would focus on self development, attachment theory and it's implications for practitioners and the use of technology (videos) to promote the power of interactions on the developing child's mind. This approach is particular to the Marte Meo approach wherein practitioners get a 'birds eye' view of the effect of their presence, responsiveness and style of interacting on the young child's engagement. Another approach highlighted in the findings, the Hanen method, emphasises contingent responsiveness in interactions and techniques to foster positive communication, particularly in matching or moderating the child's own style of communication. According to this method adults who respond contingently promptly and appropriately to children's activities are thought to facilitate a sense of self efficacy, motivation and security of attachment, autonomy and competence (Manolson, Ward & Doddington, 1995).

The final theme that emerged was one of motivation. Participants highlighted the need to motivate practitioners to promote positive interactions. Understanding the importance of positive interactions, experiencing the positive consequences that can occur and reflecting on ones learning were addressed. Aistear, congruent with such findings promotes a professional development tool that supports: reflection in and on practise, development of

observation and pedagogical documentation skills and the promotion of the integration of research in practise. The literature highlights the importance of relationships echoing Neven's (1997) advocacy that relationships be put right at the centre of any childcare facility and efforts to support these, through positive adult-child interactions prioritised.

5.6 Conclusion

The narrative showed clear evidence that the participants, through practice were keenly aware of the power of interactions, both positive and negative on the young child development and the urgency for vigilance in endeavouring to meet the child's needs, particularly in stressful situations and adapting their 'style' of interaction. Secure attachments influence the growth of a broad range of competencies, including a continuous coherent unified sense of self, a love of learning successful relationships in later life and a sophisticated understanding of emotions NSCDC (2004). Respondents urge that stable and predictable relationships both within the family and in childcare settings needs to be acknowledged in practice and policy and in the training of all those who work with young children. Psychological maturity was seen by the respondents to depend on the foundation of positive interactions between the adult and child, wherein the attuned adult co-constructs a life framework that supports the developing child.

5.7 Recommendations

- 1) Recognition must be made of:
 - the fact that the young child's capacity to relate and to form an attachment to a consistent care giving figure is of primary importance and informs all the other activities that the child is able to engage in and
 - the plasticity of the brain and the early childhood educator's influence as a role model and co-constructor be recognised
- 2) Training courses should incorporate theoretical and practical aspects of 'affect regulation', empathic communication, self development and reflective practice.
- 3) The emotional support of staff must be addressed and seen as a key to the provision of safe and sustainable services in which positive adult-child interactions can take place
- 4) The Marte Meo and the Hanen programmes should be part of the Early Childhood Educators studies to enhance communication skills
- 5) Service provision and its environment must be child-centred, warm, stimulating, safe and respectful

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APPENDIX I

Consent Form

Researcher: Thea Norton

Interview Consent Form

My name is Thea Norton. I am an early childhood educator at St Audoens pre-school, Dublin. I have extensive experience of early childhood education both in Ireland and in Canada. I am at present completing a Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies at the Dublin Institute of Technology.

I would like you to take part in my research which is aiming to explore the perspectives and attitudes of practitioners working with young children and the potential impact of their interactive style on the young child's emotional and cognitive development.

If you agree to participate, I will come to interview you at your convenience at an agreed venue. The interview could take up to one hour and I will record the interview if that is acceptable to you. The interview recording will be available to you if you wish to hear it. A list of the questions I will be asking is available on request.

All the information that I obtain will be kept confidential. Your identity will be kept confidential.

The interview is designed to be approximately one hour in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. Also, if there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will stop the interview, take a break or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

Your participation is voluntary.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read the description above and consent to participate.

Signed _____

Name

(Printed) _____ Date _____

____ *Your participation is very much appreciated.*

APPENDIX II

The Research Instrument

Characteristics of the Adult

- What characteristics of an adult would you highlight as being important in terms of their interactions with children in the early years?
 - Can you tell me a little more about why you would highlight this as important
- What are the potential impacts of these characteristics (and the interaction involved) on the child?

Characteristics of the Child

- To what extent are adult interactions with children shaped by the particular characteristics of the child involved?

