An Leanbh Óg

An Leanbh Óg- the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies.

Vol. 10, September 2016

Edited by
Rosaleen Murphy, Patricia Radley and Anna Ridgway

Published by OMEP Ireland
Published by OMEP Ireland 2016.

OMEP Ireland is the National Committee for Ireland of OMEP.

OMEP:
L’Organisation Mondiale pour l’Education Préscolaire
World Organisation for Early Childhood Education and Care
Organización Mundial para la Educación Preescolar
An t-Eagraíocht Dhomhanda um Oideachas agus Chúram Luath-Óige

OMEP Ireland/ OMEP Êireann: An Eagraíocht um Oideachas agus Chúram Luath-Óige

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Published by OMEP Ireland, c/o School of Education, University College Cork
Website: www.omepireland.ie
Email: info@omepireland.ie

ISSN 2009-5910 (Online)
ISSN 2009-5902 (Print)

Printed by Lettertec Ireland Limited
Springhill House, Carrigtwohill, Co. Cork
www.lettertec.com
2016
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Acknowledgements

OMEP Ireland would like to thank its Patrons, Professor Emeritus Francis Douglas (University College Cork), Prof Nóirín Hayes (Dublin Institute of Technology) and Dr Mary Horgan (School of Education. University College Cork) for their on-going help, support and encouragement.

OMEP Ireland would also like to thank the Editorial Committee and the Editorial Associates, without whom this publication would not be possible. We would like in particular to thank our reviewers, who give of their time and expertise to read and respond to papers submitted.

OMEP Ireland would like to thank The Katharine Howard Foundation, without whose help over the years this journal would not have continued to be published.

OMEP Ireland also gratefully acknowledges the support received from Professor Kathy Hall and the School of Education, University College Cork.
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On behalf of OMEP Ireland, we are delighted to introduce Volume 10 of *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, which once again includes a varied selection of papers on early childhood topics.

At international level, OMEP campaigns on behalf of the right of all children to an equitable start in life, and the role of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in promoting this. There is an increasing tendency at government level in many countries to focus on the role of ECEC in preparing children for school. This may be welcomed, as it gives increased recognition to this important early stage in a child’s life and may also lead to increased funding for the sector. However, as Professor Nóirín Hayes, a Patron of OMEP Ireland, pointed out in her paper published in an earlier volume of this journal (Volume 9, 2015), there are concomitant dangers in always looking towards the future when viewing early childhood, rather than seeing it as an enormously important phase of life with its own characteristics and attributes that should be valued in and for itself. At the OMEP European Conference held in Canterbury, England in May 2016, a resolution was passed welcoming the continued importance that early childhood education retains in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals but highlighting the dangers of promoting, through Goal 4, the notion that early childhood education is primarily a preparatory phase for schooling. The resolution went on to state that OMEP supports the United Nations’ intention that access to early childhood education should be available to all young children, but maintains that early childhood is a significant period in its own right and that viewing early childhood as a time only to get ‘ready’ for the primary school curriculum is an impoverished view of being human.

The keynote address by Dr Maggie Koong, the OMEP World President, given at the 66th OMEP World Assembly and Conference held in University College Cork in 2014, addresses this very topic of ‘school readiness’. Maggie Koong’s paper considers the role of early childhood development programmes in decreasing gaps in school readiness and promoting an equitable start, given that children from socially and economically disadvantaged families start school with less-developed cognitive, language and social skills than their more advantaged peers all over the world, and that this disadvantage can persist all through their school careers unless it is tackled at an early age. She goes on to describe how programmes in different countries aim to make children’s transition to primary
school a smoother one are designed to target this and discusses OMEP’s advocacy role in promoting an equitable start in life for all children.

The 2014 World assembly and conference at which Dr Koong’s address was given was a landmark occasion for OMEP Ireland and for this journal, bringing us an even greater awareness of the common concerns of early childhood advocates, educators and parents internationally. Several of the conference papers appear in Vol. 9 (2015) of *An Leanbh Óg*. Two more papers from the 2014 conference are included in this volume. In the first, Natalya Rhyzova, a professor at the Moscow City Pedagogical University, describes how some of the goals of the UN Action Agenda on Sustainable Development can be (and have been) introduced and acted upon in some Russian kindergartens, and how this has impacted positively on children and their families. She also relates this to programmes in other countries, including Ireland’s Green Schools initiative. In the second paper, also first presented at the 2014 World Conference, Gerasimos Koustourakis & Anthoula Efthymiou (University of Patras, Greece) report on a study of kindergarten teacher’s views on the integration of children with special needs into mainstream settings, and how their existing dispositions or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986) influence their reactions to this. Many of the participants in this study felt ill-prepared to teach children with additional or special needs, stating that they lacked the knowledge, experience and training to do so successfully. Consequently, they viewed integration in the classroom with trepidation. The authors conclude that official in-service training programs on special education are needed for kindergarten teachers in order to change their dispositions and facilitate the inclusion of students with special needs in normal kindergarten classrooms.

The second section of the journal includes a series of peer-reviewed papers that reflect on the changing face of ECEC in Ireland. In the first of these, Thomas Walsh examines recent key policy developments in early childhood care and education in Ireland and profiles the government departments and agencies responsible for their development and implementation. The complex and intertwined nature of the many different bodies that are responsible for aspects of early childhood education and care is obvious from his analysis, and he brings us a most useful overview of who they are and how they interact. One of the key conclusions is that a clearer vision is needed for the sector to ensure that policies are coherent, consistent and manageable for those with a responsibility for their enactment.

Katie Duggan’s essay considers the influence of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on policy and legislation in Ireland. She concludes that a rights-based
approach can be discerned in many recent policy documents and initiatives, but that limitations on children’s rights being fully acknowledged include issues with interdepartmental responsibility, the lack of formal structures in place to elicit and encourage the voices of Ireland’s youngest children, and the limited wording and circumstances associated with Article 42A of the Constitution.

Ireland has seen unprecedented levels of inward migration in recent years. In their paper, Breda McTaggart and Christina McTaggart explore the experiences of members of the Polish community who are now living in Ireland as they access and negotiate an educational system different from that of their country of origin. Quite often, their level of education is in excess of that required for their current occupation. Like many first-generation migrants, they have moved in order to seek a better life for themselves and their families. The authors conclude that although many of them are working in comparatively low-status jobs, they possess a middle class educational habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). Their own cultural and meritocratic beliefs provide a resilience and ability to negotiate an unfamiliar education system, with the goal of improving the life outcomes of their children.

Marie Cuddihy’s paper on Travellers and their participation in the Free Pre-school Year also explores how cultural issues affect people’s ability to access education and care. The results show that the Traveller children in her study mainly access pre-school in the community sector. When choosing a pre-school, Traveller families rely on personal recommendation from others in their community, and build up a relationship with particular services that they feel they can trust, and where they and their children are respected. However, there were gaps apparent in terms of pre-school practitioners understanding the needs and preferences of Traveller families and in enabling them to access to private as well as community services.

Relationships and the sharing of knowledge are also central to the paper by Sinead McNally, Gráinne Kent, Beth Fagan and Josephine Bleach. The authors point out the gap that often occurs between research and practice and discuss a knowledge exchange initiative that aims to bridge that gap. Through a series of collaborations between the Parent-Child Home Programme (PCHP) and the Psychology Programme in the National College of Ireland (NCI) in Dublin, PCHP practitioners were enabled to explore recent developments in child research while developmental psychology students were able to see contemporary child and family interventions in action. This initiative is in its early stages, but results are promising and there are plans to continue and extend it.
On a different topic, but picking up on something that has come increasingly to the forefront in recent years, Lorraine O’Connor’s paper discusses the role of information and communications technology in children’s lives at home and at pre-school or school, with a particular focus on screen media - computers, tablets, television. Given that children are increasingly engaged with such media in the home, questions about their role in early childhood settings arise. Should there be greater use of them? Should we be taking advantage of the learning opportunities that they can offer? Or should early years settings provide an environment where their play is uninterrupted or influenced by screen media? These are questions that need to be considered for the future.

As in previous years, one of the functions of this journal is to support and encourage the early childhood research community by offering students the opportunity to publish papers based on final year undergraduate or Masters’ dissertations. These, while small in scale, frequently offer interesting insights into aspects of ECEC in Ireland. Two papers appear in the Student Papers section of this volume. In the first, Olivea Comer presents her research on the views of resource teachers about the value of therapeutic play skills as a support in working with children with behavioural issues. In the second paper in this section, Ayooluwa Oke discusses stakeholders’ views on quality in early childhood care and education, and identifies critical issues of training, regulation and inspection, and funding that need to be addressed in order to ensure high quality ECEC in Ireland.

Finally, in our From the Field section, Evelyn Egan Rainy describes an inspiring initiative in Cork Institute of Technology that facilitates and encourages future Early Years Education (EYE) practitioners to explore the creative process, using a variety of open-ended materials and strategies, throughout their undergraduate studies. The very well received workshop on this topic at the 2016 OMEP Ireland conference showed how open-ended, natural materials can inspire and uplift, and we hope that this article brings a small flavour of this work to our readers.

The vital importance of getting it right for children in these early years is a theme which runs through all of the papers in An Leanbh Óg. Some issues are local, but others are common concerns across many states and many settings. OMEP was founded in the aftermath of World War II, and some of the concerns of its founders then are unfortunately equally valid today. Young children in many parts of the world continue to suffer in the upheavals that follow on from war and civil strife, as well as from the effects of poverty and disadvantage. OMEP has joined with other organisations to warmly welcome the UN Secretary-General’s Report
for the World Humanitarian Summit, One Humanity, Shared Responsibility, and especially recommends that the educational needs of the youngest children (ages 1 – 5) be ensured, particularly for refugees, and including those who are stateless and those detained in refugee camps. More about this World OMEP position statement and other examples of OMEP’s advocacy work may be accessed at http://www.worldomep.org/en/omeps-advocacy-efforts/ and we encourage our readers to support OMEP in this.

At a more local level, the Irish committee of OMEP has been instrumental in promoting and publishing research on early childhood care and education, and in helping to raise the professional profile of those working in ECCE in Ireland. By publishing papers such as those in this volume, we hope to contribute to the conversation we should all be having about what is best for our children and grandchildren, and how we can make their childhood a good one and their future a promising one. We encourage all of our readers to consider submitting a paper to be considered for inclusion in future volumes of An Leanbh Óg. The guidelines for authors may be found towards the end of this volume. They are also available on-line on the OMEP Ireland website, www.omepireland.ie

We thank all our contributors and supporters, and in particular our authors, external reviewers and all others who contribute in different ways. Special thanks are due this year to Dr Anna Ridgway and to Dr Patricia Radley for their work on the journal over the last five years, and to Dr Judith Butler of Cork Institute of Technology who helped with the final stages of putting together this volume of the journal.

Rosaleen Murphy

Dr Rosaleen Murphy, Dr Patricia Radley, Dr Anna Ridgway,
Co-Editors,
An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies
University College Cork, June, 2016
From an uneven to an equitable start:
Promoting school readiness in all children
(Keynote Speech, OMEP World Conference, University College Cork, 2014)

Dr Maggie Koong, OMEP World President

Abstract

Competencies at school entry are predictive of later academic and occupational success. However, children from socially and economically disadvantaged families start school with less-developed cognitive, language and social skills than their more advantaged peers. This uneven start, which is largely due to differences in parental education, family wealth and living environment, are wide and persistent and are found all over the world. This paper begins by considering notions of school readiness and highlighting disparities in school readiness. It then considers the role of early childhood development (ECD) programmes in decreasing gaps in school readiness and promoting an equitable start. Next, it considers national level efforts to promote school readiness and smooth the transition of children and families into primary schools. Finally, it focuses on the role of professional societies such as the Organisation Mondiale pour l’Éducation Préscolaire /World Early Childhood Organisation (OMEP) in promoting school readiness and better transition, thereby advancing an equitable start for all children, regardless of where they live.

Introduction

The UN Convention on Children’s Rights (United Nations, 1989) points out that children have inherent rights. These rights extend beyond survival. Children also have a right to thrive and to develop to their full potential. An important way to realize these rights is, as stated as one of the six internationally-agreed Education for All (EFA) goals, to “[expand] and [improve] comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children” (UNESCO, 2000).
Since its establishment in 1948, the Organisation Mondiale pour l’Éducation Préscolaire/World Early Childhood Organisation (OMEP) has supported all efforts to ensure that young children develop to their full potential so they can be successful in all aspects of their future lives. OMEP emphasises the importance of the period between birth and age eight with special attention to enhancing young children’s school readiness and facilitating their transition from their home or an early care environment and then to the school environment.

Based on the results of several empirical studies, this paper first discusses why school readiness deserves OMEP’s attention and highlights disparities in school readiness in the majority and minority worlds. Then, it examines the role of early childhood development (ECD) programmes in decreasing gaps and promoting an equitable school start, as well as national-level efforts to enhance school readiness and facilitate smooth transitions. Finally, it focuses on the role of OMEP in promoting school readiness and thereby advancing an equitable start for all children.

School Readiness: The Concepts

School readiness has long been viewed as a condition of child, that is, the characteristics and skills that a child should possess in order to learn effectively in school (Janus, 2007). Such definition emphasises the physical, cognitive, and emotional maturity levels of the child that would allow her/him to meet reasonable demands for learning (Gesell, Ilg & Ames, 1974).

Other conceptualisations, however, stress the bi-directionality between the child and her/his specific environments (Murphy & Burns 2002). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory highlights the interconnections and mutual influences between the social worlds of the child and her/his caregivers. Briefly, the child’s everyday experiences are at the centre of and embedded in wider social systems — in microsystems (peers, teachers and caregivers in everyday settings, at home, school, child care centre, etc.); mesosystems (things and roles individuals experience during shifts of settings or ecological transitions); exosystems (areas of social life in which the child does not participate, but which nonetheless impact on her/his life and well-being through interconnections with microsystems); and macrosystem (policies, rights and responsibilities, culture and ideologies) (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002). As a participant both within microsystems and at the intersections between microsystems (i.e., transitions), the child not only develops through everyday interactions with agents (e.g., caregivers, teachers, and other children) in the environments but also actively...
changes the environments in which s/he lives (Volger, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008).

School readiness, in this sense, is a product of the interaction between the child and the range of environmental and cultural experiences that influence the developmental outcomes for the child. Instead of being considered merely as the child’s readiness for school, school readiness also concerns the readiness of the child’s family for school, the school’s readiness for children and their families, and the dynamic interrelationship among the three (Figure 1).

**Families’ Readiness for School**

Families’ readiness for school is the amount of support the families of children provide to allow the children to adjust to the school environment and to complement school practices (UNICEF, 2012b).

**School’s Readiness for Children**

School’s readiness for children is defined in terms of the aspects of the school environment that support a smooth transition for children (and their families) into primary school and advance their learning (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; UNICEF, 2012b). Some argue that, in order to achieve successful transition, preschools and early childhood settings need to be “schoolified”, that the traditional aims and practices of school education should start in early childhood so that children may adapt to it early. Others maintain that early childhood settings have their own pedagogical strength and they should carry it upward and influence early primary education. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2006) fuses the dichotomy in its *Starting Strong II* report. It asserts that preschools and schools are equal partners. They should both come together in a “pedagogical meeting place” to create a new and shared understanding of the child. Only with a strong and equal partnership can one ensure greater continuity within the education system.
School readiness as a multi-facet construct.

To be school-ready, in other words, requires not only the child, but also both the family and the school to be ready. This is important because competence at school entry is predictive of later academic and occupational success. A large body of research has shown that failure in early primary years can result in low attendance, grade repetition, and incompletion, which will divert trajectories. Improving children’s school readiness, thus, helps improve their school trajectories. Moreover, since the culture children face at school is often different from those of their home and their preschool, the different socio-economic and cultural factors may affect children’s transition and adaptation. Improving the readiness of children, families, and schools helps ensure that all children have an equitable start. Hence, school readiness leads to educational equity.

Disparities in School Readiness

Huge disparities in school readiness in the world today, however, hinder the developmental potentials of many young children. Poverty is one of the most important factors that impede families’ and children’s readiness for school (UNICEF, 2012a, 2012b; Woodhead, Dornan, & Murray, 2013). Research has shown that adults of families in poverty often feel little sense of agency or control and underestimate their ability to support their young children’s learning (e.g., see Arnold & Bartlett, 2007). UNICEF (2012a) surveyed 60 countries and found that children living in poor households were less likely to receive support for early learning at home and up to 10 times
less likely to attend early childhood education programmes. Consequently, they were also much less likely to have cognitive and early literacy readiness skills than were children living above the poverty threshold. According to O’Donnell (2008), in 2007, only 21% of poor children aged three to six in the USA were able to recognise all 26 letters of the alphabet, compared with 35% living above the poverty threshold. While 67% of those living above the poverty threshold were able to count to 20 or higher, only 49% of their less fortunate peers were able to do so. Moreover, only 46% of poor children were able to write their names, compared with 64% of those living above the poverty threshold.

Other risk factors include low parental educational attainment; malnutrition; female gender; lack of access to clean water, sanitation and stimulating environments; and other developmental, environmental and cultural risk factors (see Child Trends Data Bank, 2012; Hanson et al., 2011; Issacs, 2012; Issacs & Magnuson, 2011; Rose-Jacobs et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2011; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008). In Peru, for instance, strong impacts of low maternal education and minority language at home have been found on young children’s achievement scores in vocabulary, maths, and reading (Woodhead et al., 2013).

Furthermore, poor access to early childhood development (ECD), particularly pre-primary services, has expropriated the opportunity for development for many young children. The results of the Program for International Student Assessment of the OECD (PISA) survey, conducted in 65 countries in 2009, demonstrate that 15 year old students who lacked early educational enrichment fell behind their peers who attended one year of pre primary school. They were also more likely than their peers to drop out of school and have low academic achievement (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2012).

Children exposed to these risk factors are more likely to enter school without being adequately prepared. The further behind a child is upon entering school, the more likely it is that s/he will not be able to compensate for that achievement gap. This will adversely affect her/his school completion and is linked with behavioural problems. These establish a downward economic and social trajectory in adulthood. Inability to combat these risk factors, consequently, may also lead to long-term costs for societies in terms of stagnant or lowered economic growth (UNICEF, 2012b).

**Early Childhood Development (ECD) and an Equitable Start**

The significance of school readiness provides a compelling argument for action to reduce the risks faced by many children as described above. A way to do so
is to enhance the protective factors in children, families, and the communities. Protective factors attenuate adverse consequences of risk factors. Although risk and protective factors are conceptually distinct, many protective factors are the inverse of risk factors. For example, children that are from better-off families, have supportive and more educated parents, have enriched home-literacy environment and access to quality services are more likely to be better prepared for schools (see Child Trends Data Bank, 2012; Hanson et al., 2011; Issacs, 2012; Issacs & Magnuson, 2011; Rose-Jacobs et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2011; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008).

To enhance these protective factors and minimise the negative influences of risk factors, it is best to start the intervention in the early years, when the brain undergoes its most rapid proliferation of neuronal development. During this period, the child’s early experiences determine how the brain matures and influences a broad range of skills (Walker et al., 2011). As the child grows, the disparity between an average growth trajectory and a delayed trajectory widens. Intervening earlier therefore requires fewer resources and less effort with greater effectiveness.

Early identification and quality ECD programmes that combine health, nutrition, social protection and cognitive stimulation are vital to assist children, especially those with disadvantaged backgrounds, remedy a poor early start and put children on an upward trajectory (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2012; UNICEF, 2012b).

**Enhance National Productivity**

Quality ECD is the most productive form of educational investment (Heckman, 2006, 2011). In the USA, for instance, investment in ECD for disadvantaged children provides 7 to 10% return to society through increased personal achievement and productivity (Heckman, 2011). Even in low and middle income countries, research has shown that increasing enrolment in just one type of ECD programme can result in a benefit to society of between US$10 and US$34 billion and a benefit-to-cost ratio of 6.4 to 17.6 (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2012).

**Promote Gender Equality**

ECD programmes also promote gender equality (Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2012). ECD programmes that directly serve children, such as childcare and development, early learning, and preschool programmes, improve school readiness of girls, especially those who came from disadvantaged
families. Since the younger children are enrolled in ECD programmes, older sisters, who are often substitute parents for younger siblings when mothers are at work or otherwise unavailable, are able to attend school. Mothers are also able to participate in the labour force and have better employment and income opportunities. Support and education programmes for parents, furthermore, improve parenting skills, knowledge and attitudes. These programmes help enhance mothers’ self-esteem, confidence and knowledge of parenting behaviours and often encourage greater participation by fathers in parenting, which not only leads to a sharing of tasks but also to greater equality in decision making in the home.

**Decrease Intergenerational Poverty**

Investment in ECD is one of the most effective economic actions to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. As mentioned, enrolment in preschool programmes helps improve children’s educational outcomes and earning potential. In addition, they provide a buffer against the negative influence of poverty. Social assistance programmes in terms of conditional cash transfers, vouchers, subsidies and other types of income supplementation help reduce poverty and ensure better immunisation compliance, diet diversity and school enrolment. Parental support programmes provide parents with education, skills and support, which lead to better child health, education, nutrition and development outcomes. These, in turn, improve a child’s holistic development, and lead to an upward trajectory of positive earning outcomes and greater equality in society (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2012).

**Promote a Healthy Start to Life**

Evidence has demonstrated that ECD is a critical social determinant of health. The prenatal health of mothers and nutrition and growth in foetal and early post natal life determine the structure, function and adaptive capacities of key organ systems. Nutrition and other environmental factors acting during early development also influence susceptibility to many non-communicable diseases develop later in life (e.g., cancer). Programmes that improve nutrition during early childhood therefore promote a healthy start and enhance the quality of life (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2012).
Meet both EFA Goals and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

ECD provides a viable solution for inclusive social and economic development. Results from studies conducted in every world region and on a range of ECD programmes have consistently demonstrated that quality ECD programmes are effective in improving school readiness and help countries to meet EFA goals. The benefits mentioned in the above paragraphs also suggest that ECD helps meet the MDGs, by leading to gender equality and empowerment, enhancing health and education outcomes; improving skills, abilities and productivity; narrowing the income, ethnic, and geographic inequality gaps, providing timely intervention for persons with disabilities, and is a cost effective strategy for eliminating disadvantage (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2012).

However, the core rationale for implementing ECD programmes is, as asserted by Woodhead (2009), nothing but child rights:

Child rights are the firmest foundation for policy, recognising that children are social actors, entitled to respect, care, education and comprehensive services in their best interests, and identifying those with responsibility to secure these rights with and on behalf of young children: caregivers, teachers, communities and governments (p.2).

Young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2005), and child rights should be the firmest foundation for any ECD programmes or early childhood policy.

Smoothing Transition and Enhancing School Readiness

Even though a growing and convincing body of research has shown the importance of investing in the early childhood years in promoting the development of individual children and the societies in which they live and increasing the likelihood that investments made in other sectors will be sustained over time, most governments still do not prioritise early childhood in their health, education, poverty reduction or other national plans. Many countries still lack coherent ECD policies, strategic plans and laws. Low enrolment rates, poor attendance, high dropout rates and widespread underachievement during the early grades all signal that children, families and schools are not readily prepared (Woodhead, 2007).

Nonetheless, few countries have taken the initiative to implement school readiness programmes to smooth the transition of children and families into primary schools.
USA

In the developed world, the Chicago Child-Parent Center Programme is a noteworthy example of school readiness programmes. The programme is often housed at the local primary school, which allows the preschool and primary school components work in sync with each other. The preschool programme is also able to exert more influence on the primary school system. As a result, primary school classrooms are often small, and there are additional resource teachers and low student to teacher ratios. As the name of the programme suggests, parental involvement is central. Parents dedicate at least half a day a week in the child’s classroom. These help assure a high level of learning continuity for both children and families (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Research (e.g. Barnett, 1995; Reynolds, 2000) shows that the programme has led to high levels of educational attainment, low rates of repetition and low levels of delinquency.

Kenya, Zanzibar and Uganda

In the developing world, the Madrasa Resource Centres (MRCs), a community-based early childhood programme in Kenya, Zanzibar, and Uganda, has enabled Muslim children, who are among the most educationally disadvantaged and under-performing students, to succeed in school. The MRCs have created a high-quality early learning environment and a curriculum in which religious and secular content, which is traditionally not focused in the education system, are integrated with cultural and religious values, in keeping with practices of the local communities (Malmberg, Mwaura, & Sylva, 2011). These help children and their families reaffirm local cultural and religious values and knowledge. The MRCs, in addition, organised annual Open Days and workshops to offer hands-on experience with many of the MRCs’ learning materials for Grade One teachers and Head teachers. MRC teachers also often visit local primary schools. These proved effective in engaging their primary colleagues in discussion with respect to “active learning” principles and develop a mutual respect (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Research has shown a beneficial curvilinear effect of the MRC programme on young children’s cognitive gains (Malmberg et al., 2011).

China

China is undergoing a number of reforms in early childhood. The concepts of early educational practices have now been incorporated into China’s early childhood national curriculum. These concepts and practices, originated in the West, are in some ways at odds with traditional Chinese educational ideologies
such as teacher authority, discipline, and acquisition of knowledge through rote memorisation, all of which are considered important for both early learning and cultural transmission (Akhter, Sarkar, Kibria, & Das, 2012). The Chinese, however, have found a unique way of fusing play-based education and learning from the national early childhood curriculum with their own traditional beliefs. For instance, while the curriculum emphasised free choice activities in kindergartens, free play in kindergartens accounted for only 17% of overall activity time. This form of play-based education with “Chinese characteristics”, termed by Rao and Li (2008) as “Eduplay”, is prevalent in Chinese preschools.

Very recently, the Ministry of Education has set goals to reach universal access for at least one year of preschool before primary school by 2020. Preschool enrolment rate has jumped from 50.9% (2009) to 64.5% (2012) (Jiang, 2013). These promote the readiness of children and help smooth their transition to more academically-oriented school education.

**Good Practices**

The above examples shed light on some good practices. Firstly, teachers and/or practitioners at both early childhood and school levels should develop a shared understanding of pedagogy and how children learn. Secondly, shared planning across the sectors can support continuity and progression. Collaboration should be encouraged across learning communities and working groups. Thirdly, curricula and activities must be developed by taking culture into consideration. Mismatch of language and culture of home versus school and more general lack of respect for children’s cultural competencies and prior learning are likely to hinder children’s transition to schools. Fourthly, parental involvement is essential. Not only should parents be involved in the planning process, but they should also be supported in developing realistic and positive expectations of what happens in schools, including supporting an understanding of active approaches to learning.

Besides, researchers and experts in education (e.g., Jindal-Snape, 2010) suggest a number of good practices. In particular, transfer of information/individual profiles between early childhood settings and schools must be carefully considered in order to provide holistic information to enable progression. Reference may be made to preferred learning styles, behaviour and social patterns. A dedicated transition co-ordinator in every school may further help ensure the transition process is managed effectively. In addition, sharing of information must always respect issues of confidentiality. Continuous
professional development should also be encouraged to allow teachers and/or practitioners to develop professional knowledge of child development and active learning approaches. Furthermore, local authorities should facilitate opportunities for the development of relationships across the early childhood and school sectors. They should also provide practical guidance and support on what information should be shared across levels to ensure progression.

The Role of OMEP in Promoting an Equitable Start

As the oldest and largest international organisation that focuses on early childhood, OMEP’s national committees are all working for healthy, peaceful, equitable, sustainable and just environments for the world’s children, today and into the future. OMEP emphasises policy advocacy, capacity building, knowledge generation, education and outreach, as well as emergency relief, to ensure all children will have an equitable start.

Advocacy for Policy Change

Since 1948, OMEP has been an active group in advocating for education and wellbeing for young children and for ECD on the policy level. In recent years, OMEP has been advocating strongly to put ECD on the Post-2015 sustainable development agenda. Between 2012 and 2014, OMEP partnered, formally and informally, with UNESCO, UNICEF, Save the Children, Global Partners for Education, Asia Pacific Network for Early Childhood, World Bank, World Health Organisation, the International Labour Organisation, the Consultative Group for Early Childhood Education and Care, the Psychology Coalition at the United Nations, SOS Children’s Villages, Association for the Development of Education in Africa, and several others to (a) sponsor and co-sponsor events, including two United Nations Side Events; (b) draft position papers; and (c) participate in various conference and meetings on the Post-2015 goals. Moreover, in June 2014, OMEP was elected as one of the two international focal points to the Collective Consultation of Non-governmental Organisations on Education for All (CCNGO/EFA) Coordination Group of UNESCO for 2014-2016.

Capacity Building

School readiness cannot be developed and smooth transition cannot be achieved without professional and qualified teachers and practitioners of ECD. OMEP, therefore, ardently encourages the training of personnel. Very recently, the national committees of China and Hong Kong as well as France and Poland
have organised various teacher exchange programmes and teacher training activities. The OMEP Environmental Rating Scale for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood (ERS-SDEC) has also been developed to serve as both a research tool and a self-assessment tool for practitioners to support curriculum development through identifying priorities, setting targets and managing change without difficulties.

OMEP also partners with UNICEF to implement the WASH from the START initiative. WASH stands for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. It extends UNICEF’s successful WASH in Schools programmes and services in early childhood settings, including homes, communities, health centres, and preschools, to ensure young children’s basic right to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene.

Knowledge Generation

OMEP actively promotes studies and research related to ECD and school readiness. The Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) world project, conducted since 2010, aims to enhance the awareness of ESD among OMEP members, young children and early childhood education at large. The work began with an interview study based on a logo where children were portrayed cleaning the world. The next phase involved projects with children engaged in preschool practices based on the 7Rs — respect, reflect, rethink, reuse, reduce, recycle, and redistribute. A third project involved intergenerational dialogues, where three generations were involved. The fourth project focused on ways to promote equality. Around 35 countries from all regions of the world have participated and thousands of children and teachers have been involved in the four parts of the ESD projects. The forthcoming fifth project will aim to generate knowledge and ideas for preparing teachers to incorporate the concept of ESD in their practices.

Education and Outreach

An important work of OMEP is to promote education and knowledge sharing. Once a year, a world conference is held in a member country for early childhood educators, researchers, advocators and politicians to discuss important issues of early childhood education and care and share their experiences. OMEP also partners with other organisations to organise seminars, symposiums and conferences. For example, in September 2014, OMEP co-organised the International Non-governmental Organisations Conference on Literacy and Lifelong Education for All with other organisations to encourage exchange
and sharing among field practitioners and specialists in action research in early literacy and in responding to the diversity of learners’ needs. In addition, OMEP disseminates information about ECD all over the world through the publication of the International Journal of Early Childhood, a blind peer-reviewed journal which represents individual members, organisations, and libraries in over 70 countries, and numerous study reports.

Meanwhile, OMEP strives to enhance public awareness of the importance of ECD. Our national presidents and members are frequently interviewed by the media on issues related to ECD. They also actively contribute to columns in newspapers and magazines.

Emergency Relief

In face of natural or other unpredictable disasters, the extensive network of OMEP member countries allows it to quickly respond and launch worldwide appeals for donations to help the victims. Other than immediate humanitarian assistance, OMEP also provides support that would contribute to long-term wellbeing of children and their families. The Southeast Asia Tsunami Relief project between 2005 and 2007 and the Love Library project carried out after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, for instance, ensured that children affected by the crises to regain their self-confidence in caring, safe and protective environments and that care givers and educators of young children provide quality early programmes for young children.

Moving Forward

Promoting an equitable start cannot simply rely on non-governmental organisations and pressure groups, the participation of governments are equally important. Although issues surrounding transition and school readiness can appear similar in different places, yet they are played out in profoundly different ways, shaped by political, economic and cultural context, as well as resources, organisation and priorities for early childhood and primary school. Policymakers, researchers and educators should recognise these differences in order to identify appropriate solutions to mobilise all children, schools and early childhood settings, and families and communities. In order to move forward, Woodhead and Moss (2007) offer some key policy questions for them to consider:

1. How to define and measure “readiness to learn”? Specifically, how should children’s readiness for school be defined in different cultural contexts?
What domains should it constitute and how to measure them? How can one ensure the measures are sensitive to the sociocultural contexts, at the same time avoid “schoolification” of early childhood programmes?

2. How to support the transition of the most disadvantaged? In other words, how to locate the risk and protective factors available in the community and the culture? How can adequate resource be assured for the critical early years? And how can families and communities be encouraged to engage effectively in their children’s education?

3. How to enhance school’s readiness for young children? What are the key characteristics of schools that are ready for children? What policies are needed to foster a shared understanding of the child, learning and knowledge so as to create a strong and equal partnership between ECD and primary schooling? How to enhance pre-service and in-service training for teachers and practitioners and support professionals working together in the best interests of children? How can policy changes foster continuity between ECD and primary schooling and ensure initiatives are implemented in the best interests of children?

With the concerted efforts of governments, advocacy groups, early childhood service providers, schools, parents and the communities, an equitable start of all children will not be a dream. Together, we strive for healthy, peaceful, equitable, sustainable and just environments for the world’s children.

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Kindergarten teachers’ dispositions on the inclusion of students with special needs in public kindergarten classrooms

Gerasimos Koustourakis & Anthoula Efthymiou

(Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, University of Patras, Greece)

Abstract:

According to the principles of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as defined in the Salamanca Statement (1994) for the recognition of rights of students with special needs, the principle of inclusion should guide any educational policy. For this reason students with special needs should attend mainstream public schools. The Greek law for special education and training (Law 3699/2008) promotes the inclusion of students with special needs in the mainstream kindergarten classrooms. The aim of this study is to investigate how the dispositions of the kindergarten teachers could influence the inclusion of students with special needs in the kindergarten. The research was carried out during the school year 2012-2013 using questionnaires with kindergarten teachers who worked in public kindergartens in the city of Patras in Greece. The results revealed that the dispositions of kindergarten teachers could affect the inclusion initiative, as the participants in this research expressed low levels of agreement with the contemporary policy for Greek special education. Additionally, they showed a low level of readiness to educate students with special needs; they argued that they lack suitable knowledge, ability, teaching experience and training for this purpose. So, it appears likely that these teachers would feel anxiety, insecurity and fear in the event of students with special needs being enrolled in their kindergarten classrooms. Consequently, official in-service training programs on special education for kindergarten teachers need to be established in order to change their dispositions and facilitate the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream kindergarten classrooms.
Introduction

From the study of current international scientific literature on special education, we conclude that issues related to the education of students with special needs, as well as perceptions and attitudes of teachers who interact with them in their classrooms, are an important area for researchers, politicians and educators (see: Alkhateeb, Hadidi, & Alkhateeb, 2016; Anati & Ain, 2012; Loreman et al., 2016; Lundqvist, Allodi Westling, & Siljehag, 2016; Reindal, 2016; Sharma & Jacobs, 2016; Shin, Lee, & McKenna, 2016; Specht et al., 2016; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009).

The inclusion of students with special needs in classrooms in mainstream schools is a prevalent trend in educational policy internationally during the 21st century (Björn et al., 2016; Cefai et al., 2015; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Schlifer, 2005; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2012; Qu, 2015). The enactment of Law 3699 (2008) for special education and training in Greece requires the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream kindergartens. This Law adopts the principles of UNESCO as defined in the Salamanca Statement (1994) for the recognition of the rights of students with special needs and the promotion of equal educational opportunities for them (Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013). In addition, according to the contemporary curriculum for Greek kindergartens (Pedagogic Institute, 2011), the adoption of a ‘differentiated pedagogical approach’ [individualised education plan] is required for every single case of a student presenting with special needs. Therefore, teachers are required to meet the needs of children with a wide range of needs, and they asked to design and implement different educational programs in order to cover the educational needs of these students that attend their class. This leads to the question: Are kindergarten teachers willing and have they the ability to implement the educational policy of inclusion for students with special needs?

This paper focuses on the exploration of how the dispositions of Greek kindergarten teachers could influence the inclusion of students with special needs in kindergarten. This study begins with a theoretical framework followed by some information on Kindergarten Education in Greece, the research question and methodology, a presentation and discussion of the findings and some concluding remarks.

Theoretical Framework

According to Bourdieu (1977) the term disposition ‘expresses what is covered by the concept of habitus (defined as a system of dispositions)’ (p. 214). The
dispositions of a person are formed under the influence of experiences in the social environment in which these external structures are internalized (Swartz, 1997) setting limits in his/her actions and choices. These ‘acquired dispositions’ define how each person understands, realizes and evaluates social reality, because they guide the formation of behaviours and strategies that he/she chooses in various social fields in which he/she participates (Bourdieu, 1990a).

In particular, Bourdieu claims that dispositions define the ways in which people act and they make up an internalization and incorporation of the basic social conditions of their being. The contribution of primary socialization within the family is important in the creation of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990b; Jacobs, 2007). This primary habitus is subject to change during the life of individuals under the influence of education and the exercise of a profession (Bourdieu, 1977). Consequently, habitus is a product of a person’s past (Bourdieu, 1990a); that is why ‘different conditions of existence produce different habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170).

In the case of this study, kindergarten teachers develop dispositions that determine their approach to students with special needs. These are formed as a result of the knowledge and experience that they have acquired during their previous experiences and actions in different social fields, of their education and training, and of their professional occupation with students with special needs such as learning disabilities (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a; Swartz, 1997). These dispositions are incorporated into teachers’ daily practices and guide their pedagogical choices for the education of students in their classrooms. Habitus consists of embodied social knowledge and is detected in the practical effects of a person’s actions, in his/her way of speaking, in his/her perceptions and the arguments that he/she expresses on specific issues (Bourdieu, 1990b), such as the implementation of an inclusion educational policy. Therefore, habitus consists of a practical logic that appears as an embodied conviction (Bourdieu, 1998). Also, habitus has a productive character on the grounds that it guides the way that people improvise and exhibit creative behaviours in order to face difficult or unpredictable situations (Sterne, 2003). Thus it can be suggested that kindergarten teachers, who do not have sufficient knowledge about special education, choose to formulate strategies that are shaped by their habitus to educate students with special needs that enrol to attend their classrooms.