Child Interactions

- What factors are important for you in terms of promoting positive adult –child interaction?
- How can we draw out and engage the child in a positive way?
- Who has influenced you most in terms of your thinking around adult-child interactions
 - Can you tell me a little about why they have influenced you?
- Do you feel that professionals working in the Early childhood sector focus sufficiently on the impact of adult-child interactions and children’s emotional development?
- In your view, do you think that children’s cognitive development is in any way shaped by their emotional experiences?
- Goleman states “emotional circuits are sculpted by experience throughout childhood and we leave these experiences utterly to chance at our peril”. What do you feel about such a statement?
- In what ways do you think that adult interaction which children can impact negatively on them – in terms of emotional development (e.g. being sarcastic, impatient and abrupt with child – the tone of the adult can impact negatively on child)

Context surrounding the relationship

- To what extent do you think the context surrounding the relationship with the child is important (e.g. a stressful environment, a demanding curriculum may impact on interactions)?
- Research has shown that we often revert to the original formative belief systems, even if they are not the desirable one, when we are in situations of stress, pressure and so on.
 - To what extent would you agree with this idea?
 - Are there any particular strategies that you can mention to overcome this?
 - How can we use strategies to help practitioners see beyond the immediate behaviour manifestations to the original child

Self Awareness in Interactions young children

- How important do you feel self awareness is in adult interactions with children?
 - Body language?
 - Tone of expression?
 - Reactivating negative responses in children?
- How important is it for the adult to remain at a remove and not to allow your personal views overtake?
- How can adults maintain appropriate boundaries in their interactions with children while at the same time communicating kindness to each child?

Training

- To what extent do you feel that the issues we have been discussing are addressed in training of early childhood practitioners?
- Do you feel that the importance of shaping children's emotional development receives sufficient emphasis in childcare training?
- Can you think of how it might be further promoted and supported in childcare training?
- Does pedagogic training encompass sufficiently a focus on the interplay between biology, neuroscience and psychology regarding the importance healthy emotional development which underpins cognitive development?
- To what extent are your core pedagogic philosophies challenged through the experience of actually working with children?

- Does your continuous learning and practical experience facilitate further knowledge with regard to the influence of the practitioner on children’s emotional and cognitive development
- How important is the practitioner’s
 - Sensitivity
 - Empathy
 - Role modelling
- How can personal experience and practice gained in working with children inform and contribute to the development of early childhood education training programmes?
 - How could this be improved?
- Are there any other questions that you feel that I could have asked you related to this topic?

APPENDIX III

Transcribed Interview

INTERVIEW Participant Number 1

Interviewer: Good morning, just to begin could you tell me your qualifications and training in the area of childcare.

Interviewee: My qualifications: I have a BSc in Psychology, I also have a higher diploma in ABA and in teaching adults and my background in early education goes back over a very long time. A long time ago I worked in a small community play group worked more as a volunteer initially and then getting into the likes of very small courses foundation level courses with the IPPA in child care and I took a break for a number of year. I was rearing my own children and I was away and then I began my degree and while I was doing that then working in an outreach class for children with autism. So I have a bigger background in working with children with special needs and I have been back in the early year's sector for five years now. Special needs sector for primary age children for about seven years.

Interviewer: What does your work with children involve? Your role and your day to day practice?

Interviewee: I suppose for the last year I have not been not working directly with the children. I have moved up and manage the services for the children I work with. It would be my role to set the ethos of the organisations to direct the child care apart from the housekeeping management and finances services and budgets. I direct it.

Interviewer: Would you supervise?

Interviewee: I supervise the staff. I also liaise with any outside organisations that we would refer children to. I do all the referrals with the community team for anything I do all the liaising for that. I do all the report writing for any outside agencies in relation to the children. I will do direct practical there is a certain amount of work. It is not definitely as much as it used to be actual direct practice.

Interviewer: What characteristics of an adult would you highlight as being important in terms of their interaction with children in their early years.

Interviewee: In the early years I think that one of the most important things is that you have to have absolute patience. You have to be very emphatic. You have to be able to put yourself in the child's situation. I think you have to be very accepting of the child of who they are and to be open yourself because I think if you are not open enough well then you have lost children and I don't think you have any hope of getting across to them.

Interviewer: What do you feel the potential impacts of these characteristics would be on the child?

Interviewee: I think if your characteristics are the ones mentioned above they should be very very positive. I think if you have any influence to interact with the children and I think what that helps to do is It helps the children to build trust in other people so that they know where they stand and they have no fear of being ridiculed or not accepted in certain situations which I think kind of enhances their self and help them to build good esteem and good internal working of models of relationships with other people.

Interviewer: Do you think child care workers can be helped to develop these, or are they intrinsic in the person?

Interviewee: I think there is an element of that. I think there are certain people. We do a lot of recruitment in taking on a lot of staff. I think for me personally I would always get a sense within the first say month or so of someone starting whether or not they are cut out for childcare. I think there is an element in that you have the type of nature that allows you to work with young children and I think if you have that basic quality or characteristic that you interact with children in a certain way that it is obvious you actually like because it is very surprising the amount of people that come to work and it is quite obvious that they don't like children really all that much .and they think it is an easy option so they just go into it. It has to be there intrinsically I think it needs to be worked on as well over time.

Interviewer: To what extent are adult interactions with children shaped by the particular characteristics of the child. Do you think different children would evoke different responses?

Interviewee: I definitely think so and you can see that quite clearly sometimes you can see adults spend more time, be more attached be more kind to a particular child. You can see at times that there are some children that certain adults find very difficult. They say things like I don't know what it is with that child every time she opens her mouth or every time she looks at me I have to force myself. So I definitely think there is an interaction there. There is a play off between and it is something very hard to define and very hard to put your finger on and I do think it is very easy to push peoples buttons and I think an awful lot of people are not aware of that when they are working and actually don't make allowances for that.

Interviewer: Regarding those interactions what factors are important in terms of promoting positive child/adult interactions do you feel?

Interviewee: I think the first thing is that you have to be very accepting absolutely as they are. I think it is very easy to make judgements and say she whinges all the time. She would be a great kid if she didn't whinge as much as she does. So it is very important that you are totally accepting of them. I think you need to have a little

bit of recognition of being accepting maybe of where they are coming from and their background. I know it is a big thing now and many children now have a huge amount of baggage with them. A lot of them do and what is normal for them may not be for you but you have to accept their norm and that that is where they are operating from. Again I think just in terms of to be very honest and very genuine with children in your own feeling and in your own way of being and I think they respond well to that..

Interviewer: That leads us and influences the next question how can we draw and engage the child in a positive way.

Interviewee: I think it is about being open and honest. Take a genuine interest in their interests rather than having your own agenda. I think you need to be a very good role model for the children. There is no point in being all nice and sweet to the children and then turning around and snapping at another staff member and say 'what did you do that for' or whatever. Being a very good role model and I think then it is up to you as the adult to provide the opportunity to engage at a good level and you do that through being open.

Interviewer: Who has influenced you most in terms of your thinking around adult/child would there be any theorist.

Interviewee: I would have said going back a long long time ago going back certainly five years or so, the theorist that I would have most been influenced by, would have been Piaget. I like the whole thing "children think differently". that kind of view. For the last number of years I think who influenced me most was actually the children.. To me they are the biggest influence in how I work I mean I read a lot. I read a lot in the area of different theories and that sort of thing and they are all very relevant. But I actually think in terms of children is my biggest influence is the children.

Interviewer: Do feel professionals working in the area of early childhood focus sufficiently on the impact adult/child interactions especially with children's emotional development.

Interviewee: I definitely think there is not enough emphasis on the interaction. I think there is an over emphasis nowadays on behaviour management. I know in the line of work that I am in, we deal with a lot of children in a disadvantaged area and so that brings a complexity of problems that you might not see elsewhere but I think everything is behaviour management. I just think if people actually would concentrate more on interactions and talk more and see how the children were doing emotionally. If they are secure emotionally if they are good emotionally kind of development you might not have as many problems as you do when that is not the case. I think sometimes they are acting purely, they just don't know what to do, how they are feeling and the manifestation of those feelings. I think if you concentrate more on programmes around feelings and emotions and being very careful of your interaction,

Interviewer: Would you feel popular programmes like Super Nanny have influenced people in behaviour management.

Interviewee: To some extent. I would ban that programme.

Interviewer: Why

Interviewee: Because it is again concentrating on the behaviour. I seriously disagree with the bold step, bold carpet, bold corner all of these. I don't really rate reward charts a whole lot. I think they are very limiting in what they do and I actually think in some instances they can cause more problems than they solve. Now there is no doubt they might work for a very small thing. The problems to my mind are not actually with the children but with parents. I know she does talk about that, to an extent,

oh we have to spend time but to me that should be the emphasis and not sitting on the bold step for doing this or for doing that.