Habitus is reshaped under the influence of experience that actors gain by their daily presence and activation within specific social fields (Bourdieu, 1998). This fact allows for a change of teachers’ dispositions on the inclusion of students...
with special needs in mainstream schools. In addition, it could push them to try to gain theoretical and practical knowledge on special education in order to be able to adapt to current educational requirements connected with the application of an inclusion policy.

Bourdieu (1977) uses the concept of ‘hysteresis effect’ to describe a type of relationship between habitus and field (Asimaki & Koustourakis, 2014; McDonough & Polzer, 2012). The dispositions (habitus) of a person are shaped by the social structure (field) and they change ‘in response to new experiences’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 161). Moreover, changes in the rules of a field, such as the introduction of a new educational law, will not usually produce quick changes in the dispositions of actors like teachers. Hysteresis effect is the experience of mismatch caused by the temporal lag between a person’s dispositions and a changing social structure (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990b, 1998); people tend to maintain the dispositions already acquired even when they do not fit the new situation. More specifically, Bourdieu argues:

\[
\text{as a result of heightened consciousness associated with an effort of transformation...there is an inertia (hysteresis) of habitus which has a spontaneous tendency to perpetuate structures corresponding to their conditions of production. As a result, it can happen that ... dispositions are out of line with the field and with the ‘collective expectations’ which are constitutive of its normality” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 160).}
\]

Changes in the field of education (objective social structure) in Greece occurred by the enactment of the Law 3699 (2008) that promotes the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream kindergartens. The adoption of this educational policy has changed the working conditions in public kindergartens. Thus many of the teachers who work in these schools may experience the hysteresis effect, that is the lag between their dispositions (habitus) adjusting to the implementation of inclusion policy in contemporary classrooms.

**Kindergarten Education in Greece**

Two years of schooling are included in Greek Kindergarten Education that administratively is considered as part of primary education and is offered in both public and private kindergartens (K1 for 4 year old students and K2 for 5 year old students). K1 and K2 children are usually placed together in one classroom, and only the attendance of K2 children in kindergarten is compulsory. Public kindergartens in Greece are state-funded and are free of charge. The number
of public kindergarten schools is far bigger than private ones and there are both regular kindergartens (timetable from 8:30 until 12:30) and all-day kindergartens (timetable from 7:45 until 16:00). The majority of Greek kindergarten teachers are females as male teachers make up only about 4% of the kindergarten workforce. Currently the staff working in kindergarten are either 2-year graduates from Preschool Pedagogical Academies (closed in 1988) and 4-year university graduates (from 1989 onwards). Kindergarten teachers are under the pedagogic/didactic guidance, supervision and surveillance of a specific Preschool Advisor who is responsible for evaluating their work and helping them to overcome difficulties with everyday serious educational problems that could arise. Matters related to students with special needs are the remit of the Advisor of Special Education who offers his/her services to all primary and secondary education schools in a large geographical/educational periphery. Thus, teachers that face relevant problems in their classrooms have to inform first their Preschool Advisor and then they can also communicate with the Advisor of Special Education to ask for help (Doliopoulou, 2006; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Newman, 2010; UNESCO, 2012; Zacharos, Koustourakis, & Papadimitriou, 2014). Moreover, public Centres of Differential Diagnosis and Support (CEDDS) for the diagnosis and assessment of students with special needs were established in 2000. CEDDS are the official scientific committees that decide whether a specific student should be integrated in a normal kindergarten classroom or if he/she has to attend a special kindergarten. In the case of the latter kindergartens, the students with special needs are educated by “special” early childhood teachers (Law 3699, 2008).

Research Question and Methodology

The main research question of this study is: Could kindergarten teachers’ dispositions influence the inclusion of students with special needs in their classrooms?

Participants

The research sample consists of 44 kindergarten teachers. Table 1 presents the profiles of kindergarten teachers that participated in this research which was carried out during the spring semester of the school year 2012-2013.
Table 1. Profiles of the sample (n=44)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>43 Females (97.7%) and 1 Male (2.3%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Average Age: 42.5 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Standard Deviation/SD=6 years old, Minimum Age=32 years old, Maximum Age=53 years old)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td>Average Teaching experience: 15.3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(SD=6.9 years, Minimum=7 years, Maximum=31 years teaching experience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>• 2-years Preschool Pedagogical Academy graduates: 11 kindergarten teachers (24.4%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Preschool Pedagogical Academy graduates with in-service education in Universities: 8 kindergarten teachers (18.2%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 4-years University graduates: 34 kindergarten teachers (75.6%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Master’s degree: 3 kindergarten teachers (6.7%).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research sample consists of 44 kindergarten teachers (43 females and 1 male). Their average age was 42.5 years old and their average teaching experience was 15.3 years. Thirty-four (75.6%) of the teachers were university graduates and 11 individuals (24.4%) were two-years Preschool Pedagogical Academy graduates. 8 of the latter had attended early childhood university department programmes offered to graduates of Preschool Pedagogical Academies in order to give them the opportunity to complete their education by taking a university degree. Moreover, three kindergarten teachers (6.7%) had a master’s degree. In conclusion, overall 93.3% of the kindergarten teachers of the sample were university graduates and 6.7% had studied only in a two-year Preschool Pedagogical Academy.

Research Tool

To accomplish this study a two-part anonymous questionnaire was utilized. The first part of the questionnaire included questions on demographic characteristics of the sample. The second part of the questionnaire was composed of closed questions related to: the kindergarten teachers’ opinions on the educational
policy of inclusion, their self-efficacy on their ability to educate students with special needs, and their thoughts and reactions when they are informed that a student with special needs is going to attend their classroom. The closed questions of this questionnaire answered using a five-point Likert scale (Not at all, A little, Not sure/don’t know, a lot, very much) that allows for the statistical analysis of the research data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Robson, 2007). For the selection of the types of special needs that were included in the questionnaire we consulted an Advisor of Special Education and a Preschool Advisor. When the questionnaire was set up in its final form, a pilot study was conducted with three kindergarten teachers, who were excluded from the research, and the questionnaire was revised accordingly (Robson, 2007). Convenience sampling was used to distribute the final version of the questionnaire to kindergarten teachers in public kindergartens in the region of the city of Patras (Cohen et al., 2007). More specifically 80 questionnaires were distributed and 44 of them were returned fully completed (a response rate of 55%). Consequently, it should be noted that the findings of this research are not generalizable but are both indicative and revealing of the dispositions of a significant part of current Greek kindergarten teachers on inclusion. Finally, after the collection of the research data the reliability analysis showed that the reliability coefficient Cronbach’s Alpha was 0.84. This result proves that the data collection procedure was reliable and adapted to the targets of our research.

Results

Thirty five kindergarten teachers (77.8% of the sample) had teaching experience with students with special needs at some time during their educational career. The types of special needs encountered were:

- Students with speech problems (35 cases, 100% of the kindergarten teachers that had experience with students with special needs),
- Students with learning disabilities (34 cases, 97.1%),
- Students with behavioural problems (30 cases, 85.7%),
- Students with diagnosed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (13 cases, 37.1%),
- Students with autism (13 cases, 37.1%),
- Students with mental delayed development (5 cases, 14.3%),
- Students with physical limitations (4 cases, 11.4%),
• Students with vision problems (4 cases, 11.4%),
• Students with hearing problems (3 cases, 8.6%)
• Students with Down syndrome (2 cases, 5.7%).

A significant part of the kindergarten teachers of the sample, who had taught students with special needs, classified their experience as neither positive nor negative (18 teachers, 39.6%). In addition, 10 kindergarten teachers (22%) evaluated their teaching experience with students with special needs as negative, and 7 individuals (15.4%) as positive or very positive.

When the kindergarten teachers were asked whether they thought that “the policy that determines the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classes is right?”, 29 of them answered negatively (categories “not at all” and “a little”, 64.4%), 8 (17.8%) stated that they were not sure and only 8 teachers (17.8%) had a positive attitude towards the inclusion policy. Moreover, when they were asked to choose whether they would prefer to teach either in a classroom in which students with special needs attended or in another classroom with students without special needs, only 1 kindergarten teacher (2.2%) chose to work with the first group of students, 39 (86.7%) chose the second group of students and 5 teachers (11.1%) stated that they were unsure about their choice.

Table 2 presents the answers given by the kindergarten teachers of the sample when asked about which of the students with special needs should attend in regular kindergarten classes, as defined by Law 3699/2008.

The results in Table 2 reveal that the majority of kindergarten teachers responded positively (“a lot” and “very much” categories) to the inclusion of students in normal classrooms with speech disorders (32 teachers, 71.1%; Mean=3.6, SD=1.1), learning disabilities (31 teachers, 68.9%; Mean=3.58, SD=1.08), and behavioural problems (26 teachers, 57.8%; Mean=3.24, SD=1.05). In contrast, there were negative responses (categories “not at all” and “a little”) from the majority towards the attendance in normal classrooms of students with autism (33 teachers, 73.3%; Mean=1.82, SD=0.94), mental delayed development (31 teachers, 68.9%; Mean=1.78, SD=1.00), Down syndrome (29 teachers, 64.5%; Mean=1.84, SD=1.07), physical limitations (27 teachers, 60.0%; Mean=2.42, SD=1.23), hearing problems (24 teachers, 53.4%; Mean=2.24, SD=1.15) and vision problems (24 teachers, 53.4%; Mean=2.2, SD=1.14).
Table 2. Cases of students that should be included and study in regular kindergarten classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students presenting with:</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Very much</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>10 (22.2%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>24 (53.4%)</td>
<td>7 (15.5%)</td>
<td>3.58 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural problems</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>15 (33.3%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>24 (53.4%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>3.24 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech disorders</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>8 (17.8%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>25 (55.6%)</td>
<td>7 (15.5%)</td>
<td>3.6 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder</td>
<td>12 (26.7%)</td>
<td>10 (22.2%)</td>
<td>9 (20.0%)</td>
<td>14 (31.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2.56 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical limitations</td>
<td>12 (26.7%)</td>
<td>15 (33.3%)</td>
<td>8 (17.8%)</td>
<td>7 (15.5%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>2.42 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision problems</td>
<td>18 (40.1%)</td>
<td>6 (13.3%)</td>
<td>16 (35.5%)</td>
<td>4 (8.9%)</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>2.2 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing problems</td>
<td>17 (37.9%)</td>
<td>7 (15.5%)</td>
<td>15 (33.3%)</td>
<td>5 (11.1%)</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>2.24 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>22 (48.9%)</td>
<td>11 (24.4%)</td>
<td>10 (22.2%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1.82 (0.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental delayed development</td>
<td>26 (57.8%)</td>
<td>5 (11.1%)</td>
<td>12 (26.7%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1.78 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down syndrome</td>
<td>26 (57.8%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>13 (28.9%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1.84 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Self-evaluation of kindergarten teachers’ knowledge and abilities regarding their readiness to teach students with special needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>I am not sure</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Very much</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I'm trained to teach students with special needs in my classroom.</td>
<td>25 (55.5%)</td>
<td>17 (37.8%)</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1.56 (0.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can identify which students have special needs.</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>17 (37.8%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>22 (48.9%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>3.2 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can design and implement individualized teaching programs for students with special needs.</td>
<td>25 (55.5%)</td>
<td>18 (40.0%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1.49 (0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have experience to support the educational needs of students with special needs.</td>
<td>20 (44.0%)</td>
<td>19 (42.2%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1.76 (0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am mentally and emotionally prepared to work in classes with students with special needs.</td>
<td>22 (48.9%)</td>
<td>18 (40.0%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>1.71 (0.92)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 3 we can see that although most of the kindergarten teachers of the sample said they could identify which pupils are students with special needs ("a lot" and "very much" categories: 25 teachers, 55.6%; Mean=3.2, SD=1.1), almost all of them replied they could not design and implement
individualized educational programs for these students as required by the modern kindergarten curriculum (43 teachers, 95.5%). This is because they feel they lack the necessary education and training for this purpose (42 teachers, 93.3%). Thus, they do not feel mentally and emotionally prepared to work in classrooms that have students in attendance with special needs (40 teachers, 88.9%). They also believe that their experience is not sufficient to help them respond to the education of students with special needs (39 teachers, 86.2%).

Table 4 presents the thoughts and emotional reactions of the kindergarten teachers in the sample when presented with the case in which they are informed during the school year that a student with special needs is going to unexpectedly enrol and attend their classroom. It can be concluded that the majority of kindergarten teachers participating in the survey did not have appropriate dispositions to accept and educate students with special needs. More specifically, the raw emotional reactions of most kindergarten teachers (“a lot” and “very much” categories) in such a case are: concern (35 teachers, 77.8%), fear (31 teachers, 69%) and insecurity (30 teachers, 66.7%). This is because they believe that their work will become very difficult (29 teachers, 64.5%) and will upset their teaching programming and teaching preparation (27 teachers, 60%). Also, many believe there will be problems in maintaining the operating rules of their class (24 cases, 53.4%) because students with special needs face difficulties adjusting to the “new” classroom environment. So they feel it is imperative to seek immediate help and support from specialists (42 teachers, 93.3%; Mean=4.31, SD=0.73). Therefore, there seems to be an apparent reluctance of kindergarten teachers to work with students with special needs. At the same time a small number of teachers (4, 8.9%) expressed a desire to work in classrooms that include some of these children.
Table 4. Thoughts and emotional reactions of kindergarten teachers at the sudden arrival of students with special needs attending their classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Very much</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concern because they are not trained.</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>8 (17.8%)</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>21 (46.7%)</td>
<td>14 (31.1%)</td>
<td>3.87 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of facing serious teaching problems.</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>10 (22.2%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>20 (44.5%)</td>
<td>11 (24.5%)</td>
<td>3.62 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure that they would not succeed to educate students with special needs.</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>10 (22.2%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>23 (51.1%)</td>
<td>7 (15.6%)</td>
<td>3.47 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overturn their teaching plan.</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>13 (28.9%)</td>
<td>4 (8.9%)</td>
<td>22 (48.9%)</td>
<td>5 (11.1%)</td>
<td>3.37 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interfere with operating rules of their class.</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>14 (31.0%)</td>
<td>7 (15.6%)</td>
<td>17 (37.8%)</td>
<td>7 (15.6%)</td>
<td>3.38 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief that their work in kindergarten will be more difficult.</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>12 (26.6%)</td>
<td>4 (8.9%)</td>
<td>21 (46.7%)</td>
<td>8 (17.8%)</td>
<td>3.55 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to ask immediately for help and support by experts.</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>23 (51.1%)</td>
<td>19 (42.2%)</td>
<td>4.31 (0.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence that they will manage to work as expected.</td>
<td>15 (33.4%)</td>
<td>24 (53.3%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>1.91 (0.92)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Proposed actions of kindergarten teachers when a student with special needs comes to attend their classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Actions</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>I am not sure</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Very much</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They would simultaneously inform both the Preschool Advisor and the Advisor of Special Education.</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>4 (8.9%)</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>14 (31.1%)</td>
<td>26 (57.8%)</td>
<td>4.37 (0.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They would ask for immediate assistance from the Preschool Advisor.</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>10 (22.2%)</td>
<td>5 (11.1%)</td>
<td>12 (26.7%)</td>
<td>17 (37.8%)</td>
<td>3.75 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They would ask for immediate assistance from the Advisor of Special Education.</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>5 (11.1%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>14 (31.1%)</td>
<td>24 (53.3%)</td>
<td>4.27 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They would seek frequent support mainly from the Preschool Advisor.</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>20 (44.4%)</td>
<td>4 (8.9%)</td>
<td>10 (22.2%)</td>
<td>8 (17.8%)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They would seek frequent support mainly from the Advisor of Special Education.</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>16 (35.6%)</td>
<td>24 (53.3%)</td>
<td>4.35 (0.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They would ask the parents to ensure an examination of their child by a CEDDS in order to offer clear assistive instructions.</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
<td>5 (11.1%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
<td>16 (35.6%)</td>
<td>21 (46.7%)</td>
<td>4.13 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They would ask for the examination of the child by a CEDDS in order to be transferred to a special kindergarten or to a special classroom.</td>
<td>4 (8.9%)</td>
<td>11 (24.4%)</td>
<td>7 (15.6%)</td>
<td>11 (24.4%)</td>
<td>12 (26.7%)</td>
<td>3.35 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 presents what the proposed actions of the kindergarten teachers of the sample would be in the case that during the school year a student with special needs unexpectedly arrives to attend their classroom. An examination of the data in Table 5 shows that the kindergarten teachers that participated in this research would react as follows: They would inform the Preschool Advisor and the Advisor of Special Education, as they have to according to rules of their agency (40 teachers, 88.9%), but they would seek immediate help from the latter (38 teachers, 84.5%) and they would seek to ensure that his/her support will be permanent (40 teachers, 88.9%). That is teachers of the sample desire the assistance of the Advisor of Special Education to be stable and permanent. Also, they would like their teaching work to be supported by a “special” early childhood teacher (43 teachers, 95.6%). Moreover, they would ask the child’s parents to ensure the examination of their child by the CEDDS, as they expect that this Centre will make the proper diagnosis and will give them instructions on how they should approach and work with the particular student (37 teachers, 82.3%). An interesting finding is the lesser degree of confidence in the Preschool Advisor, who has a direct employment relationship with the kindergarten teachers of the sample, compared with the Advisor of Special Education, to deal with issues related to students with special needs. The teachers of the sample recognise that the latter possesses the scientific knowledge to help and advise them how to educate and include these students in their classrooms. Therefore, the number of kindergarten teachers who would seek immediate help and advice by the Preschool Advisor is smaller (29 cases, 64.5%) compared to the number who would seek the advice of the Advisor of Special Education (38 teachers, 84.5%). Even smaller is the number of those who would like frequent support mainly from the Preschool Advisor to deal with problems related to the education of students with special needs in their classrooms.
cases, 40%). Moreover, it seems that a large part of the kindergarten teachers of the sample maintain a traditional rationale in approaching the students with special needs. Thus, in order to keep specific students in their classrooms they ask for permanent support by qualified staff (35 teachers, 77.8%). Also, many kindergarten teachers (23 cases, 51.1%) would request the examination of a student by the expert committee (CEDDS) in order to decide whether to move him/her to a special kindergarten or to a kindergarten that includes a special classroom for students of a specific group. Therefore, these views seem to reflect the existence of dispositions favouring the separation rather than the inclusion of students with special needs in ordinary kindergarten classrooms.

Table 6. Requirements for the education of kindergarten teachers to teach students with special needs in mainstream classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Very much</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A kindergarten teacher in order to be effective should know how</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.24 (0.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to approach students with special needs.</td>
<td>(2.2%)</td>
<td>(4.4%)</td>
<td>(6.7%)</td>
<td>(40.0%)</td>
<td>(46.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current kindergarten teachers should be trained in teaching</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.89 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students with special needs.</td>
<td>(4.4%)</td>
<td>(11.1%)</td>
<td>(11.1%)</td>
<td>(37.8%)</td>
<td>(35.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I had trained on issues related to the education of students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.6 (0.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with special needs I could succeed.</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(20.0%)</td>
<td>(11.1%)</td>
<td>(57.8%)</td>
<td>(11.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 presents the opinions of the kindergarten teachers on the educational and training requirements for teachers that could facilitate the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream kindergarten classrooms. The elements in Table 6 show that a significant number of kindergarten teachers (categories ‘a lot’ and ‘very much’: 31 teachers, 68.9%) believe that if they had participated in in-service training programs in special education they could have managed the education of students with special needs in their classrooms. It is
obvious that they believe that current kindergarten teachers should be trained in teaching students with special needs (33 teachers, 73.4%) in order to be able to be effective in their job (39 teachers, 86.7%).

**Discussion**

The findings of this study show that the majority of kindergarten teachers in the sample have negative dispositions both towards the acceptance of inclusion educational policy and to the prospect of teaching in classrooms in which students with special needs attend. According to the theoretical framework on which this research is embedded, the kindergarten teachers’ dispositions could be said to have emerged as a result of the construction of their habitus during their history in the fields of education and from the exercise of their profession (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a). It is striking that these kindergarten teachers consider their education and in-service training to approach issues of students with special needs inadequate. Also, this study revealed that the majority of kindergarten teachers (84.4%) did not have a positive experience in their attempt to educate students with special needs in their mainstream classrooms.

As habitus is directly linked to the experiences of individuals and determines their perception of everyday and professional reality (Bourdieu, 1990a), we observed that teachers of the sample had worked in their classrooms primarily with students who had speech problems (77.8% of the total sample), learning disabilities (75.5%) and behavioural problems (66.7%). These experiences seem to have contributed to shaping acceptance dispositions, as these were the three categories of special needs that teachers were most likely to accept as suitable for inclusion in mainstream kindergarten classrooms (Table 2).

Furthermore, this study noted the existence of a cultural lag or “hysteresis effect” in the kindergarten teachers’ habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Swartz, 1998). This is because, although the objective conditions for the education of students with special needs have changed by Law 3699/2008 and the contemporary kindergarten curriculum (Pedagogic Institute, 2011), it appears that many kindergarten teachers maintain outdated perceptions in their educational and pedagogical approach towards specific students because of their previous working experience that contributed to shaping their professional habitus (Bourdieu, 1990b, 1998). More specifically, before the establishment of Law 3699/2008 in Greece the students with special needs attended usually in special classes. Thus, it is typical that the expectation of a significant part of the kindergarten teachers of the sample (51.1%) is that the examination by the
CEDDS of students with special needs who attend their classrooms will lead to either moving them to a special kindergarten or to a kindergarten that has a special classroom. Also, there seems to be a dominant misconception in the minds of kindergarten teachers (77.8%) about the possibility of negotiating with educational authorities to accept that students with special needs stay in their classroom if they are supported by the appointment of an assistant special early childhood teacher. That is why we pinpointed feelings of insecurity, anxiety and fear in teachers of the sample at the prospect of working in classrooms that include students with special needs. Indeed, kindergarten teachers trying to improvise to tackle difficult professional situations (Bourdieu, 1990b; Sterne, 2003), such as the arrival of a new student with special needs in their classroom, stated that they will be immediately active in order to guarantee themselves the provision of moral and scientific support mainly by the Advisor of Special Education. Simultaneously, the new educational conditions brought about in Greek contemporary preschool education by the enactment of Law 3699 (2008), such as the obligation to include and educate students with special needs in their classrooms, creates preconditions for changing their habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). That is why the kindergarten teachers who participated in this study recognize the necessity of education and training of modern teachers in issues of special education in order to be able to approach and educate students with special needs in their ordinary classrooms.

Concluding Remarks

In this study we tried to answer the question whether kindergarten teachers’ dispositions could influence the inclusion of students with special needs in their classrooms. The results revealed that the dispositions of kindergarten teachers could affect the attempt of inclusion on the grounds that a) kindergarten teachers who participated in this research expressed a low level of agreement to this specific policy of inclusion and, b) kindergarten teachers showed a low level of readiness to educate students with special needs because they argued that they lacked suitable knowledge, ability, teaching experience and training to meet the demands that this brings. Thus, when students with special needs enrol in their kindergarten classroom, it is likely that in all probability teachers would feel anxiety, insecurity and fear about their ability to cope with the consequent demands on them. Also, they would immediately ask for help and support from advisors for the kindergarten school and especially from the Advisor for Special Education, and would request if possible the assistance of special personnel for the education of students with special needs. This research
leads to the conclusion that official in-service training programmes on special education need to be established for kindergarten teachers in order to change their dispositions and in order to facilitate the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream kindergarten classrooms.

References


Priority Sustainable Development challenges: how kindergartens can help to face them

Natalia Ryzhova (Moscow City Pedagogical University)

Abstract

This paper, presented at the OMEP World Conference in Cork in 2014, addresses issues of implementation of sustainable development (SD) in ECCE and gives examples of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) implementation in different kindergartens. It outlines how kindergartens may contribute to answering the SD Goals (Challenges) that have been identified by the Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN) as priority challenges, which are interconnected and each contribute to the dimensions of sustainable development. These ten sustainable development challenges must be addressed at global, regional, national, and local scales. Such an approach is exemplified by adaptation of the SD Goal “Improve Agricultural Systems...” to ESD. The article contains an analysis of the adaptation and implementation of SDG at three levels: functioning of an educational institution, activities of children and family activities. For each level concrete examples and cases are given. It is suggested that SDGs be used as the foundation for building a strategy of ESD implementation in ECCE. The necessary adaptation of the ideas for early childhood is underlined, as well as consideration for local specifics (such as climate, economic, social peculiarities in a country; learning environment in a kindergarten or school; educational programs etc.) while solving global problems.

Introduction

2014 was the final year in the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development
The results of the DESD were summarized in Japan in November 2014, and a new Global Action Programme was launched (UNESCO, 2014). Thus it is important to outline some opportunities for implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) ideas in the education of young children (ECCE) (Didonet, 2008; Kaga, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, Smith, Pramling Samuelsson, 2010; Ryzhova, 2001). Thanks to OMEP, ESD has been declared as a priority, which has been confirmed at the OMEP Assembly and Conference in Cork (OMEP Declaration, 2014).

At present many kindergartens and schools are involved in solving ESD tasks. The solutions they find are quite different, due not only to diversity of natural, cultural, political, economic and social factors in each country, but also to the resources and opportunities available to a specific educational institution. The main purpose of this article is not exactly that of comparative studies of kindergartens’ SD activities in different countries, but rather an attempt to define separate directions in ECCE, generalize them and unite them in a coherent system. It was important to analyse the documents and see how things that children and pedagogues do in kindergartens are related to SD Goals and to underscore the importance of early education for sustainable development solutions.

In our opinion, it is possible to create a coherent system of implementation of ESD ideas and help children, parents and pedagogues develop a sustainable lifestyle. We consider that the document An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development, a report for the UN Secretary-General, prepared by Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solution Network (Agenda, 2013) can serve as the basis for classification of different activities in kindergartens or schools. This document includes many ideas that can be viewed from an ECCE perspective. These ideas are analysed as linked to the Millennium Development Goals. The authors of the report made an analysis of contemporary trends in ESD and outlined the nine most important Sustainable Development Goals (challenges):

- Goal 1 - End Extreme Poverty including Hunger;
- Goal 2 – Achieve Development within Planetary Boundaries;
- Goal 3 – Ensure Effective Learning for all Children and Youth for Life and Livelihood;
- Goal 4 – Achieve Gender Equality, Social Inclusion and Human Rights;
- Goal 5 – Achieve Health and Wellbeing at All Ages;
Goal 6 – Improve Agriculture Systems and Raise Rural Prosperity;
Goal 7 – Empower Inclusive, Productive, and Resilient Cities;
Goal 8 – Curb Human-Induced Climate Change and Ensure Clean Energy for All;
Goal 10 – Secure Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity, and Ensure Good Management of Water and Other Natural resources.

All the goals are connected to each other and reflect four dimensions of sustainable development: environmental, economic, social and governance.

What in this document is so important with regard to ECCE? It is, of course, in the first place addressed to governments and businesses. In addition, it underlines the vital importance of education (starting from an early age) for facing the challenges. It also states that achievement of the goals listed above is impossible without civil society actors, including universities and research institutions. We think that this definition may apply not only to research institutions and universities, but also to kindergartens, child-care centres and schools. First of all, they can shape new citizens and their sets of values, based on the ideas of sustainable development. Moreover, these institutions have close ties with families (in a broad sense, including older generations), community and society as a whole. That means that kindergartens and similar institutions can involve many people, professionally not connected with ESD, into the problem-solving process.

The authors of the 2013 Agenda emphasize that there are no priorities among the Goals; they are all equal and linked to each other. However not all of the challenges mentioned therein are equally applicable for implementation in kindergarten or in primary school. Moreover, some challenges can become more urgent in different countries. Still, the most important thing is that any educational institution is able to make its contribution at its own level. The document characterizes each SDG in a certain way. So pedagogues are able to choose those aspects that are best for implementation in their environment, at their particular institution and suitable for their age group (older children can take part in the discussion). At the same time it is important to build a strategy for achieving SDG targets in ECCE, taking into account children’s interests and abilities, and to organize worldwide exchange of ideas and information.
Methods

As the analysis of ‘An Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (2013) was conducted, we took into account opportunities for the participation of younger children in achieving SDG targets. The following indicators were set as criteria: suitability of a target for psychology of early age groups; its possible integration into existing educational programs; potential of schools and preschool institutions; and present cases of implementation of similar ideas in ECCE in different countries (the criteria are to be broadened and elaborated in the future).

The following results and research data have been used for the study:

1. The results of the author’s own research as the scientific advisor of 12 pilot kindergarten projects for children from 2 to 7 years old (1996 – 2012);
   - results of the implementation of the author’s ESD program ‘Nature Is Our Home’ (1993 – 2014), (Program ‘Nature Is Our Home’, 2016);
   - the author’s experience as the scientific advisor of the Moscow City Government Education Department in the joint project with UNESCO, titled ‘Nature and Us’, which has been implemented as part of the Decade for Sustainable Development from 2008 to 2012 (The joint International project ‘Nature and Us’, 2009) and as the city environmental education for sustainable development project for kindergartens and primary schools ‘Young Moscow Ecologists’ (2015 to present time), and as the National Leader of OMEP ESD Project (Parts 1 through 5, 2011 – 2014) (International projects, 2016).

2. Special attention was given to the implementation of the ‘Environmental certificate for kindergartens’ (Ryzhova, 2009) by preschool institutions. The ‘Environmental certificate for kindergartens’ was first developed by us in 1997 as a separate ecological project, that addressed not only educational problems, but also child health and safety and environmental protection. The first ‘Environmental certificate for kindergartens’ project was implemented back in 1998 as a part of the work for a master’s thesis. At present this methodology is in use by thousands of Russian kindergartens, it is included into the university courses on environmental education for students of preschool education departments in a number of pedagogical universities; it also has become a part of some teacher
training courses. In 2000 the project was expanded and it came to be regarded as an ESD project.

The project helps a kindergarten (or a primary school) to audit its environment (or that of its neighbourhood or town) with regard to ecological safety and children’s health by analysing several criteria: specific features of construction, interior design, safety for children, child nutrition, variety of toys provided, spaces, etc., as well as determining what resources are consumed by the kindergarten, and the nature and extent of the kindergarten’s general environmental impact. The staff also evaluate whether the programs and methodology they use correspond to ESD.

The ‘Environmental certificate for kindergartens’ comprises several large units (Ryzhova, 2009). Children, together with adults, search for information by studying their immediate surroundings, and record it in special workbooks.

- The Unit ‘Environmental situation in the kindergarten’s neighbourhood’ includes indicators for atmospheric, water and soil pollution in the vicinity of the kindergarten, transportation that is used in the neighbourhood and in town, sources of water and energy for the kindergarten, list of animals and plants that can be found in that part of town (or in the town in general), etc. The information for this unit is found by pedagogues together with parents and older children: they look for it online, address the local departments of natural resources and environmental protection.

- The unit ‘Description of the kindergarten outdoor space’ contains information about soils, plants, animals (biodiversity) on the kindergarten territory, evaluation of the outdoor space as a learning environment, availability of flower beds and kitchen gardens where children can play and study nature;

- The unit ‘Kindergarten buildings’ gives an evaluation of materials used in its construction, its energy saving capacity, diversity of toys, availability of natural and waste material for children to use, use of environmentally safe materials, options for children’s contact with nature, facilities for experimenting etc.

- The unit ‘Environmental impact’ comprises analysis of the kindergarten’s use of energy, water, heating, amount and quality of waste it is disposing of, and so on.
The unit ‘Professional and methodological basis’ is an analysis of programmes and educational technologies from an ESD prospective, together with links of a kindergarten to families and society in general, relationships between the pedagogues, parents, children, and other social aspects.

While summarizing the results of the project ‘Environmental certificate of a kindergarten’, pedagogues, children and parents together try to conclude whether their kindergarten complies with ESD goals and work out an Action Plan for moving forward: what needs to be changed to make the principles of sustainable development more deeply embedded into the kindergarten’s everyday life. As the project is implemented jointly by teachers, children and their families, they develop a new vision of their environment, their lifestyle, and, if necessary, find ways to change it. The project laid the foundation for the ‘sustainable kindergarten’ concept.

3. Analysis of ESD practices in kindergartens and primary schools in different countries, as well as international projects and movements in this field. In this regard eco-schools and green kindergartens are especially important. Thus, in the report of the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability ‘Whole-school approaches to sustainability: An international review of whole-school sustainability programmes’ (ARIES, 2016) different school programmes for sustainability are analysed: the FEE International Eco-school Program, China’s Green School Project (China Green Schools, 2008), Sweden’s Green School Award (DESD, 2016), New Zealand’s Enviroschools program (Enviroschools, 2016), ENSI Eco schools. The authors mention that kindergartens are also included among the participants of the majority of the programs. For instance, the FEE International Eco-school Program was initially intended for school pupils. It included 7 steps that are to be implemented in order to achieve the status of eco-school: form an Eco-Committee, carry out Environmental reviews, make an Action Plan, etc. (About eco-schools, 2016). Eco-schools work on such topics as Biodiversity & Nature, Climate Change, Energy, Global Citizenship, Health & Wellbeing, School Grounds, Transport, Waste, Water. All of these topics are to some extent covered in the Agenda for Sustainable Development (2013) and they are related to SDG targets. At present kindergartens from various countries have joined the program: from Ireland, Sweden, Russia, and many others. Thus, in Ireland not only schools, but kindergartens also take part in the Green-Schools program (six Green-School themes) (Green-
schools Ireland, 2016). ESD issues are also reflected in key frameworks - Aistear, the Irish early years curriculum framework (NCCA, 200), and Síolta (2006), the national quality framework. The preschool sector is also included into the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland (Education for Sustainability, 2014).

Canadian kindergartens also participate in the program Eco-Globe Schools (Recognizing Education for sustainable Development in Kindergarten to Grade 12 Schools). The Eco-Globe Schools annual recognition program has been developed by Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning. It includes 3 levels: awareness level, action level and transformation level (Eco-globe Schools, 2016).

**Achieving SDG targets in educational settings**

In looking at how educational institutions can take part in achievement of SDG targets, we outline three levels:

1. activity of the institution proper;
2. activities of children in kindergarten (school);
3. family activities.

As an example of how this might be implemented, we now take one of the SDGs for close examination: Goal 6: ‘Improve Agriculture Systems and Raise Rural Prosperity’. This challenge is connected with such issues as food production, agricultural stress on environment, food consumption, sustainable agriculture, climate change, loss of biodiversity, among others (Agenda, 2013).

This Goal was chosen because some of the intermediate tasks that it requires can be adapted for young children and are of interest to them. Also, at present many preschool institutions in many countries grow crops and plants and create vegetable gardens in the grounds of kindergartens and schools. The vegetable gardens can serve as an example of sustainable agriculture that can be easily explained to young children in their language.

For the most part kitchen gardens are used for growing plants and caring for them, cooking food for children and promoting healthy and sustainable lifestyle. Within the framework of our ESD Program ‘Nature is Our Home’ (2016) we used an integrative approach, regarding the kitchen garden as a learning environment. The program consists of 10 blocks, each of which is related to some component of nature (for example, units ‘Air Around Us’, ‘Water Around Us’, ‘Who Lives in Nature’s House?’, ‘Soil, the Living Earth’) or interaction between the child
(humanity) and nature (units ‘Nature and Me’, ‘Man and Nature’). In its turn, each unit includes topics related to environmental and social dimensions of ESD. A special learning environment is created for the program’s implementation that ensures child’s contact with nature. Every element of this environment (a flower bed, a water body, a kitchen garden, etc.) is used as an educational tool for each program unit and for initiating various activities for children aimed at ESD objectives. This approach implies that in a kitchen garden children not only work, care for and observe plants to harvest and cook them afterwards, but also carry out experiments with soil and study organisms that live in it, air and water that it contains, their role in the life of plants (program units ‘Soil, the Living Earth’, ‘Water’, ‘Air’), make stories, take part in drama performances, playing, drawing, study cultures of different countries, develop and implement water saving project, and so on.

The analysis of the results obtained thanks to this integrative approach helped us to formulate the following activities that we can recommend.

How schools and kindergartens can contribute to the solution of the problem (activity at the institution level)

1. Create conditions for growing plants in kindergarten or school.

At the moment different approaches exist in various countries. For instance, some preschool institutions have playgrounds covered with artificial materials, while some, on the contrary, use natural soil so that they can grow trees, bushes and grass. Often these patches of land are used for growing and observing plants. These vegetable gardens may occupy relatively large areas, with vegetables and herbs growing there. Presently such vegetable gardens can be found, for instance, in Russia, Poland, Croatia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Australia, Great Britain, and in some other countries.

In 2007 the British RHS Campaign for School Gardening was launched. Its three major goals were to encourage all schools to use gardening as a teaching tool; to show how gardening can enrich the curriculum, teach children life skills, and contribute to their emotional and physical health; to demonstrate gardening’s pivotal role in developing active citizens of the future (Gardening in school, 2016). ‘Kitchen and food gardens are an increasingly popular way for schools to promote environmental and sustainability learning and to connect students with healthy food and lifestyles’ (Kitchen gardens, 2016).