Interviewer: In your view do you think children's cognitive development is in any way shaped by their emotional experiences.

Interviewee: I think it is totally linked. I don't think children do well cognitively if they are not doing well emotionally and I don't think they are in a place to be able to. I think for children to do well cognitively, I think they have to have a good sense of themselves a good sense of security and a good sense of, I am okay in the world and I think children who struggle with their cognitive development, not all children, some children can have particular difficulties, but I think again in the disadvantaged area that I work in I see a lot of children, I think it is more to do with their involvement in their environment and their emotional development. I think they tend to be emotionally extremely immature and therefore that is a huge barrier as far as I am concerned for anyone.

Interviewer: A writer in the area, Goleman has written a lot about emotional development and his statement if I could read it to you "Emotional circuits are sculpted by experience throughout childhood and our experiences are utterly to chance at our peril". What do you feel about that? Does that resonate with you?

Interviewee: Yes it does. I have to say I read Goldman and I do totally agree with that. I do think that emotional development is hugely overlooked. I think as well, nowadays, parents have an awful emphasis on doing well in school and it is not that you don't want children to do well in school but I often think that children who are extremely bright may not perform as well as they could do, may or may not be well adjusted adults. But you know what I am getting at, a lot of times for those children there is a huge push and huge emphasis on development and their achievements in school and I think their emotional development tends to be ignored as there is a belief I think, that she is so bright she won't have any problems and that parents kind of just focus on that and ignore the rest. It is not a deliberate thing I think but their

needs get overlooked and I definitely think if you are not emotionally mature you just won't do well regardless of you or any measures of any other intelligence.

Interviewer: So regarding that idea of 'peril' in the future. Would you agree?

Interviewee: Oh 100%

Interviewer: In what way do you think adult interactions with children can impact negatively on them in terms of emotional development like an adult being sarcastic?

Interviewee: A huge impact on children. When you think in the early years and you see it a lot and I know there is a big push on people to have Fetac Level 5, or people have their degree training, or that training, but I sometimes think there is an awful lot of adults going in and they act with children the same way as they do with other adults like being sarcastic. Just being cranky and off and I think that makes children very very insecure. It gives them an awful model of relationships with other people. I actually think it kind of builds a fear in them and I have seen children who are afraid in early years and I think that is so wrong in that instance it is very very damaging.

Interviewer: In relation to in the service and the context around the relationship. Can you talk a little about that? How you feel to what extent the cognitive influences interactions.

Interviewee: If there is a lot of stress anywhere that has a huge influence on interaction. If you are working on a high stress level I don't think you are mindful of your own feelings and therefore you are not aware of anybody else's feelings for example "I am majorly stressed at the moment but I have to do this" I do think and I know children can be very challenging but I actually think that an awful lot of stress in these services are from adults as opposed to the children. When you think they are three year olds and your expectations should be at the way three year olds are

.You will not be stressed on the understanding of and you can deal with anything that arises. Sometimes staff expectations are very high than what they expect.

Interviewer: Do you think staff should change the environment, curriculum if they are in a primary setting. Do you have any input that might help the adult or help the child?

Interviewee: I think support is a big thing for staff and support in what they are doing. I think it needs to be acknowledged that the work is difficult by its very nature. I have been working in primary schools for over seven years. I definitely in a primary situation it is very regimental. I think there is no flexibility whatsoever and you can see the very odd teacher that will do something different or whatever. A lot of occasions it is actually knocked on the head in very subtle ways but it is knocked on the head. There is big thing to conform. That is a difficulty. I do genuinely think it is a difficulty.

Interviewer: Research has shown that we often revert to our original formative beliefs that we have, even though they are not desirable when we are in situations of pressure. To what extent would you agree with this?

Interviewee: I do agree with this. I see it. You have staff and everyone has training and people do further training. Yet at times I am still amazed at what staff may say after a staff meeting "where if it was my child I would have given them a good slap and it might never have happened". That shocks me; and the amount of staff who think "she is just bold" all it is "she is just bold" with absolutely no understanding. Not only is it not acceptable it is actually not right. But I do think despite all that at times people definitely revert back to that of their original belief in relation to children's behaviour.