Another option, often encountered in European kindergartens, are mini-kitchen
gardens on the grounds of a kindergarten. These take the form of containers where plants are cultivated. In countries with a moderate climate and four clearly marked seasons, children sow vegetable seeds (tomatoes, peppers etc.) in spring, and later plant them in open ground. Another option in countries with colder climate is using greenhouses. In Russia kitchen gardens are present on the grounds of most kindergartens. In spring children grow seedlings in the rooms to plant them outdoors later. Besides, there is a popular type of kitchen garden in kindergartens – the ‘windowsill kitchen garden’.

Vegetable gardens help children to observe plants growing, to learn what is necessary for a plant to live, to see the ties that plants have with their environment. Children can acquire some of the skills and patterns of a sustainable lifestyle when sowing the seeds and taking care of the plants.

2. Pedagogues can invite different people into the kindergarten or school

a) Parents, grandparents and other representatives of the older generation who can tell children about their own personal experience in growing plants: how they planted them, what fertilizers they used, etc. This approach strengthens the link between generations and helps children to create a picture of the past. In particular this approach was used within the framework of the OMEP ESD Project Part 3 (Intergenerational Dialogues, 2012).

In the Volzhskiy kindergarten (Russia) children and their families were invited to come up with their own projects of design for the kitchen garden on the kindergarten grounds. The project with the most votes has been implemented. Children and parents also gave their propositions on what plants they would want to grow there. The seedlings were grown not only by the project participants, but also by people from the neighbourhood. University students and Botanical garden staff helped with the kitchen garden design and selection of plant species best adapted to the local environment. Children not only studied plant growing technology, but also found stories, fairy-tales, riddles about kitchen garden plants, as well as information about dishes that are cooked from them in different cultures. The kids also learned about geographical expansion of the plant species and marked their places of origin on the map.

b) Farmers and scientific experts in agriculture, ecologists and other professionals could speak to children about agriculture and problems in the industry.

In Australia the Kitchen Garden Foundation (for Growing, Harvesting, Preparing, Sharing) organizes kitchen and garden classes for kindergartens and schools,
where children learn to grow, harvest, prepare and share fresh, seasonal, delicious food. The establishment intends to spread the model of pleasurable food education.

3. Pedagogues and children can organize a guided tour to a farm and/or to greenhouses.

It is important to plan the program in advance, so that children will receive more information about sustainable agriculture.

4. Pedagogues and children can think about nutrition in kindergarten or at school, and about ways to reduce wastage.

At present, meals and food provision is organized in diverse ways in different countries: children may bring food from home, or food is cooked in the kindergarten, or the kindergarten obtains ready-made food and microwaves it, and so on. Food is distributed among children in different ways too: children may receive standard ready-made portions (often too big for them; sometimes adults don’t take into consideration their food preferences), or alternatively, children fill their plates themselves and get a second helping if they want to. The second way is more compatible with a sustainable lifestyle. In any case, with some thought and planning at organisational level, kindergartens are able to arrange children’s nutrition so as to ensure optimal consumption of food and minimize organic waste.

5. Pedagogues together with children can study the sources from which food comes into their kindergarten,

They can find out in what conditions animals are kept (Engdahl, Arlemalm-Hagser, 2008), how fruits and vegetables are grown, and learn to choose those suppliers that are closer to sustainable lifestyle. It is no less important to prefer local food to imported, whenever possible.

6. Waste management: organizing separate collection of organic waste that is further composted and used, for instance, in the vegetable garden.

Thus, in the Australian Albany Community Kindergarten the Vegetable Garden Installation was implemented in 2011 (Albany Community Kindergarten..., 2011). The project helped children to acquire experience and skills related to sustainable land management practices. The students created a vegetable garden and took care of plants that later were used as food. The kitchen garden
helped them to learn more about healthy nutrition. A composting system also was a substantial part of the project. The project involved not only children, but also their parents, Senior High School students and the Officer from the Department of Environment and Conservation. The project was integrated with the kindergarten’s educational program.

7. Finally, children’s activities in this area should be planned so that they can see links between all ESD dimensions: ecological, economic and social.

What can children learn? (the level of children’s activities in kindergarten)

First of all, it is important that children see plants grow- the same ordinary vegetables, fruits and grains that they find on their plates. It is significant for a child, especially for a city child, to plant a seed, to take care of the future plant, and finally see it bloom and bear fruit. This way the child learns how hard it is to grow a fruit, how much effort must be put into it.

Second, as children are future consumers, it is fundamental to teach them to avoid wasting food. For instance, they learn to put on one’s plate only as much food as one is able to eat, etc. Let us examine a specific case. Projects about bread are popular in many countries. As a rule, in the course of the project children can learn how grain is grown, how it is ground into flour, how bread is baked. In what ways can this project be extended to deal with ESD challenges? We could draw children’s attention to the fact that grains grow in fields. What was there before it became a field? (forests, meadows). So in order to grow grain, people cut down trees and plough up meadows. The less forests or meadows there are, the less forest or meadow plants and animals there will be – in other words, less biodiversity. Why are there so many ‘undesirable’ insects in the fields, which people struggle to exterminate? Because usually people grow crops of a single species (monoculture), which are vulnerable to pests. A meadow contains plants of different species and, correspondingly, lots of insect species. Also, when agricultural machines work in the fields, they use gasoline that pollutes the environment. When machines grow old, they become waste and are thrown away or recycled.

Third, children can learn about conservation of resources. In order to grow large harvests, people spend money and resources to make fertilizers, which penetrate into the environment. Many also plants need watering, so people
have to spend a lot of water on them, using water pumps (that in their turn need energy). Thus in one of the Moscow kindergartens a girl told her class that her parents were using drip irrigation for their kitchen garden. Children in her group grew interested, and they decided to design a similar system for watering the kindergarten’s kitchen garden. First, a sample device for sparing water use was made and used on the ‘windowsill kitchen garden’, and then the drip irrigation system was introduced into the big kitchen garden outdoors. All the while children and teachers used only waste material for building the system.

The main idea of these discussions is to make children understand that production of agricultural plants is a complex process that has an impact on environment, to incite changes in their attitude towards everyday food. Thus, in one of the Russian kindergartens, pedagogues noticed that children often leave pieces of bread on the plates. So they launched the project ‘Where bread comes from’, and as a result children started to take less bread during lunch and tried to leave nothing on their plates.

Cultivated plants from all over the world grow in vegetable gardens. Children can mark on the map the place of origin of the plants growing in the kindergarten grounds and find out what their ancestors in wild nature were. This approach not only develops children’s global thinking and introduces them to basic geography, but also helps them understand why biodiversity is so important.

When children grow plants they learn about mutual connections between organisms, about their links to environmental and ecological features. It is important that children understand the meanings of their actions, for example, why they have to loosen the soil in the vegetable garden. An experiment can help to understand this: let us compare two lumps of earth – one taken from the vegetable garden after the soil has been loosened, the other taken from a patch that has been trampled down by many feet. Both lumps are then immersed in water and children observe what is happening (the lump of loosened soil emits a lot of bubbles, while the other lump makes much less). In this way children learn that soil contains air, required by plants, and come to understand why we need to loosen soil in order for plants to grow there.

When watering plants children can realize the significance of water in life of plants and animals. To make them think of sustainable aspects, we may suggest that they should state their hypotheses: where does the water come from and where does it go after they have watered the plants? As a rule after having a discussion like this, children begin to understand that water is a valuable resource that should be spared. They also give their opinions on how it can be
done. For example, in the rain we could collect water into a container and later give it to the plants.

Together with children you may learn what power sources are used to supply the kindergarten with water, whether there are alternative energy sources among them (the energy of the Sun, the wind, etc.). Treating, pumping and heating water uses energy, so if the power source for your kindergarten burns carbon fuels, then sparing use of water for the plants will reduce emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

A further point is that it is necessary to learn about ecological preferences of different plants: for instance, some of them require more water, some need to be watered rarely and scarcely, while water needs to go directly down the stem for some.

A vegetable garden provides themes for discussion of environmental safety. For example, which places are suitable for a vegetable garden and which are not, and why. Sites close to highways with heavy traffic and in other environmentally hazardous areas in cities are totally unsuitable for growing food. In these conditions plants accumulate substances harmful to our health.

Growing different kinds of plants can also contribute to multi-cultural education (social dimension). Together with their parents, children can find information about how vegetables are cooked in different countries and make the dishes themselves. If the kindergarten has children from different nations they can present their national dishes, made of the fruits and vegetables they have grown themselves.

There is another multi-cultural aspect: which fruits and vegetables can be found in fairy-tales and folk riddles in different cultural traditions? When implementing projects about bread, children can learn about kinds of bread typical for different nations and try to make them in the kindergarten.

A vegetable garden is a perfect place for studying natural cycles and understanding ecologically sound agriculture. Children can gather food leftovers, dead leaves and fruits and turn them into compost to make organic fertilizers for the vegetable garden. To help children understand the recycling of substances in nature, you can bury fallen leaves, remains of leaves and roots from the vegetable garden, mark the place and dig it up after some time. You can examine the site and discuss with children what happened to the organic remains. You can also compare green leaves to dead ones. How are they similar and how are they different? Where did the dead leaves go? And how?
Another interesting activity is studying animals that live in soil in the vegetable garden. Children can study the specimens of soil with magnifying glasses, trying to find as many of underground dwellers as possible, sharing their discoveries. For example, why are there so many earthworms in the vegetable garden? It is also very interesting to study insects that visit the flowers in the vegetable garden, discuss their reasons for landing on flowers and their role in pollination of plants. These observations help children to understand close relationships between plants and insects and to realize the importance of biodiversity (in this case in the animal kingdom) and the benefits of organic agriculture (artificial chemicals lead to reduction in number of insects and other animals).

It is important for young children to realize that not all plants can be grown in their area (geographical and ecological aspects). Some plants require a warm and humid climate, while others can grow in cold dry places of the Earth.

A vegetable garden in a kindergarten or at school can contribute to a healthy lifestyle: children spend more time in the open air, they learn about the significance of vegetables in their everyday diet and about organic farming, etc.

**What can parents learn? (Family level)**

Family involvement in the achievement of SDG targets was partially discussed above, so this section contains some additional information. Early childhood is the period when parents are most actively involved in bringing up their child and have active contact with pedagogues. Not only do parents influence the child, but the reverse is also true: children’s activities can change the outlooks and attitude of parents. Often kindergarten projects help their adult participants to look at things from a new angle. In one of the Russian kindergartens, parents and grandparents together with children created an ecologically-friendly garden that would allow them to grow plants in a natural way (the plants were chosen according to local climate taking biodiversity into account; elements of organic agriculture were applied; the participants created compost heaps, rationed water for plants etc.). As a result, many of the adults changed their views on agriculture and started applying principles of sustainable agriculture in their home vegetable gardens.

Another example of how the older generation took part in working towards SDG targets is OMEP ESD Project Part 3, Goal 2 (Intergenerational dialogues, 2013). In the course of the project children asked their grandparents whether they used to grow plants in their vegetable gardens, what is needed for successful gardening, etc. Traditionally many people in Russia have their own vegetable
gardens, so grandparents and other adults were happy to share their knowledge and experience with young children. Residents of the community around the kindergarten brought seedlings and offered their recipes for vegetable dishes. This kind of cooperation ensures equality and partnership in relationships between children and adults and promotes passing down knowledge across generations.

A further example of the influence that kindergarten projects can have on parents is the project dedicated to waste in one of the Moscow kindergartens. Children made compost heaps to fertilize soil in the vegetable garden and on the flower bed, thus they found out why there is no waste in nature, where dead leaves and branches go, etc. Then children learned about signs and labels of environmental safety on products (including the ‘recyclable’ sign). After some time, parents began to tell teachers at the kindergarten that when the family goes shopping their children look for environmentally safe products and insist on buying only products of this kind. Many mothers and fathers confessed that they had not paid much attention to these labels before, but they changed their attitude thanks to children. In this way children together with parents (families) become civil society actors and implement some of the SDGs in their everyday lives.

Results

The analysis presented above shows that a number of SDG targets can be adapted for young children and implemented in preschool institutions at three levels:

- at the level of functioning of the institution (in organizing work with children; creating the learning environment; educational programmes; choice of equipment; children’s nutrition; use of alternative power sources, etc.)
- at the level of children’s activities;
- at the family level.

Participation in the implementation of SDG targets helps children and parents develop a new set of values. They start to realize that sustainable development on the planet also depends on their everyday demands, habits and conscious actions. And they learn about sustainable development and put its principles into practice.

Since sustainable development is essentially an integrative concept, children’s involvement in these activities contributes to their comprehensive development
and to their understanding of links between economic, social and environmental problems. Children learn in action: they put forth hypotheses, test them in practice, independently search for information, and communicate with people of different generations, while adults provide support for their initiative. The examples described above show that activities of children and adults in implementing SDG targets can vary widely in forms and content.

As Sustainable Development Goals encompass all domains of sustainable development, they can become the foundation for the strategy of implementation of ESD ideas in ECCE (or at least they can be taken into account as the strategy is developed). That will help create a coherent educational system and embed SD ideas at the global level with reference to local specifics – that is, implement one of the basic principles of sustainable development: think globally – act locally!

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Recent Policy Developments in Early Childhood Education (ECE): A jigsaw with too many pieces?

Dr. Thomas Walsh, Department of Education, Maynooth University

Abstract

In recent years, there have been a myriad of policy and practice developments in the field of early childhood education (ECE). These developments emanate from a range of government departments and agencies, including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the Department of Education and Skills (DES), and the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA). This paper examines recent key policy developments and profiles the government departments and agencies responsible for their development and implementation. One of the key conclusions is that a clearer vision is needed for the sector to ensure that policies are coherent, consistent and manageable for those with a responsibility for their enactment.

Introduction

The ECE sector in Ireland has experienced a period of rapid policy development since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Overall, this development has filled the legislative and policy vacuum that previously existed and has provided a structure and framework for the sector to operate within. However, the locus of policy development has been varied and diverse in these decades and policy responsibility has been transferred and shared across a range of government departments and agencies. The complexity of the ECE policy development space has become more pronounced in recent times as various departments and agencies develop policy on specific aspects for the sector, often with insufficient examination of the overall totality of expectations and
requirements. It also has had the effect of reinforcing the traditional split system of ‘care’ and ‘education’ that has characterised ECE development in Ireland as policy development is often delineated along these lines. This paper explores recent policy developments in ECE in Ireland, examines the departments and organisations responsible and posits a number of recommendations for future policy development for the sector. It is argued that a clearer vision and a more focused centralised departmental leadership are required to ensure that ECE policy is coherent, consistent and manageable for those with a responsibility for its enactment.

A list of acronyms used is included at the end of the paper.

Origins of ECE policy development in Ireland

Historically, there has been a State reluctance to intervene in family matters or to directly deliver services in the pre-school sector (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004). Moreover, policy responsibility has been passed between and shared among a large number of government departments and agencies in the last two decades, with a heavy reliance on private, voluntary and community providers alongside limited direct State provision. Increased recognition of the value of ECE for all children and the increased participation of women in the workforce were the two main drivers of policy attention on ECE from the 1990s. Hayes (2010) argues that both structurally and conceptually, a distinction has been made between childcare and early education with childcare considered to be part of the equality and labour market agenda and early education used to combat educational disadvantage.

In 1997, Hayes and O’Flaherty with Kernan (1997:12) stated that there “...is no national policy to coordinate early childhood services” in Ireland, delineating the ad hoc range of services delivered by the Department of Health and Children (DHC), the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and private, community voluntary sector providers. The lack of co-ordination and the split nature of the system were key themes of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education in 1998; with the DHC largely responsible for children aged birth to three/four years and the DES\(^1\) responsible for children aged three/four to six years of age (Coolahan, 1998:27). As early as 1998, there was general consensus as to the need for a single co-ordinating agency for ECE and the debate had begun as to

\(^1\) The Department of Education and Science was renamed the Department of Education and Skills in 2010. However, the role of the Department remained largely the same in relation to ECE. The ‘DES’ is used in this article to relate to both the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Education and Skills depending on the year involved.
which government department or newly established interdepartmental agency might be most suited to this role.

Issues of co-ordination were also central to The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn (DES, 1999). Recommendations in the White Paper included coordination among and within departments, agencies and organisations at national, intermediate and local levels. It proposed the assignment of policy responsibility for ECE to the DES and the creation of an Early Childhood Education Agency to take responsibility for administrative/executive issues. Such a need for greater co-ordination for policy and service delivery has been a recurring theme in policy documents in the early years of the 21st century (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004; National Economic and Social Forum, 2005). To date, no one department or agency has assumed ultimate responsibility for ECE policy development in Ireland.

Three main government departments shared policy responsibility for ECE in the early years of the 21st century – the DES, DHC and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR). Moreover, the role of in excess of ten different government departments in the development and implementation of ECE policy is well documented (see Duignan and Walsh, 2004; Walsh and Cassidy, 2007). The DJELR involvement in ECE was largely in relation to its remit around equality and women’s participation in the workforce. The National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 1999) was developed to integrate and develop the delivery of childcare and early educational services, with a major focus on the provision of places. The DJELR was instrumental in the establishment and implementation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006). This was succeeded by the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) (2006-2011) and collectively these programmes represented the largest investment ever seen in the sector.

The split system between care and education in Ireland has long historical roots and is deeply embedded at a structural and conceptual level. This division has been reinforced by recent policy developments such as targeted ECE schemes and the Free Pre-school Year, which further accentuates the delineation between provision for children under and over three years of age. The lack of co-ordination has remained a policy debate up to the present day. In early 2015, the Chief Executive of TUSLA, Mr. Gordon Jeyes, expressed concern at the fragmentation of relationships within the early years sector and the lack of co-ordination around the ECE regulatory system, where multiple agencies
were involved without strategic consideration for the sector. He stated “[T]hese new schemes [education-focused inspections], coupled with the introduction of new standards and regulations are leading to confusion and will burden the system with extra administration and interaction with multiple agencies. It is essential that the full range of welcome Government initiatives in this sector are strategically complementary” (Irish Times, 2015a).

**Key Influences on ECE Policy**

A growing recognition of the social and economic value of ECE, the availability of EU funding and increased female labour market participation made ECE policy an international and national priority. This has led to the involvement of a wide range of contributors to the ECE policy development arena. These include government departments and agencies, the national childcare organisations (NCOs), professional bodies, international influences (such as the European Commission, the United Nations and the European Council) parents and other key stakeholders. However, the primary focus of this paper is on the policy development role of key government departments and organisations on ECE, most particularly the DCYA and the DES, and their associated agencies. The paper also focuses on agencies and organisations that have a greater role in policy implementation than policy development, namely TUSLA and Pobal (see Figure 1).
Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

The DCYA was established in 2011 and “…focuses on harmonising policy issues that affect children in areas such as early childhood care and education…” (DCYA, 2015a). It was preceded by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) which was a unit of the DHC with a policy co-ordination role for children and young people (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2008). The OMCYA was one of the first efforts at co-ordinating the sector, centralising and co-locating policy responsibility from the DJELR, the DES and DHC. The key functions of the DCYA are delineated in Figure 2.

The DCYA is responsible for the administration of the €260 million spent annually on early years and school-age care and education services (DCYA, 2015c:27). It
is also responsible for the roll out and administration of a number of childcare and ECE programmes, including the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (Free Pre-school Year). Introduced in 2010, this is the first universal State funded provision (three hours per day over 38 weeks) of ECE in Ireland for children in the year prior to attending the infant classes of primary schools. Its popularity is evident in that in excess of 68,000 children (approximately 95% of eligible children) attend the 4,200 services participating in the scheme annually (DCYA, 2015c:27). The scheme costs €175 million annually. Participation by ECE settings in the scheme has required them to sign contracts stating that they “... provide an appropriate educational programme for children in their pre-school year which adheres to the principles of Siolta, the Childcare Quality Framework, and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework...” (DCYA, 2014b:10).

Higher capitation is paid to services that meet enhanced staff qualification criteria, with 28% of ECE services eligible for this payment in 2014-15 (DCYA, 2015c:66). One of the perhaps unintended consequences of the scheme is that the payment of higher capitation has led to a concentration of staff with higher qualifications working with children over the age of three to the detriment of children under age three. From September 2016, provision has been extended to include children from age three to five-and-a-half, allowing children to avail of up to eighty-eight weeks of provision in pre-schools prior to enrolment in primary schools into the future (DCYA, 2015e).

The DCYA is also responsible for the administration of two other targeted national childcare funding programmes, namely:

- The Community Childcare Subvention Programme (CCS) which provides places for approximately 25,000 children annually in 900 community childcare services. The annual cost of the scheme is €45 million (DCYA, 2015c:27)

- The Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programmes collectively provides places to approximately 8,000 children annually through three schemes:
  - Childcare Education and Training Support programme (CETS)
  - After-school Child Care Programme (ASCC)
  - Community Employment Childcare Programme (CEC) (DCYA, 2015b)

These programmes are administratively complex with strict eligibility criteria for the services, children and/or parents participating. €246 million of the DCYA budget is spent on the aforementioned schemes (DCYA, 2015c:27).
The regulations governing pre-school services are formulated by the Child Welfare and Policy Unit of the DCYA. Since 2013, the DCYA has been working on developing and enhancing the regulatory system for the ECE sector in conjunction with the DES and TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency. At present, both the Childcare Regulations (DHC, 2006) and the National Pre-school Standards (DHC, 2010) are under review by the DCYA and revised drafts are not expected until 2016. The revised Early Years Regulations will replace the existing childcare regulations from 2006 and these, and the National Standards which will replace the 2006 guidelines, will provide the basis for regulation into the future. Collectively, these documents will provide the framework in which statutory inspections will take place by the Pre-school Inspectorate of TUSLA. Moreover, these regulations and standards will now need to be cognisant of the education-focussed inspection framework that will be used to undertake inspections in settings operating the Free Pre-school Year (see section on DES). The DCYA chairs an Operational Alignment Group comprising the DES and Tusla Inspectorates, Pobal and Better Start with a view to reduce any unnecessary burden on providers, to minimise duplication and to co-ordinate inspection, quality support and compliance visits. Considering the complexity of this regulatory space, the Operational Alignment Group has an onerous task to simplify the process and procedure for the sector.

The DCYA is responsible for the preparation and implementation of the government’s Children and Young People’s Policy Framework 2014-2020, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (DCYA, 2014a), the successor to the National Children’s Strategy. This is the first overarching national policy framework for children and young people (0-24 years of age) and its purpose is to co-ordinate policy across government departments to improve outcomes for children and young people. A National Early Years Strategy (NEYS) has been proposed by a wide range of national and international agencies in order to provide a guiding vision for the development of the sector in Ireland. This is planned to be an integral element of the Children and Young People’s Policy Framework 2014-2020 and “...an innovative and exciting blueprint for the future strategic development of Ireland’s Early Years Sector” (DCYA, 2012). The NEYS is being informed by the report of an expert advisory group (DCYA, 2013), and is expected to be launched in early 2016. This Strategy has the potential to bring cohesion to a sector that to date has operated in the absence of an articulated core vision.

Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSCs) are being established by the DCYA at county level to promote the co-ordination of services and supports through local and national interagency working of statutory,
community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people (see [http://www.cypsc.ie/]). Their overall purpose is to improve outcomes for children and young people, particularly through the realisation of the national outcomes set out in the Children and Young People’s Policy Framework 2014-2020 (DCYA, 2014a). A number of CYPSCs has been established to promote the local co-ordination of services and supports for children and families as part of the Policy Framework. In many instances, City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) are part of the membership of CYPSCs.

The Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme 2013-17 is a prevention and early intervention initiative to provide an area-based approach to improving outcomes for children by reducing child poverty. Thirteen sites are involved in the delivery of services in areas such as child health and development, children’s learning and parenting. The ABC Programme is overseen by a cross-departmental and interagency Project Team. This programme is co-funded by the DCYA and Atlantic Philanthropies and is administered by Pobal (DCYA, 2016).

A number of NCOs are supported by the DCYA to promote quality and to deliver services within the ECE sector. These include Early Childhood Ireland, Barnardos, Childminding Ireland, the Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association and the St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland. A network of 31 CCCs is also funded by the DCYA. These were established in 2001 to offer a variety of services at a local level, including services to parents and ECE settings. They are also centrally involved in the administration of national ECE schemes and in the quality improvement agenda. The DCYA provides funding of approximately €14 million annually to the NCOs and the CCCs, as well as Better Start, the Learner Fund and Childminder Development Grants (DCYA, 2015c:27).

In July 2015, the Interdepartmental Working Group on Childcare reported after being established to “...identify and assess policies and future options for increasing the affordability, quality and supply of early years and school-age care and education services in Ireland” (DCYA, 2015c:7). The report notes the tension between the drivers of reform in ECE, including supporting children’s outcomes, supporting parents and facilitating labour market participation. It makes a number of recommendations for the future development of childcare and ECE but the report surprisingly makes little reference to issues of co-ordination. Crucially, the report recommends further investment in the supply side of the sector as opposed to tax breaks and this will accentuate the need for policy co-ordination between the various departments and agencies with a responsibility for ECE.
Better Start is a national initiative established by the DCYA, in collaboration with the EYEPUs of the DES, to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in ECE for children aged from birth to six years in Ireland. It is hosted by Pobal on behalf of the DCYA which involves Pobal acting as the employer and providing office accommodation and organisational support for Better Start staff. However, the National Manager of Better Start reports directly to the DCYA. Better Start co-ordinates and extends the supports and services relating to quality already provided through CCCs and the NCOs (see www.betterstart.ie). The service involves a cadre of 30 highly skilled and experienced Early Years Specialists working directly in a mentoring capacity with ECE services. The *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA, 2015]) is being used by Better Start as the core document for its work with services.

While the DCYA brings together a number of policy and provision responsibilities for children, crucially many important policy areas remain outside its remit, particularly within the DES. To address this, the EYEPU has been established and this unit is co-located between the DCYA and the DES. Among other responsibilities, the EYEPU is responsible for the *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), targeted interventions for children living in areas designated as disadvantaged and the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan (DES, 2010). To support the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan which aims to standardise training and promote the flexible delivery of training, a Learner Fund was created in late 2013 by the DCYA to support staff to meet higher qualification requirements. The Learner Fund is administered by Pobal with the support of the CCCs and is directed at ECE professionals becoming qualified up to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. In autumn 2015, the DCYA published a list of recognised qualifications for the regulations and for the various ECE schemes operated by the Department (DCYA, 2015f).

**Pobal**

*Pobal* is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1992 that manages various funding programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU (see www.pobal.ie). *Pobal* is instrumental in providing a range of services to and on behalf of the DCYA in the area of ECE, including the administration of schemes such as CETS, CCS, the Free Pre-school Year, the Learner Fund, capital funding and the management of the NCIP. In most instances, *Pobal* undertakes compliance visits to services and organisations that are being funded by the DCYA to ensure the terms of the programmes are being met. Funding for the CCCs,
the NCOs and Comhairle na nÓg is also managed by Pobal, which oversees their work, supports their development, and carries out on-site checks to ensure investment by the Department is appropriately spent. A Programme Implementation Platform (PIP) is used by Pobal to streamline the administration of the three national childcare funding programmes (ECCE, TEC and CCS) for service providers and other stakeholder organisations such as the CCCs.

Annually, Pobal issues an Annual Early Years Sector Survey based on responses from ECE settings participating in the three national childcare funding programmes (ECCE, TEC and CCS) to support policy development for the sector (see for example Pobal, 2014).

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

The DES has a traditional involvement in ECE through the infant classes of primary schools and by specific targeted initiatives relating to educational disadvantage, such as the Rutland Street Project and Early Start. While the compulsory school starting age is six years of age, approximately half of all four year olds and almost all five year olds attend the infant classes of primary schools annually. In the school year 2014-15, nearly 100,000 four- and five-year old pupils attended the infant classes of primary schools and 1,262 pupils attended Early Start settings (DES, 2015a). A review of the primary school curriculum is underway, with a specific focus on aligning the approaches and methods in the infant classes with those of Aistear as recommended in the national Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011). However, the remit of the DES in the broader sphere of ECE has always been greater than may be immediately apparent and this has continued to expand in recent years, particularly around training, qualifications and quality (see Figure 3 below).
The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established by the DES in 2002 to develop and co-ordinate ECE in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn (DES, 1999). The work of the CECDE culminated in the development of Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). However, the CECDE was closed in 2008 before a comprehensive roll-out of the Síolta framework was possible. While many settings are aware of Síolta, very few have engaged systematically with the framework in the absence of support. Through the EYEPU, a Síolta QAP was initiated. The Pobal Annual Early Years Survey reported that only 2% of ECE services, mostly high functioning services, were formally engaged in the Síolta QAP in 2013 (Pobal, 2014:79).

The NCCA is a statutory agency with a remit to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on matters relating to “…the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools…” (Government of Ireland, 1998: Section 41 (1)(a)). From an ECE perspective, a long research, consultative and development process led to the publication of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). This represented the first curriculum framework in Ireland for all children aged birth to six years of age. Since its publication, there have been many positive examples of its use in ECE settings supported by a number of agencies and organisations. However, its adoption has been impeded by a lack of a strategic implementation plan or adequate resourcing (French, 2013).
What is perhaps surprising is that two frameworks (\textit{Aistear} and \textit{Síolta}) were developed for the ECE sector largely in parallel with one another, one focusing on the curriculum exclusively and one focusing on all aspects of quality, including the curriculum. These examples of policy development are perhaps symptomatic of the wider lack of coherence and co-ordination within ECE policy development (Neylon, 2014). It is arguable that the arrival of two comprehensive frameworks within a short timeframe caused confusion and in the absence of broad supports for their implementation, their potential impact was not realised. Moreover, Hayes et al. (2013) argue that their rights-based and integrated care and education nature were at odds with the prevailing policy paradigm and this has contributed to their slow and partial adoption. It was this realisation that catalysed the development of the \textit{Aistear Síolta Practice Guide} for the sector in 2015 that incorporated core elements of both frameworks in a format that was more accessible and adoptable for the sector (NCCA, 2015). While welcome, this new practice guide introduces a new range of terminology and structures which will take some time to become embedded in the parlance of the sector.

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, \textit{Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life}, was published in 2011 with the purpose to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children and young people (DES, 2011). Reassuringly, the importance of ECE is well recognised within the Strategy and a number of actions relate to the ECE sector, including training and qualifications, assessment, curriculum and methodologies in both pre-school settings and in the infant classes of primary schools.

The DES has responsibility for the quality assurance of training programmes for ECE professionals. The Minister for Education and Skills appoints the board of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), which is responsible for, inter alia, maintaining the 10-point National Framework of Qualifications and the validation of education and training programmes (see \url{www.qqi.ie}). In 2014, the DES initiated a review of training and education programmes that result in a qualification for the ECE sector. Among other issues being reviewed are the extent to which relevant education and training programmes are being delivered efficiently and by appropriately qualified experts, the quality assurance procedures within institutions, the quality of work placements and the appropriateness of learning outcomes (DES, 2014a). The DES is in the process of analysing the data collected as part of the review and a report is expected in 2016.

In May 2015, the DES launched a consultative process in relation to undertaking
education-focused inspections in settings operating the Free Pre-school Year. This initiative originated in an invite from the DCYA to the DES, as part of the DCYA pre-school quality agenda, to lead and organise an inspection process that focused on the educational aspects of ECE provision. The aim of the education-focused inspections is to complement the existing TUSLA Pre-school Inspectorate inspections which will still focus on compliance with the revised pre-school regulations and standards (DES, 2015b). In summer 2015, a cadre of 10 Early Years Inspectors with expertise and experience in ECE were recruited on a permanent basis to the existing DES Inspectorate to undertake the ECE inspections. Pilot inspections will begin in late 2015 and following the pilot and consultation phases, reports generated on the basis of inspections will be published. A key focus of the inspections is to promote continuous improvement in ECE settings by affirming good practice and making recommendations for improvement. This development marks a milestone for the DES Inspectorate in the direct inspection of pre-school services and provision. It is understood that the co-operation between the DES Inspectorate, the TUSLA Inspectorate and the DCYA is underpinned by a formal Memorandum of Understanding.

In December 2014, the Minister for Education and Skills established an Early Years Advisory Group to provide advice to the Minister and to guide policy development on education issues in the birth to six year old sector. The Group has comprehensive terms of reference which includes the co-ordination of existing education-related activity in the sector, to strengthen the integration of ECE into the overall education continuum and to inform future policy development in relation to ECE issues. It is also tasked to organise an Annual Early Years Education Forum (DES, 2014b). The grouping met twice in 2015.

The split system of care and education is also apparent in the policy provision for children in the birth to six age category with special educational needs (SEN). The Disability Act 2005, which has commenced for children under five years of age, provides for an independent assessment of the health and education needs of applicants and a statement of the services which it is proposed to provide (Government of Ireland, 2005). However, there is no statutory guarantee that such services will be provided. Through the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 for children of school-going age, all children have an entitlement to services (DES, 2004). For the period birth to six years, these are provided through education services at a pre-school or school level, depending on the nature of the disability. The rollout of services as specified in this Act, at a regional and local level, is co-ordinated by Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) of the National Council for Special
Education (NCSE). This involves identifying the needs of children and deciding on the level of resources schools require to provide them with an appropriate education service. SENOs also provide a service to parents and children through the co-ordination of the delivery of services between the health sector and schools (Walsh, 2010). It should be noted that not all the provisions of the EPSEN Act are operational at present. The interface between the Disability Act and the EPSEN Act is not always immediately evident or easily navigable for services, schools or parents catering for children with SEN. Entitlements vary between both Acts for children of the same age depending on the setting that they attend. The DCYA is currently leading, in conjunction with the DES and DoH, the development of a logic model on the process for developing SEN service provision (DCYA, 2015c:54).

Moreover, an interdepartmental working group chaired by the DCYA, Supporting Access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with Disability, reported in September 2015 on accessibility issues to the Free Preschool Year programme for children with a disability (Interdepartmental Working Group, 2015). It outlined the provision of seven levels of support across a continuum to enable children with disabilities to fully participate in the Free Preschool Year. A Cross-Sectoral Implementation Group has been established to oversee the implementation of the provisions of the report which is financed by a €17 budget in 2016.

**TUSLA – The Child and Family Agency**

TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, is a dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. Since 2014, TUSLA has assumed responsibility from the HSE for inspecting pre-schools, play groups, nurseries, crèches, day-care and similar services which cater for children aged 0-6, under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006 (DHC, 2006) (see Figure 4 below). These inspections are undertaken by the Pre-school Inspectorate. Since 2013, Standard Operating Procedures have been introduced to harmonise inspection approaches.
As part of a programme of reforms, structures for a National Early Years Inspectorate have been established in 2015 under Tusla’s Quality Assurance Directorate. At present, the pre-school regulations are under review (see section on DCYA) and pre-school inspectors are using a focused inspection tool in the interim which primarily focuses on issues of Governance, Welfare and Safety. The Advisory Service previously offered by the Inspection Teams has been suspended by TUSLA to allow for a focus on the core task of inspection. Since July 2013, all inspection reports prepared by the Pre-school Inspectorate are published on the Pobal website.

A system of registration for ECE services is planned to follow the publication of the revised pre-school regulations and revised national standards. At present, services notify rather than register with TUSLA and they are not subject to any inspection prior to commencing operation. Once the registration system is operational, services will be unable to operate until they have undergone an inspection and they will then be subjected to ongoing inspection in order to determine their ongoing registration status (DCYA, 2014c).

TUSLA is also responsible for providing Child Protection Training based on Children First, National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (DCYA, 2011). Children First provides national guidance for the protection and welfare of children in Ireland. This training is delivered to voluntary and community organisations through their Children First Information and Advice Officers (DCYA, 2015d).

**Wider Government Departments and Agencies**

A range of other government departments and agencies also has an impact on
or peripheral responsibility for aspects of ECE provision in Ireland (see Figure 5 below).

**Figure 5: Wider Government Departments and Agencies**

![Diagram of Wider Government Departments and Agencies]

In summary, the role of these departments and agencies includes:

- The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) has ultimate responsibility for the reform and improvement of public services, including public expenditure, public service pay and public service modernisation ([http://www.per.gov.ie/](http://www.per.gov.ie/)).

- The Department of Finance is responsible for the administration of public finances in Ireland ([http://www.finance.gov.ie/](http://www.finance.gov.ie/)).

- The Department of Justice and Equality has responsibility around child and family law and for Garda Vetting by An Garda Síochána ([http://www.justice.ie/](http://www.justice.ie/)).

- The Department of Health has responsibility for the roll out of free GP care to all children under the age of six as part of the Government Health Reform Programme ([http://health.gov.ie/](http://health.gov.ie/)).

- The Health Service Executive (HSE) delivers services to children and their
parents/ families who may have special educational needs or be affected by educational disadvantage. It also promotes and delivers parenting programmes (http://www.hse.ie/eng/).

- The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is responsible for the implementation of the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 (Government of Ireland, 2010) (http://www.ahg.gov.ie/en/).

- The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has responsibility for the planning and building regulations for ECE services and for public spaces for children and young people (http://www.environ.ie/en/).

- The Department of Social Protection is responsible for the provision of a number of payments relating to children and families, including Child Benefit, the Family Income Supplement, the Single Person Child Carer Credit, the After School Child Care Scheme and the One-parent Family Payment. Approximately €2.3 billion is allocated annually in child and family related supports (https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/home.aspx).

- The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation encourages the creation of high quality and sustainable full employment and is responsible for the National Employment Rights Authority. At present, close to 25,000 early childhood professionals are employed in the ECE sector (http://www.enterprise.gov.ie/en/).

As children’s and family’s lives permeate all aspects of society, it is inevitable that a large number of departments have a role in ECE. What is necessary is the development of a core vision and policy framework to guide and inform decisions made by these wider departments and agencies in relation to children.