Interviewer: What would you suggest to staff to try to help overcome an initial reaction?

Interviewee: Say for instance in one of our services there were huge problems. Absolutely a total range of problems that might have stemmed from the children and their interactions and everything else, that manifested itself in a lot of behaviour. Very challenging to staff and very stressful. Staff were being hit, being hurt and there was a big push for behaviour management. What I did was we brought in somebody to do a little bit of training around the needs and we brought the behaviour in as an additional need. This is an additional need to the child, so every time we try to say there is always a reason for the behaviour and they might not know always what the reason is. You need to say this is making sense to the child. It is not making sense to me but it is making sense to the child and I need to come at it from a different angle. So I always say behaviour management is actually an additional need.

Interviewer: Has practice improved and have staffs responded to the training

Interviewee: It did. I think there was a point at one stage where there were great difficulties. So what we did was a little roll play. We just did a little role play from the child's point of view and the parent's point of view and the child care workers point of view and I got different staff to read them and I left the script from the child's point of view to the last. It was only at that you could begin to see a shift, and began to say well maybe. There was no miracle. I think it is about shifting and getting to the point where they are looking at it from the child's point of view.

Interviewer: Was that from your own learning. It sounds very innovativefrom your own model from your own practice from your own experience.

Interviewee: It is to do with your training in a philosophical background. Like I say mine is psychology. I have a very good understanding of a child's development. I think it is easier to see a child's point of view when you understand how they think. It is just

from having a sense over the years and having a sense of the children as opposed to a sense of the adult.

Interviewer: Regarding adults maintaining appropriate boundaries with their interactions; do you feel it important to communicate kindness within that boundary.

Interviewee: I think that in terms of boundaries it is very important that children be given their own space to fail or succeed. I think you need to be careful not to enforce kindness; you need to be kind to everyone not just to children. Staff may say regarding a child. 'Oh he is gorgeous' and the staff are putting him on their lap and they are cuddling him. I think you never force anything like that on young children because you are not the children's parents therefore it is not your responsibility. You have to be open to it if children seek it. I don't agree with no touching, no hugging, no kissing. Small children require that and again in been available to children and in every sense they can seek it if they want. I think in terms of your boundaries you have to be very careful of taking your own value system. I think it is about self awareness. I think if you have good self awareness well then your boundaries shouldn't be a problem and maintaining your boundaries.

Interviewer: Do you feel by your tone or expression you would influence a child. Would you be aware of that?

Interviewee: Yes I know what you are talking about. Again it is about putting them on the child. I think you need to be self aware. Then you are very aware of your body language. In our services I say do not stand over any child with your hand on your hips. I do think your voice is hugely important. I don't think you should use a very cross tone or a nasty tone. I do think that hugely influences the interaction as I say the behaviour. You are putting messages and you need to be very careful as to what message you are putting across.

Interviewer: That particular one, hands on hips. Why do you feel so strongly about that? How would the child feel seeing that body language?

Interviewee: I think as an adult you are naturally bigger than the child and it is intimidating. I wouldn't want anybody standing over me if you are talking to someone who is much taller than you are and putting your head up to look. It is hugely intimidating. To me that is intimidating. So therefore you just don't do it. You get down to their level whether it is on your knees wherever and you deal with it.

Interviewer: To what extent do you feel that the issues that we have been discussing in the training of early childhood have been addressed?

Interviewee: I do not think that they have been addressed very well in terms of the impact of the adult. I think and I mean hands on heart I have worked as a tutor for many years in childhood education and as you know at Fetac Level 5 and 6 training child care workers whereas I would always place a great emphasis on the adult/child interaction. It is only a bare reference on material provided to course trainers. There is a lot of emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene and I know that it is to do with the regulations. I am not saying that is not important. It is important. I think what needs to be included in terms of childcare workers is self development. I think if you have it yourself and are fairly sure of yourself very certain of your own stance on things and awareness about your own interaction with other people and what way you come across well then that is important.

Interviewer: What about the area of self reflection. Is there enough guidance for people or do you think that people need some other strategy to make the person aware?