**Looking to the Future**

This brief outline of the policy responsibility of the main department and agencies with a remit for ECE presents a bewildering and complex array of relationships and interconnections between and among the various stakeholders. In some instances, the absence of effective co-ordination between these departments and agencies accentuates the problem. It is important to remember that there are many other partners that are involved in the policy and practice domain of ECE at an international, national and local level that also impact on policy development and enactment. Figure 6 below maps the key policy responsibilities of the main government departments and agencies and highlights the overcrowded space that is the ECE policy development arena. This paper argues that what is
missing from this figure is a clear vision or dominant department at the core that orients policy and practice in relation to ECE in Ireland. In its absence, individual departments and agencies are continuing, despite efforts at collaboration, to work largely in isolation and insulation from one another. A consequence of this approach is the development of multiple overlapping layers of policy for the sector that is complex to understand or enact.

While there has been a flurry of policy development and activity across a range of departments and agencies in recent years, Hayes et al. (2013) assert that little has changed in terms of the State’s fundamental philosophy relating to ECE, with a distinction still evident between childcare and early education despite the rhetoric of an integrated system. They characterise the period 1995-2012 as one “...of rapid policy change without transformation” (Hayes et al., 2013:4). In its submission on the development of a National Early Years Strategy, Start Strong called for a re-examination of the split in relation to policy development and delivery of services responsibility for ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’ and recommended that a single government department be assigned responsibility for ECE considering the integrated nature of care and education (Start Strong, 2013). Right from the Start, the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy recommended bringing “…together in a single Government department all policy responsibility for early care and education services, including their funding, quality assurance, curriculum development, training and workforce development” (DCYA, 2013:26). Policy documents and policymakers continue to iterate the inseparable nature of care and education but policy implementation continues along divided lines. As Hayes (2010:69) states, “…simply headlining the two concepts together within the phrase early childhood care and education is insufficient to integrate them conceptually, politically or practically.”

In 2010, UNESCO research asserted the overall policy benefits of integrating policy responsibility for childcare and ECE within Departments of Education rather than attempting policy co-ordination across departments (Kaga, Bennett and Moss, 2010). The most positive benefits accrued to systems that achieved deep policy integration where all levels are committed to the change process. This is the policy norm in countries such as England, Scotland, Sweden, Norway, Slovenia, Spain and New Zealand and in many countries that have high quality ECE provision. Similarly, the Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe) report (European Commission, 2011) focuses on the importance of all aspects of the ECE system being fit for purpose to achieve a competent system, including the inter-institutional and governance levels.
Who is ultimately responsible for ECE policy?
Implications and Recommendations

It is evident that policy responsibility for ECE is fragmented among a bewildering array of government departments, agencies and organisations. Recent years have witnessed the proliferation of a vast range of policy and legislative initiatives in the sector and the creation of new structures for their implementation. The current energy and interest in the sector must be harnessed with a view to bringing greater coherence and shared approaches. While departments and agencies are cognisant of wider policy developments, it is arguable that many policies are developed in isolation from one another and with insufficient cognisance of their impact on the service providers in the sector. This has led to a situation and context that is becoming increasingly complex and untenable for the sector.

In conclusion, a number of considerations and recommendations are posited for the future development of ECE policy. Some of these re-echo the recommendations of earlier policy documents but have not been enacted or implemented to date:

• One essential key strategic policy game changer must be the centralisation of key ECE policy development within a single government department. It is evident that interdepartmental co-ordination and co-operation has failed to provide a cohesive and integrated policy vision or practice delivery model for the sector. As well as developing and providing for the implementation of key ECE policy, this central department should also be instrumental in co-ordinating ECE policy across all other government departments that have a remit for ECE for children aged birth to six years. This department must become the key centre point of all ECE policy development with a strong understanding of the totality of impact of policy development on the sector. This development is central to the creation of a ‘competent system’ as advocated by the CoRe report (European Commission, 2011).

• To guide the work of the centralised department with responsibility for ECE, a clear shared vision or strategy for the sector is required. The National Early Years Strategy, currently being developed, has the potential to provide this shared cohesive vision spanning all aspects that affect the lives of young children. A strategic consultative process is required as part of its development to ensure participation in its development and an ownership of its contents. Consultation must be focussed, transparent and underpinned by a commitment to act on outcomes, a process that has not always been characteristic of consultation in the ECE sector to date.
• A single, cohesive regulatory system for the sector is required. While welcome, the education-focused inspections must integrate cohesively with the existing pre-school inspections so that a single unified inspection system that focuses on all aspects of quality in ECE provision, and that complements settings’ self-evaluation practices, can be developed.

• A policy audit needs to be undertaken to enumerate and evaluate the totality of policy documentation for the ECE sector that has been developed in recent times. This should identify the policy gaps, the policy duplications and the obsolete policy currently in existence. An implementation plan should then be developed for the range of worthwhile existing policy initiatives in the sector to translate their vision into reality. The centralised department with policy responsibility for ECE must support the sector with a cohesive suite of ECE policy that will remove the need for individuals and settings to navigate the complex and multiple requirements of a myriad of departments and agencies currently being imposed.

• At a government level, a strategic investment plan for the sector spanning the next five years should be discussed and delivered to raise expenditure on ECE from 0.5% at present (DCYA, 2015c:32) to the OECD average of 0.8% of GDP. A longer term investment target should be to raise this investment to the 1% UNICEF benchmark by 2025. Development and improvement will not occur unless there is an immediate, significant and consistent increase in State investment in the sector.

• Much of the administrative complexity of the ECE system could be reduced or eliminated by adopting a policy of progressive universalism, i.e., providing a universal provision of basic supports and services for all with extra supports for those who need them.

• Much of the investment to date in the ECE sector has been targeted at the physical infrastructure. It is now time to invest in the professionals who work in the ECE sector from whom so much is expected, the people who deliver the service and who are fundamental to the quality of experiences and outcomes experienced by the child. This investment should be targeted at supporting improved training and qualifications for early childhood educators, provision for ongoing CPD, ensuring payment for non-contact hours for professional purposes and the introduction of appropriate salary structures and scales.
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**List of acronyms**

ABC - Area Based Childhood Programme  
ASCC - After-school Child Care Programme  
CCCs - City and County Childcare Committees  
CCS - Community Childcare Subvention Programme  
CEC - Community Employment Childcare Programme  
CECDE - Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education  
CETS - Childcare Education and Training Support Programme  
CYPSCs - Children and Young People’s Services Committees  
DCYA - Department of Children and Youth Affairs  
DES - Department of Education and Skills  
DHC - Department of Health and Children  
DJELR - Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform  
DPER - Department of Public Expenditure and Reform  
ECE - Early Childhood Education  
EPSEN - Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs  
EYEPU - Early Years Education Policy Unit  
HSE - Health Service Executive  
NCCA - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
NCIP - National Childcare Investment Programme  
NCO – National Childcare Organisation
NCSE - National Council for Special Education
NEYS - National Early Years Strategy
OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMCYA - Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
PIP - Programme Implementation Platform
QAP - Quality Assurance Programme
QQI - Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SEN - Special Educational Needs
SENO - Special Educational Needs Organiser
TEC - Training and Employment Childcare
Towards a Children’s Rights Model in Ireland: An Exploration of the Values and Limitations of Irish Policy, Legislation and Practice from a Children’s Rights Perspective

Katie Duggan

Abstract

There has been increasing concern, both nationally and internationally, in recent years to respect and recognise the rights of children. In this paper, the author explores the extent to which Ireland has addressed this concern from a children’s rights perspective by adopting a children’s rights model in both policy and practice. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is used as a benchmark for this exploration by utilising Article 3 and Article 12 of the Convention to assess the value and limitations of recent Irish policy and legislation including the National Children’s Strategy (2000), Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014), the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation and Decision Making (2015) and the implementation of Article 42A of the Constitution. Ultimately, Ireland has made significant progress with regards to adopting a children’s rights model. This is being expressed in recent policy and legislation which acknowledges children as active rights citizens, and indeed rights holders within the constitution, the development of a children’s rights participation checklist and renewed governmental support for implementation of rights-based provision. However, limitations also exist such as the potential for children’s issues to be overlooked due to interdepartmental responsibility, the lack of formal structures supporting Ireland’s youngest children and the limited wording and circumstances associated with Article 42A. These limitations must be addressed before Ireland can fully adopt a children’s rights model in both policy and practice.
Introduction

This paper explores the value and limitations of Irish policy and legislation from a children’s rights perspective in order to assess the extent to which Ireland has adopted a children’s rights model in both policy and practice. A brief overview is presented on the origins and key theoretical influences on the children’s rights model before discussing the changing landscape of Irish policy and legislation over the past 25 years. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is used as a benchmark to assess the value and limitations of Irish policy and legislation as it can be seen as a clear formulation of the children’s rights model in practice. Two articles, Article 3 and Article 12, have been chosen for discussion due to their clear underpinning of current rights-based policy and legislation in Ireland, namely the National Children’s Strategy (2000), Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014), the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation and Decision Making (2015) and the implementation of Article 42A of the Constitution. The value and limitations of these developments is explored in order to ultimately assess the extent to which Ireland has adopted a children’s rights model in both policy and practice.

A Brief Introduction to the Children’s Rights Model

The origins of the children’s rights movement can be traced back to the middle of nineteenth century Britain with the emergence of the modern-day children’s rights model coinciding with the birth of the sociology of childhood in the 1970s (Hill and Tisdale 1997, Freeman 1998). Proponents of this model stress the importance of rights as a tool for advocacy in which children’s needs may be legitimately articulated and their rights subsequently vindicated. Thus, the children’s rights model provides an alternative to the more traditional, paternalistic welfare model which emphasises the importance of protecting children’s welfare rather than recognising children as autonomous bearers of rights in themselves. This newfound focus on children as autonomous rights-bearers has consequently lead to the children’s rights model cementing itself as one of the dominant models within rights-based discourse particularly with regard to participation and decision-making (Freeman, 1998). The sociology of childhood has had a clear influence on the children’s rights model; the main theoretical and philosophical similarity being a shift in focus from children as passive beings shaped largely by the family, the school and the church to children as active agents with the ability to co-construct their own social worlds. Within both schools of thought, children are recognised as ‘persons, not
property; subjects, not objects of social concern or control [and] participants in social processes, not social problems’ (Freeman, 1998: 436).

For the purpose of this paper, one particular concern of the children’s rights model is reviewed with regard to Irish policy and legislation. This concern necessitates that the value and limitations of policy and legislation relating to children’s rights be explored (Freeman 1998). It is envisaged that an exploration of this kind in relation to Irish policy and legislation will allow for a preliminary assessment from a children’s rights perspective of the extent to which Ireland has adopted a children’s rights model in both policy and practice. In order to provide context for this exploration, a brief overview will be given concerning the changing landscape of rights-based policy and legislation regarding children in Ireland.

Towards a Children’s Rights Model in Ireland

‘Respect for human rights on a national level begins with the way a society as a whole cares for its children’ (Martin 2000, 2000:2). Historically, Ireland has a poor record of respecting children’s rights as demonstrated through the numerous abuse scandals which have come to light in recent years, notoriously documented in the Kilkenny Incest Inquiry (1993), the Ryan Report (2009) and the Roscommon Child Care Inquiry (2010) These horrifying abuse cases clearly show some of the dreadful failings on behalf of the State in relation to upholding the rights of children. The Catholic values enshrined within the Constitution coupled with the historically low value placed on children in Irish society, in which children were viewed as property of their parents and as being in need of control, lead to the suppression of children rather than valuing them as rights holders and active citizens (Kilkelly, 2010: Burns and Lynch, 2012). Despite a growing concern both nationally and internationally to honour children’s rights, Ireland has been slow to embrace a children’s rights model in both policy and practice. Despite crucial international advancements for children’s rights, beginning with the Declaration on the Rights of the Child embraced by the League of Nations in 1924 and culminating in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, Irish policy and legislation remained scant in this regard until the 1990s. During this period comprehensive child protection and welfare legislation was introduced for the first time under the Child Care Act (1991), the British enacted Children Act (1908) being the principal policy document in place until this time. Furthermore, in 1992 Ireland ratified the UNCRC, making a formal commitment to respect and uphold children’s rights by embracing a children’s rights model at a domestic level (Martin 2000, Freeman 2007b, Kilkelly
Since these pivotal changes, Ireland has continuously strived towards developing policy and legislation in which all children are empowered to be active, autonomous citizens with fully recognised legal rights (Martin 2000, Kilkelly 2008). This burgeoning commitment to children’s rights can be clearly seen throughout the major legislative developments of the past 25 years including, but not limited to, the Education Act (1998), Children Act (2001) and subsequent amendments, Education for Persons with Special Needs Act (2004), Adoption Act (2010), Child and Family Agency Act (2013), Children First Act (2015) and the signing into law of the Thirty First Amendment of the Constitution Act (2012) in early 2015. Social policy concerning children has also become more rights-based during this time with notable developments including the National Children’s Strategy (2000), Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011), Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014) and the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making (2015).

However, despite this success, the Irish Government has been criticised for the ad hoc and incident driven nature of policy creation, which has often occurred directly as a result of pressure from international and non-governmental organisations (Burns and Lynch 2012, Moran 2013). Irrespective of the driving force behind policy creation and change, there remains a need to continuously assess and reassess the values and limitations of both policy and legislative frameworks that seek to uphold children’s rights in Ireland and, in doing so, protect the distinct nature of childhood and ultimately enhance children’s position in society (Hayes 2002). The UNCRC is used as a benchmark in order to assess the value and limitations of developments in Irish policy, legislation and practice. The UNCRC has been specifically chosen in this regard as it has been described as a clear formulation of the children’s rights model in practice (Freeman 1998). The following sections will outline and critique two of the key principles of the UNCRC in relation to Ireland in order to facilitate an exploration of the value and limitations of current policy/legislation and ultimately assess the extent to which Ireland has adopted a children’s rights model in both policy and practice.

**The UNCRC in Ireland**

The UNCRC is significant for being the first all-inclusive and internationally binding treaty to fully respect and recognise the rights of children. The Convention has
been ratified by one hundred and ninety one countries, indicating a strong international agreement on children’s rights and the way in which children should be treated (Freeman 2000, Kilkelly 2008). Central to the Convention are four basic principles, namely Article 2, that the rights guaranteed under the Convention must be made freely available to all children without discrimination; Article 3, that the best interests of the child be upheld as the primary consideration in all actions concerning children; Article 6, that the right of every child to life, survival and development be protected at all times and Article 12, that children’s views are to be respected and taken account in all matters which affect them. These principles are crucially important as their implementation on the most basic level is necessary in order to uphold all other rights (Children’s Rights Alliance 2010). Although all four principles have underpinned policy and legislative developments that aim to further children’s rights in Ireland, it is not within the scope of this paper to offer an in-depth discussion on each principle. Instead, two of these principles, Article 3 and Article 12, have been chosen for more in-depth discussion due to their topical nature as they provide a clear underpinning for recent policy and legislation, including the implementation of Article 42A of the Constitution, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014) and the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making (2015). Furthermore, Article 3 is also a ‘widely used [and] fundamental concept in the treatment of children within the Irish legal system’ (McPartland 2010, p.93). In order to assess the value and limitations of these key policy and legislative developments, it is first important to understand and critique the aforementioned principles which underpin them.

**Outlining and Critiquing Article 3 – The Best Interests of the Child**

Article 3 relates to the best interests of the child and states that:

> In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. (United Nations 1989, p.2)

Though the UNCRC does not provide a definition of the best interests of the child, Eekelaar defines best interests as:

> Basic interests, for example to physical, emotional and intellectual care; developmental interests, to enter adulthood as far from possible without disadvantage; autonomy interests, especially the freedom to choose a lifestyle of their own. (Eekelaar cited in Freeman 2007a, p.27)
Although it may be agreed upon that the best interests principle concerns protecting and upholding children’s interests as a fundamental right, it cannot be ignored that the concept of best interests as a whole remains indeterminate. Notions of what constitutes the best interests of an individual child is subject to change across history, society and culture, giving rise to limitations within this principle long before its incorporation into Irish law and policy (Freeman 2007a, Seale cited in Kiersey and Hayes 2010). In the case of Article 3, one particular limitation is striking in that the best interests of the child are to be considered merely as a primary consideration, as opposed to being the primary consideration, in all activities concerning children. Criticised by Kilkelly (2008) and Parker (1994) as being a vague and indeterminate principle, the wording used allows for the best interests of children to be compared to other considerations deemed equally important such as the rights of parents or the availability of resources from the State. This causes difficulties in implementing the Convention in Ireland in particular as the wording may serve to relegate the position of children rather than highlight the paramountcy of their best interests, particularly in relation to the Irish Constitution where the inalienable rights afforded to the family under Article 41 often supersede the rights of children (O’Shea 2012).

In 2006, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the expert body charged with monitoring the implementation of the UNCRC, raised concerns that the best interests of the child remained insufficiently addressed within Irish policy and legislation Ten years later, with an assessment due from the CRC in 2016, Ombudsman for Children Niall Muldoon has noted that, although progress has been made with regard to incorporating the best interests principle into Irish legislation affecting children, there remains significant work to be done in this regard (Ombudsman for Children’s Office, 2015). This is particularly noteworthy when assessing the extent to which Ireland has adopted a children’s rights model in both policy and practice, as the best interests of the child is merely an idea or an expression until it is given true meaning when put into practice (McPartland 2010). Without adequate policy, legislation and practical frameworks/provisions, it is difficult to see the value of the ‘best interests’ principle for positively affecting children’s rights in Ireland on a practical level. Following a discussion of the value and limitations of Article 12 of the UNCRC, this paper finally seeks to explore Irish policy and legislation influenced by these articles in order to assess, from a children’s rights perspective, the extent to which Ireland has adopted a children’s rights model in both policy and practice.
Outlining and Critiquing Article 12 – The Voice of the Child

Article 12 is concerned with the child’s opinion and the right of ‘the child who is capable of forming his or her own views...to express those views freely in all matters affecting [them]’ (United Nations 1989, p.4). Not only does Article 12 concern children’s right to express their views, it also concerns the right of children to have these views heard and given due weight (Lundy 2007). Kilkelly (2007) recognises the fundamental value of this principle as it ‘encapsulates the true meaning of children’s rights as a recognition of the respect and equal treatment to which all children and their views are entitled’ (Kilkelly 2007, p. 10). Brady (2007) and Kilkelly (2008) discuss the undeniable benefits of children’s participation in matters affecting them which includes empowering children, enhancing their self-esteem and improving services and decision making. However, in order to facilitate children’s meaningful and sustained participation rights, there are also challenges and limitations that need to be acknowledged and addressed including the long-held presumption of children as incapable, children’s lack of power/status, the lack of community-based participation and the need to develop indicators to measure children’s participation (Lansdown 2010). With regard to Ireland, notable developments in relation to respecting the voice of children and promoting children’s participation have been the development of the Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO) (2002) and the establishment of the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2005). This latter Office was subsequently upgraded to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011 with the addition of a full ministerial brief. These developments have been pivotal in raising awareness of children’s issues at a government and non-governmental level with the OCO being particularly important in relation to advocating for and safeguarding the rights of children through handling complaints, conducting and commissioning research and making recommendations to the government on children’s issues (The Ombudsman for Children 2014).

Lundy (2007) offers a rights-based model for the conceptualisation and implementation of Article 12 which focuses on the concepts of space, voice, audience and influence. Children must be facilitated (voice) and given the opportunity (space) to express their views. Their views must then be listened to (audience) and subsequently acted on as appropriate (influence) (See Fig. 1). One of the most practical ways to facilitate children in expressing their views is to appoint a guardian ad litem (GAL) to represent the child’s best interests during court proceedings as provided for under the Child Care Act (1991). However, there have been issues regarding the geographical disparity between...
the appointment of GALs and concerns raised due to the unregulated, non-statutory nature of the service (MacMahon 2014). The CRC have also raised concerns in relation to insufficient provisions for the service while noting a high number of complaints relating to respect for the views of children as received by the Ombudsman for Children (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2006). There has been further confusion recently due to the absence of GALs from the Children and Family Relationships Act (2015) which allows for a child’s views expert to be appointed in proceedings dealing with children. This can be seen as a step backwards rather than forwards with regard to the practical implementation of a children’s rights model as there are no current guidelines regarding the qualification, role or standards for this new profession (Department of Justice and Equality 2014). Though the DCYA appear to be aware of this issue (DCYA 2015b), there has been little progress to date in instigating reform within the sector. It is therefore recommended that this issue be rectified with haste in order to further respect and implement Article 3 and Article 12 and to contribute to ultimately adopting a children’s rights model in Ireland on a practical level. The next section assesses the value and limitations of four of the most crucial developments underpinned by these articles.

Assessing the Value and Limitations of Major Developments for Children’s Rights in Ireland

The National Children’s Strategy

Kilkelly (2008) considers the development of the National Children’s Strategy (2000) as the most significant policy development resulting from Ireland’s ratification of the UNCRC. The overall vision of the strategy is one of ‘an Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own’ (Department of Health and Children 2004, P. 10). Although the strategy itself is not rights based, the three overarching, national goals of the strategy are derived from the principles of the UNCRC and read as follows:

Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their maturity…Children’s lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services…and children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development. (Department of Health and Children 2000, p.11)
However, this undoubtedly valuable development for children’s rights has been criticised by Kilkelly (2007) and the Children’s Rights Alliance (2006) for failing to unify the fragmented nature of child policy and service provision in Ireland and also failing to legislate for necessary mechanisms to promote the voice of children in Ireland. The objectives of the strategy have been hampered due to lack of clarity, focus and direction, the absence of an independent budget and the lack of strategic action in relation to the fundamental commitments outlined within (Peyton and Wilson 2006, DCYA 2015b). However, these shortcomings have been recognised by the DCYA (2015b) and have led to the development of improved policy and structures in order to promote the best interests of children in Ireland and to strengthen the commitment to hearing, respecting and acting on the voice of the child. Examples of these policies include Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures and the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation and Decision Making (2015-2020), both of which will be discussed below. Other major developments with regard to implementing a children’s rights model in Ireland include the establishment of Comhairle na nÓg (local child and youth councils), Dáil na nÓg (the national youth parliament) and the Child and Young People’s Participation Support Team, established in order to develop good practice around children’s participation in decision-making.

**Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures**

The vision of the current national policy framework, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures appears to be more rights-based than its predecessor as it states that ‘the rights of all children and young people [are to be] respected, protected and fulfilled’ and their voices to be heard (DCYA 2014, p. VI). Along with five new national goals, related to health, learning and development, child protection, economic security, and respect, connection and contribution to children’s worlds, the strategy offers six complementary ‘transformational goals for achieving better outcomes’ for children in Ireland (ibid, p.7). These goals aim to support parents, provide earlier intervention and prevention, listen to and involve children and young people, ensure quality services, strengthen transitions and promote cross-government and interagency collaboration and coordination (ibid). The value of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures is threefold. Firstly, an outcomes approach is taken, aligning the framework to current government policy and consequently supporting greater cohesion across government. With regard to government cohesion, a whole government approach is also taken which is envisaged to lead to coordinated action between multiple government departments and agencies. However, with responsibility to uphold children’s
participation rights across so many government departments, there is also a legitimate concern that this may limit rather than enhance children’s participation as there is the potential for aspects of children’s rights to fall through the cracks or become overlooked as the responsibility of another department. Within *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, the government has also acknowledged the challenging task that is putting policy into practice. This has resulted in a strong focus on supporting implementation throughout this framework (Mooney et al. 2014). In the first year of the framework, an Implementation Team was established within the DCYA in order to achieve a coordinated approach to the implementation of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* as a whole. This may help to offset concerns relating to interdepartmental responsibility as there will be a centralised team to ensure the successful implementation of the framework (DCYA 2015a).

From a children’s rights perspective, this policy is particularly valuable as it explicitly acknowledges children as active citizens with a right to express and have their voice heard in all decisions affecting them. The framework also works to counteract children’s vulnerable status by noting children’s evolving capacity to participate in decision making from birth and acknowledging the need for adults to facilitate children’s voice to be heard (DCYA 2014). One resounding success that has come from *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* has been the development and implementation of the *National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation and Decision Making*. This major development has highlighted a clear commitment from the Government to upholding the participation rights of children. Nevertheless, the success of this strategy will depend on sufficient, continued government investment and commitment in order to fully implement a children’s rights model in both policy and practice in Ireland.

**The National Participation Strategy**

The National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation and Decision Making (National Participation Strategy) is predicated on the transformational goal of listening to and involving children and young people as found within *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. The four priority objectives of the National Participation Strategy (DCYA 2015b:3) are that:

1. Children and young people will have a voice in decisions made in their local communities.

2. Children and young people will have a voice in decision-making in early education, schools and wider formal and non-formal education systems.
3. Children and young people will have a voice in decisions that affect their health and well-being, including on the health and social services delivered to them.

4. Children and young people will have a voice in the Courts and legal system.

One immediately clear value of the National Participation Strategy is that it is underpinned by Lundy’s Model of Participation. With the help of a subgroup composed of representatives from both Government departments and agencies, Professor Lundy contributed to the development of the strategy by first creating a checklist for children’s participation. The development of this checklist is envisaged to make an important difference to the way in which children are listened to and are facilitated to participate within Irish society, as it addresses the aforementioned need to develop quality indicators which measure children’s participation as recommended by Lansdown (2010).

The Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO) (2015: 16) has welcomed the National Participation Strategy as a potential vehicle for ‘mainstreaming a culture of children’s participation’, without which a children’s rights model will never be fully implemented in Ireland. In order to achieve this, it has recommended that the implementation of the strategy be adequately resourced while commitments made by specific Government departments should be led and monitored at a senior level with an appropriate accountability structure put in place to ensure implementation.
Fig. 1. Lundy’s Model of Participation (DCYA, 2015c: 241)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPACE</th>
<th>VOICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How:</strong> Provide a safe and inclusive space for children to express their views</td>
<td><strong>How:</strong> Provide appropriate information and facilitate the expression of children’s views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have children’s views been actively sought?</td>
<td>• Have children been given the information they need to form a view?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Was there a safe space in which children can express themselves freely?</td>
<td>• Do children know that they do not have to take part?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have steps been taken to ensure that all children can take part?</td>
<td>• Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express themselves?</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUDIENCE</th>
<th>INFLUENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How:</strong> Ensure that children’s views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen</td>
<td><strong>How:</strong> Ensure that children’s views are taken seriously and acted upon, where appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Is there a process for communicating children’s views?</td>
<td>▪ Were the children’s views considered by those with the power to effect change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Do children know who their views are being communicated to?</td>
<td>▪ Are there procedures in place that ensure that the children’s views have been taken seriously?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?</td>
<td>▪ Have the children and young people been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, despite what may be arguably one of Ireland’s most important policy developments to date in furthering the full implementation of a children’s rights model in Ireland, there is an important limitation to the National Participation Strategy that has remained largely overlooked within participation discourse in Ireland. Although it is stated that all children and young people, including preschool children, have the right to have their voice heard in all matters affecting them, this is the extent of the strategy’s specific commitment to promoting the participation rights of children in the early years sector. There is only one mention of pre-school children within the strategy, which seems discordant with the purported view that ‘ideally, children can begin to experience participation at a very early age’ (DCYA 2015b:13). To date, there exists no national, formal infrastructure to elicit and encourage the voice of children in the early years sector, with key existing supports, such as the aforementioned *Comhairle na*
nÓg and Dáil na nÓg, appearing to focus heavily on youth (i.e. 12+) rather than child participation. Perhaps this issue is to be addressed in the long anticipated National Early Years Strategy as the National Participation Strategy does include the participation of children in decision-making as a core aim of this future policy framework.

**The Children’s Rights Referendum**

One final noteworthy development towards implementing a children’s rights model in Ireland has been the children’s rights referendum in 2012, held ‘to specifically enshrine children as rights holders into the Constitution of Ireland’ (DCYA 2012, p. 5). 58% of voters chose to adopt the proposed constitutional amendment which was hoped to have a positive impact in relation to promoting the best interests and the voice of the child in relation to child protection and adoption (Corbett, 2012). However, there are limitations within this outwardly valuable development due to the unchanged nature of Article 41. Article 41 guarantees the protection of the inalienable and imprescriptible rights of the family as antecedent and superior to all other law, including Article 42A, thus creating a constitutional hierarchy. Harding (2012) has argued the potentially flawed nature of Article 42A in this regard, as individual courts may be tasked with weighing the notoriously abstract best interests of the child against the rights of the family. This may lead to disparity in practice by courts potentially favouring the rights of the family as a whole over the individual child. Moreover, while the rights of the family are guaranteed to be upheld under Article 41, Article 42A merely allows for the rights of children to be acknowledged and upheld as far as is deemed practicable by the court. Thus, it remains difficult to envisage any major change for children’s rights in this regard as the best interests of the child will remain to be considered under the same constitutional framework (ibid).

Similarly, other issues exist regarding the wording of the constitutional amendment which have consequently led to a restricted number of circumstances in which Article 42A will be practically applicable to children’s everyday lives. Apart from exceptional cases, adoption and other legal proceedings, it is doubtful whether Article 42A will prove to be useful in supporting the rights of all children in Ireland in relation to day to day matters, for example within the education system. In fact, there appears to be no legislation to adequately uphold children’s rights regarding daily matters in Ireland. It is therefore recommended that this be rectified immediately by legislating for the best interests and the voice of the child to be considered in day to day proceedings and within institutions that
children more frequently interact with in order to allow for a children’s rights model to become reality in children’s daily lives in Ireland.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper set out to explore one particular concern of the children’s rights model; that the value and limitations of Irish policy and legislation were to be investigated in order to assess the extent to which Ireland has adopted a children’s rights model in both policy and practice. The UNCRC was chosen as a benchmark to explore the value and limitations of particular developments in Irish law and policy, namely the *National Children’s Strategy, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, the *National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation and Decision Making* and the implementation of Article 42A of the Constitution. An overview and critique of the key articles of the UNCRC, in particular Article 3 and Article 12, was provided for the purpose of understanding the rights-based rationale underpinning these developments and indeed to further facilitate this exploration.

Ultimately, on assessing the value and limitations of the aforementioned developments, it can be concluded that there are many inherent rights-based values within Irish policy and legislation which contribute to the continued effort to adopt a rights-based model in Ireland. These values include, but are not limited to, the development of more rights-based policy provision which explicitly acknowledge children as active citizens and rights holders, the enshrinement of children as rights holders within the Constitution, a newfound focus on supporting the implementation of right-based policy across government departments and agencies and the development of a checklist for children’s participation in Ireland contributing to a culture in which children’s voices are heard, respected and considered as the norm. However, limitations also exist within current policy and legislation which have particular consequences in relation to adopting a children’s rights model on a practical level. These limitations include the potential for children’s rights issues to be overlooked due to issues with interdepartmental responsibility, the lack of formal structures in place to elicit and encourage the voices of Ireland’s youngest children, and the limited wording and circumstances associated with Article 42A. Though Ireland is clearly on the right path to adopting a children’s rights model, the true vision of this model cannot be reached until these limitations are sufficiently addressed within policy, legislation and practice.
References


Exploring educational challenges for Polish migrants in Ireland: Some key implications for early years teachers

Dr Breda Mc Taggart, Institute of Technology, Sligo & Christina Mc Taggart, Sligo Social Services

Abstract

Making the decision to migrate to a new country is an emotional experience and is not without its challenges. One such challenge can be the accessing and negotiating of the educational system. This paper explores this issue with members of the Polish community living in the Republic of Ireland.

It became apparent that, often in contradiction to participants’ social status, they possess a middle class educational habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). This habitus, an existing home, cultural capital and meritocratic beliefs provide a resilience and an ability to negotiate an unfamiliar education system, with the goal of improving life outcomes of their children.

Keywords: Migration, education, habitus, cultural, social and economic capital.

Introduction

Currently, within the 4.589 million people who are registered as living in the Republic of Ireland, the Polish community makes up 2.7% (122,585) (Central Statistical Office [CSO], 2011). They are the second largest migrant population in the Republic of Ireland and its largest non-English speaking community. Polish migration to Ireland is related to the work and employment opportunities that arose when Poland joined the European Union [EU] in 2004 (Lopez Rodriguez, 2010). However, this migration can bring with it many transitory challenges, including those posed by inherently different education systems (Houses of the
Whilst much has been investigated elsewhere on how migrant families experience education transitions, and ultimately the impact of such transitions on their life opportunities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012), similar research is limited within the Irish context (OECD, 2012). What is known is that comparable to other countries, migrant groups within Ireland and in particular, those for whom English is a second language, are often employed in poorly paid jobs and as a result are at a greater risk of poverty than their national peers (European Anti-Poverty Network [EAPN], 2010; Migrant Rights Centre Ireland 2007; Hough, 2012).

This migrant poverty has been shown in other contexts to have intergenerational consequences, where childhood poverty “breeds” adult poverty (Borjas, 2011:249). A possible reason for this is that children of migrant groups, particularly second language English migrants, fare less well in education than non-migrant groups (Department of Education and Skills [DfES], 2006; Borjas, 2011), reducing their earning potential into the future and creating the risk of a poverty cycle continuing (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003). Therefore a key goal for (Irish) professionals, educators, and policy makers should be to understand migrant transitory experiences in support of reducing/ preventing future intergenerational poverty. By understanding the types of challenges and barriers individuals face during and following migration, it is possible to show which barriers exist and can be solved at the individual level, and which are systemic issues that require resources offered at a broader scale (Lingel et al., 2013).

The main research aim of this paper is to investigate and provide an insight into the experiences and challenges experienced by members of the migrant Polish community in Ireland and how they negotiate Ireland’s educational space to support their children’s learning and life opportunities into the future.

**Polish Education System**

Pre-primary education is regarded as the first level of the education system in Poland. Children as young as 3 years old may attend preschool institutions, but this is a parental decision. Compulsory pre-primary education begins at a later age. Prior to 2011/12, this commenced when children were six-year-olds. This was subsequently changed, in preparation for a planned lowering of school starting age in 2014, and now all children must attend compulsory full-time pre-primary education from the age of five. Following this stage of education,
children then progress to six years of primary school, followed by three years of lower secondary school (Polish Eurydice Unit, 2013).

Within this primary system, there is a state streaming exam at the end of 6th grade (when the child is 13 years of age), which will determine access to the lower secondary school (Middle School/Junior High). Children will attend this lower second level for another three years for grades, 7, 8, and 9. At the end, there is a second compulsory streaming exam to determine which upper secondary level school they can attend. Specifically, depending on points in this second exam, students can choose one of the following: 3 years of Lyceum (Liceum), which is the most common choice, 4 years of Technical School (Technikum) or 2 years of Vocation School (Szkola Zawodowa). Those who attend the Lyceum or Technical School sit a maturity examination (Matura). This exam presents students with a Maturity Certificate (Swiadectwo Maturalne) which allows them to apply to enter into a higher education institution of their choice; for example University, Technology University or perhaps the Academy of Art. Both end with a maturity examination and may be followed by several forms of upper education, leading to a Bachelor’s degree.

There has been a significant growth in citizens’ educational aspirations, from 1993, where 42% of Poles believed that it is important to get an education, increasing to 91% in 2009. This has occurred in tandem with an equally steep rise in participation rates in higher education of 41.4% in 2011 (Sielatycki, 2011).

It is worth noting that in 1999 a major reform occurred within the Polish education system with the introduction of ‘middle school’. This change was premised on the idea of moving from a situation of parentocracy to one of meritocracy (Brown, 1990; Sawinski, 2012). However, this change did not prove sustainable over time, as members of Polish society who were in possession of greater direct economic capital were able to purchase educational advantage, enabling their children to access better grades at middle school level. Consequently, during one decade, educational inequality reached the same level as before the reform, as middle schools diversified into what was perceived as educational exclusion, mainly in big cities where statistical surveys show a close relationship between learning achievements, educational attainment and the economic status of one’s family. This has resulted in what some believe to be a very inequitable education system within Poland (Sleszynski 2004; Dabrowa-Szefler and Jablecka-Pryslopska 2006; Sawinski, 2012).

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1 Parentocracy is understood as a system where education is dependent upon the wealth and desires of parents, rather than the ability and efforts of students (Brown, 1990)
In the Irish system, all children are entitled to a year of free-preschool from the age of three years three months since 2009, though this is not compulsory. It does, however, prompt a 96% participation rate for children who are eligible to attend. Children commence formal primary school between four and six years of age, and leave after eight years. There are no formal state streaming exams in this cycle. However, the new National Literacy and Numeracy strategy has introduced the formal testing of literacy and numeracy at three points during this cycle, in second, fourth and sixth classes (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Secondary school selection is based primarily on geographical location of parents (O’Mahony, 2008), with a small amount of private second level education provision. Two state exams exist in this secondary cycle, the Junior Certificate exam at the end of the third year and the Leaving Certificate exam at the end of the secondary school cycle. It is the grades at Leaving Certificate level which determine which route a student may take to either further (mainly vocational) or higher education. Whilst it is acknowledged that inequality exists outside the state education system, as some parents can afford to purchase extra private tuition for their children, within the selection process of schools, and within the sector itself, efforts have been made to build a fair and equitable education system, with varying degrees of success (OECD, 2012; Lynch and Baker, 2005).

Research Design

In order to explore the experiences and perceptions of individuals through and post transition to a new country, one must ask questions about their knowledge, views and experiences, understandings and interpretations of their social reality (Mason, 2002: 63). Reflecting on quantitative approaches to the study of migration, the researchers concur with Noble, (2013: 284) who concludes that quantitative approaches do not allow for a detailed understanding of the perceptions of migration to be developed.