Interviewee: I don't think there is any self reflection in the child care. The word that they use is evaluate. I cannot speak for third level but I definitely know at Fetac Level 5 and 6 the evaluation specifies the process as opposed to self evaluation. What I need to be aware of should be highlighted to the workers. . It is about reflecting. For

Example - we were doing a collage and all the children sat quietly while we were trying to do this ...Well Johnny was fidgeting. Well the next time we will give Johnny something to play with and it will go better. That is evaluating what the collage looks like at the end of the day. Put together and is it good enough for display. But missing is 'What did the children get out of it. What did I get out of it and how did we all relate to one another'

Interviewer: Do you feel then that there should be a particular module and how would you describe it.

Interviewee: I think what you need is reflective practice. Your practice as opposed to say your processes. Everyone thinks they reflect, they think about things that happened. I think reflection is much much deeper than thinking about what has happened. I think intrinsically it is the idea of change. I think there definitely should be a module or continual professional development on reflective practice. I think the emphasis should be on the person.

Interviewer: This is very interesting, because on the degree course especially in the DIT they do have a reflective practice emphasis but when you were teaching Level 5 and 6 it was not part of that.

Interviewee: No

Interviewer: And that is the level a lot of childcare workers will be trained to

Interviewee: Yes. Evaluation. To me is not the same as reflective practice and I would say the evaluation is about the processes

Interviewer: We probably have covered a lot of these questions. Does pedagogic training encompass sufficiently a focus on the interplay between biology, neuroscience and psychology regarding the importance of healthy emotional development which underpins cognitive development?

Interviewee: No I don't think there is a big emphasis on it. I think they are treated separately. I think there is a reference that everything influences one another without a greater understanding of how it is done in relation to the interaction and in relation to neuroscience. So let us not be too concerned about who the child is going to be and I think people need to realise that. I think if you are talking about potential for children, in whatever aspect you are talking about that, whether it is in their teens or their adulthood you need to be very cognitive of the total of where they are coming from and what the influences are coming from and that comes from everything.

Interviewer: To what extent have your core pedagogic philosophies been challenged or have they been challenged in actually working with the children.

Interviewee: Again, things like psychology and it would have been Piaget I would have favoured. But I think working with children certainly influenced the way I think about them. I dislike the use of the word curriculum I dislike not that I dislike the word education, I am a great believer of education but I do not think it encompasses what is required and I think working with children just shows you that you can be very limited. I think I can take anything on board. I don't think I have any one pedagogic philosophy to adhere to.

Interviewer: Therefore do you think you have enjoyed continuous learning experiences. Has that further knowledge influenced your practice with regard to the influence of a practitioner on emotional and cognitive development?

Interviewee: Totally, I think continual professional development is worthwhile. I think when you bring it all together with good self reflection it should improve things. If you are not shifting, if you still have the same thoughts from college eight years ago and you are exactly the same today as you were eight years ago then you have not learnt anything.

Interviewer: How can the practical work experience gained in working with the children, would you think, inform and contribute in the development of education programmes. Do you think there is any way to feed back into programmes?

Interviewee: At the moment there is no great way to feed back into programmes. I do think there is a need for that. Maybe at fifth level with a little bit of research where you are bringing your own thoughts and your own knowledge gained in both your knowledge of the area and your practices and you are able to bring that in but I think that lower down the level there is no feedback system and I feel it would be hugely useful. Often times a lot of the people there can be experts but have never really worked with children. They may well have the academic background and I am not dismissing academia as I think it is hugely important but I do think that there should be an element, where people that have worked in the area of childcare and engaged in the process, can share their knowledge, currently I do not think it exists.

Interviewer: Just to wrap it up to say thank you very much for your time and expertise. Are there any other questions you feel I could have asked in regard to this topic that you would like me to have asked?

Interviewee: The only thing I feel you could have asked is around the importance of early year's education and it is important for young children. I know that the research shows it is hugely beneficial to children long term especially in the early years but I have seen so much questionable and bad early childhood education that I think some children would be better off at home.

Interviewer: Why?

Interviewee: I still think with the exception of exceptional circumstances, and I know family life can be difficult, I think it is the best environment for the child. I know some people just cannot do it but any parent cares more about their children than any early education practitioner. They might feel that they may not have the skills to follow through on it but I think the bond and the attachment with the parent will be better than it ever will be with an early year's worker. I don't think early years workers should set themselves as experts on the children. If it is a choice between a bad home environment and a bad early year's environment, the better is a bad home environment.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time