Therefore, similar to other research studies exploring migrant views, experiences of migration and integration into a new country, this directed the researchers towards the adoption of an interpretive methodology and the associated individual in-depth interview method of data collection (Lopez Rodriguez, 2009; McAreavey, 2010). This methodology and method of data collection allowed access to the stories of twenty participants’ lived experiences throughout this journey, their story (Lingel, et al., 2013).

Interviews were semi-structured, guided by a small number of open ended
questions. Questions pursued were developed with the support of research in the field and as such explored participant reasons for migration; their views and understanding of the similarities and differences from host country to migrant home country; barriers to their child's successful educational transition to the new country and how they negotiated such barriers. This allowed participants to answer from their own frame of reference rather than being confined by the structure of pre-arranged questions (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

**Study Participation**

Three cultural insiders from the Polish community in Ireland were key to accessing study participants (Renert, Russell-Mayhew and Arthur, 2013). Insiders made contact with thirty three potential participants and, where individuals were agreeable, forwarded information regarding the study, its purpose, their role as participants and asked for consent to pass their details to the researchers. Researchers followed up with a phone call where they took the opportunity to answer any questions potential participants had regarding the research study and obtain verbal consent on participation in this study. At this time, any linguistic considerations that needed to be addressed before data collection were explored (participants had the option of doing interviews in their first language or in English (Squires, 2008). All of this was employed to ensure the credibility and dependability of study findings. Before interviews commenced, the research process was re-explained and participants were given the opportunity to ask any additional questions regarding the study and use of research findings. Once all questions had been fully answered, participants provided informed (written) consent to be part of this research study (Renert et al., 2013).

This strategy resulted in a convenience sample size of twenty participants (18 female/2 male) (see Figure One for a selection of participant profiles). All were proficient and/or fluent in English; resided in both urban and rural parts of Ireland; had moved to Ireland within the last ten years; were parents of children between the ages of 1-13 years and had experience of one or both their children within the Irish education system. Additionally, most participants (17 of the 20) had a personal educational attainment from their home country which was of a perceived higher status level than the employment opportunities and jobs they had undertaken since their arrival in Ireland e.g. a judge in Poland, working in the kitchen of a hotel in Ireland.
Figure 1: Profile of a sample of study participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Occupation in Poland / education level</th>
<th>Moved to Ireland</th>
<th>Current Occupation</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jarek</td>
<td>Chef</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Chef</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magda</td>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Owns own business</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes</td>
<td>MSc Immunology</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Deli counter, shop, cleaning, intern in HSE</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evanna</td>
<td>Masters in Polish and Politics</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Office work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casa</td>
<td>College(left through pregnancy)</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Owns own business</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halina</td>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Owns own business</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irena</td>
<td>Physiotherapist</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Works as carer in nursing home</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>Left after college</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Working in factory</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabela</td>
<td>Working in factory</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Assistant Manager, in large retail store</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Worked in government office</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Recently has had a child, currently saving to open own business</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethics Strategy

As this research involved direct contact with individuals about what they may perceive as a very personal area of their lives, it was necessary to follow the ethics protocols of the researchers’ academic institute (Institute of Technology Sligo). Specifically, good practice guidelines required the researcher to develop a participant information sheet and consent form in a manner and medium appropriate (English and Polish) to the needs of the study and participants. This allowed the researcher to explain the area of research, the research process,
the ability of participants to withdraw at any time and the process on which confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained e.g. through the use of pseudonyms and the secure maintenance of data. All those who participated in this research study were invited to contact the researchers if they wanted access to the findings of this research, or if they wished to receive a copy of the completed study. It was hoped that the employment of these strategies would reduce the risks of harm to the participants, and remove any concerns that they, as participants, may have had regarding consent, privacy and confidentiality of the study and the data produced (Punch, 2005).

Analysis

A general inductive approach, a common social science research and evaluation tool, was used to analyse data collected (Thomas, 2006). This approach allows research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant themes inherent in raw data (Thomas, 2006). On this occasion, the outcome of analysis was the development of categories that summarizes the raw data and conveys key themes and processes. Specifically, data was analysed and interpreted by reading and re-reading scripts, followed by a process of identifying specific segments related to the topic under investigation e.g. reason for migration and the difference and similarities in education systems. These subsequently created specific categories, e.g. education values; education opportunities in Poland and in Ireland; educational progression. All categories were reviewed and where overlap in categories was evident, these were reduced, leading to the thematic findings included in this paper.

Migration towards a ‘Normalisation’ of economic existence

Thematic categories were developed from a review of the data collected from participants detailing reasons why they had chosen to migrate to Ireland. Coding on this occasion produced preliminary categories such as: ‘a better life’, ‘we needed the money’, ‘money is a priority’, ‘better status job at home but limited options at home’, ‘employment opportunities’. Moving forward, these were linked and grouped; e.g., the preliminary categories became the specific categories ‘economic reasons’ ‘employment choices’ and ‘quality of life’. All categories were reviewed and the core category of Migration towards a ‘Normalisation’ of economic existence emerged. For example, ‘economic reasons’, ‘employment choices’ and ‘quality of life’ merged to explain how, regardless of participants’ education qualification, the choice and status of the job undertaken in Ireland was of less importance to them than being employed
and generating income, as it supported a better quality of life for participants and their families. Consequently, the majority of participants made the decision to take a job that would be considered of a lesser social status in order to gain financial security, to support a better quality of life for themselves and their families. This will be elaborated in subsequent paragraphs.

Participants in this study, similar to other studies on migration, made the move for the ‘pull’ of economic reasons (Piore, 1979). This was influenced by the entry of Poland to the EU and the economic opportunities that this brought with it (Bobek, 2013). Within a very short space of participants’ arrival to what, at the time, could be considered a very economically vibrant Ireland (Hughes, 2006), they were able to find employment. This employment, particularly in the early days of their migration (within the first two years), was often in very menial non-skilled occupations, which in the main was below their level of previous educational advisement and qualifications (see Figure One). However, these lower status jobs had higher wage earnings compared to that which participants achieved in the higher educational status jobs they had left behind in Poland e.g. they may have been members of the legal system in Poland, but were now working in the hotel industry in Ireland. Whilst many of us may find such a downward trajectory in social status difficult to come to terms with, and while for some it did cause on occasional frustration, for the majority of participants, this appeared not to be the case.

This was explained by parents, who saw what could be perceived as downward social mobility and social status as acceptable as it offered them the opportunity to have a ‘better lifestyle’ and ‘better start for their children’ than if they were to remain in Poland. This was viewed in terms of being able to provide better (financially) for the family; in the words of one parent, Julia, “(we are) financially much better off in Ireland” as the pay for more menial and often less stressful work was similar or even greater than for professional work in Poland. The extent of this financial struggle in Poland whilst working long hours is explained by Irena:

I now working as a care attendant (physiotherapist in Poland), so prefer to be for less job, just clean etc., for €10/hour. First thinking about the money, always some money, this is case in Poland you are just thinking about the first to the end (of the month) when you get the money—that is for the bills that is for the house, oh right, that is food. Better life style, Yes, Yes, I have the flat in Poland, we have no money left over, basics only (Irena).
But participants also believed that this undertaking of jobs, which could be considered of less social status, facilitated a better family life. Casa and Isabela explain “In Poland parents would have to work much longer hours, in more stressful jobs, leaving much less time for children and family life”. “I wish (to go back to Poland), but I think we have a better life than in Poland” (Isabela).

Therefore participants were able to normalise this downward social mobility, as it facilitated economic mobility and opportunities for them and their families.

**Education - an engine for change**

Whilst the majority of participants often undertook jobs in Ireland that did not require the level of academic qualifications they possessed, this did not impact on their future academic aspirations for their children. These intergenerational opportunities, of passing on choices to their children, appeared to be of key importance to this study. Specifically, participants held the belief that it was necessary to ensure that their children had a good education because of the perception that education could bring opportunities for their children into the future. This belief in the importance of education as a tool to successful life progression, primarily in terms of the wage earning potential but also in terms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), was evident even for participants who themselves were in possession of a higher education qualification which was not of immediate benefit to them in their current employment situation in Ireland. This insight led to the evolution of the theme, **Education – an engine for social change**. All participants spoke about the importance of education and educational achievement, to support “having a good life” (Halina). Not having a good education and progressing within it, was seen to have a wider social impact: “if you don’t go to college you are nobody” (Yvonne).

Based on participants’ perceptions of the role education plays in life opportunities (more wage earning ability, more family time, increased social status), participants were asked about their future educational aspirations for their children. Even where children were very young, all parents had considered this subject. Many (13 of 20) stated that they wanted to give their children the choice regarding progression to higher education; however all emphasised that they would “love” their children to progress to higher education, as this will offer opportunities for professional jobs and a better life. This can be summed up by Jarek in his discussions about his children’s future (aged two and four): “I will do everything to send them to the college; actually they will have a choice, because it is a better start of life. Education is important, of course, for a decent
life”. This belief on the value of educations appears to be shared with Polish citizens who remain resident in their home country, where there has been a significant growth in participation rates in higher education, rising to 41.4% in 2011 (Sielatycki, 2011).

While much literature exists on the key ingredients to support successful progression in education, such as economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Quinn, Thomas, Slack, Casey, Thexton and Noble, 2005), it appeared from the findings of this study that for participants, their employment and social status, and the associated social and economic capital, are not a barrier to their educational attainment wishes and “better life” aspirations for their children. Existing (personal) high levels of educational and/or cultural capital may in fact be the key to support them and their children into the future in a successful learning journey. This has been found when parents’ cultural and social resources become forms of capital which facilitates their compliance with the dominant action in learning environments. This includes a parent’s sense of entitlement to interact with teachers, a noted finding of this study, where all parents had actively interacted with teachers to determine their child’s progress (Lareau and McNamara-Horvat, 1992)

The importance of social status, and the struggle for social reproduction as evident in Bourdieu’s (1986) work, highlights the disadvantage immigrants who may not have the requisite social capital could face. However, in the case of the Polish participants of this study (regardless of their own educational attainment) who appeared to be ‘middle class’ in educational terms, this cultural capital, their home practices and consequently their habitus (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), is close to, or comparable with, the institutional habitus of the educational field in Ireland. What is being expected of middle class families (e.g. parental involvement, the ethos of working professionally) is already part of participants’ mind-set from their own cultural capital and habitus, and is similar to the educational values of the Irish middle classes and the norms of our educational institutions (O’Reilly, 2008; Dorrity and Maxwell, 2009).

Consequently, this study’s findings would agree with those of Lopez Rodriguez and would argue that although structural conditions of social class play an important part in placing in the ‘trajectories needed for social mobility’ (Lopez Rodriguez, 2010: 340), this factor is not as apparent in the case of many Polish migrant families in our study. While it may take distinct forms, working class parents display an almost ‘middle-class’ involvement and education values and beliefs (Lopez Rodriguez, 2010).
Meritocracy – A system of differences

When participants were questioned on the differences between the Irish educational systems and that of Poland, the category of Meritocracy emerged. Whilst education and educational attainment was viewed by participants as being paramount if the desired state of ‘a good life’ was to be achieved, it was equally perceived by participants that this educational attainment was more easily achieved in Ireland than in Poland. Participants believed that if you worked hard, it would be rewarded within the Irish system, both in terms of educational achievement and progression, but also in terms of employment. They used words and phrases, such as “fairer system”, ”not need money”, “you can do well if you work hard”. However, whilst participants appreciated this meritocracy, they also had concerns about the academic validity of the Irish system and questioned whether the system, and how it supported a meritocracy through its early learning pedagogy, might actually disadvantage their children into the future. This will be elaborated on in subsequent paragraphs.

All participants, when questioned about the differences in Polish and Irish educational systems, explained that getting the required education was very difficult in Poland, and that the system only allowed for the students with the best grades, and/or those who were economically affluent, to do well and progress within this system. This inequality did not end at school but progressed through life, with participants concluding that even if you were professionally qualified, getting work was very difficult due to insufficient employment opportunities. Added to this were perceived issues of nepotism in employment selection processes. Finally, even if you succeeded in getting work in your profession, the pay was extremely poor. This was evident in claims such as – “did not go (to college) as could not afford, very expensive” (Magda); “it is about who you know, not what you know (in reference to getting a job)” (Agnes), and ”just because you are not educated, if you work hard, you should not be poor” (Yvonne). This struggle to progress oneself within Poland is well documented, where a history as a post-communist country is believed to be related to struggles in personal, economic and educational progression and attainment for its citizens, in a country which is still trying to find its own place and success. (Sleszynski 2004; Dabrowa-Szeffler and Jablecka-Prylowska 2006; Kochanowicz, 2010; Sawinski, 2012).

In contrast, Ireland was described by interviewees as offering opportunities which allowed everyone to have a fair chance. This fair chance was discussed in terms of the personal effort that one exerts, equates to a better return in
terms of wage earning and progression within employment and education. At no time did participants appear to problematize the education-economy relationship, or feel that this could effectively disadvantage those who were unable to participate in such a structure; rather they viewed it purely as a positive. Specifically, all participants felt that Polish migrants have a very strong work ethic which is rewarded in Ireland, but not necessarily in Poland.

This can be explained by Sofia:

I love them (her children) to be brought up the same as I am, work for something you would have; I want them to go to college, travel to work, to do the things they want to do. That is probably why I here. I did not get those opportunities; my mother did not have the money, to even give us the opportunity to go to college. She doesn’t have the money. We had to go to work early. I do not have this opportunity, but that is why I try to do everything for my kids, to try to save money to get to college, to get them to work (Sofia).

Equally participants believed that Ireland’s education system itself was a fairer system and if you worked hard, you would be rewarded within this system. This fairer system was felt to be related to the demands within the learning environment, which allowed children, regardless of their and their parental social and/or economic situation, to successfully progress within it. Specifically, all interviewees concluded that the academic demands for children in primary school within the Polish system were much greater than that of the Irish system: “(you) have to know everything about everything” (in the Polish system) (Caroline). Magda supported this view, saying that children in the Polish primary school system at the age of 6/7 years have to “pick up, it is too much stuff put into kid’s heads … e.g. biology, how many bones you have exactly. Too much detail that you not need it”. Evanna expands on this and provides insight into the perceived fairness of Ireland’s system: “You have to know everything in your head, learn to it more adult learn; learn loads of stuff (in Poland). You don’t need to know everything about everything… here (Ireland)... you get rewarded for working hard. … people are different and people need less time than others, a little bit fairer” (Evanna).

The ability to gain this knowledge in Poland, they concluded, was related to economic position and disposable income; to ‘do well’ within the Polish system was equated to being able to afford extra learning support for children outside the formal education system.

When exploring further participants’ understanding of the Irish education
system, it became apparent that all participants had investigated the Irish education system, either formally or informally through their social networks, and on occasion directly with the educational environments. They appeared knowledgeable on how to access educators and the systems and supports that were in existence for learners. Where parents had needed support for their children, they could, and had been, able to access it within the current educational system, without having to pay for it privately. Participants also concluded that as the early years and early primary curriculum was delivered as a combination of learning and play based pedagogy, that this in itself supported the diverse needs and abilities of all children, allowing all children to develop and progress. The belief is that if the child and family work hard, this will provide them with equal opportunities to progress successfully, regardless of economic status.

As a result, participants believed a meritocracy was supported within the Irish early learning system of preschool and early years of primary school. Parents supported such a system as they perceived it “allowed children to be children” and was not as stressful for them and allowed children to “compete” (Jacqueline) more easily than within the Polish system. It is however noteworthy that while this meritocratic approach is acknowledged within the literature (Ni Laoire et al., 2012), it does not support all children, but only those who are capable of achieving at this higher level. Equally for children who may be unable to achieve at this higher academic level, it can remove opportunities for the child at a very early age and begin a life trajectory of disadvantage for children (Wóycicka, 2009).

In this context, even within the acknowledged benefits of this meritocracy based system, questions were raised about the academic integrity of the learning their child received in both pre-school and early years of primary school. Parents in this study had questions about whether it was play or learning that their children were engaged with at school, and were concerned about the potential impact of this on their child’s educational attainment in the future. This lack of understanding was based on parents’ previous knowledge and experience of education in Poland, and on encountering an approach that was at odds with what participants considered to be a ‘good’ education, they appeared to have difficulties understanding the merits of a play based pedagogical approach as advocated by Hayes (2008) and Woods (2011). One parent (Irena) described her struggle with this alternative approach through an example of ‘correcting’ her child’s homework in primary school. When she spoke to teachers, they told her this was ‘wrong’ as the child should write what she thinks is correct. Irena believed
this is different to Poland as there, the child would be expected to “know and write the correct thing – not what they think”. Other parents (Isabella, Sofia) explained how they approached the school when they felt that their children, who were in year two/three of the Irish primary school system, were not getting sufficient homework. Parental concerns appear to revolve around the fear that their children were not being sufficiently academically educated at their current stage in school, compared to peers in Poland. Agnes explains this both in terms of benefits and difficulties. In this unfamiliar system, she concluded that here “it is like more friendly for the children (Ireland), but for me, they don’t have enough like (to) learn, and he has a cousin in Poland (same age) and he is at a different level”.

When the use of such a play-based learning approach (as is used in the Irish pre-school and the first years of primary school) and the way in which it supports successful learning was further explored with parents, they appeared unfamiliar and unaware of the use of play as an effective early years pedagogy (Hayes, 2008; Wood, 2009; Wood, 2010). Consequently even though they noted the value within the Irish system, they considered a more formal and traditional pedagogy as a more appropriate academic learning environment for their children, thus demonstrating parents’ social locations and how their own political, economic and social structures shaped their habitus, and on this occasion, validated participants’ views on what they considered to be a good education (Hong 2016: 33), which was in contradiction to what their children were experiencing.

This Irish system caused a struggle at a personal level, and had additional dimensions as parents felt that if they were to return to Poland, their children would not be as educationally advanced as a child of a similar age there, and therefore would be at a disadvantage in a system which parents believed (and the literature is in agreement) supports high educational academic attainment (Sielatycki, 2011). Therefore, whilst they valued and appreciated this meritocracy, they had reservations in case it caused ‘disadvantages’ in the future, similar to that which they themselves had experienced in their home country, albeit for different reasons.

**Preschool - first step towards the future**

Whilst the importance of education as a stepping stone to future life opportunities was evident within the findings of this research, and participants felt that the Irish system was very much a meritocracy, participants were asked if they felt that there were any barriers to successful progression within this local system.
All acknowledged that as migrants to Ireland, for them there remains a barrier of language, which they believed could impact negatively on the educational progression and social mobility of their children. However, participants also appeared to find strategies to reduce this barrier and support the successful educational progression of their children.

Language as a barrier to educational achievement is more usually discussed in research on the progression of adults within the education system (Christensen and Stanat, 2007; Simpson and Cooke, 2009) and the same appears to exist in this case context. Polish remained the primary language in all but one household, (Irish parent); thus, almost all of the children, whether born in Poland or Ireland, had Polish as their primary language for the first 2 or 3 years of their lives. Parents recognised the difficulties this would/did present for their children within the formal education system and tried to address this potential barrier, even where income was limited, by paying for early childhood care and education, or availing of the Free Preschool Year where eligible. This provided children with the opportunity to learn English as early as possible in order to allow their child have the best chance when they commenced formal primary school. Casa explains:

Even though he was going to the Montessori school, because I wanted him to pick up language before he goes to school, because I knew would happen soon you know, I was very happy that I sent him over to the Montessori school because his language improved very much. Even though I know English very well, we wouldn't speak English at home. We would speak Polish only and you know for him it was more difficult because he started speaking Polish before he started to learn English.

Consequently most children entered Early Childhood Care and Education [ECCE] environments from the age of one onwards, even when there were alternative options such as family and friends to care for their child, often at a much lower cost than ECCE care. This was the case for Maria, where both parents themselves did not speak English when they arrived and as they worked with other members of the Polish community, they had not acquired English for quite some time and neither had their daughter. As a result, even though there were more cost effective options for caring for their daughter, both parents decided to send her to a crèche at 18 months old. Maria believed that this was the correct decision, as she concluded that the “crèche were brilliant and after two or three months she (daughter) began to understand simple things – the teachers in the pre-school taught her how to speak”. As a result her daughter,
and more recently her son, are both bilingual.

Halina supported this view and sent her child to crèche and pre-school early, even though it was “very expensive” and before it was a necessity for her own work commitments, stating: “My son went to crèche at one year old and learned English and it is perfect”. Her rationale for this decision was that “I don’t want to teach him bad English. As I have not to think about myself, but have to think about the kids”. This family investment in second language learning supports the acquisition of linguistic capital, allowing the child to integrate and successfully progress through the Irish education system (Brammer, 2002). Such parental investment and involvement in a child’s life and future opportunities is not uncommon, but perhaps more pronounced for migrants, who first of all make the move for a better life and endeavour to continue this by giving their child the best start in their life. For migrants, this parental involvement contributes to the socialisation of their children into believing in the importance of education (Domina, 2005) and in doing so, supports the development of the child’s own educational and cultural capital.

Participants (parents) wished that ECCE settings would recognise and be aware of this role of the early childhood care and education settings in their child’s learning trajectory and future. Magda, drawing on her own experience, describes how she had asked her son’s preschool, which had Polish staff, to stop speaking to her child in Polish as she felt it was limiting his ability to learn English and would result in him being behind in school and become a barrier to his academic progression.

Whilst Early Childhood Care and Education has been in existence for an extended period of time, the mainstreaming of preschool in Ireland is a relatively new concept, supported by the introduction of the ECCE\(^2\) scheme in 2009. Its value has been noted by this community as a tool to support their child’s life opportunities and outcomes. This role of ECCE as support for language acquisition for children where English is a second language may not have been a goal of this scheme; however it certainly appears to have evolved into one, for this cohort of parents. While debates exist on the appropriateness of immersion education for second language children (Stanat and Christensen, 2006), parents believe in this instance that this is a strategy that will support the child’s successful progression through an education system and allow for better

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\(^2\) The introduction of the “free preschool year”, unlike other earlier initiatives has supported the almost universal uptake to this opportunity within communities. This is intended to increase to two years in the near future.
outcomes for their child in the future.

Conclusion

The findings of this small qualitative study concur with similar studies in this field in concluding that this migrant Polish group are highly educated and appear to possess a strong work ethic and value system (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Barrett, Bergin, and Duffy, 2006). In addition, findings suggest that if participants are supported to overcome barriers to learning such as language, their personal meritocratic system and beliefs make their child’s successful progression within education something that they believe is necessary and attainable. For this group, this translates into academic aspirations and high levels of educational capital for their children’s future, despite the unfamiliarity of the host country system. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 127), talk about being a “fish in water” as a description of higher education being a natural place for those in possession of high levels of social capital. For these participants the cultural value system and the high educational capital could make the Irish education system one that they will feel comfortable in, or feel that they belong to, regardless of their social capital.

It is noteworthy that participants in this study believe that ECCE is the first step towards this future (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012), to level the playing field for their children before entry into the formal education system. As such, ECCE supports future (educational) aspirations at an early stage of the child’s life. This is not without its challenges for those delivering these programmes, and strategies locally and nationally need to be put in place to address the role that early learning and early education are already playing, albeit inadvertently, in second language acquisition for migrant groups.

To note

While the findings and conclusions of the paper offer a ‘specific’ rather than ‘general’ account of the experiences and perceptions of twenty minority ethnic parents and, as such, are insufficient to provide definitive and generalizable conclusions on the space and place of education within the Polish community living in Ireland, what the paper does provide is the beginnings of an evidence base on Polish migrants’ transition (educational) experiences and perceptions, to acknowledge the educational issues that the participants experience during this transition. and to address these within our own practices and programmes.
of learning, with the intention that this evidence base will be added to by many into the future.

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The Traveller Child and the Free Pre-School Year
2010 to 2016

Marie Cuddihy

Abstract

This paper is based on a small-scale piece of primary research carried out in 2014, in fulfilment of a Master’s Dissertation at Stranmillis College, Queen’s University Belfast. It explores how the introduction of the free pre-school year in 2010 has impacted upon Traveller children and families. The literature widely shows that Travellers’ educational outcomes are not on a par with non-Travellers and highlights the role of early education in this area. A mixed methods research approach was adopted which incorporated a survey that was distributed to childcare practitioners, interviews with childcare practitioners and Traveller parents and a focus group of young Traveller parents. The results found that Traveller children mainly access pre-school in the community sector. When choosing a pre-school, Traveller families put emphasis on familiarity and relationships. Recommendations evolved in the areas of on-going data collection, partnership with parents, the rolling out of a well-resourced Equality & Diversity training strategy combined with on-going mentoring of Childcare practitioners.

Introduction

Since the introduction of the free pre-school year in the Republic of Ireland in January 2010, there have been many changes in the Early Years sector. These include increased qualification requirements for early years workers (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2013a); compliance visits for childcare services to ensure that the funding received through the Free Pre-School Year (ECCE) schemes is being correctly administered (Pobal, 2014); heightened emphasis on quality standards within childcare services using Síolta, the quality
framework for early years settings, and Aistear, the early years curriculum framework. Murray & Urban (2012:69) remind us of the specific quality targets in the area of diversity, as itemised by the European Commission Network on Childcare in 1996.

The changes mentioned above are measurable, tangible aspects of children’s education and care. Pobal annual statistics show the increase in the qualification levels of staff working in ECCE services (Pobal, 2013:53); “93.7% of services have had at least one compliance visit from Pobal”, (Pobal, 2013:71) and “24 practitioners across the seven services” took part in the 2011 – 2013 Aistear initiative (Aistear, 2013:24). These statistics indicate progress in the sector.

The changes that have not been documented are the everyday experiences of families who avail of the free pre-school year. This paper focusses on the experiences of Traveller families who access pre-school.

**Literature Review**

The literature shows that educational outcomes for travellers are not on a par with non-Travellers (Nugent, 2010: Pavee Point, 2013) and that early childhood care and education impacts positively upon outcomes for children (Murray, 2012; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Mandatory Diversity and Equality training is a cornerstone to ensure that an inclusive ethos is active in the pre-school setting (Right from the Start, 2013). Inclusive pre-school education provides better outcomes for some Traveller children (Hamilton et al, 2012). The role of pre-school leaders is vital in the promotion of social inclusion (Bhopal & Myers, 2009) and the relationships between pre-schools and Traveller parents need to be focussed upon (Maddock, 2012) always keeping in mind the factors which act as barriers to participation in early years’ education. Travellers themselves ultimately have the final say in which educational options they wish to utilise (O’Hanlon, 2010).

Social Learning Theory is a lens through which to view the impact of educational inclusion. When social groups which have traditionally had little or no contact, for example when Traveller children and non-Traveller children come into contact in pre-school settings that are open to all children, two-way social learning occurs. This contact and the subsequent learning that occurs can be explained by the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954) which states that “…sustained inter-ethnic contact can promote perspective taking and acceptance of and respect for difference” (Hughes, Campbell & Jenkins, 2011: 981).

For the years coming up to 2010 when the universal pre-school year was
introduced, and from 2010 to 2012, there was a phased reduction in government spending on segregated pre-school provision for Traveller children. Figure 1 below shows the reduction in investment in the segregated model of Traveller pre-school provision.

**Figure 1 – Investment in Traveller Pre-School Education 2008-2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traveller Pre-School Spending (€)</td>
<td>468,920</td>
<td>761,252</td>
<td>627,887</td>
<td>253,179</td>
<td>95,143</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Education & Skills.

Arguably, this reduction in spending on segregated pre-schools paved the path towards creating an inclusive educational environment. Pre-school provision for Traveller children is now funded through the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme (Harvey, 2013:36) and childcare services who administer the ECCE scheme receive a capitation rate for each child who attends the service.

**Introduction of the free pre-school year**

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) free pre-school year was introduced in January 2010. This scheme entitled all pre-school children to one year’s free pre-school provision over 38 weeks. The scheme is universal with the only eligibility criterion being the child’s age – the child had to be between the ages of 3 years 3 months and 4 years 7 months when enrolling in September. This scheme is being expanded from September 2016 to allow all children access the scheme after their third birthday and to continue accessing free pre-school provision until they start primary school. With this expansion of the ECCE scheme, and depending on date of birth and school starting age, children will be able to access up to 2 years and 1 term of pre-school provision as opposed to 1 year prior to the expansion.

The free pre-school year was a new path in the provision of ECCE in Ireland. Pre-school services contracted to deliver the service on behalf of the government. The contractual terms and conditions require that childcare services engage with Síolta, the early years’ quality framework, and that a minimum qualification structure is adhered to (DCYA2, 2013). Arguably, the quality of a service can be partly measured by its Equality and Diversity practices.
Inclusion of traveller children in education

The following quote from McNamara (2006) goes a long way towards explaining the issues that Travellers may experience with the formal education system, and helps to justify the use of the Contact Hypothesis to counteract such issues.

Many Traveller parents feel that they cannot take for granted things that settled parents generally do not even have to consider, for example that their child will be welcomed in some schools, will be treated fairly, and will have their needs dealt with in a respectful way. This can lead to ambivalence and a negative attitude on the part of some Traveller parents regarding the value of formal education. (McNamara, 2006:22)

When applied to the pre-school sector, the Contact Hypothesis, as referred to earlier, can arguably have the same outcomes when different groups, which have traditionally been segregated, are brought together for the purpose of education and care. The social learning that occurs during contact promotes empathy and respect for difference and leads to enhanced social inclusion. (Hughes, Campbell & Jenkins, 2011). Just being admitted to the setting, however, is not enough. Social learning needs to happen. Putnam’s assertion that admittance of an out-group causes the original members of the group to pull back (Putnam, 2000), may happen initially, but, arguably if the contact is ‘sustained’ (Hughes et al, 2011: 981), there will be time for social learning to happen and a gradual process of understanding to evolve. This links with Aistear’s theme of Identity and Belonging and the underlying principles of uniqueness, equality and diversity, children as citizens, relationships, parents, family and community, the adult’s role and active social learning (NCCA, 2009a).

Research Questions

From the Literature, the following research questions arose in relation to Traveller Pre-school experiences. Because the study was small scale, the questions were asked of Travellers and pre-school services in one county only, and therefore the trends shown in the results cannot be said to be indicative of Ireland nationally.

1. Where, in 2014, do Traveller Children attend pre-school?
2. What are Traveller parents’ views on how their children experience pre-school?
3. Are pre-schools equipped to understand what Traveller families are looking for in a pre-school?
Methodology

A mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies was considered the best choice for this study, to produce a holistic picture of Early Childhood Care and Education for Traveller children since 2010. A quantitative approach in the form of a survey questionnaire was disseminated to pre-school services. This was followed by a qualitative element which comprised interviews with three pre-school services and two focus group discussions with Traveller parents.

Participants

The participants in this research were selected from the early years sector in one county in Ireland. Using the open database from the local county childcare committee, 150 preschool providers who provide the ECCE scheme were invited to complete the questionnaire. These providers covered the spectrum of private, community and full day care services. The last question on the questionnaire asked the participant, if s/he would be prepared to engage in a short one-to-one interview with the researcher on the topics covered in the questionnaire. Based on the feedback from this particular question, three early years services were chosen for the interview phase of the research. These three were a private service where Traveller children were attending, a private service where no Traveller children attended and a community service that has a long history of engagement with Traveller families. The ratio of private to community services interviewed in this study is in line with Pobal statistics nationally, which show a 70% private to 30% community split (Pobal, 2015:6).

Access to Traveller parents was achieved by linking in with two local training networks for Travellers and two Family Resource centres. These stakeholders acted as gatekeepers for the researcher to gain access to Traveller parents. Two focus groups with Traveller Parents from different geographical areas were organised through the involvement of these stakeholders.

Ethics

Prior to embarking on the study, ethical approval was obtained from Stranmillis University College MA Ethics Committee using the guidelines contained in RESPECT (2004). Informed consent from the participants in the study was sought. Along with the consent form, all participants were emailed a synopsis of the research aims and an explanation of the input required. Prior to the
interviews and focus group discussions, consent forms and the study synopsis were presented to the interviewees and focus group participants. Focus group participants were accessed through four gatekeepers, which promoted increased trust in the project from the viewpoint of the participants. It was emphasised verbally to the participants that they were not obliged to take part in the process (Connolly, 2003). Participants were informed that they could refuse to take part in the research or could withdraw at any time during the research. The research was explained to the participants and questions were answered as they arose. Consent for recording of information, whether in writing or electronically was also sought.

Participants were assured that potential identifiers would be removed from data before presentation of the findings to ensure anonymony and confidentiality. Findings were presented to stakeholders in a number of ways, including an email leaflet to childcare providers, a PowerPoint presentation to funders and verbal presentation to Traveller parents.

**Survey questionnaire results**

There was a 45% response rate to the questionnaire (n=67). There was an even spread of responses across the private and community sectors, in line with the numbers of services in each category.

The findings identified the following:

1. **Where Traveller Children attend pre-school:**

   In the main, Traveller children attend pre-school in community settings. 66% (n= 9) of the community settings surveyed had enquiries re admission to the pre-school by Traveller families, whereas less than 9% (n=58) of private services had such enquiries. When looking at the attendance of Traveller children in community pre-school, 44% had Traveller children attending (n=9) and 5% (n=58) of private pre-schools had Traveller children in attendance.

2. **How pre-school practitioners self-report on their level of expertise in the area of Equality and Diversity:**

   Most Pre-school practitioners reported that they had some level of training in the area of Equality and Diversity. Only one pre-school from the 67 surveyed reports having no qualifications or learning in the area of Equality and Diversity. Each pre-school had the choice of choosing all options that applied within a service. For example, one member of staff may have a FETAC 6 module in Equality and Diversity, another may have studied Equality and Diversity as part of general
childcare training and another may have other non-accredited training in the area.

3. **The factors seen as important to Traveller families when choosing a pre-school.**

There are differences across the community and private sectors but quality of care and education, and feeling welcomed score high as factors of importance to Traveller Families, in both sectors. For community Services, Familiarity is a factor which is felt to be important to almost 89% (n=9) of services. In contrast, only 41% (n=58) of private services feel that familiarity is an important factor in attracting Traveller families. Training options for parents is another aspect of provision which 44% (n=9) of community services feel is important to Traveller families. Only a third of community services feel that proximity to the childcare service is a consideration for Traveller families. The private sector attributes high importance to proximity of the service to the town centre, with almost half of those surveyed stating that this would attract Traveller families.

**Summary of Results of Focus Group & Interviews with Traveller Parents**

The results of the focus group discussions and the interviews indicate that from the perspective of the Traveller parent, the following factors are important when Traveller children attend pre-school.

Five main themes emerged from interviewing the Traveller Parents (M1, M2, L, M3, K, B, K1):

1. **Quality of Care and Education.** The Traveller parents had very strong and definite ideas about why they send their children to pre-school: education "To learn" (M2), socialisation "To mix" (M1) and "To be not stuck at home all day" (L) and childcare "To have a break" (M3) were the reasons stated as to why pre-schools were used. As the focus group progressed, it became more obvious that quality of care seemed to be more of a consideration than quality of education. There was reference to the 2013 Primetime documentary, aired in May 2013, on national television (Eurofound, 2014) during which early years’ services were secretly filmed and seen to be engaging in practices that were concerning in terms of best practice and quality of care. “It was on the news about it - you’d have to trust someone to mind your child like." (M2). There was a fear that a child might be treated badly “I’d be afraid they’d get neglected or something” (M2)

2. The second theme that emerged was around familiarity and connection
with the preschool. If other family members had attended the pre-school in the past and there was a historical or current connection with the pre-school, it seemed that the participants would be more likely to use the pre-school. “Her father went there and a lot of her aunties and uncles are up there” (in the primary school section) (K). A familiarity of the pre-school through wider networks was also seen as a positive. “A lot of people I know and their father went to it” (K). A knowledge of the leadership in the pre-school was also mentioned “The better you know the person who’s running the crèche” (M1) along with the experience and longevity of service of pre-school personnel as evidenced by “She’s been up there for years” (K)

3. The third theme that emerged was around the relationships between the pre-school service and the Traveller family. How the child is dealt with on a daily basis was seen as very important. “The way they treat your children” (L). Having time for the children was also mentioned during the focus group. There was a concern expressed around, “If they” (the childcare workers) “have no time for them” (the children) (M2), and this was given as a reason for not sending a child to pre-school. It was also thought that the personality of the pre-school personnel plays a vital role in relationship building. One participant when talking about her decision to move her child from one pre-school to another said, of the teacher in the school that the child was moving to, “It’s just the teacher up there is very, very nice” (K). Trust, which is an aspect of relationships, was seen to play a part in how Traveller children experience pre-school. As the participants stated “…you’re leaving the life of your child in someone else’s hands” (L) and “…you’d have to trust someone to mind your child, like” (M2).

During the individual interviews, emphasis was placed on the relationships between the child and the pre-school personnel and the relationship between the Traveller child’s family and the pre-school. One interviewee spoke about an incident where she removed her child from a preschool because of a biting incident. The interviewee felt that the pre-school was “shocked” (B) when she brought up the incident and that in the end she had no option but to change pre-schools because she felt the issue was being disregarded because she was from the Travelling community. “…when you go to talk to someone you’re not talking about Traveller, you are talking about a child. And that’s where I think the people gets very confused with schools and the Education system” (B). This interviewee moved her child to a private pre-school where Traveller children had not previously attended. Verbal communication there was stronger and the importance of this was even more highly accentuated as the interviewee could not read or write: “…they communicated a lot with me” (B). Another interviewee (C) also pointed to “The relationship between the kids and the teacher” as one
of the most important things in making a good pre-school. A further interviewee (K), when asked, “What makes a good pre-school?” answered, “I think the women. It’s nice if they could have a good relationship with the children. That’s the most important part for me…That the child is comfortable with the person is the most important thing for me…The teacher greets the child each morning by his name and this welcoming is important” (K). This shows that the on-going everyday relationship between the child and teacher, and how it is affirmed though the use of names and a welcoming ritual, is recognised and appreciated by Traveller parents.

4. Another dominant theme was around how Traveller families get information on the pre-school services they use. When choosing a pre-school, Traveller parents widely seek recommendations from other parents and act upon these recommendations. Interviewees, when talking about why they chose a particular pre-school, said, “Because I heard a lot of people talking about it (K1) and “A few of the friends I was talking to was telling me about it. They had kids in it, themselves” (K1). The reliance on verbal recommendations can be seen throughout the interviews. Another interviewee stated, “I can’t read or write so I would rely more on word of mouth” (B).

5. The fifth theme that emerged was the issue of inclusion and integration and the importance that Traveller parents attributed to this concept and process. An interviewee (K1) said she chose a particular pre-school because “It wasn’t just for settled children like. It was mixed”. This was backed up by another interviewee (K) who thought, “I think it’s nice for them to mix with others and to see other cultures” . When asked if they thought it was a good idea to phase out Traveller specific preschools, 3 of the 4 interviewees said it was a good idea; however, there was some concern around cultural erosion and the loss of Traveller culture. “I think children need to integrate in society but I think some children do get lost along the way too. They’re losing their identity” (B). Another view expressed was that “Yes. I think that’s the best decision. I wouldn’t like my child to be singled out, to be in their own community all the time and not mixing. I think that’s a good thing for their development as well. They can mix with other children of their own age. Travelling children have their own culture but at this age they are just developing and they can keep this culture, I feel this personally myself” (C)

Results of one-to-one interviews with childcare providers

The interviews were conducted with three pre-school services (M, M1, O) and data analysis led to the emergence of themes. Two dominant themes emerged.
The first theme concerned **familiarity and connection with the pre-school** and was evident in all three interviews. Interviewee One (M) attributed her personal experiences and connections with Travellers as she was growing up as a factor in her current ability to communicate and interact with Travellers who approach her pre-school:

> I believe in being upfront. I grew up with Travellers. A family moved to my area when I was young. I went to school with them. My parents never made any fuss that I hung around with Travellers. It's all about having normal conversations with them about everyday things. If you hide from them, they'll hide from you (M).

The interviewee felt that her method of communication and her personal history contributes to the attendance of Traveller children in this private childcare service. From the community childcare service's point of view, it was felt that connections with Traveller families evolved over time. Notably, while Travellers may have been reticent about engaging with pre-school services in the past, their other connections with the service, in terms of training or homework and breakfast clubs acted as a bridge for Travellers to eventually access pre-school using the free pre-school year (M1). This indicates that familiarity with the service in terms of other services provided and connection with the service over time increases the attendance of Traveller children in community childcare services. A private childcare provider noted that “**Giving help to parents filling out forms and reading and explaining what’s on the forms**” (M) seems to be one of the factors that attracts Traveller families to the service. When asked, “What would put a Traveller family off applying to a service?” there was a feeling that location or lack of knowledge about a service would put Traveller families off (O). The same private service, which does not have Traveller children attending the service responded to the question “What would attract Traveller Families to the service?” saying, “I don’t know if advertising works because we do a lot of that. Maybe some other way of reaching the families. Maybe linking in with family support workers who work with the families” (O). This familiarity or connection theme presents a strong basis for understanding where Traveller children attend pre-school and the underlying reasons for choosing the particular pre-school. “**We would have built a rapport with Traveller families over the years**”… “… and I was very interested when the Free Pre-school Year (ECCE) came in to see if these families would send their children to other services but it hasn’t happened”. (M1)
The second main theme was relationship building. There was a consensus among the private pre-school providers that "Being friendly and welcoming" (M) and "Being open" (O) in relationship forming would attract and retain Traveller families.

In conjunction with this open-armed approach, it was asserted that the relationship between the pre-school and the Traveller family should not be "judgemental" (M1), or not have "...any pre-conceived ideas about how their children are going to behave or how they are going to perform" (M1).

Communication was evident as a factor that impacts upon the Traveller experience of pre-school. When speaking about what Travellers want from a pre-school, one interviewee said, "I think very often they would like a pre-school where they are going to be talked to. It has to be face-to-face communication, the note or the text won’t do" (M1). Another interviewee stated "Being honest with them and being upfront even asking ‘Can you read and write?’" (M). Acknowledging the importance of verbal communication for the Traveller family and being honest and direct in your communication style emerged as important sub themes.

Differences and Similarities: what Traveller Parents and Pre-schools see as important factors when choosing a pre-school

The findings from the questionnaire show generally, that the most important factors when a Traveller family is choosing a pre-school are the quality of care and the welcome that the child and family receive.

This concurs with the qualitative research with Traveller parents.

- Welcome is important, “The teacher says ‘Hello’ to the child each morning by his name and this is good”. The absence of this welcome may lead to "...ambivalence and a negative attitude on the part of some Traveller parents” (McNamara, 2006:22).

- Quality of care is part of the decision process when choosing a pre-school “… you know that they’re taking care of your child and their eyes is on them, full stop”. Quality of education was also mentioned but not as often as the care element. “To learn” was one of the responses to “What would encourage you to send a child to pre-school?” From this research, Traveller families seem to put emphasis on the care rather than the education of their children and this stance is corroborated by McNamara, (McNamara, 2006)
Secondly, further data from the questionnaire shows that over 48% (n=58) of private Childcare Providers and 33% (n=9) of community Services feel that proximity of the service to the town centre would be a factor when Traveller parents choose a pre-school but this was clearly shown not to be the case. One Traveller parent said during the interviews “…when I moved to another town I still drove back to the previous town to put my daughter in the pre-school that I moved my son to”. This shows that location of the pre-school is secondary when choosing a pre-school. This is in line with what the literature shows around the choices that Travellers make in respect of pre-school: ‘Travellers are doing what they always have done and still do, and that is taking control for themselves and choosing what specific educational opportunities on offer will benefit them’ (O’Hanlon, 2010: 239).

Thirdly, it is worth noting the large gap in understanding between the percentage of community services (89%) (n=9) and private Services (41%) (n=58) who perceive that familiarity with a service encourages enquiries from Traveller families and enrolment of Traveller children. This could be due to the additional services that community services are often attached to, or it could be because the information about the universal availability of pre-school services is not filtering down to Traveller families. Another consideration could be the link between availability of community childcare subvention (CCS) funding and the free pre-school year.

The above three points highlight the fact that while there is some understanding in the pre-school sector around the reasons why Traveller families choose a particular pre-school, there are also mixed understandings across community and private pre-schools, and less recognition of some of the issues that are closest to the hearts of Traveller parents.

**Inclusion/Integration of Traveller children into private pre-schools**

Questionnaire Finding 2 shows that Traveller children are more likely to attend in community pre-schools than private pre-schools. This indicates that Traveller children are not moving into the private sector and not integrating into universal pre-school provision. A manager of a community pre-school said “…I was very interested when the Free Pre-school Year (ECCE) came in to see if these families would send their children to other services but it hasn’t happened”. (M1).

From the qualitative strand of the research, Traveller parents spoke repeatedly about how their child is being treated and being included in the service.

There is the widespread belief that inclusion issues can be addressed through
“informed practice” (Hayes, 2013: 100) which is achieved by up-skilling and training in the area of Equality and Diversity (Murray & Urban, 2012; Nutbrown, 2012), which brings us to the third issue arising from the Research.

**Pre-schools’ level of expertise in Equality and Diversity**

What emerged from this Research Project is that the training that has been received by early years’ practitioners is not becoming a reality on the ground, in terms of understanding the needs and preferences of Traveller families and in enabling access to private services for Traveller families. Another issue is the early years practitioners’ perception of their expertise in the area. This highlights the continued need for training (Neylon, 2014; Murray & Urban, 2012; Nutbrown, 2012), combined with coaching & mentoring (Duffy and Gibbs, 2013), reflexive thinking (Brock, 2006) and specific resources (Neylon, 2014; Miller & Cable, 2011).

Budget 2015 announced a funding allocation to progress a model of supporting access to the early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme for children with a disability. (IDG, 2015) and expansion of this model to promote the inclusion of Traveller children could be explored.

‘Building Partnerships’ (Hayes, 2013: 81) will become feasible if the above elements are streamlined to meaningfully engage with Traveller families. Streamlining could be enhanced by taking guidance from Aistear’s parent partnership guidelines (NCCA, 2009b). This engagement requires developing relationships from the outset. This is the fourth theme that emerged from the study.

**Relationship building**

Relationships emerged as a very dominant theme. Verbal communication emerged as the preferred mode of communication. Being able to go and talk to a pre-school manager if an issue arose was also seen as important, as evidenced by the biting incident and the Traveller parent who wanted to talk about this to the pre-school. The parent described the pre-school’s reaction as “shocked” that she should bring up the issue. Murray & Urban (2012:160) talk about “Meaningful engagement with parents” which has its foundation in “Partnership with parents…” and “…Genuine interest” (Murray & Urban, 2012: 161). Relationships that do not feel safe or strong to Traveller parents can impinge upon the child’s pre-school experiences. It can be seen from the findings of the questionnaire that pre-school services mainly believe that the onus is on them
to ensure that Traveller children have good peer relationships within the pre-school setting. If this thinking was changed to a collaborative vision where both pre-schools and parents share this responsibility, and partnership with parents was the norm, not just in the realm of promoting good peer relationships, arguably relationships between Traveller families and pre-school services would be greatly enhanced and the child’s experience of pre-school improved.

To achieve meaningful partnership with parents, the ethos of the service needs to reflect the willingness and drive for partnership in its policies and procedures and communicate this ethos to Traveller parents. The underlying research for Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Síolta, 2006a) that states “…parental involvement needs to be individualised and reflective of the diversity of families” (Síolta, 2006b:6). It is acknowledged that involving parents in decision-making in the early years sector is difficult to implement (Síolta, 2006b) but arguably with a drive to apply the strategies outlined in Síolta Standard 3, Parents & Families (Síolta, 2006: 29) and linking with Aistear’s theme of Identity and Belonging (NCCA, 2009a), improved outcomes could be realised for Traveller families and pre-schools alike.

According to the results of the interview with a community service, there is the belief that relationship building is slow and cumulative and can sometimes take generations, as evidenced by the following quote:

**The big thing is familiarity and trust that builds up over a lot of years, so maybe even Traveller families who would never have sent their children to pre-school, they have sent their children to homework club. So they might have had older ones in homework club and then the free pre-school year (ECCE) came in and they might send younger children or their grandchildren because the service is some place they trust for the care of their children. (M1)**

This leads to the fifth theme that emerged from the study.

**Promoting familiarity and connection between the pre-school and the Travelling community.**

Findings from the questionnaire showed that the community sector placed more emphasis (88%) (n=9) on familiarity with or connection to the pre-school service by Traveller families than did the private sector (41%) (n= 58). One private service when asked, “what would put Traveller families off accessing your pre-school?” seemed cognizant of this lack of familiarity when answering “Maybe where we are, or maybe they don’t know where we are” (O). This may well be the case,
because during the focus group with Traveller participants, when asked, “Do you have enough information about pre-schools in your area?” a participant answered “Well, I didn’t know there was 40 in this town” (K) indicating that there is a lack of familiarity around pre-school services. This familiarity is greatly increased in the community sector due to provision of other services on-site and it was acknowledged by a community pre-school that Traveller families are pragmatic in their choice of pre-school and would often base their decision to choose a service if “…it suits in other ways” (M1). This echoes the literature, specifically in that Travellers choose what education suits them and are active decision makers (O’ Hanlon, 2010).

The issue, going forward, is how to promote familiarity and connectedness with pre-schools for Traveller families, especially where the pre-school is a stand-alone service. Budget 2015 announced funding for the rollout of an Equality and Diversity Programme nationwide (IDG, 2015). This model to support access to the free pre-school year for children with disabilities could be extended to Traveller families and indeed to all children who need that extra support. This programme has yet to be implemented.

**Conclusion**

Bringing the quantitative and qualitative data together and enmeshing it with the literature produced a snapshot of Traveller families’ experience of pre-school since the introduction of the free pre-school year. This snapshot had five differing aspects:

1. Differences between what Traveller Parents and Pre-schools see as important factors when choosing a pre-school
2. Inclusion/Integration of Traveller children into private pre-schools
3. Pre-schools level of expertise in Equality and Diversity
4. Relationship building
5. Promoting Familiarity and Connection between the Pre-school Sector and the Travelling community.

Based on the participating services in this research, Traveller children attend pre-school mainly in community services, and there is minimal evidence of Traveller children moving into the private pre-school sector. Fundamentally, community services get more enquiries from Traveller families than private services do. The familiarity/connectedness theme, or the Travellers not being
aware of the universality of pre-school services since 2010, can further explain this practice.

Again, based on those who responded to this piece of research, Traveller parents rank the relationship that the child has with the pre-school practitioner as very important, along with putting great emphasis on the care the child receives. Verbal communication and trust were sub-themes that were prevalent in the findings as were inclusion and integration.

The third research question asked whether pre-schools are equipped to understand what Traveller families are looking for in a pre-school. Those Pre-schools who engaged with this research do understand this on many levels: however, there are areas that need to be highlighted and worked upon. These areas include addressing the level of practical expertise of childcare practitioners in the area of Equality and Diversity; exploring childcare services’ perception of their level of expertise; facilitation of the translation of training into inclusive practices on the ground; considering providing intensive coaching and mentoring following Equality and Diversity Training; allocation of resources; promoting understanding that, traditionally, Traveller families access pre-school on a multi-service site, and that this pattern is challenging in terms of attracting Traveller families into universal pre-school settings.

Consequently, it may be concluded that pre-schools have some of the tools to understand the needs of Travellers but more resources are required to fully equip pre-schools.

Recommendations

Three recommendations arise from the findings of this research project:

1. **A National Audit of where Traveller children attend Pre-school:** Arising from research question 1 and its findings, it might be useful if a National Audit of where Traveller Children attend Pre-school was completed. This could be easily achieved by adding a question to the ECCE registration forms that pre-schools gather from parents each September. Annual collections of data would show trends in where Travellers attend pre-school and document any shift towards the private sector.

2. **Implementation of a Partnership with Parents Strategy:** As a result of the concerns arising from research question 2, on what Traveller parents want from the preschool sector, it is recommended that the *Aistear/Siolta Practice guide* be implemented extensively throughout the
country. This would incorporate Síolta's Standard 3 (Parents and Families) and Aistear's Identity and Belonging theme. The issue of engagement with parents could be considered with a view to opening up sustained dialogue and engagement with Traveller families, valuing and involving Traveller families and promoting partnership while Traveller children attend pre-school and beyond.

3. Facilitation of the continuance of Equality and Diversity Training:
Finally, arising from Research Question 3 and the question of equipping pre-schools to understand what Traveller families want from the pre-school sector, continuing with the rollout of Equality and Diversity training might be considered, with the addition of coaching and mentoring and the requirement for reflexive practice. A similar model to that proposed to promote access to the free pre-school sector for children with disabilities (IDG, 2015), as announced in Budget 2015, could be explored for the enhanced inclusion of Traveller children. Further to the rolling out of this training, consideration might be given to adopting more holistic approaches to Equality and Diversity Training as shown by the Toybox Project in Northern Ireland (McVeigh, 2007) The Toybox Project aims to tackle disadvantage, exclusion and poor educational attainments experienced by Traveller children through supporting them from birth to 4 years. The project operates by collaborating with parents and children and delivering outreach interventions through the medium of play. Staff were employed to carry out his work and some government funding was accessed (Early Years, 2014). One of the specific aims of the project was to “actively promote their (Traveller Children's) enrolment in pre-school settings” (McVeigh, 2007:6). The TOYBOX project that involved, children, parents and the wider community, is unique in that it intervenes early in the child's life to, firstly, increase the child's likelihood of attending pre-school and secondly, equip the child's family to play a more active role in the child's education.

The three recommendations outlined above can be universally applied to the Early Years sector and could be viewed as initiatives to facilitate all children in the early years’ environment. The recommendations could be initial steps to inform policy makers when planning educational services to include all young children.
References


Knowledge Exchange in Early Childhood Research and Practice: Findings from the Early Learning Initiative and the National College of Ireland

Sinéad McNally (National College of Ireland)
Gráinne Kent (Early Learning Initiative)
Beth Fagan (Early Learning Initiative)
Josephine Bleach (Early Learning Initiative)

Abstract

The Parent-Child Home Programme (PCHP) at the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) aims to strengthen the natural bond between parent and child and to encourage a love of learning. Through a series of collaborations between the PCHP and Psychology Programme in the National College of Ireland (NCI) in Dublin, PCHP practitioners explored recent developments in child research while developmental psychology students studied contemporary child and family interventions. Exemplifying collaborative actions to support and empower children and parents, this work is discussed here in terms of effective knowledge exchange practices between early childhood researchers and practitioners. Plans to further develop this collaboration are also discussed.

Introduction

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at the National College of Ireland (NCI) is a community-based educational initiative which aims to improve outcomes for children living in disadvantaged areas (Fagan, 2012). The ELI was established by NCI in 2006 in an attempt to improve educational attainment in inner city communities adjacent to NCI using best practice programmes. The initiative aims to address educational disadvantage through the provision of an integrated
programme of activities, training and learning support. These programmes are delivered to children, their parents, families and educators from early years up to third level in the local community (Bleach, 2013). The ELI operates as a community partnership with all relevant parties committed to actively supporting and planning to deliver the most effective education for children and young people both within the home and the school environments (Bleach, 2010). The ELI has been successfully operating within the Dublin Docklands for the past nine years with approximately 4,681 children, young people, parents, professionals and volunteers taking part in the programme in 2014-15. An independent base-line evaluation of ELI’s suite of programmes completed in 2011 by the Children’s Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin found that ELI is having a positive impact on educators, children, parents and the home learning environment (Share et al., 2011). One such programme offered by the ELI is the Parent Child Home Programme (PCHP).

**Parent Child Home Programme**

Originally from the United States, the PCHP is an innovative home based literacy and parenting programme that strengthens families and prepares children to succeed academically. The PCHP aims to give children at risk of educational disadvantage the oral language, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills needed to be successful in the formal education system (Fagan, 2011). The families all volunteer to take part in the programme with children being eligible to begin the programme at 18 months. Ideally, children stay with the programme for two years.

The programme is delivered by Home Visitors who are all local women employed and trained by NCI. Some Home Visitors have up to seven years’ experience in delivering PCHP and are highly skilled. Initially when the programme began operating in the Dublin Docklands the Home Visitors were all early school leavers, and had little formal education. They were trained by ELI to deliver the programme. NCI provided the Early Years Care and Education FETAC level 5 for the Home Visiting staff. It is now expected that Home Visitors will have, or be in the process of attaining, a FETAC level 5 qualification. This QQI/ FETAC Level 5 programme allows the Home Visitors to develop the skills to work with children aged 0 – 6 years through modules such as Early Care and Education Practice, Child Development, Approaches to Early Childhood Education, Child Health and Wellbeing, Infant and Toddler Years and Early Childhood Education and Play.
In keeping with the ethos of the Early Learning Initiative as a community based educational initiative, the PCHP Home Visitors have been able to avail of training courses including Hanen Speech and Language Course, Parents Plus Facilitators Course as well as annual training of Home Visitors at the beginning of each academic year. The Hanen Program ‘Learning Language and Loving it’ aims to give parents suggestions about how to engage children from a very young age in conversation, by adding words to everything the child says. The Parents Plus course models for parents ways to acknowledge what the child is saying, or feeling, while also helping the child to behave in age appropriate ways. The training of Home Visitors at the beginning of each academic year allows for the induction and training of new Home Visitors, in addition to up-skilling current Home Visitors. This training is delivered by the PCHP Coordinators with diverse guest speakers such as Early Years Specialists, Speech and Language Therapists, Child Protection Officers etc. PCHP, the Hanen Programme and Parents Plus all share the same basic message: it is important to listen to children, understand what they are feeling / saying, and guide them to be responsible in age appropriate ways. Children who are able to express their emotions, who have an appropriate level of self-regulation, and are considerate of the feelings of others, are able to engage in the world in ways that enhance their learning and enjoyment of life.

The Home Visitors visit children and their parents in their home environment twice a week and interact with children, using books and toys provided, while modelling oral language, reading and play. Through using a non-directive modelling approach, the Home Visitors follow the child’s lead throughout the programme and attempt to foster positive interactions between the child and parent. This approach increases the parents’ understanding of their child’s development and gives them the skills to support their child as they move into the education system (Fagan, 2012). The approach used by the Home Visitors is based on the Irish National Curriculum and Quality Frameworks, Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and Síolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006).

From 2007 to 2015, 450 children and their families have taken part in the PCHP in the Docklands. At present there are 81 families in the programme with 22 Home Visitors employed by NCI to deliver the programme. NCI is the licence holder for the Parent Child Home Programme in Ireland. A National Coordinator is employed to help expand the programme beyond the Docklands and East Inner City. Two local Coordinators are responsible for the day to day running of the programme in the Docklands.
Over twenty years of rigorous research has demonstrated the programme’s success across the United States (Allen et al., 2007; Plymouth Public Schools, 2008). In Ireland, external and internal evaluations of the PCHP have continuously highlighted the positive impact of the PCHP on the children and families involved. Internal evaluations completed on an annual basis within the ELI have found that overall parents express a high degree of satisfaction with the programme (ELI, 2014). External research completed by the Children’s Research Centre, Trinity College highlighted the positive impact of the programme on the children and families (Share et al., 2011c). The main benefits of the programme were reported as being the positive relationship the child and families had with the Home Visitor, the skills the parents learnt and the benefits to the PCHP child’s development (Share et al., 2011c).

PCHP exemplifies evidenced-based practice: the programme is informed by current child development research and is rigorously evaluated to ensure it is effective in helping the families for whom it is intended. This reflects a national consensus regarding the need for child and family policies and practices to be evidence-based. This has been prompted by the reduced tolerance for ineffective policies and practices and a potential waste of resources (Ruane, 2012).

Knowledge Exchange

With an increased recognition of the role of research in the development of policy and practice has come a growing acceptance of the requirement for knowledge exchange between researchers, practitioners and policy makers to facilitate this collaboration. Knowledge exchange has been defined by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation as ‘interaction between decision-makers and researchers and results in mutual learning through the process of planning, producing, dissemination, and applying existing or new research in decision-making’ (as cited in Goldfeld, 2010:78). Essentially, knowledge exchange brings people from different professions together to form relationships, identify needs, and share knowledge, experiences and evidence to support them in their profession (Canadian Health Services Research Foundation [CHSRF], 2003). The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the United Kingdom identifies the benefits of knowledge exchange for both partners involved in the collaboration as allowing both sides to advance their knowledge, learn about the other’s expertise and gain an insight into different professions (ESRC, 2015). The primary objective of knowledge exchange is to allow for evidence-based
decision making in policy and practice, however it also facilitates a mutual understanding between researchers, practitioners and policy makers. While the researcher community has a long standing history of communicating recent findings and new research questions to each other, the pathway of communication between researchers and practitioners about reflecting on and implementing findings is less established (Lavis et al., 2003). There often appears to be a ‘know-do’ gap between the research findings and what actually happens in practice. In other words, it can be difficult to translate research findings into practice and to implement effectively what has been demonstrated in research to contribute to quality practices. This may be attributed to the fact that this partnership is often not something that emerges naturally and takes time to prosper into actual real life outcomes. This partnership needs time to have an impact as professionals are approaching the tasks from different cultures. There is often a lack of insight into the other partner’s role with little recognition of what the other profession does (Lomas, 2007). An action research methodology is one way to encourage this exchange effectively. In order to establish a system of effective and efficient knowledge exchange the relationship should be established early in the research, practice or policy process and a strong relationship maintained throughout the process (Lomas, 2007).

In recognizing the ‘know-do’ gap between research and practice the concept of knowledge brokering was developed. The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation defined knowledge brokering as ‘the active process that links researchers and decision makers (or practitioners) so that they are better able to understand each other’s goals and professional culture, influence each other’s work, forge new partnerships, and use research evidence’ (CHSFT, 2008 as cited in Goldfeld, 2010). Knowledge brokering accepts that developing knowledge and designing policy are two different processes and shifts the focus to supporting interactions between researchers, practitioners and policy makers. Van Kammen, de Savign and Sewankambo (2006) proposed that the priority is not on transferring the research results but rather on organising the interaction between parties resulting in usable and evidence-based policies and practices. These interactions include some or all of the following; holding joint fora between researchers, policy makers and practitioners, building relationships, identifying common goals, identifying and developing opportunities, sharing information, synthesising research information, monitoring effects and allowing for knowledge translation (van Kammen et al., 2006).
Knowledge Exchange at the National College of Ireland

In 2012, the NCI launched a three-year Bachelor of Arts honours degree in psychology and currently also runs a part-time Bachelor of Arts honours degree in psychology. One of the advanced modules on these accredited programmes is advanced developmental psychology which was first delivered in 2014. The Developmental Psychologist at the college responsible for the developmental modules, was invited by the ELI to speak to the PCHP Home Visitors about recent developments in early childhood research. During the guest lecture on early childhood research, Home Visitors and Coordinators were invited in turn to deliver specialist lectures on their work to the final year psychology students as part of the advanced developmental psychology module. The National Coordinator for the programme and two PCHP Coordinators and Home Visitors delivered these specialist lectures during the academic term.

The application of knowledge brokering was exemplified though this collaboration between the Parent Child Home Programme and the developmental psychology stream in NCI. This collaboration was an example of knowledge exchange between academics (in Developmental Psychology) and practitioners (in the PCHP). The aim of this collaboration was to inform PCHP practitioners of current research in early childhood development, to inform psychology students of an example of research in effective intervention (PCHP) and to develop a sustainable knowledge exchange programme between practice (ELI) and education (NCI). The collaboration allowed for PCHP practitioners to explore recent developments in child research which ensured that their practice was informed by the most up-to-date research in this area. Additionally, it allowed them to develop an understanding of the benefits for the children and families of their practice. Through this collaboration developmental psychology students were provided with an insight into contemporary child and family interventions.

Knowledge Exchange Learning and Outcomes: (a) Practitioners

During the guest lecture on contemporary child development research findings, the Home Visitors had the opportunity to make observations and ask questions of the Developmental Psychologist. Many of these related to research on the relationship between reading to children in early childhood and early language development, and on the relationship between responsive caregiving and child outcomes. This sharing of information advanced the knowledge of the Home Visitors about child development and parental support, while at the same time
fostering further insight into their roles in the intervention process.

When the Coordinators and Home Visitors were asked to present to the 3rd year Psychology students, there was some apprehension, but no hesitation. Presenting to the students gave the Coordinators and Home Visitors a safe space in which to articulate and showcase what they do, and why. Through a series of talks entitled “Introducing the work of the PCHP - the value of early interventions in the community”, the PCHP staff highlighted the importance of such programmes in improving outcomes for children, the subtle changes in the parents’ approach to reading and playing over the course of two years and the great satisfaction they get in supporting a love of learning to both parents and children. A positive, strengths-based perspective of parent support was presented to the students, with the Home Visitors describing how by highlighting the competence of very young children, parents are encouraged to continue reading and playing with their children when the Home Visitors are not there.

**Knowledge Exchange Learning and Outcome: (b) Academic Staff and Students**

Several learning opportunities were afforded to Psychology Staff and the Students throughout the knowledge exchange process. A deeper understanding of the work of the PCHP was developed through discussion with the Home Visitors during psychology guest lectures to the group. Translating research findings into practice was challenging and informed subsequent teaching in advanced developmental psychology at the college.

Student learning was two-fold. Firstly, the students gained insight into early intervention practice through guest lectures which included videos and materials from an ongoing, evidence-based programme, i.e. the PCHP. Secondly, students were afforded an opportunity to reflect and apply their growing knowledge of developmental psychology by asking many questions of the Coordinators and Home Visitors. Students completed evaluation forms on the guest lectures and provided positive reports of their experience of hearing how research is applied in a practical setting through intervention. Through these talks they were provided with an opportunity to apply their knowledge of developmental research by asking questions about the evaluation of the PCHP, the scientific basis for the programme, and future applications and development of the programme.

The guest lectures by the Coordinators and Home Visitors also informed subsequent data collection which the students undertook as part of their
psychology programme. Throughout their assessments in developmental psychology, the students demonstrated considerable knowledge of the work of the ELI, the impact of interventions on children and their families and educators, and the value of evaluation and evidence-based policies and practice.

Future Plans

The engagement between the academic and practice streams exemplified a way of bridging the ‘know-do’ gap for students and PCHP Home Visitors, as well as affording the PCHP and psychology staff several opportunities to inform each other’s work. Collaboration between the developmental psychology academic stream in NCI and the PCHP and broader work of the ELI is continuing in the 2015-2016 academic year. Plans to formalise the collaboration and knowledge exchange practices will be outlined in a forthcoming strategy for the ELI. The objective will be to give NCI students practical experience of assessments, evaluations and research methods in real-life situations, while the data can be used by ELI as evidence of outcomes and impact. Although the first year of delivery evolved naturally due to the enthusiasm and positive relationship building of the staff in the practice, research and academic streams, formal plans are necessary to ensure continued smooth implementation of this valuable knowledge exchange programme.

Conclusion

The benefits of knowledge exchange were exemplified in this collaboration with evidence of learning occurring for both the practitioners, academics and students. Actively engaging students in learning about early years’ practice and the application of the research which informs their studies lays the foundation for good research-practitioners who will understand the important connections between research, policy and practice. Similarly, providing specialist lectures on the most current research in developmental psychology for PCHP Home Visitors and other practitioners places a high value on the evidence-based nature of early years’ interventions and the important work of Home Visitors in the PCHP.
References


The Digital Transition; ICT in Childhood and Early Childhood Settings in Ireland

Lorraine O’Connor, Early Childhood Ireland

Abstract

This paper will explore the digital transition of children from their homes to early childhood settings in Ireland. It will discuss children’s engagement with information and communication technologies (ICT) in childhood and the place of ICT in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland. Young children live in a world of interactive ICT. They are growing up at ease with digital devices which are rapidly becoming the tools of the culture at home, and their early years setting. This paper is not about ‘detoxing’ childhood from ICT but rather examining the role of ICT in the lives of pre-school children, and the position of screen media with ECCE settings in Ireland.

Introduction

ICT stands for ‘information and communication technologies’. This term is now widely used in educational research, policy, and practice. ‘From birth, today’s children are growing up in an environment that is saturated with media culture- on screens such as television, movies, computers, tablets, MP3 players, E-Readers, Smartphones, and more almost every day’. (Levin, 2013:1). For the purpose of this paper, the aspect of ICT to be examined will primarily be screen media. Specific emphasis will be placed on the pre-school child, defined here as a child between the ages of 3-5 years. Irish based literature and research will be examined, and international research will be drawn on to enrich and enhance understanding.
The Context of ICT in Childhood

Ireland has the highest proportion of children in the EU. In 2011, there were 1,148,687 children in Ireland, accounting for 25% of the population (DCYA, 2012a). In today’s society, we know and understand more about children than ever before. The digital age is a new phenomenon affecting children. Children are born into a society immersed in ICT, and in recent years there has been an explosion in child-directed ICT, so much so that the child born with this access is being referred to as the ‘digital child’ (Elkind, 2003). Consequently, children are increasingly engaging in a ‘digital world’. Christakis & Garrison (2009) suggest that to understand children and ICT, there are two aspects to consider; the amount of time children spend with ICT and how children spend time with ICT. Through exploring both childhood and ICT, we can begin to understand the role of ICT within children’s worlds, and how children are engaging with it. Simultaneously, the time occupied with screen media will be understood.

Childhood

Aries (1962) explored the concept of childhood as a distinct stage in life, with its own attributes. Believing children were separate ‘beings’ to adults, he considered childhood as a time of ‘innocence’ which was time-linked and context linked. This suggests childhood is transient and evolutionary. As a result, ‘childhood’ will differ for each child, depending on the time and place which childhood is taking place. However, play is central to childhood and is a common characteristic and a natural behaviour of children worldwide (Kernan, 2007). ‘Play is a natural and universal human impulse … adults never have to make children play, and only rarely do we have to help children play. Adults have to let children play’ (Shier, 2010:19)

Axline (1947) speaks of play as a key feature of childhood, but says that defining play is difficult as it has many forms and guises. However, Huizinga (1938) believes play can be described as providing a child with a ‘magic circle’. Through this, we can see that the essence of play is ‘the ability to ‘lose’ sense of time through one’s own experience of the world’ (Gleave and Cole-Hamilton, 2012:19). It means ‘encountering the world in an exciting relationship, full of mystery, risk, adventure’ (Tonucci, 2006:186)

Thus, play becomes a space separate from the adult world, where children can explore their feelings, experiences and understandings. Play can be anywhere, with any person or object. ‘Play’ is considered as the activity, while playfulness is a choice; a choice which the child makes to participate and become ‘playful’
(O’Connor, 2014). As it is a reflection of the child’s world, it can be anywhere, with any person or object, and it does not necessarily have an end goal. Children will choose to engage; they cannot be made to play. Mirroring what children already know, play provides the setting for extending knowledge, skills and understandings in a way that makes sense to them at that particular time (Axline, 1947). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) well-known ecological theory of development places the child at the centre of a hierarchal system, through which the systems surrounding the child impact on the individual child’s being. He considered that the immediate surroundings of the child such as family, and community directly affect the child. Sequentially, the society in which the child was engaged in would also alter their being. From this, it can be suggested the notion of ‘free’ play may alter as society is progressing and evolving.

Children recognise play as a key element of their being. This was shown through research carried out by Clark and Moss (2001) in the UK which found that when children aged 3-6 years old were asked about the most important aspect of preschool, all the children responded with ‘play’! Within Irish research carried out by Downey et al. (2007), these findings were corroborated, and it was discovered that where children were given the choice in their play, the majority would make their own fun outdoors. In a separate Irish study by O’Connor (2012), it was revealed that children living in rural areas enjoyed more time to play outside, compared to children from middle sized towns and cities. A key finding showed children from disadvantaged areas were in fact playing the most, and had the most freedom when outdoors (O’Connor, 2012). This suggests that play has been altered at a cultural level, and also raises the question of how children from disadvantaged areas have maintained a higher level of play compared to children from other parts of Ireland. It may be concluded that the background and location of the child will impact on play opportunities which are afforded.

**Children and Screen Media**

Children’s engagement with ICT is seen more than any other activity except sleeping in some studies, with children of preschool age in the USA watching a minimum of two hours of television a day (Elkind, 2008). As a result, Elkind (2002) claims, the traditional setting for children’s play has changed in that the traditional idea of free and spontaneous play is disappearing and ICT is taking its place. A recent Scottish study by McPake et al. (2012) found that a family’s attitude to ICT at home was an important factor in influencing a child’s relationship with it. A study of parental attitudes to play involving 2,004 parents and carried out in the UK on behalf of Ribena Plus by Trajectory (2012a, 2012b,
2012c) found that almost one fifth of parents admitted to buying toys and video games for their children to keep them indoors. One worrying claim by Sigman (2012) is that a child born in modern society, by the time they have reached 7 years of age, will have spent a full year staring at screens (tablets, computers, TVs).

On the other hand, Corsaro (2011) believes children’s ‘free time’ has become increasingly institutionalised, and children are not given the opportunity to ‘be’ children through fears for their safety. In the last decade, parents have become increasingly anxious about children’s safety, consequently, it is impacting on their play opportunities. Child panic is not a new phenomenon; however, it is becoming a ‘social norm’ for younger children to be allowed out only when accompanied by an adult (Kernan and Devine, 2010). The boundaries for children have constricted, and modern day children are increasingly protected and detached from society (Strandell, 2007; White & Stoecklin, 1997). In 2014, one in five children aged four and younger had TVs in their bedrooms, and 90% have access to a touch screen in their home (Levin, 2013, Formby, 2014). This supports Elkind’s (2002) claim that opportunities for spontaneous play are decreasing, and ICT is taking its place. All of this means that we need to think about ICT and its key role in preschool children’s childhood in Ireland.

The Digital Transition

According to Hayes (2014), children should not be distanced from society; their worlds should be linked. Children’s experiences of early childhood education should reflect and connect with their experiences in the wider world. Since the introduction in Ireland of the Free Pre-school Year, access to early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings from the age of 3 years old has become almost universal. In 2013, 68,000 children engaged with early years setting through the Free Pre-school Year. This equates to 94% of qualifying children (DCYA, 2013). As outlined in the previous sections, ICT now pervades our society, and digital literacy has become an essential skill. Therefore, ICT matters in early childhood education, as it is already an integral aspect of many young children’s lives (Bolstad, 2004). As a result, conversation needs to progress from Should young children use ICT? to How can we use ICT with young children to maximize its benefits? (Daugherty et al, 2014; NAEYC, 2012).

Hayes (2013:6) writes that ‘children have a right to expect that their early years setting, wherever they are and whatever type, will challenge and excite them… and enhance their overall development.’ Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum
Framework (NCCA, 2009) expresses a vision of early learning which celebrates the uniqueness of children as young learners, and emphasises the importance of providing them with experiences which are relevant and meaningful to them. Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education mentions the use of ICT for work with adults and children in services (Síolta, 2005). Both Aistear and Síolta make particular reference to relevant and meaningful learning experiences. Best practice in ECCE, therefore, is to integrate and reflect the world of the child and society, and this includes the use of ICT to support learning.

**ICT in Early Childhood Care and Education Settings**

There are various types of ICT which may be utilized in ECCE settings; however, for the purpose of this paper, specific focus is on the use of screen media within early years settings. Screen media includes television, computers, tablets, MP3 players, E-Readers. The following discussion is on the current position of ICT in the early years, and the role of ICT to enhance practice.

More than ever, children are entering early year’s settings with a broad knowledge of ICT. For children, it does not represent a new world, or the future, but the reality of their world now. While it is not the ‘only’ thing, it is certainly important, and early childhood educators may indeed be ‘missing the boat’ if they do not engage with it (Parette et al., 2009). There is also some evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not experience the range of opportunities to use different kinds of ICT that children from more advantaged backgrounds experience (Daugherty et al., 2014). If ICT is excluded entirely from early childhood settings, children may miss some of the opportunities it can provide. ICT can be used to support and enrich children’s learning and play experiences, but its effective use depends not just on access but on the adult’s role as facilitator and supporter (Daugherty et al., 2014).

ICT in ECCE is not a new phenomenon. In the 1930s, French educator Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) introduced a printing press into the classroom which children could use to reproduce texts they had written themselves, and this might be thought of as a precursor to using ICT in education (Kalas, 2010). Many countries such as Scotland, the UK, Australia & New Zealand have recently developed, or are developing, ICT strategies for early childhood education, while others are currently creating such frameworks (Kalas, 2010).

However, with the exception of supporting children with learning difficulties, ICT has not been fully integrated into pedagogic planning in international
practice, and the global use of ICT within early childhood care and education settings is minimal (Kalas, 2010). Similar findings were reported in a small-scale Irish study by McDermott (2012).

The most current Irish research, which was carried out by Early Childhood Ireland (2014), revealed 81% of educators believe ICT has a place in early childhood settings; however, ICT was not integrated into the curriculum in 79% of services. This could be due to the majority (92%) of the educators not receiving training and consequently, 67% of survey participants feeling only ‘somewhat’ confident in using it (Early Childhood Ireland, 2014). This supports Bolstad’s findings that ‘decisions regarding ICT are influenced by such factors as educators’ own level of confidence with ICT, and their beliefs about learning and teaching in the early childhood years’ (2004: ix). In many instances, however, practitioners are advocates of the educational value of ICT. Early Childhood Ireland (2014) found 83% of educators believe that ICT assists children to learn new skills. Daugherty et al. (2014) state however that the role of the adult as a knowledge facilitator is crucial to the development of these skills.

As with all new ventures, there are challenges and difficulties. Challenges which practitioners face may include using ICT for ICT’s sake, rather than as a means to an end (NAEYC, 2012). Without direction, examples, and support for practitioner’s own professional learning, the use of ICT within early years settings may not be as effective as it might be. Practitioners can and will make their own decisions about the nature and degree of ICT use in children’s learning, guided by their level of confidence in using ICT, and their beliefs about appropriate pedagogy in the early years (Bolstad, 2004). Effective professional development and guidance will support practitioners in developing new confidence in working with ICT, in ways that are compatible with their existing approach to ECCE (Bolstad, 2004) and that are appropriate for the children in their settings, taking into account the children’s ages, developmental levels, interests, capabilities and so on (NAEYC, 2012). Further, practitioners need to be aware of the necessity of safeguarding the development and well-being of the child (Walshe, 2012; Kane and Walsh, 2015): protecting their right to privacy, protecting them from exposure to inappropriate content, and ensuring their physical well-being- limiting screen time for younger children, for example, and ensuring that children have plenty of time to be physically active indoors and outside each day.

Focus is growing on practitioners using ICT with children, as a tool to support and scaffold children’s experiences, or to strengthen relationships between
children, practitioners, and families. Daugherty et al., (2014) and the NAEYC (2012) both use the word ‘tool’ to describe the use of ICT. The NAEYC (2012) Position Statement on technology and interactive media says that ‘When used intentionally and appropriately, technology and interactive media are effective tools to support learning and development’. Tools are designed for a specific purpose, and a specific time, so this poses the question: how can using the tool help support children’s learning? Like any tool, ICT should be used thoughtfully and purposely to support learning and build specific skills and abilities. However, critics argue that the integration of ICT in early childhood settings and childhood remains problematic. Often scepticism about the relevance of ICT as a part of the educational provision for young children it is based on the image of a passive child sitting thoughtlessly at a computer pressing buttons and being superficially entertained by fancy graphics on the screen (Hayes and Whitebread, 2006). When used appropriately and purposefully, ICT can improve literacy, numeracy, science, and motor skills. ICT can enrich the learning environment and contribute to young children’s learning (Bolstad, 2004). However, this depends on the choices practitioners make about which tools to select, how and when to use these. When ICT is used as one tool in a larger toolbox, this can maximise its benefits, while continuing to allow for the use of other learning tools and activities (Daugherty et al., 2014).

To make these choices, practitioners need to be aware of the different tools and what they can do. According to Arthur, Beecher and Downes, (2001), ICT has two roles within the early years; communication resources and play resources, and these will now be discussed.

**ICT as a Play resource**

ICT may be used to enrich and extend children’s play. Vygotsky (1896-1934) spoke of the Zone of Proximal Development whereby the adult scaffolds children’s learning. Taking Vygotsky’s idea, practitioners may use ICT to scaffold children’s learning (Glaubke, 2007). Children learn effectively when they can shape their environment and construct knowledge for themselves through playful activity. Role play is an imitation of reality in which children create play ‘themes’ and act them out by participating in various roles. Screen media can also be integrated to the environment to extend play. Morgan and Siraj-Blatchford (2013) suggest that props can be added to play for everyday topics, so that children can explore the use of ICT in everyday life, for example creating an X-Ray in hospital play, or making up the customer’s bill (shop). Other opportunities to embed screen media into role play include the addition of mobile phones (non-functional/
functional), digital weighing machines and pretending to use the internet to buy things. Children can, with help, also use digital media to research topics that they are interested in, and again with adult help, record their findings; digital media can also provide them with ideas for play. ‘Experiences that challenge children to develop new concepts and processes, especially when scaffolded by an adult or peers, are highly appropriate for young children’s learning whether they be with manipulatives or symbolic media based on print or digital technologies’ (Arthur et al., 2001: 6).

As outlined earlier, outdoor play is important for children. Screen media should extend and enrich children’s outdoor play, and their awareness of their surrounding environment. Practitioners could share videos and pictures with children of the natural world which they may not be able physically witness or have access to. Morgan and Siraj-Blatchford (2013) write about children integrating screen media into their play outdoors, believing the choice as educators is not whether we are to include or exclude screen media in early childhood education but rather how we can make the most of the opportunities which it offers. The NAEYC (2012: 7) concurs: ‘Interactions with technology and media should be playful and support creativity, exploration, pretend play, active pay and outdoor activities’.

To be effective, screen media based activities must be built into a wider curriculum, and it is important to evaluate both when these activities are likely to be most appropriate and when traditional activities are likely to be more effective. Screen media should be used only where it best suited to support learning outcomes and help children build skills (Bolstad, 2004). Although screen media has the potential to provide benefits in certain areas, it is not a substitute for many of the other early learning tools, such as open ended materials or outdoor play.

**Communication**

Screen media can be a medium for communication between the child, parent and educator. Children should have access to an environment where they are viewed as competent and active learners. ICT can provide a context for collaboration, co-operation, and positive learning experiences between children, or between children and adults. Siraj-Blatchford (2006) considers the tool should become a medium for children to share their experiences, and likewise engage parents. Children and practitioners may use screen media together to document and reflect on children’s learning, or to share children’s learning with parents, or
other practitioners. This can be through photos, videos, or audio recordings of activities and reviewing these together, or sharing them with parents. Aistear, the Irish early childhood curriculum framework, suggests that communication is about ‘children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes’ (NCCA, 2009: 34). ICT can support inclusive practice and may provide unique opportunities for scaffolding the learning and development of all children. Furthermore, it can level the playing field for children with additional needs by supporting communication or play.

Brooker and Siraj-Blatchford (2002) through their research found the use of a computer by bilingual children was especially valuable. Many children in Ireland are multilingual, whereby English is their second language. In 2011, there were 199 different nationalities in Ireland. The same year, there were 93,005 foreign national children in Ireland, 25,775 children were under 4 years of age (DCYA, 2012). The 2012 census revealed Polish is the second language of Ireland, and Irish is third, followed by French, Lithuanian and German (CSO; 2012). Screen media can provide a shared focus and experience for children who do not share the same spoken language. As a result, this can contribute toward a positive, collaborative, and language enriched multicultural learning environment (Brooker and Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). O’Dwyer (2006) highlights that children develop a sense of identity from experience- they learn about themselves and others through encounters and interactions. ECCE may be the first place where they encounter diversity and difference. Children as young as 3 years can display signs of prejudice and negative attitudes towards difference (Vandenbroeck, 2000). Through removing the language barriers, ICT can positively support the identity and belonging of all children, not treating everyone the same but rather creating an environment which diversity is celebrated.

The use of screen media is, however, only one method of supporting children and families who are bilingual and other practices should be in place. At the same time, removing the language barriers, and engaging in inclusive practice, means that the child’s sense of self can be positively supported. ICT can also support partnerships with parents; new technologies offer early years practitioners new opportunities to share information and resources with parents, and to maintain regular communication with them.

**Technological literacy**

Blatchford and Whitebread (2003) believe it is vital that young children begin
to develop ‘technological literacy’. Screen media is considered a new mode of literacy for the twenty-first century (Siraj-Blatchford & Whitebread, 2003). Children will need to be literate in the communication modes of their culture and be able to make, and understand the ‘texts’, which are no longer confined to words on paper. For young children, this could mean developing skills in the use of images and sounds to convey information, ideas, and feelings. Screen media presents many possibilities for doing this (Bolstad, 2004). Van Scoter and Boss (2002) discuss many ways in which ICT can make rich contributions to children’s literacy development, in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. One way in which this might be done is to introduce video recorders or cameras for the children to document their learning and their experiences in the ECCE setting. Providing children with recordable devices such as these views children as ‘experts in their own lives’, and offers a creative framework for listening to young children’s perspectives.

Conclusion

To sum up, more than ever, children are engaging in a digital world. This has implications for their experiences of childhood, both at home and in early years settings. There is evidence that some children may be engaging less in spontaneous play; there is also evidence that children differ in their ability to access interactive media and in their use of it. The prevalence of screen media has implications also for children’s transition from home to early years settings. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) suggests that the ECCE environment should be a reflection of the outside world which the child is engaging in. However, many early years settings are screen-free environments, and ICT is not integrated into the curriculum. The question posed by this paper, therefore, is: should children have access to screen media within early year’s settings, in order to make a seamless transition more likely? Or should early years settings provide an environment where their play is uninterrupted or influenced by screen media? The answer to this will require us to question the role of early years’ settings, and to ask whether their role is based on care for children and childhood, or on educating children to become active participants in their digital worlds?

We have seen that the use of screen media within ECCE has two key roles- a play resource and as a method of communication. Screen media can enrich and extend children’s play, and also their communication. The practitioner can effectively integrate screen media within the curriculum through using it as a tool. Therefore, when screen media are used, they should be purposefully, and the content should be meaningful to the child’s play and learning. Screen media
can potentially enhance the learning environment in early childhood education settings, support communication and learning, widen children’s knowledge of the world, and, with careful planning, encourage the development of skills and dispositions. However, it should be integrated cautiously into early years settings: practitioners must be mindful of both the content and context of its use. To achieve this, there are three recommendations to ensure children and childhood is supported appropriately. First, training should be provided for early years practitioners to support and educate the integration of screen media into early years settings, and to develop their skills as facilitators of learning through ICT. Second, there needs to be consultation with the children and the parents in early years settings, regarding screen media followed by an agreed ICT strategy. Finally, national research is needed to examine current practices and trends within early childhood care and educations settings. In doing so, we can get an accurate picture of children’s interactions with ICT in early years settings, and subsequently provide an environment which is relevant and meaningful for all children.
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Resource Teachers and Play Therapists: Views on the Value of Resource Teachers using Therapeutic Play as a Support for Children Presenting with Behavioural Issues

Olivea Comer

Introduction

The significance of play in children’s lives has been well documented; numerous theorists and scholars have highlighted the importance of play as an integral part of childhood. Froebel (1903, cited in Landreth, 2005: 28) described play as ‘the highest development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child’s soul…Children’s play is not mere sport. It is full of meaning and import’. Play is pivotal to a healthy childhood experience, as the self-directed nature of play contributes to children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical wellbeing (Goldstein, 2012). Play often mirrors what is important in children’s lives. While all types of play are significant for a child’s creativity and imagination, spontaneous play is the most critical type as it facilitates freedom of choice and personal enjoyment (Piaget, 1952). Sutton-Smith (1997) proposed that it is through play that children learn; when engaged in play children develop the neurological foundations that promote language, creativity, and problem solving. Furthermore, play enables children to expand their learning beyond what they are capable of on their own. According to Vygotsky (1967, cited in Goodwin, 2012:98) ‘In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.’ It is during play that children reach a level beyond their age as they explore their emotions and experiences in different ways. Play is important in children’s lives as it is through play that children can create their own world where they can explore and master being in control of situations in ways not conceivable in the real world (White, 1966, cited in Schaeffer 1980:95).
The Association for Play Therapy (in Getz, 2011, 20) defined Play Therapy as the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development.

Play Therapy Ireland (2016) defines therapeutic play as an activity based intervention which seeks to improve a child’s emotional wellbeing through the use of play and the creative arts.

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate resource teachers’ views of therapeutic play as a support for children presenting with behavioural issues. An analysis of literature emphasising the effectiveness of play therapy and therapeutic play as a support for children with behavioural difficulties is included. The role of resource teachers is also outlined. The results of a research project exploring the use by resource teachers of therapeutic play are presented. Furthermore, play therapists’ views on resource teachers using therapeutic play to reduce behavioural issues in young children are discussed.

The objectives of this research project were as follows:

1. To explore the value of therapeutic play as a support for children with behaviour difficulties among a group of resource teachers
2. To explore the impact of play therapy and therapeutic play on young children’s behaviour.

To investigate play therapists’ views on the value of resource teachers using therapeutic play as a support for children in their care presenting with behavioural issues.

**Play therapy**

Play therapy is a therapeutic intervention designed to assist children who may be experiencing psychosocial difficulties in their lives. Through play children can communicate feelings and experiences that they are unable to express verbally (Giordano et al, 2005). Play therapy sessions support children by giving them the tools to prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and help them achieve their potential growth and development (Association of Play Therapy, nd.). Techniques used in play therapy address several pertinent presenting problems such as anxiety, depression, impulsivity, distractibility, and noncompliance (Jennings, 1999). Play therapy aids children through allowing them express and communicate their feelings through play (Ray, 2011). According to Jennings
(1999), a play therapist recognises the child’s wants, needs, and feelings, which are expressed through play. Materials used in play therapy, such as sand, toys, or art and other play-based experiences provided in play therapy, afford children an age-appropriate and emotionally safe means to express their feelings and experiences. Therapists are aware that each toy selected by the child is a representation of what the child is trying to communicate.

Landreth (2002 : 529) states:

Play therapy is a well-thought out, philosophically conceived, developmentally based and research-supported approach to helping children cope with and overcome the problems they experience in the process of living their lives. The roots of play therapy are in understanding play, which has long been recognised as having a significant role in children’s lives.

There are two basic forms of play therapy, directive and non-directive. According to Gil (1991), the main difference between directive and non-directive approaches is the role that the therapist takes on in the process. The directive approach is where the therapist takes responsibility for the guidance and analysis of the play interactions. The non-directive approach is where the therapist will leave the responsibility and direction of the therapeutic process to the child (Rasmussen & Cunningham, 1995).

According to Schaefer (2010), no single form of play therapy has been proven to satisfactorily treat the wide range of childhood disorders prevalent today. Therefore, Schaefer proposes that therapists should use an integrative form of play therapy, using different methodologies to formulate an intervention specifically personalized for each individual child. Play therapy incorporates an extensive array of techniques and approaches such as fantasy, sensori-motor, sand and game play. Play therapy techniques ‘help children become aware of and express their feelings; manage anger; improve self-control; reduce fear, anxiety, and depression; increase empowerment; and enhance problem-solving skills’ (Schaefer, 2002: 515). According to Schaefer (2002), play therapy is a valuable intervention for children presenting with behavioural difficulties.

The value of play therapy and therapeutic play for children with behavioural difficulties

According to Schaefer (2011), play therapy for children is an age-appropriate intervention which has proven to be valuable in reducing a number of common problems of pre-schoolers, such as apprehensive and hostile behaviours.
Moreover, Landreth (2001) suggests that although children engage in play activities for pure enjoyment, play has therapeutic properties that enable children with behavioural problems to achieve an insight and an understanding of reality which supports them in coping with anxieties and conflicts in their lives. Results from a meta-analytic study by Bratton et al. (2005, cited in Drewes et al., 2010) support the use of play therapy as an intervention for treating childhood mental health problems, including behavioural disorders. The study addressed disruptive behaviours in children and examined 94 studies on play therapy from 1942 to 2000. The study found that children who took part in the play therapy sessions improved significantly over children who did not (Drewes et al., 2010). Moreover, research conducted over a ten year period by Play Therapy UK (2011) on effective ways of alleviating children’s emotional, behavioural, and mental health problems, found that between 74% and 83% of children receiving play therapy showed a positive change in their behaviour. Play is a stress release for children and it is through play children learn to tolerate frustrations and practice new skills in a way that is meaningful to them (Landreth, 2002). Children can find it difficult to articulate what they are feeling and that is often accentuated when they find themselves dealing with bigger life issues. According to Moustakas (1953, cited in Landreth, 2001:241), ‘when a child is able to release and express strong negative emotions and remains accepted by the therapist, the emotions lose some of their intensity and the child experiences less disturbance’. The relationship between the child and therapist is significant in helping children deal with difficulties they are facing in their lives.

Play Therapy Ireland (2016) suggests that therapeutic play may assist in treating or alleviating emotional or psychological problems in young children. Therapeutic play has its foundation in play therapy. However, therapeutic play solely focuses on play, and therefore, differs from play therapy which focuses on the therapy itself (McMahon, 2009). Therapeutic play can offer a way for children to express what is troubling them and help them to understand and cope with their feelings. McMahon (2009:70), proposes that therapeutic play, “facilitates communication between child and adult about matters of which the child is aware but which are hard to discuss, either because the subject is painful or embarrassing or because the child lacks the ability to use other forms of expression”. Training in therapeutic play enables practitioners to become more aware of the feelings a child is communicating and assists the practitioner in reflecting these accurately. The ability to reflect the child’s play is an essential part of therapeutic play training, as it facilitates a child’s ability to comprehend and manage their feelings (McMahon, 2009). Play Therapy Ireland proposes
that training in therapeutic play may assist practitioners by providing them with tools to prevent mild behavioural issues in young children escalating into more serious problems. Courses in therapeutic play are specifically designed for individuals working with children, such as, early year’s practitioners, teachers, clinical & educational psychologists, amongst others (Academy of Play and Child Psychotherapy (APAC), 2014). Although sessions with an established play therapist are proven effective in helping children modify their behaviours, not all children have access to outside agencies due to familial circumstances. Therefore, teachers trained in therapeutic play may provide at-risk children with the opportunity to access much needed assistance within a school setting. Moreover, children spend much of their time at school and have established relationships with their teachers. Consequently, a school may prove a more comfortable environment for at-risk children to receive assistance. As both play therapy and therapeutic play are relationship based approaches, the positive relationship developed between the child and adult is instrumental in helping the child to develop a positive sense of self and the ability to regulate emotions and behaviour (Axline, 1969). Therefore, play therapy and therapeutic play where the practitioner is highly accepting of the child may be beneficial in helping children with behavioural difficulties.

Access to courses in play therapy and therapeutic play skill are available in several locations around Ireland. A postgraduate certificate in therapeutic play is conducted over one year on a part-time basis; the course consists of a taught element and one hundred hours of clinical placement. A two year postgraduate diploma in play therapy is also available as a part-time blended learning program, which consists of a taught element and a one hundred hour clinical placement. Applicants must have at least 2 years’ experience working with children and have a working knowledge of the basic psychological theories (APAC, 2014). The cost and length of courses available in therapeutic play may pose a barrier for resource teachers seeking to enhance their practice or add to their existing qualifications.

**Role of resource teachers**

Resource teachers support children with additional educational needs in mainstream schools in Ireland, often working with the children outside of the regular educational classroom (National Council for Special Education, 2014). They may adapt the general education curriculum or employ special educational strategies and techniques to help children with mild intellectual or learning difficulties, mild communication and language difficulties, mild behavioural
difficulties, physical or sensory difficulties, or children presenting with conditions such as dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (NCSE, 2014). The identification of behavioural issues in young children is not a straightforward process, as the spectrum of behaviours can vary from mild to clinically problematic. The National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) (2010) define behavioural issues as the following,

Difficulties which a young person is experiencing which act as a barrier to their personal, social, cognitive and emotional development. These difficulties may be communicated through internalising and/or externalising behaviours. Relationships with self, others and community may be affected and the difficulties may interfere with the pupil’s own personal and educational development or that of others.

Children’s behavioural difficulties are often conceptualized as externalising or internalising behaviours. Externalising behaviours may include inattentiveness, distractibility and impulsiveness, impaired social interaction and aggressive or anti-social behaviour. Characteristics associated with internalising behaviours may include sadness, anxiety, social withdrawal, depression or obsessive behaviours (Special Education Support Services [SESS], 2011). According to a study conducted by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2010, the number of children attending mainstream schools presenting with mild to severe emotional and/or behavioural disturbances in receipt of additional resource hours was 6,900. The most prevalent types of disorders disclosed in children are as follows;

- Emotional disorders, such as, depression, anxiety states, phobias and psychosomatic disorders
- Oppositional defiant and conduct disorders, such as, non-compliance, stealing, truancy aggression and more persistent delinquency
- Attention deficit disorder, with or without hyperactivity
- Major psychiatric disorders, such as, psychosis, which increasingly occurs from puberty onwards
- Developmental delay and autism
- Eating disorders, such as, anorexia nervosa
- Elimination disorders, such as, wetting and soiling

Children presenting with behavioural issues pose numerous challenges for
teachers. Behavioural problems in the classroom can place teachers under significant levels of stress which can affect the well-being of children and teachers alike. A child’s negative behaviour may have a detrimental impact on their self-learning and social development, furthermore it may also impinge on the learning and social development of their peers (SESS, 2011). Resource teachers working with children with mild behavioural difficulties may use techniques such as behaviour modification and positive reinforcement to promote socially acceptable behaviour (NCSE, 2013). They may develop individual educational plans to support a child’s learning and development, and liaise with a child’s teacher, guardians, and other professionals working with the child. The National Council for Special Education propose that resource teachers ‘should be trained and sufficiently equipped to access and teach all students with special educational needs and to advise and assist other teachers in devising and implementing particular interventions’ (NCSE, 2013 :62). Currently in Ireland there are over 5,700 resource teachers working in approximately 3,750 schools (NCSE, 2013).

Research Design

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools were utilized for the purpose of this research project. Quantitative research methods in the form of questionnaires provide the main source of primary data to address this study. Qualitative research was used to explore perspectives, feelings, and experiences through a holistic framework in order to get a better understanding of the subject matter (Holloway and Wheeler, 2002). Qualitative research methods in the form of interviews were also used and provide the main source of secondary data. Semi structured interviews were used, as they tend to be flexible and respond to the direction which the interviewee takes. Throughout the interview process, what the interviewees saw as relevant and important relating to this research topic was highlighted.

In contrast, quantitative research, a formal systematic approach which incorporates numerical data, was also used to obtain information relating to this study (Burns and Grove, 2009). The questionnaires included open-ended and closed questions. Online surveys were administered to resource teachers currently working with children presenting with behavioural difficulties. The aim of the questionnaire was to seek their views on the professional training they received, the daily challenges they face when working with children presenting with behavioural issues and their views on therapeutic play. The second questionnaire was administered to practicing play therapists throughout
Ireland who currently work with children presenting with behavioural difficulties. The questionnaires aimed to establish the play therapists’ opinion on the effectiveness of therapeutic play as a support for children presenting with behavioural difficulties, and their opinion of training in therapeutic play as a support for resource teachers’ practice. There were several disadvantages to using questionnaires as there is no way of telling how truthful the respondent is being. Furthermore, participants may interpret questions differently.

**Sampling Method**

The chosen sampling method for this research project was purposeful sampling, as each participant was selected because of their particular expertise as resource teachers or play therapists. For this study it was deemed more important to select participants who are well-placed and well informed on this research topic rather than a large sample of resource teachers. All chosen participants are professionals who work directly with children and have an understanding of interventions for children with behavioural difficulties. The questionnaires were sent out to a group of resource teachers currently working in Irish primary schools, and a group of play therapists. Five interviews were conducted: one with a play therapist and four with resource teachers. To better understand if training in therapeutic play enhances resource teachers’ practice, two of the participating resource teachers are trained in therapeutic play and two are not.

**Limitations of this study**

All data collected was from professionals who work directly with children and have an understanding of interventions for children with behavioural difficulties. The research is, however, limited due to the scale of the study and time constraints. Only a small number of participants took part, therefore the information gathered does not represent the majority of resource teachers working in Ireland. Further, many participants are trained in therapeutic play and play therapy and, therefore, there may be an element of bias to their answers.

**Results & Findings**

The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions. A total of 60 questionnaires were distributed to resource teachers; 32 were returned, a response rate of 53.3%. A further total of 60 questionnaires were sent to play therapists, 18 of which were returned, a response rate of 30%. Many of the respondents wrote additional comments on their questionnaires which provided further important qualitative
and quantitative data. The following is an analysis of the data collected from the questionnaires and the five interviews. The responses were categorised into six major themes, three of which are presented in this paper. For the purpose of this study the interviewees are referred to in the following way: resource teachers trained in therapeutic play are referred to as R1, R2, and the resource teachers not trained in therapeutic play are referred to as R3 and R4. The play therapist is referred to as PT.

The three themes presented in this paper are:

- Resource teachers’ views on the professional training they received
- Resource teachers’ and play therapists’ views on therapeutic play as a support for children presenting with behavioural issues
- Benefits of therapeutic play in reducing behavioural issues in children

**Professional training to support children presenting with behavioural issues**

**1. Responses from Resource Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 4: Do you feel that you received adequate skills during your professional training to work and communicate with children presenting with behavioural issues?</th>
<th>Responses (number)</th>
<th>Responses (%)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Total</td>
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**Figure 1: Responses from resource teachers (n=32) to the question: Do you feel that you received adequate skills during your professional training to work and communicate with children presenting with behavioural issues?**

One of the major findings of this research indicated that 77.88% of the participating resource teachers feel they did not receive adequate training to work with children presenting with behavioural issues (figure 1). This finding is important, as it emphasises that resource teachers do not feel that their current professional training fully equips them with the skills to work with children in their care. One respondent commented that “In theory I have received adequate skills, but the reality of dealing with a child with special education needs is a lot different”. Furthermore, one of the interviewees stated:
You are taught an awful lot about education, and an awful lot about methods of teaching children, but when it comes to actual behavioural problems, that is a whole area that isn’t really looked at in the training teachers receive (R1)

Resource teachers regularly work with children who are vulnerable and whose learning is often hampered by emotional or cognitive difficulties. Therefore the implementation of new and innovative skills to support such children in all areas could be beneficial to resource teacher training.

Many of the teacher respondents in this study indicated that the main challenges they face are the lack of training, and lack of support, resources and time (figure 2). Question 9 in the survey asked respondents ‘What challenges do you face most when working with children presenting with behavioural difficulties?’ All 32 respondents answered the question, with 60.72% identifying one or more of the five challenges identified in the chart below.

**Figure 2: Five most common challenges respondents face when working with children presenting with behavioural difficulties**

Play therapy and therapeutic play are intended to aid children based on their most effective form of expression and communication, namely play (Ray, 2011). The results of the questionnaires and interviews indicate that resource teachers who participated in this study have a positive view of therapeutic play. 90.63% of questionnaire respondents stated that they use therapeutic play skills to some extent in their daily practice. Furthermore, 83.87% feel the use of therapeutic play has benefited the children in their care presenting with behavioural issues.
1. Responses from play therapists

When questioned whether they felt resource teachers would benefit from training in therapeutic play, 88.24% of the 18 play therapists who participated in the survey indicated that they would. However, respondents felt that courses in therapeutic play skills should be specialised, with proper training and support in place and adapted to facilitate resource teacher’s needs. In additional comments, one respondent highlighted the benefits of training in therapeutic play stating the following,

As a former teacher, I am well aware of the vital need for teachers to have a skills set that would enable them to create new possibilities in their relationships with the children they teach. Cognitive learning is often hampered by emotional issues that the child is unable to talk about or manage. Therefore trying to teach anything to a child who is emotionally unsettled results in frustration on both sides. The high numbers of assessments that are carried out on children who are struggling to pay attention or concentrate in the classroom are often misleading. Therapeutic play skills would provide an option for exploring possible approaches in helping a child to regulate their emotions and therefore be calm enough to concentrate and pay attention to their learning in an educational context (Play therapist).

Many of the participating play therapists made additional comments relating to the benefits of resource teachers undertaking courses in therapeutic play. They outlined the advantages of training (fig 3) and suggested that therapeutic play would add a new dimension to resource teachers’ practice, such as enabling practitioners to gain a greater understanding of children’s behaviour and insight into their actions. The following chart (Fig. 3) indicates the most common reasons resource teachers would benefit from therapeutic play skills, according to participating play therapists.
Benefits of therapeutic play in reducing behavioural issues in children

The findings show that the overall majority of participants in this study value the use of therapeutic play as a support for children presenting with behavioural issues. Unsurprisingly, all of the participating play therapists agreed that in their professional experience, play therapy/therapeutic play is successful in helping reduce behavioural issues in young children. Furthermore, all of them agreed that therapeutic play skills give children the tools to manage their emotions and gain control over their behaviour. Both of the resource teachers trained in therapeutic play skills who participated in this research stated that their training in therapeutic play has given them a different perspective for working and interacting with children presenting with behavioural issues. Interviewee R1 likened her training in therapeutic play to “putting on a new pair of glasses and seeing things differently”. Moreover, she stated, “my relationship with the child would have changed quite differently, in that my approach to them would be perhaps more understanding and perhaps a bit more compassionate”. There is a body of evidence to support the benefits of therapeutic play in reducing behavioural issues in children when implemented properly by trained practitioners. However, it must be noted that there are numerous other considerations to be taken into account regarding the reduction of behavioural issues in young children which are outside of the scope of this study.
Access to training courses in therapeutic play skills

The majority of participating resource teachers agreed that currently there is a lack of training and support for their practice (fig. 1). They recognised that there is a need for continued training to assist their practice and enable them to successfully meet the need of the children in their care presenting with behavioural issues. The play therapist interviewed for this study stated that there are courses available through Play Therapy Ireland. It was also suggested that practitioners who are interested in pursuing training in therapeutic play could undertake a one year certificate in practice based Play Therapy at NUIG. The interviewees trained in therapeutic play and the play therapist interviewed for this study all agreed there is a need for new courses in therapeutic play specifically adapted for resource teachers. The respondents made additional comments regarding the need for more accessible courses; one play therapist respondent stated,

Courses/workshops should be available-but given by fully qualified play therapists who are fully conscious of the impact of the outcome of this kind of work with children. Teachers would require much support while they developed their skills and follow-up should be an essential part of this work. Teachers constantly refer children to me, as they quite simply cannot teach with an ‘acting out’ child in the class. In some cases, play therapy treatment is essential. In other cases, if the teacher knew another way of interacting with upset children, this would reduce the overall stress within the classroom.

The play therapist felt the barriers that resource teachers would face if undertaking training in therapeutic play are lack of affordable courses, time, and clinical experience.

Recommendations

- There is a need for more specialised training for resource teachers working to support children presenting with behavioural issues. There is a need for both pre- and post-qualification training in this area. It would be important also that schools support staff by ensuring on-going training is provided.
- There is also a need for further recognition of the value of therapeutic play as an intervention and support for children presenting with behavioural issues.
• There is very little information in Ireland on the value of therapeutic play as a support for children presenting with behavioural issues. Further studies and research should be conducted in this area.

• There is a need for specialised courses in therapeutic play skills adapted to meet resource teachers’ needs and the needs of the children in their care. This should be considered by the Department of Education.

• More information on courses and the benefits of therapeutic play skills and play therapy should be available to practitioners working with young children. This could be achieved by the Department of Education liaising with Play Therapy Ireland to provide information and training evenings or courses for both practitioners and parents.

Conclusion

This study presented evidence to support the success of therapeutic play in reducing behavioural issues in young children. The study found that play therapists and resource teachers agree that therapeutic play skills would enhance resource teachers practice and benefit the children in their care. Furthermore, the majority of resource teachers who participated in this study are interested in further training in therapeutic play skills: however, there are limited opportunities available for them to do so.

It is evident from data analysed that the majority of resource teachers do not feel they received adequate training to support children in their care presenting with behavioural issues. This is an important finding, as without adequate training it is difficult for resource teachers to meet children’s needs or implement strategies to help them function more effectively in school.

This study also presented the need for new innovative training to support resource teachers in their daily practice. There is limited information and courses available to resource teachers in therapeutic play skills, although the majority of respondents would like to pursue further training in this area. This is something that should be addressed.
Bibliography


Introduction

This paper gives an overview of the implications for quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision, in Ireland. This piece of research aimed to capture the views of stakeholders, namely, parents and practitioners on quality ECEC. This research comes at a time when quality is at the forefront of ECEC discourse, both nationally and internationally. A brief overview of the methodology is presented along with the findings. These indicate a general dissatisfaction within the ECEC sector, with regards to minimal resources and supports for both practitioners and parents. Additionally, this study encapsulates the impact of the over-regulated and disjointed Irish ECEC on key stakeholders. The focus of this study is to give voice to relevant stakeholders on the components of and the challenges which hinder quality ECEC. Illustrating these challenges will facilitate the development of strategies and practical recommendations, for the implementation and maintenance of quality ECEC.

Quality Issues

If you received €16 for every €1 you invested, would you invest? Long-term follow-ups to early childhood intervention programmes in the USA showed returns similar to this (Karoly et al., 2005). Moloney (2011) asserts that government spending in ECEC is a ‘powerful investment’ (2011:4). However, an investigative report ‘A Breach of Trust’, shown by Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE) chronicled the maltreatment of young children in three Early Learning Centres across Ireland. This exposé gave way to debate and discussion vis-à-vis the determinants of
quality in ECEC settings. Teresa Heeney, CEO of Early Childhood Ireland, said ‘there were deafening calls from every political party for essential changes and investment, to improve the quality and standards in ECEC’ (2014, Mar 8). Unfortunately, if quality practices (process and structural) are not improved, the growth of children, society and the economy may be stunted (Doyle et al., 2009; Calman and Whelan, 2005). These practices also relate to the regulations which govern the running of ECEC services.

**The Pre-School Regulations (2006)**

The aim of *The Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations 2006* was to improve the health, safety and welfare of pre-school children. It also aimed to promote positive learning experiences for young children in Early Learning Centres. Garda vetting was made mandatory and the correlation between qualifications and good practice in ECEC was acknowledged. Despite these positive changes, minimum qualifications to work in Early Learning Centres was not specified. Interestingly, studies such as the EPPE longitudinal study showed that in order for teacher instruction to be of high quality, the practitioner must be well versed and knowledgeable in child development theory (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Unsurprisingly, this knowledge mainly comes from the level and type of qualifications held by the practitioner and opportunities to access continued professional development training (Son et al. 2013; Dalli and Urban, 2010).

However, the introduction of the Early Years (Services) Regulations, 2016 (Tusla, 2016b) specific educational requirements have been introduced for ECEC practitioners. All practitioners will be required from December 2016, to hold a major award at FETAC/QQI Level 5 in Childcare. Additionally, ECEC leaders will be required to have obtained a FETAC Level 6 (DCYA, 2015b). However, Barnardos and Start Strong, reflecting on Ireland's model of ECEC, argue that FETAC level 5 is inadequate to provide the quality learning experiences that children need to thrive (Barnardos et al. 2012). Although this level is the minimum requirement to work in ECEC, Moloney (2015) states that 13% of practitioners have not reached this level. This highlights the clear disconnect with best practice as advocated by non-governmental organisations and policy makers.

Furthermore, the importance of the adult/child and peer to peer relationships and interactions were not stressed in the 2006 regulations. Even though research indicates that positive child outcomes are linked to good adult/child relationships (Burchinal et al. 2010). To remedy some of these gaps and omissions,
Síolta: the national quality framework was introduced (Síolta, 2006b), followed by Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework in 2009. Síolta focuses on quality in ECEC, while Aistear (2009) supports all adults who facilitate children’s learning to provide enriching learning experiences (NCCA, 2009). Aistear has four themes which describe how children assimilate new knowledge; these four themes, which are inextricably linked, are Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating and Exploring and Thinking (Aistear, 2009: 2). Although Aistear and Síolta both champion the importance of a high quality ECEC setting, French (2013) insists that implementation remains the key problem for ECEC services. Limited funding and inadequate resources have been identified elsewhere, as some of the main factors which hinder the provision of quality ECEC (Ohi 2014; SCAA, 2012). Therefore, ECEC must be adequately supported financially in order for other strands of quality in ECEC to be realised. Another component which contributes to quality ECEC is a qualified workforce, who have access to ongoing training opportunities (Son et al., 2013).

The importance of qualifications and training in the Early Childhood workforce

The literature consistently conveys the importance of qualified staff who are trained and have relevant experience in the provision of ECEC (Miller and Cable, 2011; Penn and Lloyd, 2011; Hayes, 2007; Fukkink and Lont, 2007; Howes et al. 2003). A report prepared for the European Commission (2011) found that pre-service and in-service training directly inform good practice. In other words, practitioners are more likely to engage with children in a developmentally appropriate way, when they have been trained in child development theory and curriculum planning. On the other hand, Early et al. (2006) contend that there is little correlation between staff qualifications and the quality of the learning environment. As a result of findings such as these, it could be argued that more research is needed into the components which determine quality in ECEC.

The Workforce Development Plan (Department of Education and Skills, 2010) showed that 21% of Early Childhood Educators in Ireland were unqualified, while 45% held a non-nationally accredited qualification. In saying this, there have been strides made in developing a professional workforce in Ireland. The requirements of the ECCE programme for staff in funded services to have minimum levels of qualification has led to significant improvements, with a 2014 survey showing 87% of practitioners in funded services held a NFQ Level 5 or higher (Pobal, 2014). In 2015, €1.5 million was invested in the professional development of practitioners, in the form of the ‘Learner fund 4’ (DCYA, 2015d).
However, Greene and Hayes (2014) call the €3.9 million investment proposed by the government into the training of Early Childhood Educators from 2013-2015 ‘wholly insufficient.’ Madden (2012) asserts that in Ireland obtaining a degree in ECEC can be discouraged, further elaborating that those who obtain degrees, do not get much more in return than those with no training. A similar point was recently made by many respondents in a nation-wide survey of practitioners (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). Qualifications are one of many components which can influence the quality of practice. For the most part, these components are understood as structural and process elements of quality.

**Structural and process elements of quality**

Layzer and Goodson (2006) argue that structural factors such as low adult-child ratios can influence the holistic development of the child. Interestingly, they propound that structural characteristics alone do not determine quality ECEC. These factors range from the qualifications of the educator, to elements such as room temperature and lighting. Perhaps this is why they are frequently taken as indicators of quality because in general, structural components are easily measured and regulated (Paro et al. 2012; Cassidy et al. 2005). Countries such as Germany, Sweden and New Zealand tend to favour this approach (CECDE, 2004). Conversely, there is a general consensus that quality ECEC must incorporate both structural and process elements (Peisner et al. 2010; Ishimine, 2009; Howes et al., 2003) with more emphasis placed on the latter (Anning et al. 2009). Current research seems to validate this view. Mathers et al. (2012) claims that process or dynamic aspects of quality ECEC are primarily intangible, making them harder to quantify. In addition, Gestwiki and Bertrand (2011) maintain that process elements of quality are derived, for the most part, from the experiences of key stakeholders such as parents and practitioners. As demonstrated by Pianta (2006) process elements include the calibre of the relationships within the setting, such as peer-peer interactions. They also comprise the curriculum, as well as the type of resources and materials used in the learning environment (Rentzou and Sakellariou, 2010).

Structural and dynamic aspects of quality ECEC are interlinked. Qualifications and training (which are structural), can inform practitioners on child development and the curriculum, which are dynamic (Síolta, 2006). The OECD (2011) suggests that low staff retention may have a knock on effect on the development of the child because ‘staff provision is less stable’ (2011: 1). For instance, poorly paid staff can give rise to high turnover rates. In keeping with this sentiment, Bergin and Bergin (2009) recommend that in order to foster secure attachment
between a child and an adult, the caregiver must be nurturing, consistent and provide continuity of care. The available evidence seems to suggest that if staff turnover is high, the child may not thrive in school, and their attachment style may be affected. Significantly, in order to reach the desired level of quality, structural and process constituents of ECEC must be developed in unison (Pugh and Duffy, 2013; Maholmes and King, 2012). Although there have been many debates on what quality means, what draws many of these arguments together is their agreement on the importance of specific components of quality ECEC (UNESCO, 2015). A quality early childhood programme will have trained and nurturing Early Childhood Educators. It will follow an inclusive curriculum which fosters good relationships between the adult and child. Finally, it will encourage good family and teacher relationships (Miller and Cable, 2011). In Ireland, however, regulations governing early childhood programmes and the ECEC sector as a whole have primarily focused on structural components of quality (Moloney, 2010; O’Kane, 2002).

Methodology: The Constructivist Paradigm

This research study was driven by assumptions held within the constructivist paradigm. That is, the belief that researchers must understand the social world of the participants (Schwandt, 2000, cited in Mertens, 2014; Martin, 2012; Snowman et al. 2009). Information and learning are constructed in a social sense, and this happens when both the inquirer (Researcher) and the inquired into (parents and practitioners) are dynamic in the process. To fully understand the key components which determine quality ECEC, parents and practitioner’s views must be respected and listened to. Tools such as semi-structured interviews, and surveys were used in this study to understand the experiences of parents and practitioners, with regard to quality ECEC.

Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews can allow the researcher to uncover the hidden meanings on unobservable things such as emotions, prior experiences and how research participants view the world (Patton, 2015). A semi-structured interview schedule with six overarching themes was drawn up. Closed-ended questions were used to obtain measurable data. Open-ended questions were asked to understand participant’s stories and life experiences. Three interviews were conducted; an advocate for ECEC and two managers of ECEC settings (rural and urban)
participated.

**Surveys**

Surveys were distributed to parents and practitioners (please see Table 1). The survey used open-ended questions similar to those asked in the interviews to validate the results further. The survey was distributed in paper format and online via ‘Google Forms.’

**Table 1: Survey research Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Locations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Parents of children in Early Learning Centres (0-6) | 29          | 20 from rural areas  
|                                                   |             | 9 from urban areas                           |
| Early Childhood Educators                        | 37          | 16 working in ECEC settings in rural areas  
|                                                   |             | 21 working in ECEC settings in urban areas   |

**Informed Consent**

A consent letter was given to all participants explaining the aims of the research. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and any information given would be kept confidential. This letter was signed and dated by all participants and the researcher.

**Findings**

**The components of quality Early Childhood Education & Care**

Across the spectrum of provision came the general agreement that quality ECEC is linked to many variables. The primary components attributed to quality ECEC were: good adult-child interactions; nurturing and loving staff who are experienced and qualified; regular inspections by ECEC specialists; parental involvement; and a curriculum which fosters holistic development of the child. For practitioners (91%), the holistic development of the child was directly linked to the quality of provision. As one participant explains: “It is really about meeting their [the child’s] needs, their individual needs”. In saying this, there was still disagreement between parents and practitioners about what quality ECEC meant, as highlighted below in Table 2.
Table 2: Contrasting views between Parents and Practitioners on the components of quality ECEC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Parents’ views</th>
<th>Practitioners’ views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does quality mean to you?</td>
<td>Primary School readiness (70%). “It helps my child get ready for school and learn through play”</td>
<td>Well qualified &amp; well trained practitioners (29%) Engaging &amp; child-led curriculum (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most important component (rated as very important)</td>
<td>Safe physical environment (90%)</td>
<td>Holistic development of the child (94%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least important component (rated as slightly important)</td>
<td>Qualifications of staff (3%)</td>
<td>Preparation of child for Primary School (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should be the minimum level of qualifications for working in ECEC?</td>
<td>FETAC level 5 (45%)</td>
<td>BA ordinary level degree (29%) BA honours level degree (29%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Funding (practitioner’s views)

Investment from the state was highlighted as an important aspect in the provision of quality ECEC. Due to the deficit of funds allocated to ECEC in Ireland, one participant describes Síolta and Aistear as “unsustainable”. An ECEC service owner explains how some practitioners are availing of social welfare services during the summer months or having to get another job during this time. “I feel so guilty at the end of June saying bye to the girls…that’s why we create summer camps to try and keep them going over the summer”. Indeed, 85% of practitioners surveyed agreed that funding and support was a vital component of quality ECEC. Importantly, professional identity and status (74%), higher wages (50%), and training (35%) were also identified by them as needed in order to achieve and maintain quality in ECEC. Furthermore, a practitioner notes that “primary schools are getting training in relation to Aistear and our sector isn’t. They’re having to pay for training themselves or engage in these pilot projects that are happening for a certain amount of time but there’s still a cost”. In keeping with this, another practitioner explains how one of her peers had paid over €50,000, to train her staff.
Legislation & Inspectorates

From the interviews conducted, there was a general dissatisfaction with the health and safety inspections. These inspections were conducted initially by teams from the Health Boards/Health Service Executive, and currently fall under the remit of TUSLA, the child and family agency (Tusla, 2016). There was unanimous agreement that Public Health Nurses (PHNs) were not qualified to inspect early learning centres. Participants argued that PHNs only took into account structural factors such as the, “cobweb in the corner of a room”. One participant advocated that “inspections should be conducted by inspectors who are fit for purpose, who have a clear understanding of what quality in a setting looks like, who have experience (practical and theoretical) in the sector and who understand the pressures and difficulties experienced by Early Childhood Educators”. The education-focused inspections introduced in April 2016 for services participating in the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2015a; DLRCCC, 2013; Start Strong 2014a) have been generally welcomed by the sector. These inspections operate under the Department of Education and are separate, though complementary, to the TUSLA inspections (Department of Education and Skills, 2016b). There is still a danger of a lack of coordination between the two. The impact these inspections will have on the quality of practice remains to be seen.

Almost half of all practitioners surveyed (47%) felt that Síolta had not made a difference in the provision of quality ECEC. Practitioners cited a lack of resources as the primary reason for not being able to implement these guidelines. In addition, (29%) of participants felt the same way about Aistear (2009). Also, practitioners argued that although the Preschool Regulations (2006) placed more emphasis on the child than the previous ones, they still only set out the bare minimum standards. Difficulties were also reported in achieving compliance with the Regulations. It was felt that complying with certain Regulations meant being non-compliant with others. For instance, engaging with an inspector during a visit could affect staff ratios. One participant suggests that inspectors should only engage with staff when it will not affect ratios or act as a disruption. One participant advises that the inspectors should observe the interactions between educators and children but only engage with staff when the children have left the setting. “By all means, watch the interactions that are happening because that’s all part of Regulation 5, and we’ll engage with you in regards to paper work when the children are gone”. 
Discussion

Of the major findings and themes emerged from this research study, the focus in this discussion will be on stakeholders’ views on the components of quality ECEC and the related challenges highlighted by the participants of this study.

Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: Parents’ and Practitioners’ Perspectives

Moss and Pence (2004) propound that quality in ECEC depends on stakeholder’s views and beliefs. It is a product of discussion and mutual understanding between relevant stakeholders and can only be achieved in this manner. This appeared to be the case in this current research project. Varying definitions of quality were given by participants: however, common themes emerged. Parents and practitioners agreed that quality in ECEC was dependent on a child who was “happy”, “loved”, “safe” and “nurtured.” A child whose needs were put at the forefront of their care and education. In like manner, findings from other research studies indicate that in order to have high quality standards, practitioners must be loving and nurturing towards children in their care (Rudasill and Rimm-Kaufman 2009; Leach et al. 2008; LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2007; Carl 2007).

Apart from the child-related aspects, components of ECEC valued by parents were the implementation of national quality standards and suitably qualified practitioners, although the majority of parents felt that a basic minimum qualification (FETAC level 5) was sufficient. On the other hand, practitioners believed that a minimum of a degree level qualification was appropriate to teach in the ECEC sector. Barnett (2004) has also contributed to this debate, arguing that the basic requirements for practitioners should be an honours level degree. However, according to Early et al. (2007), qualifications are not necessarily linked to the quality of an ECEC setting. Even so, an Early Childhood Leader cannot be equipped to guide the child effectively without the strong theoretical knowledge which a degree in ECEC can provide:

Early Childhood teachers and providers who possess both higher level of formal education and specialised training in child development bring the most to early childhood education. They are generally more skilled at helping young children develop and achieve their potential. Their interactions with the children in their care are sensitive, warm and intellectually stimulating – essential components of high-quality care. (Cochran and New, 2007: 660)
The important part that experience plays in educators practice was identified by both parents and practitioners. They argued that a person could be qualified yet not have a love for working with children. This piece of research would argue that qualifications and experience work in unison. Qualifications give the learner a social and theoretical foundation, enabling the learner to analyse different situations critically, whilst experience enables the individual to learn from practical knowledge. The ideal Early Childhood Educator is one who embodies both training and experience. Many of the practitioners surveyed also felt that professional status and identity was needed for them to provide quality ECEC. This is echoed in the findings of the Dept. of Education and Skills (2016) Survey of Early Childhood Educators. Undoubtedly, having a highly qualified workforce can often lead to professional status.

Even though parents and practitioners varied in their explanations of quality ECEC, the general consensus was that quality ECE incorporates:

- An individualized, child-led programme where the child’s needs are met, however great.
- A programme where educators are qualified and equipped to nurture, care for and educate each child.

Quality ECEC is child centred and the best interests of the child are always at the forefront of discussion. However, investment is the key to ensuring quality ECEC programmes are sustainable and effective for life-long learning.

**What are the challenges in providing ECEC?**

**Regulations**

Although robust regulatory frameworks can encourage and indicate quality ECEC (DFE et al., 2012; CECDE, 2005) by ensuring certain standards are adhered to, these standards although mandatory, are basic requirements and so should not solely be relied on in the pursuit of quality ECEC (Spodek and Saracho, 2013; Siolta, 2006c). Current child policy in Ireland, such as the Pre-School Services Regulations (2006) updated in 2016 (Tusla, 2016b), are minimum standards. Furthermore, a surprising finding was that the fragmented nature of the pre-school regulations left ECEC service owners and managers susceptible to being in breach of one regulation, in order to comply with other parts of the regulations. For example, the Garda vetting process is often slow, making it difficult to cover staff absences, and there are separate Garda vetting applications needed for a practitioner if they are to work in an ECEC setting.
during the day and in an after school club during the evening. Practitioners felt that the sector was over-regulated and called for a cohesive policy which would involve extensive consultation with ECEC stakeholders. This policy document would be evidence-based and in line with best practice. However, there were also calls for major investment before any more changes in ECEC policy were mandated.

Qualifications of inspectors and Better Start Programme

Although early years inspectors have been hired to support quality processes within the ECEC setting (DES, 2016b), participants wondered whether this was a positive move towards process focused inspections, or another layer added to an already “dysfunctional model”. Many of the current Tusla inspectors are not themselves qualified to work as practitioners but are nevertheless deemed suitable to inspect and decide on the fate of ECEC settings. Even with the introduction of education focused inspections, PHNs are still part of the ECEC inspection teams. One must then ask, how can quality ECEC be successfully supported, if the people who are to ensure that settings across Ireland meet quality standards are not trained in identifying these components?

Participants welcomed the integration of 30 ECEC specialists into settings as part of a mentoring service for practitioners under the Better Start Programme (2015). Although this is a free service, the onus for the costs of implementing any recommendations made by the ECEC specialist will still be placed on the ECEC service owner (Pobal, 2015). Time will tell if this initiative will be fully implemented or remain partially un-used by ECEC centres, like other initiatives and guidelines such as Síolta, because of the costs associated with it.

Funding and Support

Ireland’s levels of investment in investment in ECEC are low, in comparison with other comparable countries (Public Policy, 2013; OECD, 2011). Ireland values other areas of education such as secondary and tertiary as can be seen in how much it invests in these areas compared to ECEC (OECD, 2011). The question must be asked: why is ECEC is not deemed as important as other areas of education? Shockingly, it appears from the current study that some graduates of ECEC are on minimum wage for 38 weeks of the year and must avail of social welfare during the summer months, due to the prevailing funding model and a reduced demand for ECEC services during this time. Therefore, an ECEC practitioner working an average of 30 hours per week will earn a gross weekly wage of €259.50.
Furthermore, societal views tend to place primary school education at a higher standard than ECEC. This is seen in the support for upskilling and training of teachers in other areas of education versus ECEC practitioners. For instance, teachers of Junior and Senior classes are better paid and can avail of training in both Síolta and Aistear and rightly so, as they are working with children, who for the most part are under six. Surprisingly, ECEC practitioners who are also facilitating and guiding children of the same age group are not supported in their professional development by the state. One of the key findings of this study was that ECEC practitioners are unable to keep up with the financial burden of upskilling. One participant described how it cost €5,000 to train ECEC practitioners in one setting on Síolta. Even though Síolta training programmes are free, this does not take into account other variables such as staff cover and travel costs to and from the training centre.

What is more, from September 2016 all ECEC practitioners will be required to have a level 5 and leaders a level 6 qualification in ECEC or similar. Unfortunately, these research findings lead one to the conclusion that practitioners will be unable to afford upskilling, and if regulations are to be updated, cognisance must be taken of the existing workforce and how certain regulations or policy will affect and change the provision of ECEC. Major investment is needed, if practitioners are to be supported in continued professional development (CPD). To illustrate, even though there are a plethora of full-time ECEC degree courses, these are not suited to full-time practitioners. Programmes that are delivered on a part-time basis are not subsidized, and so these courses are not an option for many practitioners. How can quality ECEC be realised, when practitioners are not supported in obtaining relevant qualifications and CPD and are therefore ill-equipped in providing enriching life-long learning experiences for young children?

Recommendations

Findings from this research suggest that practitioners believe that for ECEC to be improved, Early Childhood Leaders must have a level 8 qualification to begin with, but must also be supported in upskilling throughout their career. Early Childhood Leaders can be assisted by Level 5 graduates but the sector should aim for all leaders to be highly qualified and experienced in ECEC. This can be a gradual process with Early Years Educators given a specific time frame to gain a qualification in a level above their current qualification, until degree status is reached. This cannot become a reality without specific supports and resources allocated to developing a professional workforce in the ECEC sector. This could
be done through allocating more funding in the forthcoming budgets to ECEC, primarily to support continued professional development and also a salary that is reflective of qualifications and training.

Furthermore, the national Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYPU) (DCYA, 2014) should carry out a nationwide consultation with stakeholders (parents, practitioners, policy makers, child advocates) to see what supports are needed and how these can be implemented, in order for Regulations to be complied with. There should only be one government body which oversees the ECEC sector: inspections, upskilling and so on. This will aid in the unification of the ECEC sector. In addition, there is a need for appropriate bodies to provide quality assured FETAC/QQI Level 5/6/7 and Level 8 (degree) programmes part-time for practitioners who are working. Tertiary and Further Education Institutions should be funded to support mature students and educators returning to Higher Education. Indeed, Aistear (2009) and Síolta (2006) represent a vision for quality ECEC. However, there is no comprehensive implementation plan. This considerably impacts the effectiveness of these frameworks and thus quality experiences for children in ECEC. It is essential that an implementation plan be devised by the relevant stakeholders and that educators are supported financially in following this plan. The current study also showed that complying with regulations was identified as a challenge. Practitioners felt that any attempt to revise regulations would be beneficial but would need to be developed with ECEC practitioners and those working in the early years’ sector. The Early Years (Services) Regulations, 2016 took effect on June, 30th in 2016. Unfortunately, these revised regulations were not developed with key stakeholders, in the ECEC field. Rather, various briefing sessions were carried out in May, 2016 (Tusla, 2016a). However, no training was offered to practitioners on how to implement these changes.

This piece of research would advocate that a nationwide consultation (interviews and surveys) between all stakeholders (parents, practitioners and children) in the ECEC field is vital to rectify any barriers which hinder compliance, before any regulations are published and enforced. Involving key stakeholders in the development and implementation of any new regulations would increase the likelihood of compliance, practicality and application to real world settings. A collective approach is needed in pursuing a cohesive policy, which incorporates guidelines such as Síolta and regulations such as Garda Vetting to present a statutory framework. A mandatory framework will ensure that service providers, including childminders, will be working from the same template where their views, thoughts and experiences are reflected. Qualifications of inspectors
is also an important issue; they should have a comprehensive knowledge of ECEC along with experience of working in the ECEC sector. This will ensure that the inspectors have a full understanding of all facets of the curriculum and are equipped to assess structural and, more importantly, process aspects of quality ECEC. This could start with a phasing out by TUSLA of existing PHNs who currently inspect Early Learning Centres and their replacement by Early Years Graduates with a number of years’ experience as inspectors.

Conclusion

It is important to note that this research was undertaken as part of a final year dissertation in Cork Institute of Technology. It was limited in the size and scale. In-depth interviews were not conducted with parents because of time constraints. The data presented relating to parents’ views and perspectives on quality ECEC relied primarily on quantitative methods. Further investigation is needed on parental views on quality in ECEC in order to ascertain their views and experiences. Interestingly, this study found that views on quality differed according to the person being asked. This supports the position of Hayes (2002) that there is not one single mechanism of determining the components of quality in ECEC. This study argues that quality must be a process of continual growth; a consultative process between relevant stakeholders with equal chance for contribution. What is known is that quality in ECEC lies with the educator and in dynamic aspects of ECEC such as adult-child interactions (Cassidy et al., 2005; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000, Paro et al. 2012). If the educator plays a vital role in quality ECEC, then they must be valued and supported in continual professional development. However, for these quality indicators to be implemented and sustained, limited resources and funding must become a thing of the past if we are to equip children with the skills they need to contribute to society in a positive way.
Bibliography


The Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 and Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) (Amendment) Regulations 2006, Dublin: The stationery office


The necessity to facilitate and nurture creative expression and play in early childhood has been well documented by educational theorists, curriculum planners and psychologists, alike. Piaget (1962) and Vygosky (1978) both stress the nexus of play and imagination and how it impacts on cognition. Bergen (2002) claims that imagination is the inner fire of play and draws attention to an increasing body of evidence, which shows that Art is a potent medium in not only firing that imagination but also in boosting cognition. Fox (2008) posits that ‘play’ is at the core of almost all Early Childhood Education practice. This point is further explored by Walsh (2010) who emphasizes the necessity to move away from the overly formal curriculum and to recognize the importance of embracing a more authentic pedagogical approach, which meets the needs of the child. The Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) outlines ‘creative play’ as one of the key forms of ‘play’ in early childhood and suggests the use of ‘open-ended materials, such as art materials and natural materials, in ways that encourage; fluency, flexibility, originality and imagination.’ (Kernan, 2007:19).

In light of the above, it is important that third level curriculum planners and lecturers on early childhood degree and other programmes facilitate and encourage future Early Years Education (EYE) practitioners to explore the creative process, using a variety of open-ended materials and strategies, throughout their undergraduate studies.
Creative Arts at Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)

As soon as they embark on the Visual Arts component of the Creative Arts for use in EYE, students of the Early Years Education degree at the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) are required to question their perceptions of creativity, imagination and individuality. More specifically, they are encouraged to keep these concepts constantly in mind when exploring, planning and delivering any creativity-based learning opportunity, which involves the young child. They also acquire the Knowledge, Attitude and Skills (KAS) to support the child’s learning and development, through Art. The four themes of the Aistear National Curriculum framework, Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating and Exploring; and Thinking, and the three Aistear framework headings of Organisation, Environment and Resources, are all central to their work. In this way, they will become effective facilitators of the ‘Journey’ (Aistear) taken by young children in their care, ensuring that those children become ‘confident and competent learners’ (NCCA 2009: 6).

Beyond the template

‘Learning in the arts requires the ability and a willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds.’ (Eisner, 2002:70)

At CIT, the use of templates, stencils, paint by numbers, join the dots and commercially produced googly-eyes, sequins, sparklers and stickers, is actively discouraged. On attending the introductory art workshop, students invariably demonstrate a preference for this type of mass-produced and festival-orientated art material and process. From the outset, they are facilitated to question the limited benefit or ‘possibilities’, which these materials offer. The child is restricted by the very nature of the resource, as process and product are both prescribed. The process is mechanical, i.e. an outline is provided, which children colour-in and the finished product is predictable, e.g. Santa or the Easter Bunny. This preference for templates etc. is not exclusive to the Irish context but rather reflects an attitude held by some practitioners and teachers internationally. Mulcahey (2009) points out that (in America) despite the established knowledge, amongst teachers and educators, regarding the closed nature of such approaches to the visual arts, a number of them still slip back into providing children with adult-generated and adult-guided activities. The reason for this, she argues, is largely due to teachers feeling insecure vis a vis the creative process and a desire to ‘control the activity and the outcome... teachers often feel inadequate regarding art knowledge...they do not know
how to respond to the creative process...they feel that being creative is a talent that you either have or not’ (Mulcahey 2009:16). Moreover, Hudson (2010) posits that in Australia ‘the quality and value placed on the arts by pre-service teachers is directly connected to their lack of self-efficacy and confidence in teaching art forms’ (Klopper 2010:3). Whereas, Athouse (2003) claims that the Visual Arts in the early childhood setting is looked on as ‘holiday art to decorate the school.... and activities to take a break from real learning’ (Athouse et al 2003:10). The World Conference on Art Education (2006) recognises that art is undervalued and clearly outlines the challenges facing effective delivery of the arts. ‘There are insufficient teacher-training programs specialising in Arts Education and general teacher- education programs do not adequately promote the role of the arts in teaching and learning’ (UNESCO 2006:16).

In light of the aforementioned views, it is important that students engage in the process of making art, in order to challenge their own perceptions of creativity. This requires ‘the ability and willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds’ (Eisner 2002). It means reconceptualising the role, which the educator plays in a child’s artistic experience and dispelling the notion that art is just a means of keeping children busy and a time filler ‘to take a break from real learning’ (Athouse et al 2003:10). When future EYE practitioners are facilitated to look beyond the template they can become involved in the exploration, investigation and manipulation of a variety of non-conventional materials, which opens up a vast range of possibilities for creative discovery.

A Range of possibilities

‘The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences.’ (Malaguzzi, in Edwards, Gandini and Forman 2011:54)

The Resources

By way of introduction to the myriad of other possibilities available to the students, a selection of resources (additional to conventional art supplies) is made accessible. These are the free and found; organic and natural. Aesthetically pleasing provocation trays (Fig. 1) containing. e.g. twigs, bark, dried flowers, wood-shavings, shells, pebbles and sand are at their disposal. They are also encouraged to ‘find’ items outside of class, i.e. materials which are normally considered to be of no further use and which have been discarded; e.g. broken
'jewellery', remnants of fabric, empty packaging, as well as bits and bobs, which may be of personal interest or sentimental value. All of these, they can then incorporate into their art work.

Fig 1. Provocation Trays

‘Recreate’ as a Resource

As well as the stock of materials, which has been built up over the years, CIT subscribes to a very innovative and enterprising resource unit called Recreate, located in Dublin. It sources end of line and surplus stock from businesses to be reused as arts materials:

‘Our warehouse is full to the brim with all types of fantastic arts materials such as paper, wool, plastics, fabric, tubing, foam, discarded items from a variety of local businesses….for use in Early Childhood Education, for art craft, theatre and creative projects of all kinds…..and helps communities stretch their budgets and imagination.’ (Recreate 2014: np)

The Creative Process

Prior to creating individual art pieces, using the seven elements of art; line, shape, form, colour, texture, value and space; students are given a brief to explore and examine the materials. This exploration allows them to consider the variety of surfaces, shapes and colours, in an attempt to find common links.
Emphasis is placed on the creative process, transient art and visual outcomes. Subsequently, through a process of reflection and discussion, they determine what is meant by Creativity, Imagination and Individuality, all the while developing a sense of confidence, each is his/her own creative ability.

The Exhibition and Public Auction

‘Creativity is the ability to produce something novel, something with the stamp of uniqueness upon it’ (Mayesky 2011:4).

During the third year of the degree course, students create and participate in a group, theme-based exhibition. It transports the viewer to a magical world of fantasy, based on a selected children’s story, e.g. Where the Wild Things Are, Alice in Wonderland, and Narnia. This initiative successfully builds on the theoretical and practical foundation of two years and has become an annual event on the CIT calendar. It features a diverse selection of art works made exclusively from the aforementioned ‘free and found’ materials. A unicorn made entirely from sweet wrappers, a magical garden of dried flowers, an installation of jelly fish from cut-up plastic bottles, a giant eagle from one deconstructed remnant of carpet are among the creations, which have delighted children and adults alike, over the years.
Exhibiting the works for public viewing is a key component of the creative process. It provides an opportunity for feedback and evaluation from an audience beyond the art room. Now, students experience the power of display, first hand. Through mounting an exhibition, they acquire the skills necessary for co-operative learning and team work. When the individual pieces are completed, they discuss, debate and reach consensus of opinion as to the layout of the exhibition, as a unit. The aim is to display each piece, large or small, to best advantage and in keeping with the theme or the chronological order of events within a story. Throughout the Visual Arts course, they have each worked diligently, in the knowledge that the finished product would be on public display. This has served as a powerful impetus and incentive to fully engage in the creative process, from design to execution. Feedback from the post-module reflective process (written and oral) invariably indicates a real sense of achievement and satisfaction. There is often a quiet confidence that they have exploded the myth that ‘one has to be born an artist’. As it is analytical in nature, the reflective process also provides invaluable information for future EYE students. It outlines the strengths and weaknesses, the stumbling blocks and pitfalls, encountered along the way and makes suggestions as to how to surmount or avoid them. Hanging an exhibition is an exercise in logistical planning, problem-solving and lateral thinking, which should stand them in good stead, in other areas, as future EYE practitioners.

The art exhibition is open to the public, for ten days during the month of May, at the James Barry Exhibition Centre at CIT. Other college students, lecturers and CIT staff in general, family and friends, EYE practitioners, early learners and the public at large have the opportunity to view the art pieces. A few years ago, the idea of having an auction, to raise money for charity, was suggested and it is now held on the final night and has become a social event. Over refreshments, students chat with prospective bidders. The dramatic tension is palpable when the ‘auctioneer’ describes a particular work, mentions the student’s name and then invites the audience to open the bidding. When the gavel is brought down on the bid for the final art piece, the exhibition is dismantled and the body of creative output is removed to find other more permanent homes, to adorn the walls of Early Childhood centres or children’s bedrooms.
Fig 3. Exhibit of Tiddler the Story-telling Fish at the James Barry Exhibition Centre CIT
The value of nothing and the price of everything

In a world full of cheap, commercially-produced, plastic art materials, students have learned how to be resourceful and creative. They now know ‘the value of nothing’. No longer do they view broken and discarded items - the worn and the torn - as being useless. Rather, do they reflect on how to incorporate them into ‘something novel, with the stamp of uniqueness about it’ (Mayesky 2011).

CIT EYE students also know that ‘the price of everything’ - the monetary sum total of their creative efforts - on auction night(s) has been €2000, donated to the Paediatric Ward (Children’s Play/Education Room) at Cork University Hospital (CUH).
References


Guidelines for submissions to
An Leanbh Óg- The OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies

September 2016

An Leanbh Óg- The OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies is a peer-reviewed journal presenting research on topics relating to young children. The editors of An Leanbh Óg for 2016/2017 are Dr Rosaleen Murphy (University College Cork), Dr Judith Butler (Cork Institute of Technology) and Dr Frances Clerkin (Cork Institute of Technology).

An Leanbh Óg (The Young Child) welcomes articles in English or Irish relating to the field of early childhood studies in the broadest sense, including those relating to early years education and care, social studies, child health, child development and policy issues. An Leanbh Óg especially welcomes papers from practitioners, and those with an interest in relating theory to practice.

Papers should be submitted to the Editors via e-mail:

murphyrosaleen@eircom.net and omepireland@gmail.com

Address for Correspondence

Dr Denice Cunningham, School of Education, University College Cork.
Submission Form

This form should accompany papers submitted to An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies. It may be downloaded from the Publications page of the OMEP Ireland website http://www.omepireland.ie/publications.html

Title of Paper:

Authors:

Affiliation (organisation, university, etc., if applicable):

Corresponding author:

Address for correspondence:

Email address:

Signed Statement to accompany paper:

The paper being submitted herewith is my/our own original work. It has not previously been published elsewhere.

I have followed ethical guidelines throughout this research.

I have obtained permission in writing from parents/guardians for any photos of children that are included (if applicable).

I have obtained all necessary permissions for contents, including tables, graphs and images from works by others (if applicable- please contact the editors for clarification if you have any doubts as to whether this applies).

Signed: _____________________________________________

Date: _______________________________________________
SUBMITTING A PAPER

Papers should be formatted in accordance with the guidelines below. Particular attention should be paid to the specified length (3,000 to 5,000 words) and the required format for references.

Academic papers received will be sent for anonymous peer review, and authors will be notified of the results in due course. The decision of the Editor is final in any matter relating to the publication or non-publication of papers.

Non-academic papers (e.g. practical suggestions for activities to promote early learning or factual accounts of programmes or visits) may be submitted for publication in the From the Field section of the journal. These may be published at the discretion of the editorial committee, and will not be sent for peer review unless the authors indicate that they wish the paper to be reviewed.

Papers submitted should meet the following criteria:

- Papers should be original, and the work of the author(s). They should not be under consideration by another journal and they should not have been published elsewhere.

- The name, address, institution or affiliation if applicable, and contact details (phone, e-mail) of the author(s) should not appear on the paper itself, but should be given on a separate sheet, along with an abstract of 100 words.

- Papers should be written in a clear straightforward style, avoiding technical jargon as far as possible. Papers should not exceed 3,000 to 5,000 words in length; shorter papers are acceptable. Papers greatly exceeding this length will be returned to the author.

- All works cited in the paper should be properly acknowledged; see referencing guidelines below. Where the paper is taken from a larger work (thesis or dissertation), it is not necessary to include all works consulted, only those actually cited in the paper submitted.

Ethics

It is the responsibility of authors to show that they have addressed any ethical issues that may arise in connection with their research and that they have obtained the necessary consent from children, parents and settings if they wish to include photographs, examples of children’s work and so on. A statement to this effect should accompany papers submitted. See the Submission form
Please be aware that the journal will be published in print, and also on-line on the OMEP Ireland website with a two to three year delay from when the print version is published. See www.omepireland.ie/publications.html

Plagiarism Policy

Plagiarism is ‘the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own’ (Shorter Oxford Dictionary). This includes not just text but graphics, tables, ideas etc., and includes material found online as well as in print. It is the responsibility of authors to ensure that they have permission to reproduce any images, graphs, tables or other material taken from the work of others.

All research builds upon the work of others, but use of the work of others must be fully and appropriately referenced in the text and credited to the original authors. Short quotes, properly cited, are usually acceptable and do not need specific permission. Short quotes should be enclosed in quotation marks “quote”, while quotations longer than three lines should start on a new line, be indented and single-spaced, and give the page number of the original source.

A paper that overly relies on quoting the work of others or which does not reference cited works adequately will not be considered for publication and will be returned immediately to the author. Plagiarism in academic work can have very serious consequences (see for example the UCC policy on plagiarism; similar policies operate in most universities). Plagiarism may also be a breach of copyright.

Format

Papers should be submitted in Word format. They should be double or 1.5 spaced, in Times New Roman 12 point. The use of sub-headings is recommended to enhance readability. Diagrams, tables etc. should be clear and legible. They should be captioned (e.g. Table 1, Fig. 1) and it should be clearly indicated in the text where they are to be inserted (e.g. Fig. 1 here)

Any photographs or other illustrations should not be incorporated into the text, but should be sent separately, with the place where they are to be inserted clearly indicated in the text, e.g. Photo 2 here.

Tables and other graphics should be clear and legible, and the formatting
should be kept as simple as possible. The journal may be printed in monochrome and not in colour, so please take this into account when providing graphics, charts and other illustrations.

**Referencing**

*All works referred to in the text*, and only those works referred to in the text, *must be included in the bibliography/list of references* at the end of the paper. This list should be in alphabetical order, and should follow the conventions in the examples below.

The style preferred by *An Leanbh Óg* is based on the Harvard style of referencing, with some minor changes. The *author, date* system should be used for citations in the text, including indirect quotes, and page numbers given for direct quotes:

Rogoff (2003: 284) suggests that learning takes place by a process of ‘guided participation’ in community activities.

> It may be that the pressure for children to achieve academic readiness impinges on the time available for play (Bergen, 2002).

Direct quotes should be in quotation marks and the source and page number given:

> According to Rogoff (2003: 150) ‘transitions across childhoods can also be considered cultural, community events’ and our research clearly demonstrates this.

Direct quotes of more than three lines should be single-spaced and indented.
EXAMPLES OF THE PREFERRED STYLE OF REFERENCING

BOOKS - examples


CHAPTER IN AN EDITED BOOK - example


JOURNAL ARTICLES - examples


ON-LINE MATERIAL - examples


UNPUBLISHED THESIS - example

OMEP
Organisation Mondiale Pour L’Éducation Préscolaire
Organización Mundial Para La Educación Preescolar
World Organization For Early Childhood Education

About OMEP

OMEP is an international, non-governmental and non-profit organisation concerned with all aspects of Early Childhood Education and Care. OMEP defends and promotes the rights of the child to education and care worldwide and supports activities which improve accessibility to high quality education and care. OMEP is currently established in over 60 countries and is represented at meetings of UNESCO, UNICEF and other international organisations with similar aims. For further details on OMEP’s history and its activities world-wide, see the World OMEP organisation website http://www.worldomep.org/

OMEP is represented in Ireland by OMEP Ireland, a registered charity dedicated to Early Education and Care (Charity No. 14213). The objective of OMEP Ireland is to use every possible means to promote the optimum conditions for the well-being of all children, their development and happiness within their families, institutions and society. OMEP assists any undertaking to improve Early Childhood Education and supports scientific research that can influence these conditions.

The mission of OMEP Ireland is to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood experiences, both because every child has a right to a high quality childhood and because of the effect on children’s future life chances. To further this mission, OMEP Ireland holds an annual research conference and publishes its journal, An Leanbh Óg, with the aim of supporting early childhood research and bringing it to a wider public. Its publications can also be accessed through the OMEP Ireland website, www.omepireland.ie